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REPORT ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND PALESTINE

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I. Overview:

1. The period under review witnessed a continued deterioration in the situation in the Middle East. Violence has become a daily reality there and efforts to resolve the conflicts have been unsuccessful.
2. **In Iraq**, five years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, this country is yet to enjoy the expected stability. Instead, acts of violence and assassinations between the various factions continue to increase, taking the lives of many persons and forcing others to flee the country. Despite support from the United States of America, the Iraqi Government has not been able to either control the situation or help the various components of the Iraqi population to reach some political agreement. Meanwhile, the living conditions of the populations have worsened considerably.
3. Relations between **Iran** and western powers were strained by the issue of Iran's use of nuclear energy and accusations against Iran that it was enriching uranium for military purposes.
4. In Syria, despite reciprocal declarations between Israelis and Syrians which expressed both parties' readiness to engage in negotiations concerning the Golan Heights occupied by Israel, one is forced to accept the fact that no direct negotiations between the two parties on the issue have commenced and that Syria has continued to regularly receive threats from western powers.
5. Concerning the situation in **Lebanon**, there is still a political void as a result of the failure by Lebanese political forces to reach agreement on the election of the President of the Republic or the formation of a government. The period under review was marked by particularly violent armed combat between supporters of the government majority, known as the *Rassemblement de l'Avenir 14 mai* (14 may rally for the future), which is chaired by Saad El Hariri, and those of the opposition, headed by the leader of the Hezbollah Party, Hassan Nasrallah. These confrontations have cost the lives of a large number of Lebanese citizens and paralyzed the country politically and economically.
6. The Arab initiative is still relevant to the search for a political solution between the various Lebanese candidates. However, it is yet to produce tangible results, despite the numerous extraordinary meetings of the Council of Arab Foreign Affairs Ministers that have been held. It is evident that the overlapping of regional and international interventions is the cause of such a situation.
7. With regard to the **Palestinian issue**, which is considered as the main issue, no positive development has been recorded. The situation was compounded and it

deteriorated even more. In fact, during the relevant period, Israel intensified its acts of aggression against the Palestinian people living in occupied territories of the Gaza strip and the West Bank, and as well as all actions to expand its settlements. Israel continued to build the separation and apartheid wall and increased its judaization of the city of Jerusalem. Finally, Israel intensified its acts of planned assassinations, in flagrant violation of international laws and imposed arbitrary measures to render more difficult the living conditions of Palestinian citizens.

8. Concerning the Gaza Strip, Israel continued to impose the blockade. It blocked the supply of food and other basic products, like medication, electricity and fuel; thus transforming the Gaza Strip into a giant prison with daily worsening tragic living conditions. Moreover, Israel pursued its daily acts of aggression, under the pretext of ending the launch of home-made rockets from the Gaza Strip by Palestinians, and thus killing dozens of innocent persons, including women, children and old people.
9. Considering the number of meetings and talks between Palestinians and Israelis following the 2007 Annapolis Conference, at which the two parties declared that, by the end of 2008, a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel would have been created, it may be said that those meetings have produced disappointing results and that the two parties have entered into a vicious circle. Under such conditions, it is difficult to envisage the possibility of both parties finding, in the short run, a welcome solution, which reflects the aspirations of the region's populations to live in peace and to see a new era of peace and good neighbourliness.

II. The situation in occupied Palestinian territories

10. Since the holding of the Annapolis International Peace Conference in November 2007, Israel intensified its military raids on Palestinian territories, using F18- and Apache-type military planes to destroy civilian facilities and targets in the Gaza Strip. These raids, which are carried out under the pretext of ending the threats by Palestinian resistance movements that launch hand-made rockets, have cost the lives of dozens of civilians, many of whom were women and children.
11. Israeli occupation forces isolated the Gaza Strip by imposing a blockade which closed all entry points into this territory. The forces also cut off all supplies of fuel and energy, thus causing the stoppage of the main electric power plant, water plant and health care services; a situation which forced several hospitals to close down, thus endangering the lives of thousands of people. The consequence is an obvious deterioration in the living conditions of civilian Palestinians, which is a real human disaster. Several organizations in Gaza have warned about the human, health and environmental tragedy which the Palestinians face. This situation compounds an earlier Israeli raid, during which it declared the Gaza Strip as enemy territory.
12. As part of its policy of escalation, Israel carried out its threat to conduct an unparalleled, barbaric military incursion into the Gaza Strip and which lasted from 27

February to 3 March 2008. That offensive cost the lives of over 130 persons, including babies, children, women and old persons, and left hundreds of persons wounded, with a good number in a critical situation.

13. Faced with the gravity of the situation, the Council of the League of Arab States declared the Gaza Strip a disaster zone and launched an urgent appeal to States, as well as various Arab and international institutions, to provide aid to the Palestinian people and to consider as illegal and illegitimate the Israeli government's decision to declare the Gaza Strip as "enemy territory".
14. The Council of the League of Arab States also called on the United Nations Security Council to issue a statement condemning the flagrant Israeli violations of relevant international instruments, in particular, the Human Rights Charter and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and requested that an international fact finding mission to investigate the crimes perpetrated by Israel in the Gaza Strip.
15. At an extraordinary ministerial meeting on 5 March 2008, the Council of the League of Arab States condemned the continued Israeli raids on the Gaza Strip and occupied Palestinian territories. As there is no effective international mechanism to monitor Israel's compliance with its commitments and cause it to refrain from pursuing its policy of aggression and collective sanctions, the Council assessed the situation in Palestinian territories with regard to Israel's failure to pursue the objectives of the Annapolis Conference and of agreements reached during the preparatory phase of that conference.
16. Furthermore, the Council of the League of Arab States requested the parties and Palestinian Movements to start a national dialogue, in view of achieving a united Palestinian front to face the occupant as well as to favourably respond to efforts by Arab States to that end. In its communiqué, the Council of the League of Arab States also announced that it will assess the situation and make recommendations which are informed by developments in the situation, as it re-examines the strategy adopted by Arab States in their effort to revive the peace process.
17. Within this context of intensification of its acts of aggression, Israel continued its actions in the West Bank which are designed to give the city of Jerusalem (EL QODS) a more judaic character, notably by changing its historical, religious and demographic features. Israel continued by digging tunnels under Jerusalem's holy mosque, which damages underneath the Al aqsa mosque and the homes of some Palestinian citizens. The population of EL QODS (Jerusalem) continues to suffer from acts of oppression and violation of their civic rights and from racial segregation (apartheid), attempt at forceful expulsion as a result of the imposition of racist laws.
18. Israel pursued its expansion of colonial settlements in El Qods (Jerusalem). Over 91,595 building permits and plans for colonies were issued in the city of El Qods (East Jerusalem) during the period between 1 September 2007 and mid-February 2008. Israel also completed the construction of a part of the wall along the path of

the apartheid wall surrounding El Qods and which should link Israeli colonial settlements within and around the occupied El Qods to the west El Qods, as a means of totally separating the Palestinian neighbourhoods within that city. Israel is pursuing its colonization policy in AL AGWAR region and is taking all required measures to expel Palestinians from that region, so as to take over water and economic facilities and to destroy, in line with a devised plan, the territories by removing Palestinian and Arab features.

19. In Hebron, in a bid to link the KERIAT IV settlement to the Alibrahimi mosque, the military warned the inhabitants of OUED ANNASARA to abandon their homes and lands, which will thus complete the take over of the old city by Israel.
20. Similarly, Israel is pursuing its policy of confiscation of occupied Palestinian lands to achieve its settlement campaign, through the construction of new settlements and extension of existing ones, using excuses to cause them to be assigned solely to settlers and thereby reducing the sizes of territories reserved for Palestinian citizens. The goal being to cause demographic and geographic changes within territories in the occupied West Bank and thus hindering the creation of a viable Palestinian State.
21. In violation of international laws and of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legitimacy of the construction of the apartheid wall, Israel pursued its policy of confiscation of Palestinian lands, in order to go on with the construction of the wall in accordance with changes to the construction plan adopted by the ministry of defence. The area of the partitioned zone that is situated on the other side of the apartheid wall in the West Bank is 733 km², and which has isolated the Palestinian lands, thus reducing them to parcels separated from one another, without the possibility of geographical continuity. The purpose of such a situation is to incite a new Palestinian exodus from these regions.
22. In other respects and in pursuing an escalation in the violations of the rights of the Palestinian people, Israel persisted in its assassination of leaders of the Palestinian resistance, arrest of many Palestinian resistance fighters, whose number now exceeds 11,000 prisoners, including women, children, old persons, as well as 51 Palestinian Legislative Council members and ministers of the government which resigned. It is worth mentioning that there are a further 1,500 civilian prisoners, a majority of whom have spent over five years in Israeli prisons. Statistics indicate that 1,500 prisoners in Israeli prisons are suffering from chronic diseases and have not received any medical attention.
23. In the economic sphere and in occupied Palestinian territories, international and Palestinian reports on economic, social and human indicators all point to the fact that there has been a tangible reduction in the levels of the indicators in 2007 and during the first quarter of 2008. The Palestinian economy is in a critical condition for a second consecutive year, as a result of Israel's policy and the coercive measures imposed on occupied Palestinian territories, notably the isolation of regions,

imposition of a blockade, confiscation and destruction of lands, pursuit of the construction of the apartheid wall, repeated military incursions, intensification of acts of aggression, assassinations, kidnappings and prosecution of citizens.

24. This situation has negatively affected Palestinian economic development prospects. This is compounded by the situation in the Gaza strip during the second semester of 2007, with Israel's imposition of a blockade in the Gaza strip as a consequence of its declaration as an enemy zone, the elimination of rightful customs duties in the Gaza strip, causing considerable economic losses and paralyzing the activities of over 3,500 economic institutions and the disappearance of 65,000 jobs. Consequently, unemployment rose to 80% and the poverty rate to 90% in the Gaza strip. It is expected that this rate will spiral to record levels during the second half of 2008, if Israel continues to maintain the blockade.
25. In other respects still and in light of Israel's refusal to apply international decisions, notably resolution 194 on refugees, it was observed that their increased to reach 6 millions, of which 4.5 millions were registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Available and reliable data indicate that these refugees represent 44.6% of the total population of the occupied Palestinian territories, and that the poverty rate among refugees has also increased, with 4 out of 5 refugees in the various locations of occupied Palestinian territories, like the Gaza strip, living below the poverty line, according to sources at **UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency)**.

III. The Internal Situation in Palestine and its Consequences on the Palestinian Cause

26. Since the escalation of the conflict between the Hamas Movement and the failure of recent attempts by different countries such as Yemen and Egypt to settle the disagreement, the Palestinian issue has been in a complicated situation and confronted with a serious challenge that affects the foundation of the cause as well as the Palestinian National Movement. It is obvious that this division which weakens the National Movement, undermines unity and deals a serious blow to its credibility, benefits Israel which takes advantage of this division and exploits the situation to isolate the Gaza Strip, torture the people, discredit the Palestinian leaders in Ramallah and widen the gulf between the Authorities and Hamas.

IV. Peace Efforts in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

27. On 15 May 2008, the State of Israel celebrated the 60th Anniversary of its establishment, the Nakba (disaster) for the Palestinian people, which dates back to 1948, while at the same time, the Palestinian people continue to live under military occupation and efforts deployed have not led to the achievement of peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the establishment by the Palestinians of an independent State on its national territory, in conformity with the principle of international legality and United Nations decisions and principles in this regard.

28. The International Peace Conference held in Annapolis, in November 2007, which was attended by over 50 States and international organizations, was aimed at giving new impetus to the peace process. The Palestinians and Israelis concluded a joint Memorandum of Understanding to establish peace by the end of 2008 (date by which the term of office of the current American President, George W. Bush, will end) and the attainment of the actual objective, which consists in creating two States living side by side, the Israeli State and the Palestinian State. This Conference also gave concrete expression to the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Road Map, with a view to concluding a peace agreement, and the commitment to respect and immediately apply the commitments made within the framework of the Road Map, the establishment of a High-Level Palestino-Israeli Committee charged with supervising the different stages of negotiations, in order to consider all issues aimed at finding a lasting solution to the problem.

29. During the period under review, nothing significant was undertaken to effectively implement the conclusions of the Annapolis Conference and the efforts initiated by the American side in that regard appeared to be more of a last-ditch attempt by an administration at the end of its mandate desperately seeking a shelf agreement in order to save face.

30. On his part, Mr. Tony Blair, the Envoy of the Ministerial Committee, confirmed the need for new practical measures on the ground, in order to prepare conditions conducive to the establishment of the institutions of the Palestinian State, put an end to the military occupation which changed the landscape of the West Bank, transforming it into an isolated region, not forgetting the blockade that is seriously affecting the population living in the Gaza Strip. It should be pointed out in this regard that to date, Israel has only removed a few roadblocks in the West Bank, where there are more than 6000 Israeli military barriers. The removal of these roadblocks is the only way to really move the peace process forward.

31. The US Secretary of State carried out several missions to Israel and the Palestinian territories, and for his part, President George W. Bush also visited the Middle East on the occasion of the 48th Anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, the Nakba.

32. Concerning the position of Arab countries vis-à-vis efforts deployed to revive the peace process after the Annapolis Conference, the Council of the League of Arab States, meeting in its 129th Session on 5 March 2008, affirmed the commitment of Arab countries for just and total peace, as a strategic choice, and that the peace process is a global process that should not be broken down into individual operations, and which will be achieved with complete Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian and Arab territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan and occupied territories in Southern Lebanon; by a just and agreed solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees, in conformity with the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, particularly Resolution 194 of 1948; by the rejection of any form of citizenship and the establishment of an independent and

sovereign Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as the capital, in conformity with the Arab Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002, and confirmed by the Riyadh Summit in 2007.

33. The Arab Summit held in Damascus in March 2008 requested all States and parties participating in the Annapolis Conference to continue their efforts to implement the commitments made, conduct serious negotiations in all areas, consider the issues relating to the final phase, with a view to the establishment of the Palestinian State with El Qods as the capital, and Israeli withdrawal from occupied Syrian and Lebanese territories.

34. It was stated that the Arab side maintains its Peace Initiative as long as Israel begins to respect its commitments taken within the framework of basic instruments for the achievement of peace in the region.

35. The Arab Ministerial Committee in charge of the Peace Initiative is mandated to evaluate and review the strategy of Arab countries and the plan to move forward the peace process and make recommendations with a view to the convening of a special meeting of the Council of the League of Arab States, at Ministerial level, to decide on the next phase of the Arab plan in this regard.

36. The efforts deployed to convene an international conference in Moscow on peace in the Middle East during the second half of 2008 have yet to succeed. This Conference is to consider all the peace processes, including those between Israel, Syria and Lebanon, and also evaluate the negotiation processes between the Palestinians and the Israelis in the aftermath of the Annapolis Conference held in November 2007. However, Israel and the United States of America are against the holding of such a conference in Moscow.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

37. As it emerges from this report, the prospects in the Middle East and in Palestine remain dismal. There has been no significant progress observed in efforts aimed at restoring peace. In Palestine in particular, the consequences of the Annapolis Conference hardly give cause for optimism, since Israel continues its logic of aggression, in all forms, against the Palestinian people as well as its policy of expansion of colonies in the occupied territories. Under these conditions, it would be futile to believe in the effective implementation of the conclusions of the Annapolis Conference requesting the two parties to declare, by the end of 2008, the establishment of a Palestinian State that will live alongside Israel.

38. Nevertheless, the international community should continue and redouble its efforts, for it is clear that the people of the Middle East and Palestine can only hope for a dignified life when peace is truly restored in this part of the world that is now ravaged by many years of armed conflict.

39. For its part, the African Union should:

- Reaffirm African solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people who live under the yoke of Israeli occupation and strongly condemn the barbaric crimes committed by the Israeli occupation forces in the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip which is experiencing one of the most serious humanitarian crisis of our times, following the Israeli blockade and the closing of corridors, a situation that affects the daily living conditions of the Palestinian people, in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Population Living under Occupation, and request the international community to continue to provide its support and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people.
- Request the United Nations Security Council to assume its responsibilities vis-à-vis the people of Palestine in order to provide them international protection in the face of the persistence of Israel in its aggressive and barbaric acts, and request Israel to stop the establishment of settlements on Palestinian territories and denounce all Israeli measures aimed at changing the aspect of the city of El Qods.
- Support the efforts deployed to restore peace in the Middle East region, particularly between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and this in conformity with the decisions of the Annapolis Conference, the Arab Peace Initiatives and the Road Map.
- Demand the respect of Palestinian national legitimacy under the presidency of Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, and the legitimate Palestinian institutions, and call for the unity of the Palestinian people in the face of the occupying forces.
- Support Syria and Lebanon in their legitimate rights to recover their territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

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