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

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[As Delivered]

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I address you today with grave concern about the trajectory of the situation in the Middle East.

The war in Gaza with all of its human tragedy, the serious risk of regional escalation, and the unresolved Israeli – Palestinian conflict and continued occupation are combining to create a combustible situation in the whole of Middle East. Our individual and collective capacities to manage or resolve these crises are stretched beyond their limits. Any spark or miscalculation could set off a series of uncontrollable escalations – embroiling millions more in conflict. We need a ceasefire now.

We must continue all efforts to alleviate human suffering in the region – that means an immediate ceasefire and release of hostages in Gaza, it means diplomatic steps for de-escalation in the region, and it means irreversible moves toward re-establishing a political framework to end the conflict and establish a two-state solution. If any one of them remains unaddressed then prospects for a more stable, peaceful and secure region will remain elusive.

Mister President,

The war in Gaza continues to take a staggering toll on human life. In the more than ten months of war since the horrific acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October 2023, more than 40,000 Palestinians and over 1,600 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed. 109 Israelis are still held in Gaza, and the ones alive denied humanitarian visits. Tens of thousands of people have been injured, the vast majority of them Palestinians, including a staggering number of women and children.

In Gaza, incidents of mass civilian casualties, airstrikes by Israel on schools and mosques sheltering the displaced, and the wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure are fueling suffering and violence, which is reverberating throughout the broader region.

The indiscriminate launching of rockets by Hamas and other groups towards population centers in Israel continues. Civilian objects, including infrastructure, and UN premises, are also reportedly being used to shield fighters and military objectives, endangering the lives of civilians around them. The lives of the remaining hostages are at grave risk.

Many Palestinians in Gaza feel they have nowhere safe left to turn. Over the past month, around 200,000 Palestinians have been affected by evacuation orders. This is merely the latest round of mass displacement in Gaza, where nearly two million people have been forced out of their homes and shelters during the war, most of them multiple times. Eighty-five per cent of the Strip has come under evacuation orders since 7 October.

Mister President,

Despite facing overwhelming challenges, UN agencies and humanitarian organizations continue to deliver life-saving assistance with remarkable courage through all available crossing points. However, their efforts are jeopardized by unsafe conditions on the ground, which are exacerbated by a complete breakdown of law and order.

If these unacceptable conditions are allowed to prevail, humanitarian operations in Gaza will continue to fall short of meeting the massive needs of the population.

Mister President,

The scale of destruction is immense and it will take years, if not decades, to recover. The UN is working to repair and improve almost entirely defunct water, sanitation, and hygiene systems in Gaza. The five wastewater treatment plants have shut down and five out of six solid waste management facilities are damaged. The Palestinian Ministry of Health just confirmed the first cases of polio in 25 years. 1.6 million doses of Polio vaccine have been released for a campaign scheduled to begin on 31 August. The UN estimates nearly 40 million tons of debris have been generated in this conflict. Clearing the debris from key areas alone is estimated to take at least five years.

Mister President,

While the eyes of the international community are focused on Gaza, the occupied West Bank is a tinderbox of violence and tension.

Israeli security forces continue to carry out large-scale operations in Area A, including targeting Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other armed groups in densely populated refugee camps and Palestinian urban centres. These operations often result in lethal exchanges with these groups in addition to the killing or injury of bystanders.

Fatal attacks by Palestinian militants on Israelis in the West Bank and Israel have continued, including a failed bombing attack claimed by Hamas and PIJ in Tel Aviv on 19 August.

The Israeli settler rampage in the Palestinian village of Jit near Nablus that killed one Palestinian and critically injured others on 15 August was yet another illustration of the violent consequences of settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank and the persistent lack of accountability for such crimes.

Inflammatory rhetoric and provocative acts are further enflaming the situation. In recent days we have seen Hamas threaten to launch a new campaign of suicide bombings. We have also seen two Israeli ministers, alongside hundreds of Israelis, visit the holy esplanade on the Jewish holiday, Tisha B'Av.

Let me be clear, if we are to prevent yet another spiraling escalation, the violence must end – there are no justifications for acts of terror, civilians must be protected, and the incitement must stop. Any violation of the status quo at the holy sites must also be firmly rejected.

Mr. President,

The war in Gaza and the deteriorating situation in the occupied West Bank are continuing in the context of wider regional tensions and the threat of even more serious escalation.

Across the Blue Line and beyond, exchanges between Israel and Hizbullah continue to intensify, particularly following the recent strike in Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan, which resulted in the killing of 12 children, followed by a subsequent strike in the southern suburbs of Beirut that killed a senior Hizbullah commander.

In the wider region, several fatal events exacerbated tensions: Aerial attacks toward Israel from various locations across the region that Israel has attributed to Iran-backed forces, including a Houthi drone strike on Tel Aviv; Israel's strike that targeted Hudaydah port infrastructure in response; and the killing of Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas' politburo in Tehran.

Mr. President,

With all of these negative trends, and after more than 300 days of war in Gaza, we are at an inflection point in the Middle East.

A ceasefire and hostages release deal in Gaza is imperative *now* for regional peace and security.

I have continued to emphasize that message in support of regional de-escalation in discussions with the relevant parties and Member States in the region, including Lebanon, Egypt and Qatar.

I commend the mediators – Egypt, Qatar and the United States - for their continued relentless efforts in Doha and Cairo this week. I urge the parties to reach a deal in the coming days. There is simply no time to lose.

The UN remains committed and ready to scale up humanitarian assistance during a ceasefire and supporting implementation of a deal. Only a sustained ceasefire can enable a full-scale humanitarian and early recovery response in Gaza.

Mister President,

The profound social, economic and political fallout from this devastation is yet to be seen and comprehended.

We must work to put in place as soon as possible the political and security frameworks necessary to more ably address the humanitarian crisis, start early recovery and eventually rebuild Gaza, as well as change the negative dynamic in the West Bank

These political and security frameworks – even ones that are considered transitional - cannot be divorced from the context of the ongoing Israeli occupation and unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are no short cuts and no quick fixes.

Security and governance are intrinsically linked and must be addressed in tandem to achieve a lasting peace in Gaza and address the West Bank situation. It is imperative that we establish a comprehensive political framework that is accepted by the Palestinian population and addresses their legitimate aspirations and grievances, while also addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns. The UN will strongly support this work.

This framework must facilitate a Palestinian government that can effectively govern both Gaza and the occupied West Bank and ensure stability and security across the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The Palestinian Authority must be at the center of governance in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. There is simply no credible alternative.

However, to achieve this and to promote a more durable and credible model of governance to ensure stability and security for Palestinians and Israelis, steps must be taken by all parties and by the international community to strengthen and support the PA.

Violence in the occupied West Bank needs to be significantly reduced, including violence taking place in the context of scaled-up Israeli security operations. Palestinian security forces need to be supported and empowered to carry out their responsibilities fully.

Israeli measures that weaken the PA need to be urgently addressed – including IDF operations in Area A, settlement expansion, settler violence and extreme financial pressures.

The international community must work together to address the PA's persistent financial crisis, strengthen its capacity and enable its return to Gaza. Recent commitments from the World Bank and the European Union offer the promise of relief, but will not resolve the precarity of the PA's fiscal situation. We must work together to strengthen the ability of the PA to meet the needs of their people.

Most importantly, for any of these efforts to be credible or durable, a political horizon must be re-established. Security fixes alone will not lead to a more stable future for anyone in the region.

But let us not be naïve about what is required. It will take concerted effort from committed leaders, from the region and the international community. It may also require us to rethink how we get there. The steps I have outlined above – which are informed by the principles I outlined to you in May - are a start.

Mister President,

Ultimately, the only path out of these vicious cycles of despair is a political horizon that will end the occupation and achieve a two-State solution Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both. The United Nations will continue to support all efforts towards that goal.