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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**  
**ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**24 January 2012**

Mr. President,

1. After 15 months of absence of direct talks, I am pleased to report that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators started meeting on 3 January in Amman under the auspices of King Abdullah and Foreign Minister Judeh of Jordan and in the presence of Quartet Envoys and Quartet Representative Blair. Since this first meeting, a series of direct preparatory talks were held under Jordanian auspices. The parties began discussing important issues related to territory and security, in accordance with the Quartet statement of 23 September 2011. They are also discussing ways to build confidence and create a positive environment for these talks to succeed.

2. The Secretary-General commended the Palestinian and Israeli leaders on these important first steps, and expressed his appreciation to His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan for his initiative to facilitate talks and give new impetus to the Middle East peace process. The Secretary-General, who was in Lebanon ten days ago, will soon visit the region again to support the search for peace.

3. We remain hopeful that the preparatory meetings between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators will continue and will ultimately lead to serious negotiations based on comprehensive proposals on territory and security, and reaching an agreement for a two-State solution by the end of this year, as envisaged by the Quartet. In the short term, it is essential that provocations stop, as called for by the Quartet and that early progress is made to build confidence among the parties and sustain these nascent talks.

4. Neither the international community nor the parties can afford to let this opportunity pass by. The Secretary-General continues to call on the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to show vision, courage and determination to reach a historical peace agreement that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the people on both sides.

Mr. President,

5. Unfortunately, actions on the ground continue to contribute to tensions. Settlement activity in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, has continued during the reporting period, and Under-Secretary-General Amos briefed this Council last week on the current situation. Violence between Israeli settlers and Palestinians also remains troubling. On 25 December, an Israeli woman was injured by stone throwing at her car near Hebron. On 9 January, seven Palestinians were arrested by Israel Defense Forces near Ramallah for throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at vehicles traveling on road 443 through the occupied territory. Settlers injured twelve Palestinians, including four children. Three Palestinian children were hit

and injured by Israeli vehicles in Hebron and Nablus between 10 and 12 January. On 11 January, a mosque near the Palestinian town of Salfit was desecrated with Hebrew graffiti referencing “price tag” in connection with the dismantlement of an outpost. Settler attacks on Palestinian orchards also resulted in injuries and more than one hundred Palestinian trees being uprooted.

6. During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished structures related to a number of unauthorized outposts. The demolition of outposts is an Israel commitment under the Roadmap. However, in parallel, new initiatives to retroactively legalize some outposts were advanced by the Government and at the Knesset. Israeli authorities also demolished 88 Palestinian structures in different locations of the West Bank during the reporting period, including 7 in East Jerusalem, citing lack of building permits. Demolitions included 21 residences and 25 water-related structures.

7. Citing security, Israel Defense Forces conducted 336 operations in the occupied West Bank, during which 74 Palestinians were injured, including three children, and 273 Palestinians were arrested. Two IDF soldiers were also injured. IDF arrested nine Palestinians allegedly in the possession of illegal weapons and ammunition. On 4 January, IDF shot and injured a Palestinian at a checkpoint near Bethlehem. On 22 January, a Palestinian man reportedly carrying a metal object was shot and injured by IDF soldiers at the Qalandia checkpoint.

8. In another concerning development, several members of the Palestinian Legislative Council have been arrested by Israeli security forces. On 19 January, two Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council were arrested, including Speaker Aziz Dweik. On 23 January Israeli security forces entered the compound of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jerusalem and detained the two remaining Palestinian Legislative Council members who have been seeking refuge there since July 2010. Last night, another Hamas PLC member was arrested from his home in Ramallah. Two other PLC members were previously arrested at the ICRC building and transferred to Ramallah in 2011. The Palestinian negotiator subsequently delivered a letter to his Israeli counterpart complaining about the detention of the PLC Speaker, referencing Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody in general and calling for their release. We are troubled by reports that the Israeli authorities have subjected Mr. Dweik and possibly others to administrative detention.

Mr. President,

9. Palestinian security forces continued to maintain law and order in the parts of the West Bank under the control of the Palestinian Authority. On 29 December, Palestinian security forces seized and defused an improvised explosive device and on 6 January they arrested eight Palestinians on criminal charges in Hebron. On 14 January Palestinian firefighters put out a blaze on an Israeli bus traveling south of Hebron and evacuated Israeli passengers. We also would like to remind the parties of their Roadmap commitments to end incitement. In this regard, we have noted with concern the statement of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem on 9 January **at a ceremony broadcast on Palestinian Authority television.**

10. The Palestinian Authority continues to build its institutions which in April 2011 already had achieved a level sufficient for a functioning government of a state. However, in a meeting

with Special Coordinator Serry on 16 January, Prime Minister Fayyad expressed his grave concern about the financial situation of the Palestinian Authority. In 2011, direct budget support only reached 742 million US dollars out of the 1 billion US dollars that was expected. Continued shortfalls could challenge the impressive progress realized through the statebuilding agenda. The United Nations encourages donors to deliver their contributions for 2012 as early as possible in the year.

11. The pace of economic growth slowed in the third quarter of 2011, increasing by only 0.5% over the previous quarter. This however, was still a 12% increase over the third quarter of 2010. During the third quarter of 2011 the West Bank actually saw its real economy shrink by 0.3%, whereas the Gaza Strip experienced an economic expansion of 2.6% in real terms. The structure of GDP in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip reveals a continued concentration of economic activity in non-tradable sectors, including certain services, public administration and construction. Sustained growth will require an expansion of this productive base and the tradable goods sector. Increased measures to enable this and reduce access impediments will be essential for continued growth, such as manufacturing, mining and agriculture.

12. Weekly demonstrations continued in the West Bank against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice of 2004. Clashes with Israel Defense Forces left 28 Palestinians injured; one Israeli soldier was injured by rock throwing.

Mr. President,

13. Turning now to the situation in Gaza, a total of 29 rockets and 12 mortar shells fired from Gaza hit Israel without resulting in injuries or damage. Israel Defense Forces conducted 6 incursions and 10 airstrikes into Gaza, resulting in 4 Palestinian militants killed, 7 militants injured and 15 Palestinian civilians injured. We condemn in the strongest terms any indiscriminate firing towards civilian areas and call on Israel to show maximum restraint. Obligations under international humanitarian law must be respected for the protection of civilians. It is essential to strengthen the calm to improve the conditions of the population in Gaza.

14. We continue to call for the lifting of the closure in the framework of Security Council resolution 1860. In the short term, we believe the full opening for the import of construction materials would bolster the legitimate Gazan economy and enable much needed reconstruction activities. It is important that exports are allowed to resume at scale, including transfers to the West Bank and Israel. These changes could be applied with due consideration for Israel's legitimate security concerns and could make a significant difference in the lives of many Gazans. We will continue to work with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority in this regard. At present the United Nations has received approvals for a total of approximately 270 million US dollars of works requiring construction materials that are still classified as 'dual use'. However, three key UNRWA housing projects, totaling over 60 million US dollars have yet to be approved.

15. Efforts between the factions to advance Palestinian reconciliation are continuing. Fatah and Hamas representatives met again in Cairo on 21 December to that end. On 14 January, the Palestinian Central Election Commission obtained permission to re-open its offices in Gaza. We continue to support Palestinian unity within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Mr. President,

16. Allow me to turn to the situation in Lebanon. From 13 to 15 January, the Secretary-General visited Lebanon and held talks with President Sleiman, Prime Minister Mikati and Speaker Berri, as well as a number of representatives of Lebanese parties. The Secretary-General also paid a visit to UNIFIL Headquarters in Naqoura in support to the mission and efforts of UNIFIL peacekeepers who play a crucial role in preserving the calm along the Blue Line.

17. In his discussions with Lebanese interlocutors, the Secretary-General reiterated the United Nations unwavering commitment to Lebanon's stability and security, as well as the need for Lebanon to meet all of its international obligations, including those under the relevant Security Council resolutions. He strongly encouraged President Sleiman's effort to re-convene the National Dialogue, including to enable progress on the development of a national defence strategy that would address the question of arms outside the control of the State.

Mr. President,

18. A number of security incidents that illustrate the continued fragility and vulnerability of conditions in UNIFIL area of operations took place during the reporting period. On 19 December, four rockets were found and subsequently removed by the Lebanese Armed Forces near Wadi Khancha. A UNIFIL investigation is ongoing. On 28 December, an explosion, the third since mid-November, took place in Tyre in front of a restaurant, causing minor damage. The Lebanese authorities are conducting investigations into the explosions. All these incidents are violations of resolution 1701 as they manifest a presence of unauthorized weapons and related material in the UNIFIL area of operations.

19. The investigations into the rocket launchings towards Israel on 29 November and 11 December and the attack against UNIFIL personnel on 9 December in the vicinity of Tyre are still ongoing. UNIFIL, in co-operation with the Lebanese Armed Forces, intensified its operational activities and maintains a high level of vigilance in order to prevent any hostile activities.

20. In an ongoing violation of resolution 1701, almost daily Israeli violations of the Lebanese airspace continued during the reporting period.

Mr. President,

21. The situation along the Lebanese-Syrian border remains of concern. On 27 December, three Lebanese nationals were killed and one injured in the area of Wadi Khaled by gunfire from

the Syrian side of the border. President Sleiman condemned the killing and called for an investigation of the incident. On 21 January, a sixteen-year-old Lebanese fisherman was killed at sea off the coast of Arida at the Lebanese-Syrian border. Two other fishermen were detained by Syrian security forces, and subsequently released.

22. The United Nations continues to monitor the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon. As of 13 January, UNHCR and the Government have registered over 5,660 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The significant increase in number is largely due to intensified registration with UNHCR and the Government. The United Nations continues to coordinate closely with the Government of Lebanon on the provision of assistance to the displaced.

Mr. President,

23. While in Lebanon, the Secretary-General also attended a conference on “Reform and Transitions to Democracy in the Arab World” organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). In his keynote address to the meeting, the Secretary-General outlined the United Nations’ firm commitment to help Arab countries through the transitions that they have embarked upon. The Secretary-General also reiterated his clear call on President Assad to stop the violence and the killing of people.

24. For over ten months now, Syria has continued to be engulfed in a violent political crisis, with a rising death toll on a daily basis. The Arab League Foreign Ministers met in Cairo on 22 January and passed a resolution that proposes a political plan, with a specific timeline, for resolving the crisis in Syria. The plan calls for all violence and acts of killings to stop. It reminds the Syrian authorities of their obligations to withdraw all military forces outside cities and populations centers, release all prisoners, ensure the freedom of peaceful demonstration and ensure full and unhindered access to the Arab league organizations and Arab and international media throughout the country. The plan also calls on the Syrian authorities and the opposition to engage in a serious dialogue under the auspices of the Arab League with the objective of forming a transitional national unity government to oversee a peaceful transition to a democratic and pluralistic political system. The Arab League resolution envisages that the Secretary-General of the Arab League and the Chairman of the Arab League Committee on Syria inform this Council and seek its support. The Arab League ministers also decided to extend the Arab observer mission by one month, and requested Mr. Al-Araby to continue his cooperation with the United Nations Secretary-General to provide assistance to the LAS observer mission. The Syrian authorities rejected the resolution, which it described as a flagrant interference in Syria’s internal affairs with the aim of drawing foreign interference.

25. Mr. President, time is pressing for violence and human rights violations to stop and for a credible, inclusive and Syrian-led political process to start in Syria, with the aim of effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and ensuring the full exercise of their fundamental freedoms. We hope that the international community will act in a concerted and coherent manner in support of ongoing efforts for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Mr. President,

26. Turning back to the Middle East peace process, let me conclude by reiterating our determination to contribute to the ongoing talks, help the parties build mutual confidence, and develop concrete proposals on territory and security. Leadership is needed to ensure that the process moves forward with the support of regional and international partners. As the Secretary-General recalled in Beirut, a two-State solution is long overdue. The status quo only offers the guarantee of future conflict. We must all do our part to secure a lasting peace that will end the occupation, end the conflict and realize the legitimate rights of all.

27. The parties should now redouble their efforts to resolve all permanent status issues, end the conflict, and establish an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace with a secure Israel, in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions, the Roadmap and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Thank you, Mr. President