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

22 August 2017

Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to brief you on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. As detailed by Special Coordinator Mladenov last month, the recent crisis in Jerusalem highlighted once again the unsustainability of the current situation, and the need for a political horizon and a clear re-commitment by the international community and both parties to ending the occupation and realizing a two-state solution that meets the legitimate national aspirations and security needs of both Palestinians and Israelis.

Following the deadly 14 July attack in which two policemen were killed by three assailants in the Old City, three Israelis were stabbed to death in a terror attack and six Palestinians were killed during primarily peaceful protests, two as a result of live ammunition, which raises concerns about the use of force by Israeli Security forces.

I join the Secretary-General in commending the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, in line with its special and historic role, for bringing this crisis to a conclusion. I would also note positively the calls for de-escalation by prominent religious leaders on both sides. We encourage continued discussion among all concerned parties to ensure the safety and security of all worshippers and visitors, while upholding the historical status quo in the holy sites.

In this context, continued security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is paramount, and the official resumption of contacts between the parties is vital.

Mr. President,

In other incidents in recent weeks, two Palestinians were killed and over 150 injured by Israeli Security Forces. Four Israelis were injured by Palestinians, including one civilian. On 28 July, a Palestinian man was shot dead by Israeli Security Forces for reportedly attempting to stab a soldier at the Gush Etzion junction in the West Bank. On 2 August, an Israeli civilian was seriously wounded during a stabbing attack by a Palestinian in the Israeli town of Yavneh.

On 8 August, militants in Gaza fired a rocket, which landed in an open area in southern Israel. The following day, the Israeli Air Force retaliated with missile fire at two Hamas installations in Gaza, injuring three people.

On 17 August, an alleged suicide bombing killed one and injured five other in the Southern Gaza strip.

Mr. President,

Over the past month, other developments occurred that further undermine trust between the parties. On 26 July the Israeli Knesset approved in a first reading, an amendment to the "Basic Law: Jerusalem the Capital of Israel." If approved, this law would further cement Israeli control over occupied East Jerusalem and would limit the ability of both sides to reach a negotiated solution that is in line with UN resolutions

and prior agreements. Jerusalem is a final status issue that must be resolved through negotiations between the parties. Any move which could impact demographics in the city is extremely worrisome and could spark violence.

On 25 July, 15 Israeli settler families illegally occupied the so-called Machpelah House in the divided city of Hebron, despite an ongoing Israeli legal process over ownership of the house. We urge Israeli authorities to resolve the situation quickly to avoid further tensions in this already highly charged town.

Settlers reportedly also placed mobile homes near the settlement of Halamish in response to last month's deadly attack there, as well as within the Shvut Rachel neighbourhood of the Shilo settlement.

On 3 August, the Israeli Prime Minister delivered an inauguration speech at the launch of the construction of 1,000 new housing units in the Beitar Ilit settlement. In the speech, he praised the achievement of his Government in promoting settlements.

Such actions only fuel perceptions that those working to obstruct the two-state solution are gaining the upper hand. I must reiterate that settlements are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

Mr. President,

In a few days' time, we will mark the third anniversary of the ceasefire that ended the last round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel in Gaza in 2014, in which close to 1,500 civilians were killed. Since then the overall humanitarian conditions in Gaza have worsened. This was clearly documented in a recent UN Country Team report which looked at the state of Gaza's population since Hamas's take-over of the Strip in 2007, increasing concerns that the strip could become unlivable by 2020. The punishing measures taken against Gaza by the Palestinian Authority since April only add to the crippling humanitarian effect on the population of Israel's closures. Whatever the political differences between the Palestinian factions, it is not the people of Gaza who should pay the price.

Despite the reconstruction efforts over the past three years, some 29,000 people remain displaced, living in temporary shelters and in poor conditions. Completing our collective reconstruction effort in Gaza is within sight but Member States need to fulfil their funding commitments.

The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, established by Israel and the Palestinian Authority with support from the United Nations in the aftermath of the conflict, has enabled much of the reconstruction. I encourage Israel and the Palestinian Authority to intensify their engagement towards improving the Mechanism to reach its full potential. It is also time for the parties to discuss the future of this provisional instrument with the goal of fully lifting all closures.

Mr. President,

Despite the import of fuel from Egypt to run the Gaza Power Plant, most residents are experiencing the sweltering summer heat with only 4 to 5 hours of electricity per day. The impact of the ongoing energy crisis is far-reaching, affecting the availability of clean water, health care and sanitation services. The UN continues to provide a lifeline through its provision of emergency fuel supporting a number of critical facilities.

I call on Palestinian leaders to address the destructive consequences of the divisions. I encourage them to reach agreement that would allow the legitimate Palestinian authorities to take up their responsibilities

in Gaza, as a step towards the formation of a united, democratically elected Palestinian government on the basis of the PLO principles.

Hamas must also ensure that calm is maintained by stopping militant buildup against Israel and by doing its utmost to sustain security at the border with Egypt. Israel should step-up measures to lift the closures and facilitate development in Gaza as overall calm persists in the Strip, in line with Security Council resolution 1860.

I also call upon donors to respond urgently to the \$25 million humanitarian appeal made in July in the wake of the electricity crisis, and to fill the current 70 per cent funding gap.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to Lebanon, the situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained generally quiet. On 31 July, Major General Beary chaired a tripartite meeting with the parties during which both sides discussed violations of Security Council Resolution 1701, Blue Line marking and ongoing liaison and coordination matters. UNIFIL protested the presence of unauthorized weapons and uniformed personnel in violation of Resolution 1701 during a commemoration of the 2006 war organized by Hizbullah on 13 August.

Military operations against militants continue on the eastern border with Syria. As a result of local deals, a number of militants and refugees were evacuated from the area of Aarsal to areas in Syria. Support to the Lebanese Armed Forces and other security institutions of the State as the sole protectors of the security and stability of Lebanon remains important.

In the Syrian Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic has been maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the full return of UNDOF to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

Mr President,

Returning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, last month's crisis in the Old City of Jerusalem, which hosts Holy sites of all three monotheistic religions, demonstrated that tensions can ignite, threatening to transform the nature of the conflict and spread across borders.

It is, therefore, essential that international and regional partners remain engaged in ending the occupation and resolving all final status issues, in upholding and implementing the vision of two states living side-by-side in peace and security on the basis of all relevant UN resolutions, and in supporting both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to take the necessary steps for an enduring peace.

Thank you.