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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE
MIDDLE EAST
24 APRIL 2013**

Mr. President,

1. Last week, this Council heard briefings which described in grim detail the tragedy unfolding inside Syria and its dramatic humanitarian consequences in the absence of a political solution that could bring about a new and democratic Syria. It is a moment of increased risk and instability across the Middle East and there is a need for quick and concerted action to address the humanitarian issues, both inside and outside Syria. Lebanon and Jordan are on the frontline and must be supported effectively. Action must also be taken on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The fragile hope triggered by the renewed US engagement must be sustained and translated into serious efforts by the parties. The desire for peace needs to be cultivated by early measures to reverse negative trends on the ground, and build trust.

2. Last month's visit by US President Obama marked an important opening. Secretary Kerry's subsequent trips, and continued engagement with the parties and regional leaders, demonstrates a serious commitment to breaking the political deadlock. It is in support of these efforts for renewed meaningful talks that the Secretary-General met with President Obama on 11 April. The two agreed there is at least a window of opportunity for both Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations. The Secretary-General reconfirmed the United Nations commitment to support, including through the Quartet, a substantive initiative with a defined political horizon to achieve a two-state solution. He spoke to the urgency of progress towards peace. In the margins of the G8 on 10 April, Ministers recommitted themselves to a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. They further agreed on the need for a major international effort, including regional parties and the Quartet, to drive the peace process forward. Now is the time for the international community to work in a concerted manner and without delay. During the recent Doha Summit, Arab leaders reconfirmed their intentions to send a ministerial delegation to Washington, DC on 28 April to discuss the peace process.

3. Of course much depends on whether the parties have the political will and exercise the bold leadership required to create conditions conducive for the resumption of a political process, despite the considerable differences between them and the risk that events on the ground could overtake new efforts at engagement.

4. In a development of note, on 13 April President Abbas accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Fayyad. The Prime Minister is expected to continue to carry out his functions as caretaker until a new Prime Minister is announced. The United Nations recognizes that Prime Minister Fayyad had to contend with circumstances that kept constraining the success of the state-building agenda he led together with President Abbas and which is now - in the absence of a credible political horizon - at serious risk. We remain committed to working with our

Palestinian partners, under the leadership of President Abbas, towards state-building and development and to achieve the long overdue negotiated two-state solution.

5. In an encouraging development Israel and Palestine, with the facilitation of several parties, reached an important agreement on 23 April at UNESCO's Executive Board, which allows for an experts mission to the Old City of Jerusalem in mid-May. The parties also agreed on the postponement of five resolutions taken by UNESCO's Executive Board. This agreement exemplifies how cooperation and dialogue can be beneficial for all member states and also conducive to maintaining stability on the ground.

Mr. President,

6. The financial viability of the Palestinian Authority remains at stake and we continue to call for donors to step up their financial support. The budget approved by the Palestinian Cabinet on 28 March for the 2013 fiscal year reflects fiscal discipline, yet reveals the Palestinian Authority's continued and increased dependence on external aid to cover its expenditures in the short-term. The Palestinian Authority's efforts to expand its tax base and enhance collection will result in increased net revenues of \$2.5 billion, and total expenditures will amount to \$3.8 billion, more than half of which is for wages, even with the implementation of a net hiring freeze. This expenditure includes some \$350 million planned for development projects, most of it to be financed externally and dedicated to rural communities in Area C. International assistance amounting to close to \$1.4 billion will be required to cover the deficit. The last Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in March forecasted a worsening economic outlook for the current year with slower growth rates than in 2012, and a growing financing gap for the new budget should foreign aid continue on the decline.

Mr. President,

7. The reporting period witnessed a considerable increase in Palestinian casualties, mostly as result of new clashes with Israeli security forces during Palestinians demonstrations that grew more violent. On the occasion of Palestinian Prisoner's day on 17 April some 3,000 prisoners went on hunger strike for the day and demonstrations were held in main West Bank cities, resulting in eleven Palestinians injured by rubber coated bullets fired by Israeli security forces. The issue of Palestinian prisoners has fueled much of the unrest, especially following the terminal illness and death of Maysara Abu Hamdieh in prison on the 2nd of April. During the clashes that ensued, Israeli security forces killed two Palestinian teenagers and injured two more with live ammunition at a checkpoint near Tulkarem after they allegedly threw Molotov cocktails at the checkpoint. The case is under IDF investigation and we look forward to a timely and public announcement of its conclusion.

8. We welcome the resolution in the case of Samer Issawi who has reportedly suspended his hunger strike following a court ruling on 23 April that provides he will be freed to his Jerusalem home after he serves an additional eight months. We continue to call for a swift resolution to his case based on humanitarian grounds. The United Nations remains closely involved on the ground, and the Secretary-General has urged that a solution be reached without delay in order to end the prisoners' plight

and preserve calm. And we cannot but recall that other fundamental issues incorporated in the May 2012 agreement remain unresolved.

9. Wide demonstrations were also organized throughout the West Bank on the occasion of Land Day on 30 March, but violence was relatively contained compared to previous years. Some 22 Palestinian protesters and 4 Israeli soldiers were injured on that day. Protests continued against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. We reiterate that demonstrations must remain non-violent. We also urge the Israeli security forces to show utmost restraint and assure the right of Palestinians to demonstrate peacefully and freely.

10. In all, incursions by Israeli security forces in the occupied West Bank remained at a total of 303 operations compared to 186 in the reporting period. But the levels of violence have nearly doubled, with Israeli security operations resulting in two Palestinian teenagers dead and 724 people injured, including 352 children and 6 women. A total of 354 Palestinians were arrested, including a number of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders. Thirty-five Israeli soldiers were also reportedly injured by protesters in clashes during this period.

11. Clashes between Israeli settlers and Palestinians also continued. A total of 13 Palestinians, including six children, were injured by settlers, and over 600 trees belonging to Palestinians were vandalized. On 7 April Israeli settlers reportedly spray painted racist slogans on the walls of two mosques in a village near Bethlehem. In two instances Israeli security forces arrested a total of six settlers, among them a serving soldier, suspected in involvement in so-called "Price-Tag" activities. Palestinian attacks on Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank resulted in ten injuries, including one child and one woman, and extensive damage on Israeli vehicles as the result of stone-throwing.

Mr. President,

12. The reporting period registered continued demolitions and related displacements in Area C and East Jerusalem. As compared to the monthly average of 50 demolitions in 2012, 29 Palestinian-owned structures were demolished between 25 March and 23 April 2013, including 16 structures demolished yesterday, leading to the displacement of 40 Palestinians.

13. We remain deeply troubled by continued developments with respect to settlement activity. Let me reiterate unequivocally the United Nations' consistent position that settlement activity violates international law. Settlement activity further undermines Palestinians' confidence in the viability of the two-state solution. The Secretary-General is particularly worried about reports suggesting that the Israeli Minister of Housing has predicted the construction within a year and a half of housing units in E1 area of the West Bank. Separately, initial approval was granted on 9 April to begin a new construction project in a settlement which is part of occupied East Jerusalem. We are also concerned about the potentially negative impact on Palestinians of the continuing expansion of the Begin Highway through parts of the neighborhood of Beit Safafa occupied by the Israelis in 1967. Such steps are counterproductive to creating the right environment for peace.

Mr. President,

14. The situation in Gaza has become increasingly fragile. The calm that followed the ceasefire on 21 November 2012 has been challenged and there has been little progress on the more substantive underlying issues that formed part of that understanding. In an alarming development, over the past month, a total of 20 rockets, including 3 Grad rockets, and four mortar shells were fired from Gaza into Israel and toward the sea, albeit without causing injuries or damage. Explosive ordnance placed along the border fence hit an Israeli patrol causing physical damages to the vehicles but no injuries during the reporting period. Israel conducted four incursions and two airstrikes into the Gaza Strip. Two Palestinian civilians were injured on 5 and 16 April by Israeli fire while approaching the border fence. In reaction to the shooting of rockets Israel again closed the Kerem Shalom crossing from 8 to 11 April. Since 26 February, this crossing which is the only passage for goods from Israel into Gaza has been closed for 29 out of 56 days. The fishing limit has remained reduced from six to three nautical miles since 21 March, well below the 20-mile limit agreed by the Israelis and Palestinians in the 1995 Interim Accord which remains in force and should be respected. The movement of Palestinians across Erez has been further restricted to humanitarian cases with special permits for several periods since 26 February.

15. In another development, on 17 April two Grad rockets fired from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula exploded in open areas of the Israeli Red Sea resort of Eilat, causing no casualties or damage. The attack, claimed by the Salafist jihadist group Mujahedeen Shura Council, was the first such rocket firing at Eilat in a year. The same group has previously claimed responsibility for the rocket attacks from Gaza into Sderot on 21 March.

16. We continue to strongly condemn firing of rockets into Israel. These rockets, which are indiscriminate, are intended to sow fear, can cause civilian casualties, and can trigger cycles of violence difficult to stop. We also call on Israel to act with restraint. At the same time we remain seriously concerned about the impact of Israeli restrictions on the vulnerable civilian population in Gaza. The United Nations continues to support Egypt's efforts to fully implement the ceasefire understanding it brokered between the parties. In this regard, we continue to call for preservation of the calm, with crossings into Israel remaining open and the fishing line to be expanded in full implementation of the November understanding. The United Nations will also continue to work for the relief of the Gaza population, including by stepping up reconstruction efforts.

17. Demonstrations and sit-ins took place all over the Gaza Strip in front of UNRWA facilities on 4 April protesting against cuts to its cash assistance programme which were necessitated by budget shortfalls. Protests grew aggressive when a group of demonstrators entered UNRWA offices and threatened staff members, forcing UNRWA to close its offices until the 9th of April, thus preventing the Agency from providing necessary assistance to Palestinian refugees.

18. Meanwhile, efforts on Palestinian reconciliation continue. Hamas and Fatah have resumed informal working-level meetings but have not advanced in their

discussions. On the 2nd of April, Khaled Meshaal was re-elected Head of the Hamas Political Bureau. A day earlier, President Abbas reiterated his position, in accordance with the Doha Understanding of February 2012 that he was prepared to lead a technical interim government, which should prepare for elections 90 days into its term. On 12 April the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC) handed a copy of the updated voter registry to the Palestinian President and informed him that the CEC is technically ready to organize any election, once so decided. The voter register now includes over 1.8 million electors both in the West Bank and Gaza, representing over 80% of the total Palestinian adult population, of which 48.2% are female. The CEC continues to organize complementary municipal elections scheduled for 1 June 2013 in the West Bank.

Mr. President,

19. On Syria, I will keep my remarks short as the Security Council was already briefed in-depth only five days ago by the Joint Special Representative. Mr. Brahimi emphasized the need for a political solution along the lines of the Geneva Communiqué, and he warned against the growing militarization and radicalization inside Syria. He reiterated the Secretary-General's call to stop the flow of arms to either side in Syria and called on the Council to consider an arms embargo.

20. The Security Council also heard detailed presentations on the humanitarian and refugee situation, as well as on sexual violence and children in the context of the Syrian conflict by Under-Secretary-General Amos, High Commissioner Guterres, Special Representative Bangura, and Special Representative Zerrougi. The meeting provided an opportunity for the Council to hear directly about the challenges faced by the neighboring countries most affected by the humanitarian spillover of the Syrian conflict, particularly Lebanon and Jordan, in their efforts to accommodate unprecedented flows of refugees from Syria.

21. As concerns the United Nations Mission to Investigate Alleged Uses of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, we are still in discussions with the Government of Syria on the scope and modalities of the mission. In line with his authority under General Assembly resolution 42/37 C and Security Council resolution 620 (1988), it is the Secretary-General's intention to ensure that all credible allegations brought to his attention by Member States are considered and, if deemed necessary, investigated. The Secretary-General's position is that, at this time, the mission should investigate the allegations pertaining to incidents in Aleppo and Homs. While awaiting access to the Syrian territory, the experts of the mission are studying the information on the alleged incidents of the use of chemical weapons provided to them by Member States. They remain ready to deploy to Syria within 24 to 48 hours following the Syrian Government's acceptance of the modality and the scope of the mission.

22. The situation on the Golan remains unstable with sporadic clashes between Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition continuing on a daily basis. The military activities in the area of separation have a potential to escalate the situation between Israel and Syria, and jeopardize the ceasefire between the two countries as highlighted by recent incidents. On two occasions, on the 2nd and 12th of April, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fired tank rounds and missiles, respectively, in

what they described as retaliation for gun fire from the Bravo side at IDF patrols across the ceasefire line. Syrian authorities reported to UNDOF that the missiles fired by the IDF on 12 April had caused one fatality and injured several Syrian security forces.

Mr. President,

23. The spillover of the conflict in Syria continues to be felt in Lebanon, particularly in north-eastern border areas. On 21 April, at least seven rockets from the Syrian side fell on Lebanese soil, in the towns of Dorah, Waysh, Sahlet el Miyah and the city of Hermel causing material damage only. No casualties were reported. The Lebanese Armed Forces deployed heavily in the area. In a statement, President Sleiman denounced the missile attacks on Lebanon and stressed Lebanon's role in hosting Syrian refugees. He stated that Lebanon is working on controlling the border in accordance with the Baabda Declaration and that the Army and relevant authorities were instructed to take measures to prevent attacks on Lebanon and protect the safety of its citizens. There were reports of three further airstrikes on 3rd, 4th and 11th of April on Lebanese territory by Syrian military aircraft, none of which caused any injury. On the 8th of April, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry raised the violations of Lebanese sovereignty to the Syrian authorities. On the 14th of April two Lebanese civilians were killed and two injured in shelling from across the border in Syria. I take this opportunity to reiterate the United Nations concern that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon be fully respected by all parties.

24. President Sleiman designated Tamam Salam as the next Prime Minister on the 6th of April following the resignation of Prime Minister Mikati last month. Mr. Salam, whose designation received near unanimous parliamentary support, has stated that he will form a government to hold parliamentary elections and is in consultations with the parties regarding the character and composition of the future cabinet. It is critical that Lebanese leaders use this opportunity to continue to engage positively to ensure the early formation of a Government. The Secretary-General also calls on all Lebanese parties to respect President Sleiman's wise and courageous disassociation policy designed to help protect Lebanon from spillover from Syria. The Secretary-General, concerned by reports that Lebanese are fighting in Syria both on the side of the regime and on the side of the opposition, hopes that the new government will find ways to promote better compliance by all sides in Lebanon with the disassociation policy.

25. On 6 April, President Sleiman signed a decree postponing the parliamentary elections by one week to 16 June. On the 10th of April, Parliament voted to amend the current election law, suspending the candidate registration process until 19 May to give the parties a longer period in which to agree a new electoral framework. I echo Council Members' call for swift progress to ensure early agreement on the electoral law so that timely parliamentary elections take place on a consensual basis within the legal and constitutional framework.

26. Meanwhile, the situation in UNIFIL's area of operations and along the Blue Line has remained generally calm. Twice this month, President Sleiman publicly condemned Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace as breaches of Security Council resolution 1701.

Mr. President,

27. In conclusion, allow me to make the following observations. As the situation inside Syria continues to deteriorate, it is even more vital that everyone collectively work towards preserving regional stability. Advancing the Middle East Peace Process remains central to ensuring that the region is not at further risk of destabilization. Let me repeat what the Secretary-General has stated at every opportunity: there is now an opening to develop a meaningful initiative to achieve the negotiated two-state solution that will best serve the interests, rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. But it is not an over-statement to suggest that we are about to reach a critical point for the viability of the peace process. Whether that prospect solidifies or vanishes will depend on the direction that leaders on both sides choose to take, and on the level of regional and international support for new efforts.

28. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas have repeated the right commitments. The choice ultimately rests in their hands not to disappoint their people and offer them, at last, real prospects for peace and security. The international community also bears a unique responsibility to help them in moving forward. The United Nations welcomes the renewed attention the US is giving to the peace process. We stand ready to contribute to a return to meaningful negotiations in the period ahead, including through the Quartet and broader engagement with all relevant partners. Despite the difficult regional context and the challenges on the ground between Israel and Palestine, we believe that this is a moment of opportunity that cannot afford to be lost.

Thank you.