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

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Madam President, Members of the Security Council,

Some two months ago the Secretary-General visited Jerusalem and Ramallah to support collective efforts to stop the violence which had begun to erupt in Israel, the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza.

It is sad that over the past few weeks, despite a decline in attacks, the bloodshed has not stopped with some seven Israelis and 34 Palestinians killed during the reporting period. Stabbings, vehicle attacks and shootings by Palestinians targeting Israelis continue to claim victims on an almost daily basis – including, just two days ago, serious injury to a one and a half year old baby, one of eleven victims of a car ramming in Jerusalem -- as suspected assailants are shot and killed in return and as clashes continue to result in Palestinian deaths.

Hebron continues to be a hotspot and the most volatile component of the current escalation.

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I reiterate the United Nations' firm condemnation of all terrorist attacks. Leaders on all sides have the responsibility to stop incitement and to consistently, and unequivocally stand against acts of terror and violence in all its forms.

Madam President,

The current circumstances should not be accepted as “the new normal”. Israelis and Palestinians should not be resigned to living under the threat of violence. However, a comprehensive strategy to limit that threat cannot rely uniquely on enhanced security measures. It must also address the primary elements motivating Palestinian anger.

I am pleased to report some positive developments in this regard: Tensions have calmed around the flashpoint of Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and efforts are underway to implement the understandings reached between Israel and Jordan. The situation remains precarious and requires both sides to maintain an active and open communication.

Perceived impunity for settler violence against Palestinians has also driven violence. Positively, four months after the Dawabsha family was brutally murdered, a number of ar-

rests have been made. I take this opportunity to underscore the need to charge and swiftly bring the perpetrators of this terrible crime to justice.

At the same time grave concerns persist on a range of issues that continue to undermine prospects for ending violence and rebuilding trust. The injustices associated with an occupation which shows no prospect of ending feed into a perspective – particularly among the youth – that they have nothing to lose by sacrificing their lives.

Palestinians continue to endure extensive movement restrictions, intensified by the ongoing violence, which negatively impact access to basic services and livelihoods.

Ongoing demolitions against Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley, such as in al Hadidiya village a few days ago, remain troubling. All the more so as the relief provided to these households has been repeatedly seized by the Israeli security forces despite the onset of winter.

Israeli authorities have also carried out two punitive demolitions against families of those convicted or accused of attacks. Such acts are a clear violation of international law, aggravate an already tense environment and may be counterproductive.

Madam President,

Turning to Gaza, during the past month, Palestinian militants fired ten rockets toward Israel, two of which impacted Israeli territory, without injury. Palestinian militants in Gaza also conducted cross-border shooting at the IDF on two occasions. The IDF retaliated with four airstrikes. The United Nations reiterates its condemnation of the firing of rockets by militants from Gaza towards Israel. These indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas must stop.

Despite persistent security and governance challenges and funding shortages, the reconstruction process advances. More than 90 percent of damaged schools and hospitals have been repaired while repairs have either been completed or are ongoing on about half of all partially damaged homes. The key challenge is reconstruction of those homes – indeed those neighborhoods -- that were completely destroyed during the war and here, progress has been slow. Reviving the economy and productive sectors also remains a major outstanding task. Donors need to accelerate efforts to translate pledges into disbursements particularly for housing reconstruction. And let us not forget that repairing damage from the most recent hostilities will not fix the underlying chronic problems of Gaza.

Last week's global launch of humanitarian funding appeals included a \$571 million projected funding needed for Palestine. It covers a range of interventions from provision of legal assistance and the safe disposal of unexploded ordnance in Gaza, to the provision of basic services such as water and health. The appeal represents a 19 per cent reduction as compared to 2015, but remains elevated due largely to Gaza's significant humanitarian needs in the aftermath of the 2014 hostilities.

Madam President,

A political horizon to end the conflict now seems more distant than ever. Leaders on both sides cannot continue to ignore the underlying causes perpetuating violence and fueling extremism on all sides.

It is extremist voices that currently resonate. Voices that want to capitalize on the darkest of human emotions, while seeking to sabotage any genuine effort to rebuild trust.

But where are the voices urging restraint?

Where are the proponents of peace, tolerance and a shared Israeli-Palestinian future?

How can we begin to shift the momentum back towards these advocates of reason?

These questions demand answers, first and foremost from Israeli and Palestinian leaders. It is for them to choose whether they will show leadership in building sustainable peace and security, or will allow the future of their people to drift in uncertainty as radicalism and extremism take over.

Welcome Israeli statements committing to a two-state solution have yet to be followed by actions demonstrating the sincerity of that commitment. The settlement enterprise continues to deepen its roots within the occupied West Bank. The transition to greater Palestinian civil authority contemplated by prior agreements has yet to begin. Progress in the areas of housing, water, energy, communications, agriculture, and natural resources are lagging.

In the course of the last several months the United Nations and its international partners, have consistently advocated for Palestinian unity as well as for fundamental changes in Israeli policies on the ground. Such changes should bring tangible improvements to Palestinian lives by strengthening Palestinian institutions, economy and security. Without such steps, it is difficult to see how the parties can return to meaningful negotiations so as to reach a just and sustainable solution to this long-standing conflict.

Even as we speak, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet are in Israel and Palestine. They continue their efforts to promote significant steps on the ground, consistent with prior agreements that can restore hope to the Palestinian people and preserve the viability of a negotiated two-State solution.

In addition, we continue to look to the Security Council for any additional guidance on developing a new peace architecture for resolving the conflict.

Madam President,

Turning to Lebanon, let me reiterate the United Nations support for the leadership of Prime Minister Tammam Salam under difficult conditions. While Lebanon remains resilient in the face of serious challenges emanating from the conflict in Syria, the political paralysis in the country is preventing it from managing these challenges effectively.

We note the discussions in Lebanon on the question of the presidency which has now been vacant for over 18 months. The Secretary-General has consistently stressed the importance of Lebanese parties showing flexibility to enable the election of a president without delay. We sincerely hope that the current efforts can lead to an opening which will enable the institutions of State to function effectively. In the wake of last month's ISIL attack in Beirut, we further urge the international community to redouble efforts for Lebanon's security and stability. The release two weeks ago of the members of the Lebanese Armed Forces and security services held hostage by the Nusra Front since August 2014 is a welcome development. We hope for the speedy release of the remaining hostages held by ISIL.

Meanwhile, the situation along the Blue Line and in UNIFIL's area of operations has remained relatively calm. Both parties continued to work with UNIFIL through the established liaison and coordination arrangements. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on a daily basis.

Madam President,

Overcoming today's challenges in Israel and Palestine will require unprecedented vision by Israeli and Palestinian leadership to see beyond today's confrontations and take bold steps to create a peaceful future.

I call upon them to let go of their immediate political fears and focus on the greater good of achieving a sustainable long-term peace for the Palestinian and Israeli people.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting these efforts in every possible way.