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PEACE PROCESS**

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
23 July 2013**

Madame President,

Let me open with best wishes to our Muslim colleagues on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan.

Madame President,

1. As the Middle East continues to go through a deepening crisis with an ever deteriorating humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and significant political developments in Egypt, the Middle East peace process remains critical for the fate of the region. Progress in the peace process and a more constructive dynamic between the parties would have important positive political regional implications. Conversely, a continued deadlock will further erode the hope for an agreed two-state solution. In the effort to renew a serious dialogue between the parties time is of the essence.

2. It is against this compelling background that the Secretary-General has welcomed Secretary Kerry's intense diplomatic efforts in recent months and the Secretary's announcement in Amman, Jordan, that the basis has been established to resume direct final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. We understand the agreement is still in the process of being finalized, and that Palestinian and Israeli negotiators will join Secretary Kerry in the near future in Washington to begin initial talks. We also note that some very tough choices will be required from both sides in the period ahead. Both leaders will have to win the support of their domestic constituencies for renewed negotiations. The meetings President Abbas held with the PLO Executive Committee and the Fatah Central Committee serve as an indication thereof. The Secretary-General, encouraged by the positive development towards negotiations has called on both sides to show leadership, courage and responsibility to sustain this effort towards achieving the two-state solution.

3. While US engagement is central, we are convinced of the need for a broader regional and international role in support of any political initiative, as well as continued efforts to ensure that the Palestinian Authority remains a viable interlocutor and partner. In this regard we appreciate the Ministerial meetings of the Arab League Committee with Secretary Kerry and President Abbas in Amman which made a significant difference with their statement of support. And we commend in particular Jordan's important contribution to the present efforts. It is crucial to build on the opening offered by the recent reaffirmation by the Arab League ministerial committee of the Arab Peace Initiative and the prospect of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and achieving regional peace. We continue to hope that Israel will find a constructive way to respond to it. As for the United Nations, this Council may rest assured that the Secretary-General and I on the

ground will continue our engagement in support of the ongoing vital effort to revive meaningful negotiations. EU Foreign Ministers, in their Council conclusions of 22 July have also reaffirmed that they will give active and concrete support to help ensure negotiations between the parties are successful. Quartet Envoys have recently been briefed on the efforts underway and intend to meet soon to review the situation and assess how the wider international community can lend effective support to resumed negotiations.

Madame President,

4. Efforts to bridge the gaps between the parties have been commendable, but more hard work lies ahead of us. As Secretary Kerry noted, it will be important that tangible progress is made before the next General Assembly meeting in September. The United Nations has been clear that progress this year can only be expected if a credible political horizon to achieve the negotiated two-State solution emerges. Similarly, plans to shore up the Palestinian economy with a major boost to private sector development are welcome and indeed necessary, but must now be complemented by progress on the political track. In the near to last chance to preserve the viability of this solution, we remain hopeful that renewed negotiations will be substantive and set a clear path towards a two-state solution, the end of conflict, and lasting peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Nobody else but the parties themselves can make the hard choices required to achieve peace, but the international community and the region should cooperate in a concerted and committed manner to drive the peace process forward.

5. We should further stress that any negotiations must be accompanied by a renewed focus on visibly and tangibly improving the situation on the ground. Both parties must take every possible step to promote conditions conducive for the resumption of a political process and refrain from actions that undermine trust. In doing so, we must not forget the situation in Gaza, where practical steps to improve the humanitarian and security situation in the wake of transformations in Egypt can be an important enabler for peace and stability. We feel this is also the time for bold steps to enhance the understanding on the ceasefire reached in November 2012 through Egyptian good offices.

Madame President,

6. Turning to events on the ground, the situation in the reporting period can be summarized as relatively quiet, but tense and volatile at the same time. The potential risk for increased instability and violence in the West Bank was illustrated on 11 July when Israeli security forces reported seizing a rifle, ammunition and two pipe bombs during a raid in Nablus. Palestinian security forces continued working to maintain law and order in the West Bank. On 12 July a Palestinian explosive engineering unit safely disposed an unexploded ordinance near Qalqiliya.

7. We are concerned about continued prisoner's protests, including of a number of hunger strikes lasting already more than two months. On 14 July, Jordanian detainee Abdallah Bargouthi was transferred from prison to an Israeli hospital in critical condition after 76 days of continuous hunger strike. We note that President Abbas has consistently called on Israel to address the legitimate concerns of Palestinian prisoners and, as a confidence building step, to consider releasing prisoners, including those convicted in times predating the Oslo agreement. With

parties having now agreed to resume negotiations I have little doubt that a meaningful prisoners release would help to build confidence and improve the situation on the ground.

8. Israeli security forces conducted a total of 360 search and arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, including in Area A, resulting in one Palestinian shot and killed on 2 July, 134 Palestinians injured, including 24 children and six women. Three members of Israeli security forces were also injured. 419 Palestinians were arrested by Israeli security forces. This includes Hamas' Palestinian Legislative Council member Mohammed Abu Teir on 2 July in Ramallah, after having previously been deported from Jerusalem.

9. Against the background of a UNICEF report of last March on treatment of Palestinian children by the Israeli security forces, we are also troubled by the detention in Hebron on 9 July of a five-year old Palestinian boy for several hours in a stone throwing incident. The IDF is reportedly checking this incident and reviewing its policies regarding the detention of children.

10. Israeli security forces announced a crackdown on Israelis suspected of carrying out so-called "price tag" attacks, with a number of reported arrests, including of one suspect in connection to the desecration of the Latrun monastery last September. Tensions continued on the ground as a result of settler attacks injuring 13 Palestinians and causing extensive damage to Palestinian property. Palestinian attacks on settlers also resulted in two injuries and some material damage.

11. Following last month's reported slow-down, demolitions of Palestinian property in Area C and in East Jerusalem increased again during the reporting period. A total of 83 structures were demolished, leading to the displacement of 129 Palestinians, including 45 children.

12. I regret to inform that, despite earlier reports of Israeli restraint on settlement activity, the reporting period witnessed some renewed steps in settlement planning both in the West Bank, and to a lesser extent in East Jerusalem. Steps towards approval and advancement of settlements include 70 housing units in Har Homa, between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, 84 units in Nokdim, in the Southern West Bank, and 700 units in Modiin Ilit. A report of the Israeli State comptroller issued on 17 July noted that there was little to no criminal law enforcement in the settlements regarding violations of planning and construction law and that administrative procedures for demolitions are rarely implemented.

13. Of note, on 19 July the European Commission, drawing from earlier Council conclusions, issued guidelines which stipulate that it would provide grants and maintain relations only with Israeli institutions within the 1967 line. The guidelines, to come into force on 1 January 2014, prescribe that any Israeli legal entity receiving funding from the European Union will have to state that it has no links to the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, or the Golan Heights. Israeli officials have voiced their strong objection to these guidelines.

14. The position of the United Nations regarding settlements is unequivocal; they are contrary to international law and Israel's commitments under the Road Map. Continuing settlement activity would not be conducive to creating a favorable environment for negotiations.

15. In a positive development, Israel is providing a considerable number of permits for Palestinian residents of the West Bank to visit Jerusalem and Israel during Ramadan and applying more flexible regulations at checkpoints and points of passage during the holiday. Nevertheless, visits between 10-17 July of Israeli groups, including senior officials, to the Temple Mount/Haram ash Sharif, resulted in some clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police accompanying these groups. We urge all parties to show extreme restraint and keep the calm around this holy site.

Madame President,

16. In Gaza the relative calm observed in June has been largely maintained during this reporting period. A total of three rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, without resulting in casualties or damage. There were also no reports of Israeli airstrikes into Gaza. Israeli forces conducted six limited incursions into Gaza and in some instances the Israeli Navy forced Palestinian fishing boats ashore by shooting in their vicinity. No casualties were reported on either side.

17. The situation on the ground in Gaza has been affected by the political developments in Egypt. For security reasons, the Rafah crossing was closed for nearly a week, and since 11 July reopened partially to allow limited categories of people and those stranded on either side of the crossing to return home. Egypt also deployed two additional battalions in the Sinai to address security concerns. However, on 4 July two explosions were heard in the Israeli Southern city of Eilat, without any casualty or damage, reportedly resulting from rockets fired from the Sinai. A Salafist group, Ansar Beit El Makdas, took responsibility for the shooting. We strongly condemn any such shootings.

18. The Egyptian authorities also took robust measures against the tunnels into Gaza. As a result of these actions against illegal activity, according to some estimates, 80 per cent of the tunnels are now no longer functioning. Gaza is beginning to experience some serious shortages of fuel and basic building materials for which the tunnels had become the primary entry point due to severe restrictions on imports via the official crossings and the higher cost of fuel available from the West Bank and Israel.

19. While the only Israeli crossing for goods, Kerem Shalom, has remained open and is handling increased quantities of consumer goods, we are concerned that already difficult economic and humanitarian conditions in Gaza will further deteriorate, if access into Gaza through legal crossings of basic commodities like building materials is not liberalized. We are aware that the Palestinian Authority has approached the Israeli Government on the matter, requesting that remaining restrictions on the entry of building materials via Kerem Shalom be lifted.

20. We encourage all parties not to forget the precarious situation in Gaza and to take advantage of the improved context between the parties to further lift the remaining closures. We call on Israel to liberalize the entry of key construction materials into Gaza, so that the private sector will be able to legally procure these materials to satisfy Gaza's infrastructural needs.

21. The opening of Gaza and lifting of remaining closures is part of the November 2012 understanding on the ceasefire. The other part is adherence to a full calm. We therefore call on the de-facto authorities in Gaza to heed their commitments. Any violation of the ceasefire by rocket fire at this politically delicate juncture is not only unacceptable but also completely irresponsible. We also call on Egypt to maintain the Rafah crossing open for people with due consideration for Egypt's security requirements.

22. Let me briefly mention a few other developments. The United Nations Mine Action Service reported the removal over the past six months of most unexploded ordnance that were dangerously stored in Gaza City, thereby greatly improving protection of civilians there. Over 2,000 items of unexploded ordnance have been safely destroyed since January 2013.

23. We continue to be concerned about death sentences in Gaza, outside of the Palestinian legal framework. Further to the four such sentences and two executions carried out during the last reporting period, a man was sentenced to death in Gaza on 14 July. We call on de facto authorities in Gaza to refrain from carrying out further executions.

Madame President,

24. You all heard the reports of the grim situation in Syria last week from Emergency Relief Coordinator Amos, High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres and Assistant-Secretary-General for Human Rights Simonovic. The bloodshed in Syria continues unabated. The Government continues to use its military might against civilian areas, while increasingly attracting foreign fighters and using paramilitary forces. Parties to the conflict continue to fail in their obligation to protect civilians. Humanitarian needs are outpacing our efforts to increase the delivery of assistance throughout Syria. The surge in sectarian threats and violence in Syria and across the region is deeply worrisome. Syria is increasingly turning into a regional, if not a global, battleground.

25. Unfortunately, the warring parties have not responded to appeals for a cessation of violence during Ramadan. All fighters in Syria should be reminded that those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law will be held accountable. Recent reports of military victories by the Government should not create false confidence that the conflict can be won militarily. The legitimate demands of the people in Syria cannot be met with arms, but only through vision and leadership by all Syrians, the Government and the opposition alike.

26. In this regard, we continue to do our best to ensure that the Geneva Conference takes place as soon as possible. Joint Special Representative Brahimi has pursued his consultations and convened in Geneva two rounds of tripartite meetings with the Russian Federation and the United States to prepare for the Geneva Conference on Syria. While progress has been made and convergence found between the two Initiating States of the Conference, a number of parameters are still under discussion.

27. On 6 July, the Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces elected a new leadership. The General Assembly of the Coalition also increased its membership from 63 to 114 to include, inter alia, representatives of the Syrian Democratic Platform led by

veteran opposition figures. It is hoped that the laudable enlargement of the Coalition proves to be an expression of Syria's political spectrum rather than a mere response to exogenous factors.

28. The Secretary-General remains gravely concerned at the reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. The United Nations has received 13 such reports so far. In addition, the Russian Federation on 9 July presented to the Secretary-General its analysis of one incident of alleged use. This and other information is currently being studied by the investigating mission. High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Ms. Kane and Professor Sellström will visit Damascus this week to complete consultations on the modalities of cooperation required for the proper, safe and efficient conduct of the UN investigation mission. The Secretary-General hopes that the meetings in Damascus will result in a mutual understanding on the access for the mission to conduct its fact-finding activities and establish the facts pertaining to the reports received by the Secretary-General.

29. On the Golan, the situation remains volatile with heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition occurring inside the area of separation. UNDOF reported that during intense clashes in the vicinity of Al Qataniyah on 16 July, several artillery rounds landed in close proximity to UN positions, as well as across the Alpha line. These military activities in the Area of Separation have a potential to escalate the situation between Israel and Syria, and jeopardise the ceasefire between the two countries.

Madame President,

30. In its Presidential statement of 10 July, this Council unambiguously stated the need to redouble efforts to preserve Lebanon from the spillover of the conflict in Syria. The Secretary-General welcomes the Council's unity and continued attention, and its support for the efforts of President Sleiman and the Lebanese Armed Forces to preserve national unity and stability.

31. Following the fighting in Sidon last month between supporters of the Salafist Sheikh Assir and the Lebanese Armed Forces, the security forces arrested dozens of suspects. Twenty-seven have been charged, including Assir. Related violence broke out in Tripoli on 29 June and again on 2 July, causing three fatalities. There is a real danger of further escalation in violence, extending from the conflict in Syria. On 9 July, a bomb in Beirut's Shiite southern suburbs injured 53 people and caused extensive material damage. On 7 July three people were injured, including two soldiers, when a bomb exploded near Hermel, and on 16 July at least two members of Hizbullah were injured in a roadside bomb on the Masnaa highway.

32. At the political level, two sessions of Parliament scheduled for 1 and 16 July to vote on an extension of the term of the Army Commander and other issues were postponed due to a lack of quorum. Prime Minister-designate Salam continued efforts to form a government. The delay in forming a government is a matter of concern. We reiterate our call on all sides to engage constructively in this regard.

33. In a visit to Lebanon on 3 July, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stressed the need for Palestinians in Lebanon to disassociate from the conflict in Syria and from any internal tensions in Lebanon. On 14 July, the Lebanese security forces seized a vehicle with arms and

materiel reportedly en route to Syria. On 16 July, President Sleiman reiterated his call for implementation of the Baabda Declaration. He stated his intention to call a session of the National Dialogue to discuss a defence strategy for Lebanon and consider solutions to the current crises.

34. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line continued to remain broadly quiet. UNIFIL protested the violation of the Blue Line on 12 July by IDF soldiers to secure the surroundings of the Sheikh Abbad tomb during a visit by pilgrims on the Israeli side. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis.

Madame President, let me conclude,

35. Last week witnessed a promising opening in the efforts underway to develop a meaningful political initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. We have now reached a decisive point. In recent years we have shared frustration at the political deadlock. This is the moment to translate our collective call for action into a shared sense of urgency in supporting leaders on both sides as they must realize that this is an opening they cannot afford to lose.

36. Progress indeed necessitates serious political commitments if leaders on both sides are to achieve the vision of the two-state solution they have both agreed on. We do not underestimate the difficulty of developing a substantial initiative that should provide a credible horizon for achieving a two-state solution at long last. But we cannot emphasize enough that this is the moment for concerted action and continued support to the parties. The risks of foregoing the present opportunity should be clear for both sides. As the United Nations, we remain convinced that achieving the two-state solution, ending the occupation that started in 1967 and ending the conflict as envisaged by relevant resolutions of this Council are in the best interest of both Israelis and Palestinians.