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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

19 December 2012

Mr. President,

1. This is the final briefing on the Middle East for 2012. While I spoke to you with concern only a few months ago about how the world's gaze was shifting away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is fair to say that recent events have forced it right back into focus. What has transpired in the closing months of this year should remind us, at the very least, just how much the momentum for the two-state solution has slipped and just how hard we should be working in the year ahead to reverse this trend while there is still time to do so.

2. As you are well aware, on 29 November the General Assembly accorded Palestine Non-member Observer State status in the United Nations, which was greeted by peaceful celebrations across the West Bank and Gaza strip. Following this important vote, the Secretary-General underlined that the Palestinians have a legitimate right to their own independent State, and Israel has the right to live in peace and security with its neighbours. There remains no substitute for negotiations to that end, and the vote underscores the urgency of a resumption of meaningful talks. The Secretary-General, dismayed by some of the language used by various parties on the occasion of this vote, also appealed to all concerned to act responsibly.

3. Following the adoption of the resolution, the Israeli government announced it would approve plans for settlement construction of 3,000 housing units in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and most alarmingly, indicated that planning will proceed on several thousand housing units in the 'E1' area of the West Bank between Jerusalem and the settlement of Maale Adumim. The Secretary-General has expressed his grave concern and disappointment over these announcements. Many international leaders have done the same. In addition, the Israeli Government decided to expedite the construction of some 6,500 housing units in East Jerusalem which have already been approved,

including in Givat Hamatos. Settlement construction in the West Bank including East Jerusalem violates international law, and is an obstacle to peace. If implemented, these plans would represent an almost fatal blow to remaining chances of securing a two-state solution. These developments add to an increasing number of settlement approvals in recent months. According to NGO reports, there has been a threefold increase in the number of new settler housing units which were issued for tender in 2012, compared to 2011. We are not reassured by comments by some Israeli officials that these announcements are, in part, only symbolic in nature, given the clear history of how settlements have developed and expanded since the signing of the Oslo accords. We strongly urge the Israeli government to heed the wide international calls to rescind these plans.

4. On 12 December, Israel's Minister of finance signed the forfeiture of Palestinian funds in the amount of 435 million shekels, approximately 115 million USD, which were transferred to the Israel Electric Corporation. While the Secretary-General has noted his appreciation of Israel's willingness in recent months to advance clearance revenues to the Palestinians to address fiscal needs, we believe that this unilateral Israeli decision on the use of Palestinian funds undermines the integrity of the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, the decision by the Government of Israel to withhold Palestinian revenues casts doubt upon Israeli compliance with Paris Protocol provisions related to the full, timely, predictable and transparent transfer of tax and customs revenues. It comes while the Palestinians already face a dire fiscal situation that puts at risk the considerable achievements made by the Palestinian Authority in recent years under the leadership of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. The Palestinian Government has been unable to pay the salaries of its employees. Demonstrations by Palestinian teachers took place in the West Bank on 16 December and following days to protest such non-payment. We call on Israel to reconsider its decision and resume the transfers of revenue without delay, and we note the importance of Israel and the Palestinian Authority determining through direct talks the resolution of any outstanding financial claims.

5. On 9 December the League of Arab States' Follow-up Committee on the Arab Peace Initiative met in Doha. The final communiqué outlined next steps, including transferring additional funds to the Palestinian Authority to compensate for revenue lost as a result of retaliatory measures to the General Assembly vote. The Secretary-General hopes that the Arab states and others who expressed their support for the Palestinian vote in the General Assembly will indeed follow through with tangible, rapid, and generous disbursements to help the Palestinian Authority address the needs

of the Palestinian people on the ground. The Arab League also expressed doubt about the international architecture for the peace process and announced future consultations with stakeholders in the international community.

6. Palestinian leaders have discussed going beyond the General Assembly vote to approach additional international bodies. In particular, President Abbas has stated that the Israeli announcement related to E1 has crossed what he describes as a 'red-line'. A dangerous stand-off has emerged as a result. Confrontational statements from both sides will only lead the parties further away from achieving the two-state solution that remains their stated commitment. It remains vital that the parties avoid negative steps that undermine the situation on the ground and complicate a return to negotiations.

7. In this context, Quartet envoys met in Brussels on 12 December. They discussed ways to help the parties avoid escalation diplomatically and on the ground in the short-term, while also finding a way back to negotiations. It is clear that new impetus must be found for substantial peace efforts early in 2013, and the United Nations will continue its active engagement with all concerned to that end. Regional actors and Quartet partners have an important role to play. On 10 December, the European Union Foreign Affairs ministers reaffirmed the EU positions, including on parameters for negotiations, and reiterated that ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a strategic priority. The Arab Peace Initiative also remains a critical supportive framework, which should be encouraged and nurtured.

Mr. President,

8. The backdrop to these developments is a worsening security situation in the West Bank, a fragile calm in Gaza after last month's round of hostilities and a shifting geopolitical landscape in the region. In the West Bank, the effectiveness of the Palestinian security forces and their coordination with Israeli security forces have been repeatedly tested during the reporting period. Citing security concerns, Israeli security forces increased operations and arrests in the West Bank. From 27 November to 17 December, a total of 182 operations resulted in two Palestinians killed, 159 Palestinians injured and 182 Palestinians arrested, and seven Israeli soldiers were also injured. It is of particular concern that Israeli forces reportedly arrested several members of Palestinian security forces and intelligence. On 6 December in central Hebron, a confrontation between Israeli soldiers

and Palestinian police officers reportedly resulted in injuries to nine Palestinians and the arrest of over 20 Palestinians.

9. In another incident, on December 3 near Nablus, a Palestinian allegedly rammed his vehicle into another vehicle carrying Israeli security personnel. According to Israeli reports, the Palestinian attacked the soldiers with an axe, injuring two. Israeli security forces shot and killed the Palestinian. On 12 December in central Hebron a Palestinian teenager was shot dead by Israeli forces as he allegedly threatened soldiers. Riots followed and more than 20 Palestinians were injured.

10. Confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli settlers occurred on an almost daily basis, mostly consisting of stone throwing from both sides, resulting in injuries and material damage. So called “Price Tag” attacks vandalized Palestinian assets near Ramallah and Hebron and desecrated a Christian monastery in West Jerusalem. Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly expressed revulsion at these events. On 4 December Israeli security forces detained three Israelis near Hebron, suspected of carrying out such attacks.

11. Israeli security forces demolished 14 structures in the occupied West Bank, including the Al Mafkara mosque near Hebron. These demolitions resulted in the displacement of 41 Palestinians. In another concerning development, in the early hours of 11 December Israeli security forces, in another incursion into Palestinian-controlled area A, raided the Ramallah headquarters of three Palestinian NGOs and reportedly confiscated sensitive materials, including computers and cameras.

12. Three recently arrested members of the Palestinian Legislative Council were sentenced to six-month administrative detention. We are alarmed by the news of the arrest of more than 500 Palestinians in November in the West Bank, which is more than double the number of arrests reported in the September and October briefings.

13. We continue to be concerned about the approximately 4,400 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention centers. Their situation was discussed at an Arab League conference on Palestinian prisoners, which was held in Baghdad on 11-12 December. We are particularly worried by indications that some detainees have continued their hunger strikes despite initial progress after the agreement to end hunger strikes in May of this year. On 2 December, Israeli authorities resumed family visits for Gazan prisoners jailed in Israel.

14. On 12 December, the Palestinian Cabinet announced the second round of local elections will take place on 22 December, after being postponed due to the outbreak of violence in Gaza.

Mr. President,

15. The calm in Gaza brokered by Egypt on 21 November has largely held, but it remains tenuous. Since the last briefing, one rocket has been fired from Gaza into Israel and one Israeli tank shell has landed in Gaza. Israeli security forces conducted two incursions into Gaza. One Palestinian civilian was killed and 37 Palestinian civilians injured by Israeli fire, mostly while the Palestinians attempting to approach the border fence. A number of Gaza fishermen were also attacked by Israeli forces while navigating in the vicinity of the new fishing limit of 6 nautical miles, resulting in one fisherman being shot and injured, over 30 briefly arrested and the damage to, and confiscation of, some Palestinian fishing boats. More generally, the impact of last month's violence has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of some of Gaza's poorest people and left up to 3,000 people in need of emergency shelter support. In terms of humanitarian funding requirements identified by the UN and NGO partners, \$12-13 million are required to meet immediate needs just for the remainder of 2012. Moreover, at least \$70 million are required to kick start humanitarian response in the first months of 2013.

16. Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal visited Gaza for the first time from 7 to 10 December 2012. His visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the founding of Hamas, an event which was attended by a number of foreign delegations and Fatah. Khaled Meshaal expressed support for an end to the Palestinian divide. The United Nations supports Palestinian reconciliation, in the context of the PLO commitments, which remains a central and yet unimplemented element of Security Council resolution 1860. But the United Nations condemns the inflammatory remarks made by Khaled Meshaal with regard to Israel in his main speech and rejects any attempt to promote violence as a way to achieve political goals or to deny Israel's right to exist. Israel has legitimate security concerns that must be respected and ignoring or dismissing Israel's legitimate security concerns undermines the prospects for a two-state solution.

17. I would like to reiterate that the ceasefire provides an opportunity to address the underlying causes of conflict captured in resolution 1860 (2009). While talks continue in the effort to

implement the Understanding related to the ceasefire, we strongly urge all parties to strictly abide by the understanding, starting with security. The parties must agree on policy changes that address the causes of instability in Gaza and the recurrent eruptions of violence. Such changes must include an end to weapons smuggling and a full opening of crossings. UNSCO remains in close contact with Egyptian authorities to encourage progress on all aspects on the understanding for the ceasefire. In particular we advocate for a further extension of the maritime boundary, unrestricted entry of aggregate, iron bar and cement, and transfers of goods between Gaza and West Bank, as well as exports to Israel and beyond. In parallel, it is important that tangible means be identified and implemented to end weapons smuggling. The UN stands ready to assist the parties in all aspects of these issues.

Mr. President,

18. In Syria, whose conflict is now in its 22nd month, violence and military confrontation have escalated dangerously. The Secretary-General, in a statement over the weekend, expressed his growing alarm over this escalation, particularly the reports of sectarian killings in the village of Aqrab, in Hama province, and the violence which has engulfed the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. All parties are failing in their obligations to protect civilians. This Council should remind those engaged in hostilities of their obligations to abide by international humanitarian law and stress the consequences for those who fail to do so.

19. Valerie Amos briefed this Council in private consultations two days ago on her visit to Syria and stressed the severity of the increasing humanitarian crisis. More than half a million people have fled the violence to become registered refugees in Syria's neighbours and other states. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq now host over 150,000 145,000, 135,000 and 65,000 Syrian refugees respectively, making Lebanon host to the largest registered number of Syrian refugees in the region. In addition, there is a growing number of Palestinian refugees from Syria present in Lebanon, including 2,000 to 4,000 who have crossed in recent days, mainly coming from the Yarmuk camp. During their recent respective trips to the region, the Secretary-General and the Deputy-Secretary-General witnessed first hand the dire situation of the Syrian refugees. They thanked the host countries for their generosity and hospitality, and pledged to call on donors to lessen their financial burden. While it is important that Syria's neighbors continue to allow those fleeing violence in Syria

to enter their countries, helping these countries cope with the situation and address the needs of the refugees must be a priority for the international community.

20. We ask donors to contribute more generously to our efforts, and respond to the revised appeal that is launched today. Only about half of what is needed to meet the needs of people inside Syria and refugees has been received. This is grossly inadequate.

21. As we have repeatedly underlined, the military approach pursued by both sides in Syria comes at a devastating cost in terms of human lives and destruction, and breeds a serious risk of sectarian and communal strife, radicalization and terrorism. If nothing is done to change the current dynamic, and to move toward a political solution, the destruction of Syria, will be the likely outcome.

22. Long-standing fears that the conflict in Syria would seriously threaten the stability and security of Syria's neighbours have intensified. During his trip earlier this month to Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, the Secretary-General heard from all the leaders he met expressions of concern about the possible political and security fallout. In addition to Syria's neighbours, the conflict in Syria has also directly affected UNDOF's area of operation and consequently UNDOF's ability to fulfill its mandate, as acknowledged in the resolution this Council adopted a moment ago. On Monday, USG Ladsous briefed this Council in detail on the recent report of the Secretary-General on UNDOF, including daily clashes between the Syrian army and armed opposition in the area of separation, and several occasions of direct and indirect fire at UNDOF positions or convoys, in particular an incident on 29 November in which peacekeepers were injured.

23. In this regard, allow me to reiterate that the primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the area of separation and the area of limitation on the Bravo side rests with the Syrian Government. Countries with influence should also impress upon the armed members of the opposition the importance of ensuring the freedom of movement and the safety of UNDOF personnel. More generally, let me take this opportunity to remind all belligerents that they must respect and ensure the safety and security of all United Nations personnel, associated personnel and humanitarian personnel in conflict zones.

Mr. President,

24. The situation in Lebanon remains severely affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria. Cross-border shelling and arms smuggling continue. Multiple reports suggest that there are Lebanese implicated in Syria's violence, both on the side of the Assad regime and the opposition. This violates the Lebanese government's "dissociation" policy and puts Lebanon increasingly at risk. On 30 November, according to reports, approximately 14 Lebanese fighters were killed by Syrian regime forces near the town of Tal Kalakh in Syria. The Tal Kalakh incident sparked a new round of fighting in Tripoli between the Sunni neighbourhood of Bab al Tabbaneh and the Alawite community of Jebel Mohsen, resulting in approximately 14 killed and over 60 injured. Calm was restored after the Lebanese Armed Forces deployed heavily in the neighbourhoods affected and around the city following the adoption of a new security plan by the Higher Defence Council on 9 December. Once again, the Lebanese Armed Forces and security forces are to be commended for their role in containing threats to Lebanon's security and stability. During his visit to Lebanon from 9 to 11 December the Deputy Secretary-General reinforced to all his interlocutors our strong message of support to Lebanon's efforts to preserve internal stability, unity and dialogue against the difficult backdrop of the Syrian crisis.

25. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained generally quiet. There was however an explosion on 17 December near the southern village of Tayr Haifa. The nature and circumstances of the explosion are being investigated by UNIFIL in coordination with the LAF. The increased operational tempo of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces during the recent hostilities between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has since reverted to previous levels. UNIFIL maintained its enhanced presence across its area of operations as the LAF continue to operate at a lower strength of approximately two brigades and one battalion. Israeli violations of the Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis.

Mr. President,

26. On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is too much pain and anguish, disillusionment and dismay, and – as we saw in the recent violence between Gaza and Israel -- genuine fear and frustration. As fellow human beings, I hope we can all feel empathy for both the Palestinians and Israelis who, in wanting to raise their children to live normal, happy, peaceful lives in viable independent states, are not seeking unreasonable goals. At the same time, we must not allow the airing of bitterness and grievance, however strongly felt, to be a substitute for the constructive, hard work of practical, tangible conflict resolution.

27. With the New Year nearly upon us, we believe that it is important to look forward, in hopes that we can work collectively to change the dynamic of impasse to one of real momentum toward a two-state solution. Whatever it may mean in a practical sense, the General Assembly vote last month symbolizes the growing international impatience with the longstanding occupation and a resounding endorsement of Palestinian aspirations to live in freedom and dignity in an independent state of their own, and side by side with Israel in peace and security. 2013 will be a decisive year in the peace process. It is incumbent upon all of us to support the parties in stabilizing the situation and permitting progress toward the goal of achieving a two state solution that is so critical for regional peace and security.