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

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Thank you Mr. President,

Let me begin by extending my warmest wishes to all our Muslim colleagues and their families on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a region currently torn by religious radicalism, age-old sectarian rivalries and geopolitical realignments, one conflict has endured for over 65 years. Some see it as the core problem in the region; others dismiss it as unrelated to the current turmoil. Either way, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is increasingly entangled in the tectonic shifts of the Middle East. Given the region's massive transformation, it is imperative — perhaps more than ever before — that a permanent settlement be found, based on the concept of two states, Israel and a sovereign, contiguous and viable Palestine, living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

Despite continuing security coordination in the West Bank, today the two sides are further apart from that goal than ever. Support for the two-state solution among both Palestinians and Israelis is fading away. The current situation on the ground is not sustainable as the two-state solution continues to be under threat including from settlement construction, security incidents, occupation-related violence, and lack of Palestinian unity.

In the absence of a political process, the rise of violent extremism and terrorism in the region present a danger as much to the legitimate aspirations of Palestinians for statehood, as to the security of Israel.

Mr. President,

In the current environment of mistrust we in the international community must work with Israelis and Palestinians to create the conditions on the ground, regionally and internationally, that will facilitate a return to meaningful negotiations on the basis of an agreed framework and within a reasonable timeframe.

On the ground, both parties must undertake steps that demonstrate their continued commitment to a two-state solution, including through the implementation of existing agreements and by avoiding unilateral actions.

Advancing the two-state solution requires a fundamental change in policy with regard to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. I welcome the recent decision by Israel to add 8,000 new work permits for Palestinians from the West Bank, bringing the number of permits issued for employment in Israel to a new high of some 60,000. This and other similar initiatives should be sustained and expanded, while much more needs to be done for improving the quality of life for Palestinians.

Unilateral actions in the West Bank, including settlement construction, so-called legalisation of outposts, demolitions and evictions must stop.

While settlement expansion had slowed of late, planning for related infrastructure has not ceased. I am concerned by recent reports about the imminent approval of new residential units in the occupied West Bank. Such a decision will inevitably damage the prospects for peace and increase the risk for political escalation. I urge the Israeli authorities to reconsider this action. Settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the very essence and the viability of a future Palestinian state.

Meanwhile the Palestinian people rightly expect their leaders to act to advance unity and empower their government to take control of the border crossings in Gaza, implement civil service integration, pay public sector salaries and ensure that the governance framework between the West Bank and Gaza is integrated under a single authority. These efforts will pave the way for much delayed elections to take place.

I call on all Palestinian groups to avoid in-fighting and find common ground, on the basis of non-violence and reconciliation, to achieve national unity which is critical for a two-state solution.

The Secretary-General stands ready to work with the Security Council and our partners in the Middle East Quartet on a reinvigorated effort to create the conditions for the return to meaningful negotiations. In this context, I note the proposed establishment of an international support group that could contribute to such efforts. In the past month, the Quartet envoys, as part of an active outreach effort, engaged constructively with Egypt, with Jordan and with the League of Arab States. I take this opportunity to encourage the leadership of Israel to endorse the Arab Peace Initiative as an important contribution to a resolution to the conflict.

Mr. President,

July 8th marked the one-year anniversary of the outbreak of conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Gaza's painstaking emergence from last summer's conflict is undermining belief among the population that genuine progress can be achieved. Activities of Salafi jihadists and other extremist groups are a cause for concern not only in Gaza, but also in neighboring Sinai, where there are reports of their active support for militants on the Egyptian side of the border.

On 18 July, six cars were blown up in Gaza city. Palestinian Salafi militants launched a rocket at Israel on 16 July, which exploded in an open area near Ashkelon. In response, Israel conducted four airstrikes against militant infrastructure targets in Gaza. Militants also fired a rocket from

the Sinai on 3 July, which landed in Israel across the Egyptian border, highlighting the potential for violence in the Sinai to expand beyond Egypt's borders.

The Secretary-General calls on all actors in Gaza to provide information as to the possible whereabouts and conditions of two Israeli civilians who had entered Gaza sometime over the past year and remain unaccounted for, as well as to take prompt action to facilitate their safe return to their families.

These, and other incidents, underscore the fragile dynamics within Gaza that - without positive change - will continue to provide fertile ground for extremism to flourish.

Mr. President,

Last month, the Palestinian Authority and Israel reached a welcome agreement on a new mechanism to allow Palestinians in Gaza access to construction material for the reconstruction of fully destroyed homes and for new construction. Close to 700 families have already been cleared and over 160 of these have purchased the required construction materials.

Given this positive development, I take this opportunity to once again, urge donors to fulfill their pledges, in particular those allocated to housing construction and to addressing Gaza's urgent energy and water needs.

I also welcome recent agreement to install an additional scanner for containers at the Kerem Shalom crossing. This should enable a substantial increase in exports from and imports into Gaza.

The lifting of the Gaza closures within the framework of Un Security Council has resolution 1860 (2009) remains an important objective of the United Nations. Absent this, the UN continues to work with the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to support vital efforts to rebuild the lives of people in Gaza.

Mr. President,

Turning to the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, while the frequency of security incidents decreased compared to last month, the situation has remained tense.

Israeli security forces conducted some 186 search-and-arrest operations, resulting in the arrest of some 300 Palestinians. Meanwhile Palestinian security forces also arrested over 100 people in the West Bank. I continue to be concerned by the situation of Palestinian prisoners, including those on hunger strike, held in Israel. All held in administrative detention should be promptly charged and tried in a court of law, or released without delay.

In total, 50 Palestinians were injured, and four were shot and killed by Israeli security forces, including two at checkpoints near Nablus and Ramallah. Two members of the Israeli security forces were stabbed and injured, one seriously.

Clashes between Palestinians and Israeli civilians in the West Bank also continued, resulting in the death of one Israeli and injury to eight Israelis and nine Palestinians, including one child.

Just as such incidents contribute to the lack of hope and anger which feed a continuing cycle of violence and highlight the imperative to seek a resolution to this conflict, so too do the demolitions and displacement in the West Bank.

On 12 July, Israel announced that it would seek to execute demolition orders of structures in the Palestinian village of Susiya in Area C. This comes ahead of a court hearing, scheduled for 3 August, on a directly related planning-approval process. The Secretary-General joins the United States and the European Union in expressing his deep concern about the demolition and displacement plans for Susiya. Earlier today my Deputy Special Coordinator visited the community. We hope that the ongoing dialogue between Israeli authorities and the herding community will protect the rights of the persons affected.

Mr. President,

Against this backdrop intra-Palestinian talks to form a national unity government have faltered. I note the efforts of President Abbas and Prime Minister Hamdallah to reshuffle the current government and call on them to proceed without delay to appointing the new ministers.

The reshuffling comes at a particularly sensitive time as the Palestinian Authority faces significant financial challenges, including a budget deficit of some \$500 million for 2015. This gap cannot be closed through fiscal measures alone, and I urge donors to rapidly scale up their direct budget support. In this respect, it is also important to revive the functioning of the Israeli-Palestinian joint economic committee.

While first and foremost it is up to the Palestinian authorities to take the lead, the UN stands ready to support the President, the Government and all factions in their efforts to reunite the West Bank and Gaza, in line with the intra-Palestinian unity agreement of 23 April 2014.

Palestine is one and the UN will work determinedly to advance unity through its legitimate institutions.

Mr. President,

Allow me to briefly turn to the rest of the region and note that the UN's broad engagement continued during the reporting period. Following consultations with Syrian, regional and international parties, next week the Secretary-General and Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura will be briefing the Security Council on their recommendations for moving the political track forward.

In Yemen, Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed extends his good offices with all parties to restart negotiations on a political transition.

In Libya, the UN remains engaged in facilitating talks aimed at ending the current political and security crisis through the formation of a Government of National Accord.

In Iraq, the UN is working to promote political dialogue in the hopes of encouraging national reconciliation.

In Lebanon, Mr. President, concerns grow that political differences are preventing the effective functioning of state institutions, despite Prime Minister Salam's commendable efforts to run government. There has been no progress in efforts to end the Presidential vacuum. The Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for Lebanon Sigrid Kaag continues to urge Lebanon's leaders to put the country's stability and national interests ahead of partisan politics and elect a President without further delay.

Meanwhile, the situation along the Lebanese border with Syria has remained stable, with the Lebanese Armed Forces continuing their operations to prevent the infiltration of armed extremist groups from Syria. In the south, the situation along the blue line has remained generally calm, despite almost daily Israeli overflights over Lebanese territory. We encourage both parties to continue to make effective use of UNIFIL's liaison and coordination mechanisms.

Mr. President and members of the Council,

I am deeply concerned about UNRWA's current unprecedented financial crisis. If the current gap of USD 100 million is not closed in the next weeks there is a serious risk that UNRWA schools, which educate 500,000 children throughout the Middle East, will not open. This will have grave implications for Palestine refugee children in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and for the stability and security of a region already in turmoil.

I strongly urge donors to step up their support for UNRWA at this critical time.

Mr. President,

Let me turn back to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reiterate our collective resolve to prevent a further deterioration of the situation; to uphold the two-state solution; and to create the conditions for a return to meaningful negotiations.

Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas recently spoke and reaffirmed their desire for peace. This is a welcome sign. But words need to be translated into concrete and sustained actions on the ground.

But let me also be abundantly clear. Measures undertaken to improve the situation must not be considered an end unto themselves but part of a broader political framework with the goal of achieving a final status agreement.

Now is the time to act decisively, to act in order to reverse the growing perception that the two-state solution is on life-support, slowly dying a death "by a thousand cuts".

A comprehensive agreement will require committed engagement with key Arab states, including through the Arab Peace Initiative.

The Secretary-General stands ready to support both sides in order to overcome their divisions and to rise to the challenge of forging a path forward towards a peaceful future.

In closing, Mr. President, let me place on record my deep appreciation for the support that the Security Council and the Secretariat have given to the excellent UNSCO team on the ground.

I would also like to welcome Mr. Robert Piper of Australia as the new Deputy Special Coordinator who will also serve as the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council.