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

16 SEPTEMBER 2014

Madam President,

I brief today in the context of an increasingly volatile region with developments on the ground developing at an alarming pace. I intend to make short reference to the situations in Syria and Lebanon, before focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and in particular in Gaza.

Let me start by recording the Secretary-General's appreciation of Member States' efforts to counter terrorism and stop the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Al-Nusra Front.

Let me equally stress that measures to counter ISIL should be accompanied by political measures to end the appalling violence in Syria and resolve the Syrian conflict. Special Envoy de Mistura has just completed a first visit to Damascus, looking for new openings.

As Council Members are aware from the recent update notes on UNDOF's operations, the situation on the Golan remains fluid. DPKO will brief the Council tomorrow on the most recent developments and steps taken.

The Lebanese Armed Forces have regained control of the border town of Aarsal from militants from Syria, including of the Al-Nusra Front and ISIL, but efforts to secure the release of 27 LAF hostages continue. We commend the efforts of Lebanese authorities to ensure calm and contain any popular reaction against Syrian refugees.

Against the backdrop of the conflict in Gaza, there were ten separate incidents of rocket launchings from southern Lebanon towards Israel between 11 July and 25 August, and five occasions of IDF response with artillery fire across the Blue Line. A relative calm has since been restored and the parties have reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of resolution 1701. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued.

We again urge Lebanon's political leaders to elect a president without further delay. We reiterate the international community's unified support for Lebanon's security and stability in the evolving regional context, and look forward to the upcoming ministerial meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon.

Madam President, let me turn to Gaza.

The Gaza conflict is an appalling human tragedy, and has also exacted a terrible cost in already strained trust. While the ceasefire brokered by Egypt has largely held since 26 August, it remains worryingly fragile, with the underlying dynamics still unaddressed.

I visited Gaza last week, and witnessed truly shocking levels of destruction to infrastructure, hospitals and schools. Large neighbourhoods lie in total ruin. An estimated 18,000 houses were destroyed or severely damaged. 100,000 people have lost their homes, leaving families shattered and despairing. Over 65,000 displaced Palestinians remain in UNRWA shelters, while 111 UNRWA installations sustained some form of damage during the conflict. More than 2,100 Palestinians were killed. Most were civilians -- including some 500 children and 250 women, and 11 UNRWA staff. More than 11,000 Palestinians were injured. On the Israeli side, 66 IDF soldiers and six civilians, including a child and a foreign national, were killed. Some 130 Israeli civilians and more than 450 soldiers were injured.

Israel struck over 5,000 locations in Gaza, and reportedly demolished 32 tunnels, 14 with openings inside Israel. Over 3,500 rockets fired by Hamas and other Palestinian militants struck Israel; another 700 were intercepted by the Iron Dome defense system.

We reiterate the Secretary-General's strong belief that efforts must be undertaken to ensure that there is accountability for alleged violations of international law on both sides during the hostilities. I would also note that the Secretary-General plans to commission a Board of Inquiry to review and investigate a number of incidents involving UN premises.

Leaving aside hollow claims of "victory" by one side or the other, I sense a realization in my dealings with the parties that a renewed conflict would be a disaster. This means that we must change fundamentally the dynamics in Gaza. If we do not, Gaza could implode – or, yet again, explode – possibly with a new and even more devastating round of violence. While distrust is acute, I hope all parties are ready to think a-fresh about some long-held policies. If so, we may be able, together, to walk a narrow path out of the current dangerous impasse. What does this path look like?

First, the fragile calm between Israel and Gaza must be solidified at talks under Egyptian auspices in Cairo, which we hope will resume shortly. The ceasefire agreement already made general provision for entry of humanitarian and relief aid and construction materials and an expansion of the fishing zone to six nautical miles. We hope that any further arrangements are as clear as possible regarding the indefinite maintenance of a ceasefire and the lifting of the closure, bearing in mind the framework of Security Council resolution 1860, and any further guidance that may be provided by the Council.

Second, humanitarian issues require immediate attention. Critical priorities include emergency shelter, energy and water, the absence of which will make progress in all other sectors impossible. In this regard, on 10 September, the UN and the Palestinian Government called for international donors to provide US\$ 550 million in aid to help the hundreds of thousands of Gazans affected by the conflict.

Third, Gaza must now be opened up for reconstruction and recovery, while legitimate security concerns regarding “dual-use” material must be meaningfully addressed. The Governments of Israel and Palestine understand this, and I appreciate the constructive engagement of both sides in working to find a solution on this issue. This reality is also understood in Gaza.

In this regard, I am pleased to announce to the Security Council that my office, UNSCO, has brokered a trilateral agreement between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the UN to enable work at the scale required in the Strip, involving the private sector in Gaza and giving a lead role to the Palestinian Authority in the reconstruction effort -- while providing security assurances through UN monitoring that these materials will not be diverted from their entirely civilian purpose.

Arriving at this agreement has not been without its challenges. We consider this temporary mechanism, which must get up and running without delay, as an important step towards the objective of lifting all remaining closures, and a signal of hope to the people of Gaza. We will brief the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) next week in more detail and update it on our progress, and we intend to keep this Council regularly informed. The implementation of this agreement should be facilitated by the proper overall context, and we would welcome the Security Council’s support and guidance in this regard. I also note that we will need to be sufficiently resourced for these additional duties, in addition to any other tasks that may be asked from the United Nations.

This temporary mechanism will also help to increase donor confidence that investment in construction and reconstruction works will be implemented expeditiously, and solely for their intended civilian purpose. This is important and timely in anticipation of the Gaza Reconstruction conference - scheduled for 12 October and hosted by Egypt and supported by Norway. I appreciate Israel’s announcement yesterday that it has approved a programme of over US\$ 105 million worth of UN projects that had been submitted prior to the recent conflict, in advance of the AHLC meeting of 22 September. I look forward to Israeli approval of an additional programme of work that the UN will present before the Cairo conference.

Reconstruction will require significant increases in the capacity of the crossings into Gaza to allow for the importation of the required materials. We must also look now to resume exports and West Bank-Gaza trade and links – something that would be facilitated if the Palestinian Authority is able to take full responsibility at Gaza crossing points.

This leads to my fourth point. The Palestinian Government of National Consensus – which is fully committed to the PLO principles under the leadership of President Abbas – must be empowered and enabled to assume its rightful responsibilities in Gaza and oversee the reconstruction of the Strip.

Civil and administrative reform must be addressed urgently, moving beyond the current de facto existence of two separate strands of administration in order to rationalize the public sector and create a unified payroll. In this regard, I am very concerned at the continued issue of unresolved payments to staff hired by the former de facto authorities. This problem needs immediate attention, linked to the rationalization process, if the situation is to be stabilized.

As part of the continued efforts at Palestinian reconciliation, we believe there must be clear understanding that the control of security forces is a matter solely for the legitimate authority; that the issue of war and peace is a matter for that authority, and not for militant factions; and that ultimately, the legitimate authority must have control over all armed personnel, assets and weapons.

I do not under-estimate the difficulties that remain among the Palestinians, but I have been active in urging them to address these issues during meetings which I hope will take place this week. The UN also stands ready to provide increased technical assistance to the Palestinian Authority, drawing on and, as required, expanding our unique presence in Gaza, as the Government of National Consensus takes up its challenges there.

Fifth, as we focus on Gaza, we must give new attention to the West Bank. We regularly draw attention in these briefings to developments on the ground, and I could give another recitation of statistics this month regarding violence, clashes, arrests and demolitions. However, I particularly note that Israel's declaration of 1,000 acres in the Bethlehem area as so-called "state land" risks paving the way for further settlement activity -- illegal under international law and contrary to the pursuit of two states. Compounded with the April 2014 declaration of approximately 250 acres of land in the same governorate as "state land", these are the largest "state land" declarations since the 1980s.

The commitment of President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to co-existence and peace was demonstrated by continued security coordination in the West Bank, despite the conflict in Gaza and heightened tensions on the ground. We must also not forget that it was events in the West Bank that were part of the downward spiral towards the recent war. Maintaining the status quo in the West Bank while addressing Gaza anew would send entirely the wrong signal. I am pleased that Israel has confirmed that an additional 5,000 West Bank Palestinians will receive work permits in Israel. But positive Israeli actions on a range of issues -- such as empowering and enabling Palestinian planning and construction in Area C, to say nothing of ceasing Israeli settlement activity -- would send a powerful message.

Finally, Madam President, all of these efforts must be put into a revised and credible political framework. This will not be easy. The gaps on substance and the mistrust evident in the last round of talks have not subsided -- if anything, positions may have further hardened. Palestinians remind us that prolonged occupation, as well as extended closure, breeds despair, particularly given the absence of an end-game based on the 1967 lines -- something which will be a focus of Palestinian diplomatic effort in the coming period. For their part, Israelis are alarmed at the tunneling and rocket fire from Gaza and view Hamas de facto control of the Strip with grave concern. This is also reinforcing their focus on the need for security arrangements in any future political agreement for two States.

If the parties wish to break out of the dynamics that seem to portend deeper conflict and mistrust, and if they still want two States, fresh thinking is urgently needed -- from them, and perhaps from the international community as well.

Madam President,

The crisis in Gaza is far from over and the window of opportunity to address critical needs and stabilize the situation is short. The devastation unleashed by this most recent round of conflict has left civilians on both sides feeling, once again, battered and embittered. Yet the interdependence of these two peoples has only been deepened, not lessened, by the latest disaster. If they fall into a new round of violence, they will be even more inter-twined yet even more distrustful in its surely appalling aftermath. We – they – all of us must act now and set a wiser and more responsible course.

The elements I have mentioned could, as a package, fundamentally change the dynamics in Gaza and rebuild faith of both Israelis and Palestinians – in themselves, each other, and the possibilities of peace and two States, based on end of occupation and end of conflict. Failing this, I see dangers of a further downward spiral.

When I warn that Gaza could implode, or explode again, or the two State paradigm could slip irreversibly away, I do not believe I am crying wolf. This Council should not under-estimate the dangers. I hope the Council will have the occasion to make its own position clear. This would be a welcome step of confidence, commitment and hope at a time when the parties and the world desperately need it.