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20 October 2020

To:

Mr. Gabi Ashkenazi

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Dear Mr. Ashkenazi,

Re: Expulsion of United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights staff from the oPt

We, human rights organizations in Israel, are appealing to you regarding your office's decision to "sever ties" with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). As part of this decision, it appears that the work visas of OHCHR personnel will no longer be approved or renewed. As a result, the office's international staff whose visas have expired are forced to leave, and new personnel cannot arrive.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has operated [in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)] – the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip – since 1996, for nearly 25 years. OHCHR staff must obtain visas from Israel, solely due to the fact that Israel, and Israel alone, decides who may enter the oPt.

Visas to this effect have been issued to OHCHR staff for decades. Now, however, in an unprecedented move, the office of which you are in charge has decided to stop issuing visas for OHCHR personnel altogether, thereby hindering the commissioner's work.

Successive Israeli governments have been engaged for years in efforts to silence justified criticism of their policies in the oPt, which inherently involve grave, ongoing and far-reaching violations of the human rights of millions of Palestinians. Based on Israel's policy, which seeks

to perpetuate this reality, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and other Israeli bodies have been conducting a targeted campaign – both overt and covert – of defamation, denunciation, and expulsion against Palestinian, Israeli, and international organizations and activists working to expose the truth about Israel’s policy in the oPt. As part of this smear campaign, these bodies have voiced false allegations of anti-Semitism, aiding terrorism, and a host of other lies to silence criticism and enable Israel’s continued occupation, oppression and dispossession of Palestinians without being held accountable for its actions.

This measure is the latest in a series of previous and ongoing such measures, including the imposition of draconian movement restrictions on Mr. Laith Abu Zeyad, an employee of Amnesty International’s Ramallah office; the expulsion of Human Rights Watch’s Israel and Palestine Director, Mr. Omar Shakir; the branding of Al-Haq Director Shawan Jabarin as a “terrorist in a suit,” and so on. Moreover, Israel’s prime minister recently welcomed the United States’ sanctions against the International Criminal Court in the Hague, in another aggressive bid to intimidate a major international body working to protect human rights.

The severance of ties with OHCHR and the refusal to renew its staff’s visas undermine the UN Commissioner’s work in the region and violate Israel’s obligation, under the UN charter, to cooperate with its agencies and allow them to operate in the territory under Israel’s control, to carry out their work and to fulfill the UN’s mission.

However, these censorship attempts are bound to fail: They will not succeed in hiding the implications of Israel’s policy and the human rights violations it commits in the oPt, nor will they silence or hinder us, our work, or that of our colleagues.

We call on you to rescind the measures taken against OHCHR staff, to renew their visas as required, to issue new visas, and to allow OHCHR to properly continue its work.