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Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) - Country of Concern: latest update 31 December 2014

0.1 Latest update: 31 December 2014

1. West Bank, including EAST Jerusalem

We are deeply concerned about the increase in violent incidents and protests in East Jerusalem and the West Bank during the reporting period.

On 22 October, two people, including a three-month-old girl, were killed by a Palestinian driving into a light rail stop in East Jerusalem. The driver was shot and killed by Israeli police on the scene; his family home was demolished on 19 November. The Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, offered his condolences to the victims in a [statement](#) and called for calm.

On 30 October, the Israeli authorities closed the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount compound for 24 hours to all faiths for the first time since 2000, in response to a heightened security threat. Violent clashes had occurred between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli police at the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount compound in the days and weeks leading up to the closure. Tensions further increased following the shooting of a prominent US-Israeli Jewish activist, Yehuda Glick, who has been campaigning for a change in the status quo at the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount. Hours after the shooting, a Palestinian suspect was shot and killed outside his home in East Jerusalem. Although the compound was re-opened late the same evening, the Israeli authorities placed restrictions on access that remained in place until 14 November, following an agreement between the Jordanian Waqf and Israeli security forces, committing all sides to retaining the current status quo.

On 5 November, a car drove into pedestrians on Route 60, the main road in Jerusalem dividing the East and West of the city. An Israeli Border Police official was killed and 14 people injured. Israeli police shot and killed the driver.

Increased tensions during the reporting period have led to further clashes and violence between Palestinian youths and the Israeli police in a wide range of Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem.

On 10 December, a Palestinian Minister, Ziad Abu Ayn, died following an incident between the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and Palestinians at a protest and tree-planting ceremony for Human Rights Day in the West Bank. The IDF had attempted to disperse the protest, and video footage showed that the minister was pushed in the chest and grasped around the throat by an Israeli soldier. Mr Hammond issued a [statement](#) expressing his shock at the death and calling for a swift and transparent investigation. The circumstances of the incident continue to be investigated by the IDF.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that 11 Palestinians were killed, and a further 1,578 injured by the IDF between 1 October and 31 December, including during arrest raids, demonstrations, and in search and arrest operations.

Israeli demolitions of Palestinian structures continued during the reporting period, with 135 structures demolished in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, resulting in the displacement of 251 Palestinians. This included four punitive demolitions of the houses of Palestinians suspected of killing Israelis, sanctioned by the Israeli High Court. The UK is seriously concerned by this revival of the policy of punitive demolitions, which was suspended by the Israeli authorities in 2005. The Geneva Convention stipulates that demolitions are only legal in the context of military necessity. In addition, collective punishment is prohibited under the Geneva Convention.

We have strong concerns about the development of Israeli plans to relocate Bedouin communities living in the E1 area (of particular strategic significance to a contiguous future Palestinian state) in Area C of the West Bank to a "township" near Jericho. Plans for the new townships were deposited for public consultation on 25 August. If approved, it could result in the removal of 7,000 Bedouin from 45 sites there, and open up Israeli settlement development in E1. The UN Secretary General has said the potential relocation of Bedouin would amount to a "mass forcible transfer", prohibited under international humanitarian and human rights law.

According to Israeli NGO B'Tselem, at the end of November, 461 Palestinians were being held in Israeli administrative detention, the highest number since May 2009. NGO Defence for Children International reported that 156 Palestinian children were being held in Israeli military detention at the end of November.

The UK is also deeply concerned by settlement advancements. We have condemned Israel's decisions to: advance plans for 2,610 settlement units in Givat Hamatos; create a settlement in a crucial area on the Jerusalem/Bethlehem boundary; and advance plans for 1,060 new housing units in existing settlements in East Jerusalem. Mr Hammond said that the settlement announcement in Givat Hamatos would have serious implications for the possibility of Jerusalem being a shared capital in a future two-state peace agreement, and will hinder that process. Settlement advancement in East Jerusalem included issuing final permits to expand both the Har Homa and the Ramot settlements. Fifty of these are in the controversial Har Homa C; if built, alongside plans in Gilo and Givat Hamatos, these will create a ring of settlements cutting off East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank. We are deeply concerned about the long-term consequences of such actions. At a time when the priority must be calming tensions, we judge that these announcements do serious damage to Israel's standing in the international community.

2. Gaza

We were disappointed that it was not possible for the Cairo negotiations to resume due to the terrorist attack in the Sinai. We are urging the parties to ensure that these resume quickly. The Egyptian Foreign Minister assured Mr Hammond on 27 October that Egypt is still committed to the negotiation process, and that talks will resume as soon as possible. As Minister for the Middle East, Tobias Ellwood, said during his [visit](#) to Gaza in October, the UK believes that negotiations in Cairo present a genuine opportunity for the violence to end and to provide peace and security to Palestinians and Israelis. We are clear that the parties must engage in urgent negotiations in order to agree a durable ceasefire, and we will continue to work with international partners to secure a long-term end to the violence.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza deteriorated sharply following the conflict during the summer. We welcomed the efforts of the international community at the Gaza Reconstruction Conference in Cairo on 12 October, at which the UK pledged £20 million to help kick-start Gaza's recovery.

The agreement between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the UN on a monitoring and verification mechanism, that will facilitate the import and use of construction materials to rebuild Gaza, is an important step forward. Part of the UK's £20 million pledge at the Gaza Reconstruction Conference will go towards funding for the mechanism. The first entry of construction materials into Gaza under the mechanism took place on 14 October, when 75 trucks entered. 50 of these carried gravel, 15 cement and 10 steel. On 4 November, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, announced that 700 beneficiaries are now able to purchase construction material in order to start rebuilding their homes.

Whilst we welcome these positive steps, this is clearly only the beginning of what is needed. We remain concerned that demand is not being adequately met. We are engaging Israel and other parties to ensure the unimpeded delivery of aid, including through the UN mechanism on construction materials.

The closure since October of the Rafah crossing to Egypt is severely restricting the movement of people to and from Gaza. Whilst intermittent opening has eased some of the pressure, restrictions continue to have severe consequences for the civilian population of Gaza. We have continued to press Egypt to ease their restrictions, in order to allow the movement of travellers.

3. Israel

On 29 October, there was an attempted assassination of a right-wing Jewish Rabbi by a member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The attacker was later tracked down to his home and shot by Israeli police whilst they attempted to detain him. On 10 November, a man was stabbed at the entrance to Tel Aviv's Hagana station in the south of the city, in what appears to have been a politically-motivated terrorist attack.

On 18 November, there was a terrorist attack in a synagogue in West Jerusalem which left five people dead, including one dual British-Israeli national. Two Palestinian men from East Jerusalem attacked praying worshippers in a synagogue in West Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox Har Nof neighbourhood. Israeli police killed the attackers at the scene. Mr Hammond condemned the appalling attack and issued a [statement](#).

There was also a spike in violence across Israel's Arab towns in mid-November, following the killing of an Arab Israeli man in the northern Arab town of Kfar Kana by Israeli police. Footage widely circulated on the internet appeared to show that he was shot in the back. The incident sparked riots, with tyre-burning, stone- and Molotov-throwing, road junctions blocked, and a heavy police presence. A Jewish man was narrowly saved from a lynching during the protests. There has been almost no violence since this spike, but the scale was the worst in Israel since 2000, when widespread violence left 13 Arab citizens dead.

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