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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
25 February 2014**

Madam President,

1. Since the Secretary-General briefed this Council last month, we have seen new and significant developments in relation to the Syrian crisis with the holding of the much-anticipated Geneva II conference and the Security Council's welcome passage of Resolution 2139 regarding the humanitarian situation. The Secretary-General is committed to making every effort to help advance both of these important initiatives.

2. On the Middle East peace process we are nearing a defining moment. Secretary Kerry's months' long work to address Israeli and Palestinian aspirations and concerns in a fair and balanced manner has opened a credible political horizon for achieving the two-state solution. Any meaningful political initiative must continue to strive towards a comprehensive settlement. And it must address all final status issues in line with principles outlined in the relevant Security Council resolutions, the Madrid principles – including land for peace – the Road Map and previous agreements between the parties. International engagement, which is critical, remains strong. On 1 February in Munich, Quartet Principals were briefed on progress in the negotiations. Secretary of State Kerry is continuing his consultations with the leaders over the US framework proposal, meant to serve as a basis for continued negotiations, meeting with President Abbas in Paris on 19 February. We count on the continued support extended to these efforts by regional stakeholders, underlining the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative, the most viable way for attaining regional peace and yielding socio-economic and security benefits for all peoples in the Middle East. As the Secretary-General told this Council last month, if the leaders are prepared to take the bold decisions required, he will also push ahead on the positive agenda of peace dividends for both sides.

3. Ultimately, any genuine intention to pursue peace requires strong leadership. Now is the time for domestic constituencies to put their agendas behind the peace agenda, and for the leaders to reach out to their respective publics to raise awareness of the benefits of peace. For Palestinians, a negotiated peace settlement holds the promise of becoming a fully recognized Member State of equal standing. For Israel too, only a negotiated two state solution will bring it the security and recognition it deserves in the region and beyond.

Madam President,

4. The situation on the ground remains fragile. In the West Bank, the Israeli Security Forces carried out a total of 424 search and arrest operations. A total of 519 Palestinians were arrested and 218 Palestinians were injured, including during demonstrations against the barrier. Two Israeli soldiers were also injured.

5. Clashes increased in and around Palestinian refugee camps most notably in early February in the Al Arrub and Al Jalazun camps following the killing on 29 January of one Palestinian from Al Jalazun camp near Ramallah and Ofra settlement after allegedly opening fire at Israeli security forces. Over 30 Palestinian protestors have been injured by Israeli live ammunition and rubber coated metal bullets while two Israeli soldiers were injured by stone and Molotov cocktail throwing.

6. Israeli security forces reported having foiled several terrorist attacks on Israel allegedly planned by individuals in the West Bank. This included the arrest of an alleged Al-Qaida cell on 22 January and the uncovering of several arms caches. Palestinian security forces, working to maintain order and security, safely defused a number of unexploded ordinances between 22 January and 3 February and arrested Hizb-ut-Tahrir Islamic militants on 8 and 9 February.

7. Attacks by settlers on Palestinian property included damage to over 3,000 trees and saplings and some 80 vehicles. On 6 February three settlers were reportedly charged for setting fire to two vehicles and spray painting stars of David in the Palestinian village of Farata in November. During another attack on 18 February tires were slashed to some 30 cars and anti-

Arab graffiti painted in the Sharafat neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem. The Israeli police reported the arrest in four operations of over 10 settlers reportedly involved in attacks on Palestinians or their property. Palestinian stone and Molotov cocktail throwing attacks – on the rise in recent months – resulted in three settlers injured.

8. The reporting period registered increased funding and incentives by the Israeli Government for existing settlements. Continued settlement activity, including in occupied East Jerusalem, is illegal and erodes hope for the two- state solution by undermining ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

9. We are deeply concerned by the ongoing demolition of Palestinian residential and livelihood structures in Area C, particularly in the Jordan Valley and East Jerusalem. A total of 107 structures were demolished, leading to the displacement of 175 Palestinians. These demolitions must stop and Palestinians must be given access to a fair and inclusive planning regime. We are also increasingly worried by reports of impeded access of the humanitarian community in the delivery of emergency shelter and other assistance. This month, the ICRC decided to suspend its distribution of tents to people affected by house demolitions in the Jordan Valley after noting a pattern of obstructions and confiscations of these items by Israeli authorities since the beginning of 2013.

10. We have reiterated our position on the continued practice of administrative detention by Israel, including of elected Palestinian Legislative Council members and six prisoners on hunger strike since January. Administrative detainees must be either charged or released. We are concerned about today's report that a Palestinian prisoner died after he was transferred from an Israeli jail to a hospital. We will continue to follow the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention closely.

11. Visits by Israeli groups, including senior officials, to the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif, resulted in clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police accompanying these groups. Incitement or provocations from any quarter must cease and the sanctity of holy sites of all faiths respected.

Madam President,

12. Turning to Gaza, there are troubling signs that the ceasefire understanding of November 2012 is eroding in both of its main requirements: the end of hostilities and the opening of the crossing for people and goods. In the past two months we have seen more rockets being fired at Israel, border incidents and Israeli operations causing death or injury to civilians.

13. We condemn the increased rocket fire. This reporting period saw the firing of 44 rockets and mortars, of which 15 landed in Israel. Israel conducted six incursions and seven airstrikes into Gaza, resulting in the death of two militants and injuries to 10 Palestinians. Israeli forces also reported dismantling an Improvised Explosive Device on the border fence on 18 February. Palestinian activities and protests multiplied in the vicinity of the border fence and were met by increased Israeli live fire, resulting in two Palestinians shot dead and 16 injured. We are deeply concerned about this rise in violence and call on all parties to act in accordance with international law.

14. Due to the ongoing closure of Gaza, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. UNRWA urgently needs an additional \$30 million to sustain critical emergency operations in Gaza, without which food aid will be cut back. We call on all donors, including those who have traditionally supported the Agency, to contribute to UNRWA's emergency appeals.

15. The recent Israeli decision to allow the entry of 1,000 tons of cement and other construction materials for flood relief is positive. However, contrary to expectations, work on UN projects is still not back at the level originally agreed by the Israeli authorities, and over 20 projects remain stalled since November 2013 due to lack of Israeli approval. We continue to call for the Israeli approval of all UN projects, and the resumption of already approved projects. We also call for a lifting of restrictions on exports and transfers of goods to the West Bank and Israel and for permitting the import of construction materials for the private sector. We hope that the Rafah crossing with Egypt will soon resume normal operations.

16. Meanwhile, efforts to bridge the Palestinian divide continued. Fatah and Hamas delegations met in Gaza to discuss the implementation of existing reconciliation agreements, including the formation of a national consensus government headed by President Abbas and the organization of general elections. Ultimately, only the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under the legitimate Palestinian Authority based on the PLO commitments can pave the way to a durable solution for Gaza as part of political progress towards peace. Gaza too must reap the peace dividends of a negotiated two-state solution.

Madam President,

17. Allow me now to turn to the Syrian conflict whose toll of death and destruction in Syria and in the region continues to mount tragically all the time, pointing urgently to the need for a political solution. After many months of effort, the Secretary-General convened, in Montreux, on 22 January, an International Conference on Syria. Over forty countries and international organizations participated and underlined their commitment to supporting a political solution to the Syrian conflict. They urged the Syrian sides to negotiate and reach an agreement on the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué—as indeed did this Council in its resolution 2118. As you noted in that resolution, the Communiqué sets out a number of key steps beginning with the establishment of a transitional governing body exercising full executive powers, formed by mutual consent.

18. The first round of intra-Syrian talks began on 23 January and continued for eight days. They included several direct sessions as well as bilateral meetings with Joint Special Representative Brahimi and his team. The second round of talks took place from 10 to 15 February.

19. Joint Special Representative Brahimi will brief you in the coming weeks so I will therefore not go into specifics. The progress thus far has been limited, confirming the deep rift between the two sides. Yet it is no small feat that these long-awaited negotiations have finally begun, and both sides remain committed to sitting at the table. That is something on which we must try to build.

20. We are grateful to the governments of the Russian Federation and the United States, and all in the region and globally, for showing vision and helping to organize this important process. We will continue to need the help of many of the countries who attended Montreux, as well as some who were not there.

21. This Council held extensive discussions on the escalating humanitarian toll that this conflict continues to exert on the Syrian people. The Secretary-General wholeheartedly welcomed your adoption of resolution 2139. We all hope that this resolution will allow all humanitarian actors on the ground to significantly increase their reach to all those in need.

22. The ongoing hostilities in Syria also continue to impact the vulnerable community of Palestine refugees. The situation is deteriorating in Yarmouk, near Damascus, where 16,000 thousand Palestine refugees remain trapped. While some assistance has reached those in need since 18 January, UNRWA continues to experience sporadic access. We call on all parties to grant UNRWA uninterrupted access to the civilian population of Yarmouk and other civilian areas. On 10 and 18 February, explosions took place near UNRWA schools in Muzeirib, killing 18 people. We deplore these indiscriminate attacks and remind the warring parties of their obligation under international law to protect all civilians.

23. The situation in the Golan continues to be of deep concern. Heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition, and shelling continued in the area of limitation in proximity to the area of separation. On 18 and 19 February, artillery and mortar fire rounds from the Bravo side landed across the ceasefire line. There was no response from the Alpha side. We are also looking into the reports of an airstrike yesterday in the border area between Lebanon and Syria and urge all parties to avoid escalation. These developments have potential to escalate and to jeopardise the ceasefire between Israel and Syria as well as heighten tensions between Lebanon and Israel.

Madam President,

24. In Lebanon, the formation of a government of “national interest” was a major positive development against a backdrop of continued tensions stemming from a spate of deadly terrorist attacks, as well as incidents of shelling and shooting from across the Syrian border into Lebanon.

25. On 21 January, a suicide bombing in the Haret Hraik suburb of Beirut was claimed by a Lebanese branch of Jabhat al Nusra. On 1 February, another Jabhat al Nusra suicide bomber detonated a car bomb in Hermel. On 3 February a suicide attack took place in Choueifat in south Beirut. On 19 February a double suicide bombing in Bir al Hassan, a Beirut suburb, which targeted the Iranian Cultural Centre, was claimed by the Abdallah Azzam Brigades.

26. Shelling from Syria targeted Lebanese populated areas in the Beqaa and killed two people in the Akkar region. There were at least two airstrikes by Syrian aircraft in violation of Lebanese sovereignty. In Tripoli, continued fighting between the Alawite and Sunni communities caused at least five fatalities including one Lebanese soldier. The Lebanese Armed Forces have had a number of successes in capturing militants wanted in connection with the recent bombings in Beirut and Hermel, and acted to contain the movement of armed men and weapons between Lebanon and Syria.

27. The Secretary-General congratulated President Sleiman and Prime Minister Salam following the formation, on 15 February of the government of “national interest” under Prime Minister Tamam Salam. The Secretary-General noted that the inclusion of most political parties in the cabinet was important to address the serious security threats and humanitarian challenges facing the country, and in order to organize the Presidential elections on time next month. Members of the new cabinet are working on agreeing on a “ministerial statement” outlining the government’s agenda.

28. The situation in UNIFIL’s area of operations and along the Blue Line remained calm, despite almost daily Israeli air violations of Lebanese airspace. Pursuant to the recommendations of the International Support Group for Lebanon, on 20 February the Lebanese Armed Forces and

the UN launched a coordination mechanism for international assistance to the Army. We welcome France's offer to host a meeting of the International Support Group in Paris on 5 March to support the political process in Lebanon and its State institutions.

29. In conclusion, allow me to return to the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. It is the United Nations' sincere desire to see 2014 as the year that bears witness to a comprehensive settlement realizing the vision of two states for two peoples: Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition of each other's legitimate rights, including self-determination, with each state ensuring equal civil rights for all its citizens. The Middle East region suffers from multiple crises and fault-lines that require urgent attention, not least the conflict in Syria and its impact on neighbouring states. But the efforts deployed over the past seven months towards achieving a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli issue, in the form of a negotiated two-State solution, have come closer than at any point in recent time to making a real and much needed contribution to regional stability. It is therefore in our collective interest, as well as that of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, to invest in the success of this process, and ensure that it is credible and just for both parties.
