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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

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Item 13 (b) of the provisional agenda

**Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable  
Development in the Arab States**

**Impact of conflict and occupation**

**(Ministerial panel 2)**

## I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. While the world is striving to realize the Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Arab region is struggling with conflict and its repercussions. It is witnessing the longest occupation in modern history, with almost 50 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinian and other Arab land. Since 2011, it has been through an unprecedented surge of violence. Currently, 7 out of 22 Arab countries are experiencing conflict and instability of varying intensity levels.

2. So far, about 26 million people were forcibly displaced<sup>1</sup> and the region has by far the highest ratio of refugees-to-population in the world. The collapse of basic health, education, water and sanitation services is putting Arab countries at risk of creating a ‘lost generation’ and reversing the development gains that they had achieved over the past decades. Today, one in five of all Iraqi children are at a great risk of death, injury, sexual violence, recruitment into the fighting and abduction.<sup>2</sup> Ten million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup> In the Syrian Arab Republic, four out of five Syrians now live in poverty, life expectancy has decreased by more than 20 years, and school attendance has dropped by some 50 per cent, with more than 2 million children out of school.<sup>4</sup> In Yemen, about 51 per cent of the population is suffering from food insecurity and malnutrition.<sup>5</sup> In Libya, around 2.44 million people are in need of protection and some form of humanitarian assistance. This includes internally displaced persons, the non-displaced conflict-affected population, refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.<sup>6</sup>

3. Conflicts seriously undermine social cohesion, giving rise to distrust and fear that encourage retaliation and lock communities in a vicious circle of insecurity. They corrode trust in the State, hinder provision and access to basic services, and limit educational and employment opportunities. Conflicts also erode confidence and cause capital and labour flight from the afflicted countries to more peaceful and productive ones. They empower actors whose personal interests lead to political decisions favouring a non-productive environment.

4. Demographic trends contribute to heighten the challenges faced by the region. Large cohorts of young people, with inadequate skills that do not match labour market requirements, are marginalized. Chronic unemployment and lack of opportunities indeed lead to frustration and exclusion that could lead to violence. A close relationship was found between unemployment, lack of opportunities for youth and conflict intensity in the Arab region.<sup>7</sup>

5. Armed conflict and civil unrest have also generated additional stress over the scarce natural resources in all Arab countries. The issues of water security, quality and access have become pressing, particularly as a consequence of displacement. In Jordan, for example, the mass influx of Syrian refugees has sped up groundwater exhaustion.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, environmental impact assessments in Lebanon found that the increase in

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>, accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, “A heavy price for children: violence destroys childhoods in Iraq”, June 2016. Available from [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq\\_Report\\_web.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq_Report_web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.unocha.org/iraq>, accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis>, accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-ipc-analysis-summary-findings-acute-food-insecurity-current-situation-overview>, accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.unocha.org/romena/about-us/about-ocha-regional/libya>, accessed 1 December 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), “Protracted conflict and development in the Arab region”, Trends and Impacts in Conflict Settings, Issue No. 4. E/ESCWA/ECRI/2015/2.

<sup>8</sup> Mercy Corps, *Tapped Out: Water Scarcity and Refugee Pressures in Jordan* (Oregon, March 2014).

the number of refugees has led to a drop in groundwater reserve levels and to degradation of water quality.<sup>9</sup> Competition for water and other natural resources may also be a major trigger of violence and unrest.

6. In a region where conflicts have had a strong detrimental impact on livelihoods and welfare, and have in turn been fueled by the lack of development opportunities, implementing the recently adopted 2030 Agenda is going to be an extremely difficult task. Its preamble indeed affirms that “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development”.<sup>10</sup> In Goal 16, Member States also pledge to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

## II. OBJECTIVES

7. This panel will provide a platform for dialogue among decision makers and experts on the immediate and long-term impact of conflict on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Arab countries; the drivers of conflict in the Arab region; its spillover effects; and how to design interventions to mitigate its repercussions. The panel is meant to support efforts in the formulation of development policies and plans that are geared towards the SDGs yet take into consideration the national and regional contexts, capacities and needs.

## III. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### A. INCREASING INCIDENCE AND INTENSITY OF CONFLICT

8. Half of the Arab countries have experienced at least one episode of conflict in the past five years, which represents one of the highest regional rates of conflict incidence. Conflicts in the region are expanding, intensifying and becoming protracted and recurrent. The failure of State institutions in carrying out their primary functions has led to the rise of non-State actors whose influence spreads across borders, and who are increasingly self-sufficient and driven by exclusivist or separatist ideologies.

### B. ISRAELI OCCUPATION IN PALESTINE: A PERPETUAL SOURCE OF INJUSTICE AND INSTABILITY

9. The Israeli occupation in Palestine is approaching its 50 years mark. Its devastating impact on the Palestinian people, economy, society and environment, and on development in the region, cannot be easily determined. The repercussions go beyond poverty, unemployment or loss in gross domestic product. Israel has directly confiscated 20 per cent of West Bank land,<sup>11</sup> and prevented access by Palestinians to approximately 68 per cent of West Bank land.<sup>12</sup> In Gaza, the compounded impact of occupation, blockade and recurrent military offensives left the economy devastated, with an unemployment rate at almost 42 per cent in 2016.<sup>13</sup> The fact that more than half of the Palestinian population under occupation suffers from food insecurity is a testament to the extensive and cumulative impact of this military occupation. Israel also denies 5.3 million registered Palestine refugees the right to return to their land, condemning most of them to live in refugee camps, thus exerting pressure on them and on host countries. Not only does the Israeli regime seem to constitute an apartheid regime; it also fosters violence, extremism and instability in the region, in direct contradiction with the SDGs, particularly Goal 16.

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<sup>9</sup> Lebanon, Ministry of Environment, European Union and United Nations Development Programme, *Lebanon Environmental Assessment of the Syrian Conflict & Priority Interventions*. Available from <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Energy%20and%20Environment/Publications/EASC-WEB.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> A/RES/70/1.

<sup>11</sup> A/71/86-E/2016/13.

<sup>12</sup> Calculations by ESCWA, based on data from A/68/77-E/2013/13.

<sup>13</sup> Data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics Labour force Survey, April-June 2016 Round (Q2/2016).

### C. THE RISE OF EXTREMIST NON-STATE ACTORS

10. The disintegration of State institutions in conflict-affected countries has opened spaces for communal-based, non-State actors who, for mobilization and legitimacy purposes, advocate religious, ethnic or regional affiliation over affiliation to the nation State. The so-called Islamic State and related extremist religious groups are the most glaring manifestation of such trends. Such groups take advantage of failing States by challenging their legitimacy and proposing competing security, social welfare and income services. Out of 23 countries affected by conflict worldwide, 17 are also witnessing violent extremism.<sup>14</sup>

11. Efforts to prevent violent extremism at the regional, national and community levels must be based on an understanding of its root causes and a recognition of the primacy of politics. Regional polarization has increased the proliferation of non-State actors competing for outside assistance and illicit activities, further militarizing societies. In some cases, the State even relies on militias to deal with real or perceived threats, accelerating the disintegration of its institutions. Such developments inevitably complicate national reconciliation processes and, worse, exacerbate a vicious circle of dependency on foreign actors and national fragmentation. If not reversed, they could seriously compromise the attainment of the SDGs, particularly SDG 16.

### D. LONG-LASTING IMPACT OF CONFLICT

12. The direct and indirect impact of protracted conflict on Arab populations will inevitably reach future generations. Research on the subject has shown that, through repercussions on health, education and livelihood, conflict damages skills formation, a process that is very difficult to reverse and yields diminished economic and political opportunities. Affected communities also suffer from increased competition for scarce services and resources, increased exposure to health problems, overcrowding of schools, and localized inflation and reduction in wages.

### E. INADEQUACY OF EXISTING APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

13. Since 2010, the nature and tactics of armed conflict have changed markedly, raising a number of difficult questions with regard to the modalities of engagement and the leverage available to neutral actors to convene and work towards a sustainable solution for peace. United Nations operations are often obliged to deploy in conflict situations in the absence of agreement, work amidst ongoing fighting and engage in negotiations for a national solution with an ever-increasing number of actors that often shift alliances or have conflicting interests.

14. Conflicts have also increased in intensity, are more intractable and more internationalized, with one or more countries not parties to the conflict intervening on behalf of States or local allies. International actors are taking sides, directly or indirectly, and constantly changing alliances or utilizing non-State armed groups for different purposes. Combatants and foreign terrorist fighters are increasingly seeking to influence State behavior through indirect strategies, including terror and pressure on the public and civilians, posing new threats for protection.

15. In view of these changes in the very nature of conflict, it becomes necessary to think beyond country-specific solutions and shift to regional political and economic strategies able to meet the needs of affected populations, in order to end their dependency on aid. Development and humanitarian institutions should also reconsider their assistance programmes and link humanitarian aid with development assistance. Modalities have to be sought to deploy such aid quickly and sustainably through State institutions, local governance structures, civil society and the private sector, where possible.

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.sustainablegoals.org.uk/development-countering-violent-extremism/>.

#### IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

16. The suggested discussion questions are as follows:

- What is the impact of conflict on the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region? What type of development interventions are needed, given the current conflict dynamics?
- What opportunities does the 2030 Agenda provide to help Arab countries break the conflict cycle?
- How important are SDGs 16 and 17 in relation to the region's priorities? Are they pre-requisite to implementation of other Goals?
- How can the 2030 Agenda be implemented in the region in the context of the persistent Israeli occupation and aggression on the Palestinian people?
- What are the available setups and strategies for implementing development goals that take conflict into consideration?
- How to address the mushrooming of extremist non-State actors? How conducive are SDGs 1, 5, 8 and 10 to minimizing inequality and addressing some of the motives of separatist and extremist movements? Are there lessons learned from other parts of the world? How can regional organizations support efforts to overcome this problem?
- How to achieve disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of combatants in their countries of origin? How to use DDR measures for preventing violent extremism so as not to undermine SDG 16 and peaceful co-existence?
- Are current peacebuilding approaches appropriate for today's conflicts? How can a regional approach to conflict resolution be made more effective and mitigate the impact of conflict on development outcomes?
- How can the generation of knowledge contribute to meet life-saving needs?

#### V. PARTICIPANTS

17. The panel session will include high-level representatives from member States, prominent experts, academics, members of the private sector and the civil society, and representatives of United Nations entities.

#### VI. LANGUAGES

18. The panel will be held in Arabic and English, with simultaneous interpretation.

#### VII. CONTACTS

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