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THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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Mr. President, members of the Security Council,

I report to you today in the aftermath of the appalling truck-ramming attack on January 8th that killed four Israelis and injured 17 more in Jerusalem. Such attacks can never be justified and must be universally condemned. This act of cowardice was neither courageous, nor heroic. Such terrorist attacks must be unequivocally condemned by all. It is regrettable that some Palestinian factions and leaders have chosen to praise it, to glorify it or have simply remained silent.

Mr. President,

Despite the relative tranquility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict compared to developments in the region, the specter of violence is always near. Leaders on all sides have a responsibility to reduce tensions and provide a political horizon to their people. Most importantly, we all have a responsibility to prevent this conflict from being engulfed in the nexus of violent extremism and religious turmoil that is sweeping across the Middle East.

Mr. President,

In this first briefing to the UN Security Council in 2017, I would like to begin by honoring the critical efforts of the UN Country Team here on the ground. The UN agencies, funds and programmes, who work in a challenging security and political environment, deserve our full support and recognition.

Every day, the UN provides free basic education to over 300,000 students in 350 schools; family health services to almost 1.7 million Palestinians in 64 health centres.

Every month, we deliver an average of 780,000 litres of fuel to sustain health, water and sanitation, and municipal services.

Every quarter, the UN provides food assistance to 1 million Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank.

Yet, we also plan for the future. The UN in Palestine implements programmes that will bring about sustainable solutions to the economic challenges facing Palestinian households. UN programmes have supported the Palestinian Government in the creation of approximately 14,000 businesses and 45,000 jobs for people who were previously reliant on humanitarian assistance. We help strengthen Palestinian institutions and prepare them for the future. The UN facilitates emergency preparedness and regional

disaster risk cooperation between Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian emergency authorities.

The services that we provide to Palestinians touch thousands of lives across the West Bank and Gaza. This vital work would have been impossible without the cooperation and support of both Israeli and Palestinian authorities and our counterparts. On behalf of the teams on the ground I would like to thank the Security Council and all Member States for your invaluable and continuing support.

Mr. President,

In this Council, I have repeatedly warned that failure by leaders on both sides to reverse the current negative trajectory will ensure that Israelis and Palestinians continue to live as prisoners of fear, trapped in a perpetual cycle of conflict.

On 23 December, the Security Council adopted resolution 2334. It reiterated some of the key obstacles to achieving a negotiated two-state solution that were identified in the July 2016 report of the Middle East Quartet: namely the construction and expansion of illegal settlements; continued acts of violence, terrorism; and incitement.

The international community has clearly said that both sides must do their part in creating the necessary conditions to launch final status direct negotiations.

It has called on Israel to demonstrate its commitment to the two-state solution by ceasing settlement activities and by implementing policy shifts consistent with prior agreements.

It has called on the Palestinian leadership to demonstrate their commitment to a peaceful two-state future by clearly condemning all acts of terrorism and taking significant steps to curb incitement.

Such steps by both sides would have a powerful and positive impact on the prospects for peace. The Middle East Quartet has been calling for such steps, a call that the Security Council and the international community has now welcomed.

In the aftermath of the vote, emotions on the ground have been heightened. Calls have been made for the annexation of parts of or the whole of Area C.

Such divisive positions risk destroying the prospects for peace. All stakeholders must avoid any unilateral action that would prejudge a negotiated final status solution.

Mr. President,

Last weekend France hosted over 70 countries and international organizations in Paris, not to impose conditions on Israelis and Palestinians, but to reaffirm their collective support for the two-state solution and their readiness to support both parties in returning

to meaningful negotiations. In particular, I note and appreciate the participants' welcoming of the Quartet recommendations.

While these political developments were unfolding abroad, important events were taking place on the ground.

After a relative lull, during the reporting period Israel conducted 24 demolitions, resulting in the displacement of 167 persons in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Yesterday the Israel Defence Forces fatally shot a 17-year-old Palestinian during clashes near Bethlehem. I reiterate that live fire should be used only as a last resort, in situations of imminent threat of death or serious injury. Such incidents where use of force has resulted in death or injury must be properly investigated.

Turning to internal Palestinian developments, the reported revocation in December of the parliamentary immunity of five Fatah-bloc members in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) renewed debate about the legality of the decision to lift parliamentary immunity in the absence of regular PLC meetings. Palestine has come a long way on its path to building state institutions. Safeguarding their independence and checks and balances is vital to maintaining the public's trust.

Much needed preparations have begun on holding a regular session of the Palestinian National Council, which was last convened some two decades ago. I encourage all factions to seize this opportunity to achieve genuine reconciliation on the basis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) principles.

Russia's recent initiative in Moscow, which provided a forum for Palestinian factions to hold open discussions, is also a welcome effort in this direction.

Meanwhile, I remain greatly concerned by increasing tensions in Gaza exacerbated by the continued closures and the protracted humanitarian and development situation. I am particularly concerned by Hamas' crackdown on recent peaceful protests after two million Palestinians were left with just a couple of hours of electricity per day in the middle of winter. The right to freedom of expression, peaceful protest and assembly in Gaza must be respected fully by all.

While the immediate electricity crisis has been averted, thanks to the generous and timely support of the State of Qatar, the responsible authorities must find a suitable sustainable long-term solution to resolve the chronic electricity shortage. The UN is working to support such efforts.

Against this backdrop, there has also been positive developments. Israel has increased the entry of critical construction materials over the past weeks, however donor funds for shelter remain critically low. The current USD 300 million reconstruction gap is far too large. Less than half of the USD 3.5 billion that were committed two and a half years ago at the Cairo Gaza pledging conference have been disbursed.

Mr. President,

Turning to Lebanon, the formation of a Government on 18 December last year was a positive development. It sustained the momentum of the appointment of Saad Hariri as Prime Minister on 3 November and the election of President Aoun on 31 October. The President visited Saudi Arabia in early January at the invitation of King Salman. This visit paves the way for new engagement and support for Lebanon's stability and security. Both sides have described the meeting as successful and as opening a new page.

The Government in Lebanon has outlined its priorities and vision for the country, reflecting its determination to tackle the country's urgent challenges. These moves signal cautious optimism and the potential for consolidating Lebanese institutions. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Armed Forces successfully foiled an attack and arrested eleven members of a terrorist cell in Tripoli that was linked with ISIS and the Nusra Front.

On the Golan, the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic has continued to affect significantly the UNDOF area of operation. The ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic generally has been maintained, albeit in a highly volatile security environment. The Secretary-General calls on all parties to prevent tensions or their escalation, and to strictly abide by international law, in particular in respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries in the region. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the Mission.

Mr. President,

The long, bloody history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has offered us many lessons, some of which we have learned, but too many that we have not. One lesson that we should all have learned by now is that opportunities to advance peace are rare and must be seized. Making the necessary compromises will never be easy.

In recent weeks the international community has expressed its continued commitment to the two-state solution. But resolutions and communiqües alone will not achieve a just and lasting peace. What is required is action, first and foremost by the parties themselves.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting Israelis and Palestinians on the difficult road ahead.

Thank you.