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

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Mr. President,

Let me congratulate you with your stewardship of the Council this month and also express a few words of gratitude for the support I received over the last two years from the Permanent Representatives of Argentina, Australia, Luxembourg, the Republic of Korea and Rwanda. Your presence in the Security Council will be missed.

I brief today against the backdrop of a dramatic year, during which we witnessed a serious effort at a negotiated settlement stalling yet again, another devastating 51-day war in Gaza, and increased violence and tension throughout the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem.

Israel is heading to the polls. The recent collapse of the ruling coalition, less than two years into its tenure, has paved the way for early general elections scheduled for 17 March 2015. As the country begins this new chapter, the deadly diplomatic vacuum can be no excuse for either side to let the present situation get even worse.

Now is the time to deescalate and refrain from provocative steps, re-build trust and set conditions for a return to negotiations that will resolve this conflict. As the Secretary-General and I have consistently warned, hope for a lasting solution to the conflict must be restored before it is too late. Israelis and Palestinians still demand an end to the conflict despite their strong malaise on the peace process itself.

Making headway in at least salvaging prospects for resolving the conflict will require the active role of the international community. We cannot walk away from our responsibility to advocate for a meaningful framework for peace.

In a continuation of an ongoing trend in Europe, parliaments in France, Spain and Portugal adopted non-binding resolutions that call upon their respective governments to recognize a Palestinian state. These are significant developments that serve to highlight growing impatience at the continued lack of real progress in achieving a two-state solution and that Governments are under increased public pressure to promote an end to the conflict once and for all.

I note the recent League of Arab States' meeting in Cairo where it was agreed to present to the Security Council a draft resolution setting a timeframe for the creation of a Palestinian State. I understand consultations are also ongoing among Council members to

present a resolution outlining the parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian final-status agreement.

While important, we must recognize that these actions are not a substitute for a genuine peace process that will need to be negotiated between both parties. The Secretary-General hopes that Security Council action will generate constructive momentum towards the creation of a meaningful and effective framework for renewed negotiations. Such a move by the Security Council would constitute a major step on this conflict since the adoption of Security Council resolution 242, almost 50 years ago.

In the meantime, the situation on the ground remains explosive.

I am deeply troubled by the recent escalation of tensions in Jerusalem and the West Bank as daily clashes continue to take place between Palestinians and Israelis. While the conflict has consistently had religious underpinnings, what is increasingly worrying is that it is now becoming more religiously inspired.

On 18 November, two Palestinians killed five Israelis and injured several others at a West Jerusalem synagogue, before being shot dead by Israeli police. The Secretary-General strongly condemned the attack, for which there can be no justification whatsoever. He rejects any attempts to honor those who carried out such crimes.

On 29 November, a Jewish-Arab school in Jerusalem was set on fire and vandalized with anti-Arab graffiti. Several Israelis were arrested in connection with the crime which was strongly condemned by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Overall, a total of 633 Palestinians, including 73 children, were injured and another 406 were arrested by Israeli security forces during the past month. Nine Israeli soldiers and 20 Israeli settlers were also injured in clashes with Palestinians. On 10 December, Palestinian Minister Ziad Abu Ein died after protest activity near the village of Turmus Ayya that resulted in a confrontation with Israeli security forces. This Council encouraged the parties to ensure that a swift and transparent investigation into the circumstances of his death is undertaken.

I would also like to acknowledge that constructive steps have been taken by parties concerned to deescalate the tensions surrounding the holy sites as per the understandings reached in Amman last month in the presence of US Secretary of State Kerry. The Secretary-General and I hope that these commitments to maintain the status quo regarding the holy sites will continue to be implemented. We note that there has been a decrease in the numbers of Jewish activists visiting the holy compound and the lifting of access restrictions on Muslim worshippers. For the first time since 2007, Palestinians from Gaza were permitted to worship at the Al-Aqsa mosque. These are encouraging developments that should be continued. President Abbas' calls for calm have also been welcome.

In contrast, I am concerned that Israel has reinstated its practice of punitive demolitions, after almost a complete halt for nearly a decade. During the reporting period, six structures were demolished in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, resulting in the

displacement of 21 Palestinians, including 11 children. One of these demolitions was of punitive nature, when the IDF on 19 November demolished the family house of the Palestinian who, on 22 October, drove his car into a light train station, killing two. These acts, targeting family homes of perpetrators of attacks against Israeli citizens, are a form of collective penalty that contravenes international law and risk undermining the already fragile situation. They are wrong and counterproductive.

Mr. President,

I will now turn to the situation in Gaza where despite some initial setbacks, the delivery of construction material via the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism continues and in fact has been scaled up significantly over the past two weeks. As of 10 December, more than 17,000 individuals requiring construction material for shelter repairs have been cleared to purchase materials under the temporary mechanism. Of those, close to 8,000 home owners have been notified and procured materials as of last night. The Ministry of Public Works will now notify a further 10,000 individuals over the course of this week and around 25,000 home owners are expected to have access to construction materials by the end of December.

Construction materials are entering Gaza in quantities ensuring sufficient stocks for vendors. On 7 December, 44 trucks loaded with close to 1,800 tons of cement for reconstruction entered Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing. It was the largest quantity shipped in one day in years. In total over 22,000 tons of construction material have been imported by private sector vendors to date, of which over 17,000 tons has already been procured by individuals. I must reemphasize though that this temporary mechanism is not a substitute for the lifting of all closures on Gaza as laid out in Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

Trade between Gaza and the West Bank has been re-established, yet remains much below the potential. Transfers of fish and vegetables from Gaza to the West Bank have risen from one truck per day to 11 trucks per day in November.

Despite these positive developments the situation remains very fragile. Up to 80,000 families are living in houses that have sustained varying degrees of damage while eighteen UNRWA school buildings continue to serve as collective centres for some 19,000 internally displaced persons. The urgency to address these needs is compounded by the extreme weather Gaza has experienced in recent weeks with the early arrival of the rainy winter season.

As the mechanism begins operating at scale, forging a clear and realistic plan for Gaza is vital, if we want to give Gazans hope. I envisage the following three priorities to be achieved in the next three years:

We must bring affordable energy, sufficient water and the physical reconstruction of Gaza. The Strip's chronic electricity shortages cannot be met by endless and costly interim measures, however necessary in the short term. Gaza needs access to natural gas

for its only power plant to create affordable energy as well as a desalinization plant that will meet its pressing water needs. I believe it is possible to address these pressing needs, if we can be assured that crossings will be open for all required materials to enter the Strip in predictable and transparent flows, while addressing reasonable Israeli security concerns. The temporary mechanism is an important tool only in this regard.

Let me be clear, these ambitious goals cannot be reached without urgent and consistent international engagement, but any vision for Gaza's future cannot escape the current reality on the ground. Acceleration of Gaza's reconstruction process is being held back by several factors, many of which are political: the ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza has still not been solidified; the Government of National Consensus in Gaza has still not taken up its rightful governance and security functions and has no control over the crossings; civil service reform is urgently required and thousands of government staff are still not being paid. And perhaps most urgently, the reconstruction effort still requires funds. Firm donor commitments to fulfill pledges made at the October Cairo Conference is crucial. Lack of progress on these fronts can fatally undermine our capacity to face the challenges ahead and bring back hope to the people of Gaza.

I also hope that challenging security considerations will soon be overcome for Egypt to re-open the Rafah crossing, which remains crucial as a terminal for people to leave or enter.

If these and other challenging issues are not addressed, the atmosphere in an already devastated Gaza will only worsen and we are beginning to see the security implications of these persistent pressures on Gazan society. Recent incidents include one Palestinian civilian being shot and killed by Israeli security forces on 23 November - for the first time since the ceasefire - and militants reportedly test fired a total of 20 rockets towards the sea. Reports are also increasing that extremist elements are seeking to gain a foothold in Gaza. On 12 December an explosion took place on the perimeter of the French Cultural Centre compound in Gaza, injuring two guards. This is the second time the French Cultural Centre has been targeted. We note Hamas' condemnation of the attack. Pending transfer of the security responsibilities to the Government of National Consensus, we continue to hold Hamas responsible for the safety of UN and all international staff in Gaza.

I must warn that Gaza can now go both ways. We have the opportunity to make advances, but if critical issues remain unresolved, I fear we may be heading towards another implosion with dire consequences.

Mr. President,

Let me now say a few words about Syria, the Golan and Lebanon before closing.

The Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. de Mistura, is continuing consultations on his proposed action plan for conflict, including operationalising a "freeze" in the city of Aleppo. The precise parameters of the freeze plus arrangements are

now being negotiated separately with the Syrian parties and on the basis of wide consultations inside and outside of Syria. The Special Envoy completed a visit to Istanbul and Gaziantep last week and will visit Riyadh later this week. His Deputy recently visited Tehran and arrived in Damascus on 12 December.

The proposed Aleppo freeze is distinct from previous local ceasefires and is intended as a building block towards an inclusive national political process without preconditions based on the framework of the Geneva Communiqué.

On the Golan, the situation remains volatile with intermittent heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups occurring in the areas of separation and limitation. On 7 December, UNDOF observed two aircraft from the Alpha side flying north-east over the area of separation and entering the area of limitation on the Bravo side. This is a violation of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. These events jeopardise the ceasefire between Israel and Syria. On 17 December, the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations will brief the Council on the situation.

Turning to Lebanon, the Deputy Secretary-General is currently in Beirut for a two-day visit on the occasion of the launch of the new Lebanon Crisis Response Plan to address the refugee presence in the country. The visit is an opportunity to reaffirm the solidarity and commitment of the United Nations, consistent with the Security Council's support for Lebanon's stability and security, which remains fragile.

On 8 December, three Syrians in Aarsal were killed by a Syrian airstrike. On 5 December, a member of the Lebanese security forces was executed by his captors, while 25 other Lebanese soldiers and security personnel are still held hostage by Al-Nusra and ISIL. On 2 December, six Lebanese soldiers were killed in an attack on an Army patrol by militants near Ras Baalbek by the Syrian border. We strongly condemn all attacks on the Lebanese Armed Forces.

On the political front, Speaker Berri has announced that preparations are underway for dialogue between Hizbullah and the Future Movement and that a first session may be expected before the end of the year. We encourage such efforts which may ease tensions and help address outstanding concerns, the most pressing of which remains the resolution of the seven month-long vacuum in the Presidency.

Mr. President,

In conclusion, we have reached a dramatic moment in the quest for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly if that peace - as we have consistently advocated - is to be based on a two-state solution. I feel 2014 changed the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the future is more uncertain than ever. As I have alerted this Council, I am deeply concerned that a one-state reality is on the parties' doorstep if they fail to address the present deadlock.

The people of Israel and Palestine deserve better, they are in need of hope, hope that their future will see peace and end of conflict at last. Reversing the trust deficit must now take

precedence - prolonging the status quo is a sure fire route to failure. The international community, including this Council, has a responsibility and important role to play in shaping a way ahead. Yet ultimately, it is for Palestinians and Israelis and their leaderships to take the courageous steps, now more necessary than ever, to salvage a peaceful and secure future for their people.