

TOR WENNESLAND
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
UNSCR 2334 (2016)

29 September 2021

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will devote this briefing to presenting his 19th report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 12 June to 27 September.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem” and to “fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.”

During the reporting period, there were no new settlement housing plans advanced, approved or tendered.

On 2 July, some 50 Israeli settler families left the settlement outpost of Evyatar, illegal also under Israeli law, following an agreement with the Israeli Government that the Israeli military would re-establish a presence at the site and a land survey would be conducted to determine land status.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, 302 structures were demolished or seized by Israeli authorities or demolished by their owners to avoid heavy Israeli demolition fees. These actions displaced 433 people, including 251 children and 102 women.

On 7 July, Israeli authorities demolished some 30 structures, of which 17 were provided as humanitarian assistance, in the Bedouin community of Humsa Al Bqai’a, in the Jordan Valley.

On 14 July, Israeli authorities confiscated at least 49 structures in the Bedouin community of Ras al Tin in the Ramallah governorate. As a result, 84 people, including 53 children and 14 women, were displaced.

On 11 August, the Jerusalem Local Affairs Court froze the demolition of several dozen structures in the al-Bustan section of the Silwan neighborhood until 10 February 2022, pending ongoing planning discussions.

On 2 August, Israel’s Supreme Court held a hearing to consider an appeal request by four Palestinian families facing forced eviction in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in the East Jerusalem. The judges made a proposal, which was not accepted, and the hearing was adjourned with no date to reconvene. There are currently some 970 Palestinians facing eviction in East Jerusalem.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including all acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.”

Unfortunately, daily violence continued. Overall, 27 Palestinians, including two women and five children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during demonstrations, clashes, security operations, and other incidents. 4,814 Palestinians, including 3369 by tear gas inhalation, including ten women and 530 children, were injured. Of these, 3,369 injuries were due to tear gas inhalation, 205 were injured by live ammunition. One Israeli soldier was killed by Palestinians, and 42, including two women, were injured by Palestinians in clashes, rock and Molotov cocktail throwing, attacks and other incidents.

Beita village in the occupied West Bank remained a flashpoint, where demonstrations against the nearby Israeli settlement outpost of Evyatar often escalated into clashes between Palestinians and Israeli Security Forces. Since June, four Palestinians, including one child, have been shot and killed, and at least 3,530 others injured by Israeli forces during these clashes, 2,722 by tear gas inhalation as a result of Israeli security forces activities.

On 16 June during protests in Beita, ISF shot a 16-year old boy, who later died from his injuries. During a demonstration on 24 September, a Palestinian man was killed in an exchange of fire with ISF.

On 24 June, Palestinian political activist Nizar Banat died following an arrest operation by Palestinian security forces (PSF) in Hebron, during which he was reportedly beaten severely. Banat’s death sparked several demonstrations since late June leading to dozens of arrests; all were subsequently released. On 27 September, a Palestinian military court held its first hearing for the 14 officers from the PSF charged with the death of Nizar Banat.

On 18 July, three Israelis, including a one-year-old child, were injured by stones thrown by Palestinians near Damascus Gate in Jerusalem’s Old City.

On 23 July, ISF shot killed a 17-year old Palestinian during clashes in Nabi Saleh. ISF stated that the boy was throwing stones.

On 28 July, an 11-year-old Palestinian boy was killed in Beit Ummar after ISF fired at the car he was travelling in with his father and siblings. The next day, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian man amid clashes during the boy’s funeral.

On 16 August, four Palestinians were killed and another injured in an exchange of fire with ISF during an Israeli search operation in the Jenin Refugee Camp.

On 24 August, Israeli forces shot and killed a 15-year-old Palestinian boy in the Balata Refugee Camp, east of Nablus. According to Israeli officials the boy had been preparing to throw a large rock at ISF personnel from a rooftop. However, witnesses dispute the ISF account.

On 31 August, ISF shot and killed a 39-year-old Palestinian man in Beit Ur, west of Ramallah, under unclear circumstances. The ISF announced it will open an investigation into the killing.

On 10 September, following a call from Fatah and Hamas, demonstrations linked to six escaped prisoners were held across the occupied West Bank and Gaza, with several escalating into clashes with ISF resulting in 183 Palestinians injured.

On 26 September, Israeli forces conducted a search and arrest operation targeting what Israel said were Hamas operatives in several locations in the West Bank. Five Palestinians were killed, including a 16-year old boy, and seven others were injured during exchanges of fire between Israeli forces and Palestinians. Two Israeli security personnel were also injured.

In Gaza, Palestinian militants launched five rockets and numerous incendiary balloons into Israel, injuring four civilians, including one child, all while running to shelter, and causing dozens of fires. In response, Israeli forces carried out 55 air strikes on what they said were military targets in the Strip, resulting in damage but no injuries.

On 21 August in Gaza, thousands of people participated in a demonstration at the perimeter fence. Hundreds hurled stones and, reportedly, improvised explosive devices, towards ISF, who responded with live ammunition and tear gas. 41 Palestinians were injured, including 24 children. Two Palestinians, including a boy, subsequently died of their injuries. One Israeli soldier was critically injured, and later died of his wounds. On 23 August, Israeli forces carried out eight airstrikes against what Israel said were Hamas military targets.

Across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, settler-related violence continued, including reports of armed settlers carrying out attacks against Palestinians in proximity to Israel security forces.

On 17 August, a 15-year-old Palestinian boy was attacked in the northern part of the occupied West Bank, during which a group of Israeli settlers kidnapped the boy and brutally assaulted him.

A total of 102 attacks occurred in which Israeli settlers or other civilians injured 36 Palestinians or reportedly damaged property. Palestinians perpetrated 175 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the occupied West Bank, including the throwing of stones, Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs at civilian vehicles, resulting in 23 injuries and damage to property.

Again, on 21 August, PSF arrested 23 people in Ramallah for their participation in a planned demonstration. On numerous occasions, Palestinian Security Forces restricted the freedoms of expression and assembly on demonstrators and used force, including beating them with batons and indiscriminately firing tear gas and stun grenades. Women present in the demonstrations reported sexual harassment and gender-based threats on social media afterwards.

During the reporting period, ISF arrested two prominent human rights defenders, one in Ramallah and the other in Bethlehem. ISF also raided and searched three Palestinian civil society organizations located in Area A of the occupied West Bank, closed one for six months for undisclosed security reasons.

Madam President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Some Palestinian and Israeli officials continued to use such rhetoric during the reporting period.

On 27 June, an Israeli Member of Knesset challenged the status quo on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, stating “Our demand is full sovereignty, raising the Israeli flag and expelling all Waqf elements seeking to harm us.”

On 20 June, a senior Hamas official said that “neither words nor messages” were needed to resolve the status of Jerusalem, and that the movement would “arrive in Jerusalem with the help of barrages of hundreds of rockets fired at Tel Aviv”.

Madam President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for “affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution.”

On 13 September, the UN launched a cash assistance programme to aid nearly 100,000 needy families in Gaza. The effort is supported by the State of Qatar with 40 million US Dollars provided over four months.

In addition, some USD 45 million of the requested USD 95 million dollars has been raised for the UN’s humanitarian flash appeal and nearly USD 55 million has been mobilized in support of the humanitarian response more broadly.

In Gaza, Israel eased access restrictions imposed during the May escalations. In addition to key humanitarian assistance, access was progressively facilitated for commercial goods and materials for international projects, including allowing some 3,000 tons of rebar outside the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism with nearly 20,000 trucks entering Gaza through Kerem Shalom in the reporting period. The entry of materials and trade has since returned to pre-escalation levels.

Moreover, on 1 September, Israel announced it would increase entry permits for traders and business-people from 2,000 to 7,000, expand the Gaza fishing zone from 12 to 15 nautical miles, allow the entry of more goods and equipment, and increase the supply of fresh water to Gaza by five million cubic meters.

Israel continued to deduct an amount of the clearance revenues from Israel to the PA equivalent in size to what Israel calculates is paid by the PA to Palestinian security prisoners and the families of those killed in the context of attacks.

The PA continues to face a growing fiscal crisis that severely impacts its ability to cover minimum expenditures, including Government salaries and payments to needy households.

Following a meeting between President Abbas and Defense Minister Gantz on 30 August, the first meeting between both sides since the formation of the new Israeli Government, Israel said it would provide a USD 150 million loan to the PA to be repaid through commensurate deductions from the clearance revenues. Israel also announced plans to issue ID cards for thousands of undocumented foreign nationals in the occupied West Bank and grant an additional 15,000 permits for Palestinian workers to enter Israel, along with an additional 1,000 building permits for Palestinians in Area C of the West Bank.

On 6 September, the Palestinian Authority announced that they will hold local council elections on 11 December 2021 for all villages and municipalities in category C, the smallest 388 of the approximately 450 councils overall. On 27 September, the PA announced that the remaining local

elections will be held on 23 March 2022, including for 11 local councils in Gaza pending an agreement for them to take place in this second phase.

On 16 August, UNRWA schools opened for over 300,000 girls and boys across the OPT . However, UNRWA is once again struggling to obtain funding to operate in the last months of the year. A disruption in UNRWA services will deny hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, namely young people, across the region the essential rights of a dignified life: education, health, food and housing.

Madam President,

In its resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council called upon all States “to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.” No such steps were taken during the reporting period.

Resolution 2334 (2016) also called upon “all parties to continue, inter alia, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.”

On 15 July, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet met virtually to discuss the latest developments on the ground and agreed to remain engaged on the matter and to chart a way forward.

On 2 September, the Presidents of Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, met in Cairo. All three leaders pledged to work together to resume peace negotiations, in accordance with international legitimacy, under the auspices of the Quartet.

In conjunction with International Day of Peace on 21 September, Palestinian and Israeli peace organizations hosted several events to promote the establishment of a long-term solution to the conflict and warn about the costs of maintaining the status quo.

Madam President,

In closing, allow me to share the Secretary-General’s observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of UN resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

1. I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and that they undermine the prospect of achieving a viable two-State solution in line with UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements. The pause in new advancements and tenders of plans for housing units in settlements observed during this reporting period must become permanent.
2. I remain deeply concerned by the continued demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures, which have included internationally funded humanitarian projects. I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law, and to approve plans that would enable these communities to build legally and address their development needs.

3. I am deeply troubled by the continued loss of life and serious injuries in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). I am appalled that children continue to be victims of violence. I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when it is strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Pertinent authorities must carry out thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force and hold perpetrators accountable.
4. I am deeply concerned by the continued settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Israel, as the occupying power, has an obligation to ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population and to investigate such attacks. I underscore that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.
5. The launching of indiscriminate rockets and incendiary devices towards Israeli population centers violates international law and must stop.
6. I would like to reiterate that the fate of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two Israel Defense Forces soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza remains an important humanitarian concern. I call upon Hamas to provide information on their status, as required by international humanitarian law. I also remain deeply concerned by the continued Israeli practice of holding the bodies of Palestinians. I call upon Israel to return withheld bodies to their families, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.
7. The death of Nizar Banat while in the custody of PSF is unacceptable. I call on the Palestinian Authority to ensure that his death and all allegations of use of disproportionate force against protestors by PSF are investigated and those responsible held accountable.
8. All arrests of human rights defenders, journalists and activists on charges that interfere with their exercise of fundamental freedoms of expression must cease.
9. I welcome Qatar's generous contribution to support vulnerable families and improve the dire socioeconomic and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. The UN will continue to work closely with the Palestinian Authority and partners, including Egypt, to solidify the ceasefire, allow the entry of urgent humanitarian assistance and stabilize the situation in Gaza.
10. While materials for humanitarian assistance have entered Gaza more regularly, predictable access for materials, necessary for stability and economic recovery, remains a key challenge. All materials required to implement the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan and the May 2021 Flash Appeal should be allowed into Gaza. All parties must facilitate unimpeded access to humanitarian relief.
11. UN and INGO humanitarian staff must also be able to enter and exit Gaza on a regular basis. Hamas must cease practices that hinder the delivery of crucial humanitarian assistance.

12. A recent assessment, by UN Women, of the impact of the May hostilities has highlighted the importance of addressing the protection needs of women and children in Gaza. I encourage support to UN partners to continue to offer gender-based-violence (GBV) related services.
13. The PA's finances continue to be of serious concern. In addition to the severe impact of the occupation on the economy, Israelis and Palestinians should urgently resolve the impasse over the prisoner payments and the other fiscal files. The scope of the private banking sector to lend to the PA is now at its limit. I encourage donors to provide urgent, support to the PA.
14. I welcome recent high-level contacts between Israeli and Palestinian officials and steps by the Israeli Government to ease the economic pressure on the Palestinian Authority and encourage their further expansion. I encourage both Parties to take urgent steps that are necessary to stabilize the Palestinian economy and strengthen the Palestinian institutions. I also urge the implementation of existing agreements by both sides. The next meeting of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee can examine how outstanding issues can be addressed by the Parties, with the support of the donor community and the UN.
15. I reiterate the UN's gratitude to all donors who continue to support UNRWA. I urge Member States, to sustain the funding levels to UNRWA programme budget of past years and advance disbursements of funds as much as possible to avoid a disruption of essential services and humanitarian aid across the OPT. We must provide the Agency with adequate resources to fulfill the mandate it was given by the General Assembly. Investing in UNRWA remains an indispensable investment in regional stability and support for the goal of Middle East peace.
16. Crucially, Gaza requires political solutions that will see a focus on working towards advancing intra-Palestinian unity, lifting the debilitating closures in Gaza, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), and, ultimately, returning to a peace process that will end the occupation and create a viable two-State solution.
17. Palestinian unity is crucial to advancing a two-state solution. It is therefore critical that Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts continue. The UN stands firm in its support of these efforts. The holding of elections in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza would be a crucial step towards Palestinian unity, giving renewed legitimacy to national institutions, including a democratically elected Parliament and Government in Palestine. I encourage the Palestinian Authority to resume the election process as soon as possible.
18. I am encouraged that many Israelis and Palestinians remain committed to achieving a two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace despite the significant challenges. We in the international community must support the civil society organisations that continue to work tirelessly to build trust and advance the prospects for peace.

Madam President,

In closing, while I am encouraged by the recent engagement of senior Israeli and Palestinian officials, we must continue our efforts to address the worrying situation on the ground, including reversing negative trends across the OPT and stabilizing the fragile situation in Gaza. We must re-energize efforts now to establish a legitimate political horizon that will end the occupation in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements in pursuit of achieving the vision of the two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

I once again urge Israelis, Palestinians, regional States and the broader international community to take practical steps that will enable the parties to re-engage on the path to peace. I will continue to actively engage in advancing these efforts with my counterparts in the Middle East Quartet, key regional partners and Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Thank you.