

**OSCAR FERNANDEZ-TARANCO
ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
20 August 2013**

Madame President,

1. The Council meets again amidst continued regional unrest, with a volatile situation in Egypt, a fragile Lebanon, and ongoing turmoil in Syria. The Secretary-General has issued two statements in the last days regarding the situation in Egypt and the Deputy Secretary-General briefed Council Members last Thursday. The developments in Egypt and their regional implications continue to be of great concern and merit our close attention. We have in this period also witnessed a small but important opening for peace with the launch last month of resumed direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians. It has long been the United Nations' belief that progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have a positive impact on regional stability. And this has become all the more critical in recent weeks against the backdrop of such troubling developments elsewhere in the region.

2. Efforts led by the US Secretary of State over a four-month period culminated in a series of preparatory meetings between the negotiators in Washington DC on 29 and 30 July where parties agreed on an agenda that would cover all core final status issues, working towards a comprehensive agreement within nine months. These meetings were followed by a first formal round of talks in Jerusalem on 14 August, after the release of 26 pre-Oslo prisoners from Gaza and the West Bank based on an Israeli Cabinet decision of 29 July. A second round took place between negotiators today in Jericho. In its statement of 30 July, the Quartet welcomed the resumption of talks and reiterated their shared commitment to helping the parties achieve a negotiated two-state solution within the agreed timeframe. Quartet Envoys intend to meet soon to discuss the next steps.

3. It is against this background that the Secretary-General traveled to the region – to Jordan, Palestine and Israel – on 15 and 16 August to lend his personal support to the leaders on both sides. He has been encouraged by the seriousness of efforts to bring the parties to the negotiating table after a prolonged political stalemate and has praised the determination of US Secretary of State Kerry in this regard. He also welcomed the appointment of US Envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Martin Indyk. He was particularly heartened by the bold decision of President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu to embark on direct dialogue, which remains the single most credible path to a solution. The Secretary-General found both Palestinian and Israeli leaderships recommitted to the vision of a two-state solution, which is clearly in the best interest of both peoples. His own message was that this is an opportunity neither could afford to miss. It is his firm belief that direct negotiations are the only way through which Palestinians can realize their rightful aspirations for an independent and viable

Palestinian state and Israelis can meet their legitimate security needs and finally become a crucial partner in the development of a stable and prosperous Middle East.

4. The Secretary-General continues to believe that a two-state solution can be achieved through negotiations that resolve permanent status issues such as borders, security, refugees and Jerusalem. For these negotiations to have a chance at success, they need to be meaningful with a clear political horizon and yield early dividends in the immediate period ahead.

5. The Secretary-General recognizes the road ahead is fraught with obstacles. He nevertheless appealed to political leaders on both sides but also to Palestinian and Israeli youth to overcome their deep skepticism and embolden their leaders in efforts to shape the better future their peoples deserve. And it is incumbent on regional and international stakeholders to help the parties carry these efforts forward. Both sides now need to sustain an environment conducive for the peace process to move forward. The parties must refrain from actions that would risk undermining prospects during the negotiations. And there have to be visible improvements on the situation on the ground.

Madame President,

6. The reporting period witnessed a decrease in search and arrests operations conducted by Israeli Security Forces; 229 such operations in the West Bank resulted in 276 Palestinians arrested. A total of 88 Palestinian civilians were injured by Israeli forces, including 20 children and 5 women. Two Israeli soldiers were injured by Palestinians. However, in a worrisome development, on 19 August, 39 Palestinians, including 18 children, were forcibly evicted and their homes destroyed in what appears to be a significant increase in demolitions in East Jerusalem during the reporting period. At least six other structures were also demolished today in Area C.

7. As reported last month, the Israeli authorities implemented a number of measures aimed at easing access for Palestinians from the rest of the West Bank to East Jerusalem during the holy month of Ramadan. Israeli authorities also partially opened the historic access road into Hebron City from the south to Palestinian traffic, closed for the last 12 years citing security concerns for nearby settlers. Though limited, such measures represent important steps forward at this crucial moment in the political process. The Secretary-General was encouraged by indications from the Israeli authorities of additional measures in the planning to further ease restrictions on Palestinian movement and access, whether of people or goods.

8. At the same time, the Secretary-General remained deeply troubled by Israel's continuing settlement activity in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, referencing recent announcements of the approval of some 2,000 housing units. The position of the United Nations on settlements being against international law remains firm. Furthermore settlement activity deepens mistrust, undermines efforts to advance peace and will ultimately render a two-state solution impossible.

9. Continued settler violence is also disconcerting. On 25 July, Israeli settlers set

fire to about 100 Palestinian-owned olive trees in Mikhmas village, near Ramallah. Such violent attacks undermine the livelihoods of communities across the West Bank. Ahead of the olive harvest later next month, I urge the Israeli authorities to ensure all measures are taken to protect Palestinians and their property, and enable Palestinian access to their land to maintain their crops all year round.

10. The Secretary-General has welcomed the Israeli Cabinet's decision on the release of pre-Oslo prisoners. He nevertheless remains concerned about the fate of some 5,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, especially those on hunger strike, currently ten, after four Jordanians ended their strike, and those on administrative detention, who should either be tried or released.

11. In Ramallah the Secretary-General met with the newly reappointed Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Al Hamdallah, who was asked by President Abbas on 15 August to form a new government within five weeks. He reiterated the United Nations' commitment to ensuring the development of Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza deserving of economic growth and recovery, with access to land, sea and resources. He further supported efforts to shore up the Palestinian economy and safeguard the important state-building achievements, issues that will be addressed in next month's Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee.

12. On the occasion of his visit, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the UN signed the first-ever UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the State of Palestine. Describing the UN's collective response to national development priorities, the UNDAF places the Palestinian people at the center of development programming and empowers people to exercise human rights, enjoy access to basic services, and achieve their right to an adequate standard of living.

Madame President,

13. The calm in Gaza has been tentative with six projectiles shot at Israel, which we condemn strongly. Two Israeli incursions and one airstrike were recorded during the reporting period. One Palestinian was killed while attempting to infiltrate Israel through the fence in the northeast of Al-Bureij Camp on 10 August and six others were injured in similar situations, including three at sea. Three Palestinians were arrested on 17 August while attempting to swim towards Israel west of Beit Lahia. We call on Israel to show maximum restraint in such situations and make every effort to protect Palestinian civilians.

14. Gaza remains a high priority for the United Nations and must not be forgotten in the context of a resumed peace process. Despite early negative reactions, we express the hope that the Hamas de facto authorities will not hamper efforts to achieve the two-state solution, the only opportunity for lasting peace and ending the isolation of the Gaza Strip.

15. As a result of political developments in Egypt, access through Rafah has been restricted for security reasons. Combined with the long-standing restrictions on the free

movement of people and goods via Israel, such measures have continued to adversely impact the civilian population, including limiting access to healthcare for some of the most vulnerable patients in Gaza, and resulting in shortages in key medical supplies. The continued robust measures undertaken by the Egyptian authorities against illegal activity through tunnels into Gaza have also affected the availability of key commodities, in particular construction material.

16. Access through legal crossings has thus become all the more critical. The Secretary-General has seriously engaged relevant partners, including the Israeli authorities, at the request of the Palestinian Government, on further increasing access through the legal crossings and in particular on liberalizing access of construction materials into Gaza. We are hopeful that positive steps in this regard will be taken soon. Such steps would further solidify the November ceasefire understanding, which calls both for the lifting of closures, as well as addressing Israel's security concerns.

17. In the latest incident in the Sinai Peninsula, yesterday witnessed alarming news of an ambush on two minibuses, which killed 25 Egyptian police officers. The Secretary-General condemned the ambush and the United Nations hopes that that the perpetrators will be swiftly identified and brought to justice.

18. In a separate yet troubling development, three missiles were shot on the night of 12 August at the resort city of Eilat. Two missiles were intercepted by the 'Iron Dome' system and no damage was reported. A terror group named Ansar Beit El Maqdas claimed the responsibility over the attack. Such shootings are unacceptable and condemned in the strongest terms.

Madame President,

19. Let me turn to the situation in Syria where bloodshed continues unabated. The Government forces continue to use indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes against densely populated civilian areas with absolute disregard for the protection of civilians. For their part, armed opposition groups also continue to fail towards their obligation to protect civilians and many continue to engage in military operations within populated areas. Both warring sides also continue to commit acts of torture, abduction and kidnapping, at times along sectarian lines.

20. It is critical that both sides should be reminded of their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law. It is important that all efforts are made to ensure that those committing international crimes, regardless of their rank, position and affiliation, will be held accountable.

21. Reports of military confrontations and displacement throughout the country along sectarian lines threaten to further unravel the social fabric of Syrian society. We are very concerned about incidents of kidnappings of clerics, and civilians in general. The continued influx of foreign fighters exacerbates sectarian and ethnic tensions and must be brought to an end.

22. Meanwhile, and in the absence of a long-called-for political solution, humanitarian needs are growing by the minute, outpacing our efforts to respond. Well above 6.8 million Syrians now depend on humanitarian assistance. More than 4 million Syrians are estimated to be displaced inside their own country and nearly 2 million Syrians are now registered and/or assisted as refugees in Syria's neighboring countries. Over the past few days, the world watched with grave concern the exodus of over 20,000 people from north-eastern Syria into Iraq. Access to those in need continues to remain a challenge. The United Nations and our humanitarian partners count on the Security Council to assist in facilitating access to all in need inside Syria and neighbouring countries.

23. The position of the Secretary-General remains unchanged: there is no military solution to this conflict. The legitimate demands of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity will not be silenced by arms. Recent military victories by Government forces should not give the Government false confidence that it can win militarily. Likewise, promises of arms should not push the opposition towards different priorities or expectations, other than a political solution. What is urgently needed is a political solution. In this regard, we continue to do our best to endeavour that the Geneva Conference takes place as soon as possible. Technical preparations are almost complete. We hope that all in the international community will remain committed to this process and will contribute to its success, in word and in action.

24. The Secretary-General remains gravely concerned at the reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. The United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, led by Dr. Sellström, arrived in Damascus on Sunday, 18 August, and began its work yesterday. As agreed with the Government, the team will conduct its activities in the country for a period of up to 14 days, extendable by mutual consent. The Mission will contemporaneously investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons reported by the Government of Syria at Khan al-Asal as well as two other allegations of the use of chemical weapons reported by Member States. The names of these two sites have been conveyed to the Syrian authorities following their acceptance of the modalities for the conduct of the Mission. In parallel, other allegations and their related sites will be discussed between the two parties.

25. On the Golan, the situation remains volatile with intense shelling and heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition occurring inside the area of separation. From 17 August, clashes intensified in the area of separation, in particular, near UN Positions 68 and 69, which forced peacekeepers at these UN Positions to take shelter. No injuries were reported to UNDOF personnel although indirect fire caused damage to these UN Positions. On the same day, Israel Defense Forces fired at least two guided missiles from the Alpha side across the ceasefire line, in response to earlier fire from the Bravo side which crossed the ceasefire line. UNDOF observed the continued presence of roadblocks with improvised explosive devices in the vicinity of two UN Positions and a UN Observation Post, which affects the freedom of movement of UNDOF personnel. Incidents of threatening behaviour against UNDOF personnel from armed members of the opposition were also reported. On 12 August, two UNDOF vehicles were fired upon by an unidentified gunman. There were no

injuries to troops or damage to either vehicle.

Madame President,

26. In Lebanon, the relative calm during the reporting period ended tragically with the devastating bomb explosion on 15 August in the Beirut suburb of Rouweiss, in which at least 24 people were killed and more than 300 injured. The Secretary-General strongly condemned the bombing – the deadliest such incident since 2005 – stressing the international community’s continued support to Lebanon and urging all Lebanese to remain united, rally around their State institutions and safeguard their country’s security and stability. President Sleiman convened the Higher Defence Council which called for apprehending “those behind terrorist attacks in Lebanon.” An unknown group, the Brigades of Aisha, claimed responsibility and threatened further attacks.

27. Other security incidents included the firing on 1 August of two rockets in the Yarze suburb of Beirut, where the Presidential Palace and Defense Ministry are located. On 4 August, the explosion of an IED uncovered at least 18 more ready-to-use IEDs, maps and future targets. On 18 August, the discovery of a vehicle containing 250 kg of explosives in Naameh (south of Beirut) led to the arrest of four people in connection with a car-bombing ring.

28. The Syrian crisis continued to affect Lebanon’s stability, especially in the border areas. On 18 August, five rockets struck by Hermel, without casualty. On 11 August, the mayor of Aarsal was hurt when his convoy came under fire in the town of al Labweh. On 8 August, the Lebanese Armed Forces arrested three gunmen attempting to cross the border via Aarsal, confiscating weapons and a suicide vest. On 9 August, two Turkish pilots were kidnapped on the road from Beirut International Airport in an incident believed to be linked to the abduction of Lebanese pilgrims in Syria.

29. Despite the efforts of Prime Minister-designate Salam, progress in forming a government is yet to be seen. However, a 2 August decree to renew the term of the LAF Commander and the Chief of Staff for two years helped ensure institutional continuity in the Army. In a speech on Army Day, President Sleiman stated that “the Army’s duty is difficult if one or more Lebanese actors were involved in extra-territorial conflicts, thereby importing external crises.”

30. The UNIFIL area of operations remained generally calm, despite almost daily Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace. UNIFIL, in coordination with the parties, is investigating the circumstances of an explosion in the Labouneh area north of the Blue Line on 7 August, in which four Israel Defense Forces personnel were reportedly injured. Preliminary findings confirm the presence of IDF at the location, in violation of the Blue Line and in breach of the terms of the cessation of hostilities and resolution 1701. In a letter dated 14 August, Lebanon protested the incident. Determination is pending as to whether any other violation, such as the presence of un-authorized weapons or armed personnel, was involved. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah publicly claimed responsibility for the explosions, stating that Hezbollah fighters planted and detonated bombs as part of a “controlled and deliberate operation”.

Madame President,

31. In conclusion, despite an ever challenging regional environment we are finally observing long awaited movement on the peace process in the form of direct negotiations. Let me stress our hope that such efforts mark a first opportunity to overcome the recent years of shared frustration at the political deadlock. Last week witnessed a promising opening in the efforts underway to develop a meaningful political initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. We have now reached a decisive point. The test will be for both sides to go the distance and not disappoint their people. This is also the moment to translate our collective call for action into a shared sense of urgency as leaders on both sides must realize that this is an opening they cannot afford to lose. The Secretary-General and the United Nations, including with the Quartet, will continue to bring all possible support to their efforts.

Thank you.