

**NICKOLAY MLADENOV
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE
EAST**

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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Today I devote my regular briefing to the Council on the Situation in the Middle East to reporting, on behalf of the Secretary-General, on the implementation of resolution 2334.

In this first report, I will focus on developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on regional and international efforts to advocate and advance the peace process.

Let me note from the outset that none of the developments on the ground can be divorced from the broader context in which they are happening: namely the stalled peace process, the lack of dialogue between the parties, and the increased radicalization on all sides.

The reporting period has witnessed a notable increase in statements, announcements and decisions related to settlement construction and expansion.

The resolution calls on Israel to take steps “to cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem”. No such steps have been taken during the reporting period. In January, two major announcements were made for a total of 5,500 housing units in settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank. Within three weeks, some 3,000 housing units were advanced through the various stages of the planning process and over 240 units reached the final approval stage. Separately, tenders for some 800 housing units were issued.

Eighty percent of the 4,000 settlement moves during the reporting period were concentrated in and around major Israeli population centers close to the 1967 line, while some 20 per cent were in outlying locations deep inside the occupied West Bank.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me reiterate that the United Nations considers all settlement activities to be illegal under international law and one of the main obstacles to peace.

On 1 February, the Government announced its intention to establish a new settlement for the residents of the illegal Amona outpost, following its demolition by order of the Israeli High Court of Justice on February 2nd.

While there was no advancement of settlement plans in occupied East Jerusalem during the reporting period, construction in at least four East Jerusalem settlements was enabled by the granting of building permits for over 900 housing units (Pisgat Zeev, Ramat Shlomo, Ramot and Gilo southern slopes).

Overall, the last three months have seen a high rate of settlement-related activity, especially when compared to 2016, which saw tenders for only 42 units issued and some 3,000 units advanced over 12 months in Area C.

Mr. President,

The reporting period also witnessed large-scale demolitions of structures in Palestinian and Bedouin communities in Area C of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, due to a lack of the Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to acquire.

According to OCHA, 145 structures were demolished in Area C. This has affected the homes of some 220 people, while another 4,000 people were impacted, directly or indirectly, by the destruction of other property and infrastructure. In occupied East Jerusalem, 48 structures were demolished and two seized, displacing 80 people and affecting 210 people.

There were also a number of concerning legislative developments during the reporting period. On 6 February, the Israeli Parliament approved the so-called “Regularisation Law” which, if implemented, would effectively authorise the taking of privately owned Palestinian land in occupied territory that has been used for settlement purposes. It contravenes international law and is deemed unconstitutional by many Israeli legal experts, including the Attorney General. Estimates suggest that the law could enable the retroactive “regularisation” of thousands of housing units and the gradual “legalisation” of dozens of settlement outposts. This law marks a significant shift in the long-standing Israeli position concerning the legal status of the occupied territory.

Mr. President,

Allow me to turn to the problems of violence and terror, inflammatory rhetoric and provocations that remain a hallmark of the conflict. Resolution 2334 has called on all to refrain from such acts and undertake efforts to combat them.

During the reporting period, the security situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory remained relatively calm. There was a rise, albeit from a low level, in certain categories of incidents, namely rocket attacks against Israel from Gaza. Eleven Palestinians were killed and over 273 injured by Israeli security forces (ISF), including during attacks or purported attacks, clashes and security operations. In addition, one Palestinian was killed by an Israeli civilian while attempting to carry out a stabbing attack and two Palestinians died of wounds they had sustained in October and November 2016 from Israeli security forces (ISF). Four Israeli soldiers were killed and 70 other Israelis were injured in attacks by Palestinians.

On 8 January, a Palestinian man killed four Israeli soldiers and injured another 15 in a ramming attack in Jerusalem. On 9 February, in a terror attack in Petah Tikva, a Palestinian from Nablus shot and stabbed six Israelis. On 6 March in a two-hour exchange of fire, a Palestinian activist, Basel al-Araj, was killed during an arrest operation by the Israeli Security Forces in al-Bireh, near Ramallah, in Area A.

After over three months of calm, between 6 February and 19 March, Palestinian extremists in Gaza fired ten rockets towards Israel, five of which impacted without causing injury. In response to these attacks, the IDF conducted 18 airstrikes at militant locations inside Gaza. In total, two Palestinians in Gaza were killed and 24 injured as a result of various Israeli military actions.

On 16 January in the village of Tuqu near Bethlehem, a 17 year-old boy was shot dead by Israeli Security Forces. The authorities have opened an investigation into the incident, bringing to at least 17 the number of investigations opened into similar incidents since September 2015. This period saw a total of over 260 Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces, 170 of whom were carrying out or reportedly carrying out attacks.

One case, against Sergeant Elor Azaria, has led to an indictment and conviction for unlawful killing. On 4 January, Azaria was convicted of manslaughter for shooting dead an incapacitated Palestinian assailant in Hebron in March 2016. On 21 February, he was sentenced to prison for 18 months and demoted. As noted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, such a lenient prison sentence “is difficult to reconcile with the intentional killing of an unarmed and prone individual”. On 7 March, the military prosecution, calling the current sentence “excessively lenient”, has filed an appeal, seeking a three-to-five year imprisonment.

Mr. President,

While the resolution called upon both parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, such actions continued during the reporting period.

Reactions by Hamas officials to terror attacks against Israelis have been particularly reprehensible and deserve condemnation. A recent sermon by a Hamas leader and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza included appalling and racist language inciting violence against Jews.

Statements were issued by Hamas and a number of other Palestinian factions celebrating as “heroic” the terror attacks in Jerusalem and in Petah Tikva. A senior leader, addressing a rally following the truck ramming sent a message “of encouragement and support for every jihadi who carries out an attack that puts an end to the acts of the Zionist enemy”.

Regrettably, Palestinian Authority officials have not condemned these attacks, while Fatah's social media pages continued to commemorate perpetrators of previous attacks against Israeli civilians.

Provocative statements also continued on the Israeli side. A number of politicians have called for the annexation of parts or all the West Bank and for a categorical denial of Palestinian statehood. One political leader called the notion of a Palestinian state a "historic disaster" and a "hallucination", while another spoke of only the Jewish people having 'national rights' between the Jordan and the sea.

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 reiterated the call by the Middle East Quartet on both parties to take affirmative steps "to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-state solution." Allow me to outline some of the moves, taken by Israel and the Palestinian Authority that may be broadly considered in this context.

In February, the Palestinian Authority took a significant step towards strengthening its institutions and improving governance, by finalizing the Palestinian National Policy Agenda (NPA) for 2017-2022. This agenda reiterates the Palestinian Authority's commitment to state-building, and guaranteeing the rule of law. Continued support for the Palestinian Authority in providing governance and security remains critical.

In January, the Palestinian Government approved the general budget for 2017 and owing to the strong fiscal performance in the previous year, was able to reduce the budget deficit. Continued fiscal discipline and a push for revenue growth will be essential during this year as economic and financial conditions are likely to continue to be restrictive.

In a positive development, on 15 January, after six years of inactivity, Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed to reactivate the Joint Water Committee (JWC), which was established under the Oslo Agreements, in order to improve the water infrastructure and supply in the West Bank and Gaza. The new agreement outlines the types of water projects that need approval by the JWC, and, thus, by default those not requiring approval. This comes on the heels of agreements signed on electricity, 3G and postal services in the past six months.

It is also important to note that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority remain committed to maintaining security coordination amid increasing political and popular pressure on the Palestinian Authority to cease such coordination. I take the opportunity to note the professionalism of the Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) in providing public order. They operate in a highly volatile environment, and I encourage Israel and the international community to continue supporting the advancement of their capability and capacity.

The reporting period has also seen progress in Gaza reconstruction and recovery. More than 225,000 tons of cement were imported through the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) – a significant increase over the previous three-

month period. Israel also approved nearly 3,300 residential construction and reconstruction projects compared to only 78 over the previous three months.

Mr. President,

During the reporting period there have been no developments related to Member States' distinguishing, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied in 1967. There have, however, been efforts by the international community to take up its responsibility to resolve the conflict. In this respect, I would like to note the international conference hosted by France on 15 January that was attended by representatives of some 70 countries. As a follow up, interested participants resolved to meet again before the end of 2017 to review progress and to support both sides in advancing a resolution to the conflict.

In January, representatives of most Palestinian factions, including Fatah and Hamas, met in Moscow. The Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation addressed the participants, stressing the need to overcome divisions on the basis of the PLO political platform and the Arab Peace Initiative in order to create the conditions for meaningful negotiations.

On 7 March, I addressed the session of the Council of the Arab League in Cairo, where I spoke of the need to recognize that true peace requires the recognition that both Palestinians and Israelis have legitimate national aspirations that can only be realized in two states. The Arab League adopted a resolution that calls, inter alia, for developing an effective international mechanism to follow-up on the Paris Conference for ending the Israeli occupation and achieving a two-state solution within a specific timeframe.

Last week, the U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations visited Israel, the West Bank and Jordan for initial meetings with political, security and civil society leaders, including religious and youth groups. In statements following meetings with the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian President, the Special Representative reaffirmed the United States interest in advancing a genuine and lasting peace. I am encouraged by ongoing efforts to reach agreement with the parties on steps on the ground that will create the conditions for Palestinian economic development and advancing peace.

Mr. President,

Members of the Council,

In closing, let me share with you some broad observations on the reporting period. The January spike in illegal settlement announcements by Israel is deeply concerning. The large number of advancements, planned infrastructure development, legislative actions and moves to undertake large-scale demolitions against Palestinian communities in Area C, indicate a clear intent to continue expanding the settlement enterprise in the occupied Palestinian territory. In this light, the adoption of the "Regularisation Law" was a highly worrisome development.

Many of the advancements that were made in the past three months will further sever the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state and accelerate the fragmentation of the West Bank. The expansion of the settlement of Kfar Adumim, where 320 units have been moved forward during the reporting period, is gradually dividing the northern and southern West Bank. Planned construction in Shiloh effectively extends the zone that cuts across the Central West Bank. Announcements in Kokhav Yakov, situated between Ramallah and East Jerusalem, and in Shavei Shomron, located at the crossroads connecting the three major Palestinian cities of Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarem, are also of strategic significance.

Such actions are in breach of international law and they must stop. Settlement expansion undermines the very essence of the two state solution. Resolution 2334 states that the international community will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those changes that are agreed by the parties through negotiations.

Meanwhile, there has been little progress in promoting Palestinian development in Area C. I am particularly concerned about herding communities in Area C of the West Bank, who are struggling to maintain a minimum standard of living in the face of intense pressure to move. The UN has repeatedly stated that the 'relocation' of communities without their free and informed consent, would contravene Israel's obligations as an occupying power under international law.

To foster a climate conducive to meaningful negotiations, Israel must do more to improve the daily lives of Palestinians. Introducing significant policy changes that will increase Palestinian civil authority, support Palestinian development and preserve the prospect of a two-state solution, in line with the recommendations of the Middle East Quartet, remains essential. The agreement to reactivate the Joint Water Committee after six years of inactivity is a step in the right direction; however, much more can be done by both parties.

I use this opportunity to commend the Palestinian President and Prime Minister for developing the 2017-2022 National Policy Agenda. With foreign aid continuing to decline, it is critical that the PA and its international partners work together in a structured, transparent and accountable way.

The continuing deadly violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory during the past three months also remains a concern. The recent increase in rockets fired from Gaza towards Israel is also a worrying development. Such potentially lethal provocations are unnecessary, dangerous and risk devastating escalation. Resolution 2334 calls on all to "clearly condemn all acts of terrorism." The continued incitement to violence against Jews emanating from Hamas extremists and some Palestinian groups is unacceptable and undermines trust and the prospects for peace.

Similarly, it is important to note that despite the continuing closures on Gaza, there has been an increase in the import of building materials under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. However the inability to import of other materials –

considered 'dual-use' by Israel but badly needed for humanitarian and development efforts -- continues to be a major obstacle. Notwithstanding this positive development, much remains to be done.

International engagement on reviving the peace process over the last three months has reconfirmed the consensus that the two-state solution is the only means of realizing the national aspirations of both peoples. It is critical that the momentum built over the past year continues to expand and ultimately develop into a concrete vision to end the occupation and the wider conflict. Shaping a credible political horizon through reviving engagement between the parties with intensified international and regional support is essential to advancing this goal.

These international efforts must be accompanied by significant steps taken on the ground by the parties, to create an environment conducive to peace. The United Nations will continue to call on and work with the parties and all interested stakeholders to find a just, sustainable and comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions.

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