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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
26 FEBRUARY 2013**

Mr. President,

1. We meet at a moment of heightened risks across multiple fronts in the Middle East. It is already two months into a year that could preserve or even extinguish what hope remains for a two state solution, and I do not believe it hyperbole to say that. Yet, as demonstrated today in the troubling rocket attack fired from Gaza into Israel, the temperature is again rising between Israelis and Palestinians – with the situation of Palestinian prisoners the most immediate but not only cause – and there is as of yet no process of negotiation to offer hope on the horizon. In Syria, meanwhile, even tentative steps to dialogue are struggling to take root. The destructive military spiral churns more forcefully each day and threatens to pull its neighbors, most notably and worrisomely Lebanon, into its vortex. Opportunities do exist to reverse these trends, but not if the international community sits still. Stepped up efforts by this Council and its members can make a substantial difference while there is still time to do so.

2. Turning first to the Middle East peace process, we have all voiced frustration at the failure over many years to break the impasse between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet resignation is not an acceptable option. Relying on the status quo – even if it were sustainable, which we do not believe is the case – would represent a failure of the parties and the international community at the very time when we should seize opportunities to help the parties define and implement a final status agreement. It is now time for all of us to act decisively, and with concerted purpose, including through a revitalized and relevant Quartet, but also beyond, if we are to salvage the two-state solution and realize the vision of the State of Palestine and the State of Israel living side by side in peace and security. The United Nations stands ready to support any serious international initiative to that end.

3. In the aftermath of the 22 January Israeli elections, international partners have been meeting and discussing how to move forward decisively toward creating the conditions by which a two-state solution become reality, not mere rhetoric. The Secretary-General has continued his engagement with both Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Abbas. The Secretary-General's recent meetings with European Union High Representative Ashton in New York and with US Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington focused in part on the Middle East. In addition, US President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry intend to visit the region next month and Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have made separately preparatory trips to Washington, DC. We look forward to this renewed United States engagement. At a press conference on 19 February, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his commitment to a two-state solution and a peace process that yields results. On the same occasion, he announced the appointment of Tzipi Livni, an experienced interlocutor, to lead negotiations. Palestinian President Abbas has also shown patience in allowing the time necessary to get a new process on

track. Both sides must be prepared to embrace their responsibilities to engage fully with any credible new initiative and demonstrate good will and renewed commitment.

4. The dire fiscal situation of the Palestinians must be addressed. Fiscal stability is critical for safeguarding the achievements of Palestine's state-building agenda, including important progress in the Palestinian security services. In regard to the Palestinian Authority's financial situation, the Secretary-General notes with relief the decision by Israel to release Palestinian revenue clearances for January and reminds the Israeli authorities that the full transfer of Palestinian tax and customs revenues in a timely and predictable manner is an obligation Israel accepted as part of the Paris protocol which remains in force. Timely donor contributions are also now more important than ever. The forthcoming meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee next month will be an opportunity to renew the collective commitment to support state-building efforts and promote Palestinian financial and economic sustainability.

Mr. President,

5. The United Nations continues to follow closely the security, political and human rights dimensions of the issue of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody. On Saturday, we were concerned to learn that a Palestinian man died in detention after his arrest by the Israeli Defense Forces days earlier. Earlier today, Gaza militants from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade cited this death in claiming responsibility for a rocket attack on Israel, a most troubling development. The prisoner's death also sparked a series of popular demonstrations and clashes which reports indicate resulted in the injuries of 43 Palestinians by the IDF. Two Israeli soldiers were also injured.

6. The United Nations underscores the importance of restoring and maintaining calm and calls for an independent and transparent investigation by Israeli authorities into the circumstances of Mr. Jaradat's death, the results of which should be made public as soon as possible. Of particular concern also is the deteriorating health of four prisoners who have engaged in extended hunger strike. The United Nations remains closely involved on the ground, and the Secretary-General has raised his concern with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Secretary-General has urged that a solution be reached without delay in order to end the prisoners' plight and preserve calm. He also recalled the importance of full adherence by all sides to the 14 May 2012 agreement, including the implementation of the prisoners' family's visiting rights. It is the United Nations' firm position that those in administrative detention without charges should be charged and face trial with judicial guarantees in accordance with international standards, or be promptly released.

7. Operations by Israeli security forces in the occupied West Bank, including in Area A, have continued at a steady pace. According to reports, since our last briefing, a total of 391 such operations resulted in 617 Palestinian injuries including 116 children and 10 women, and 491 Palestinians arrested, while nine Israeli soldiers were also injured. Palestinians detained included two parliamentarians affiliated with Hamas, who were arrested on 4 February. The increased use of live fire by Israeli security forces, which has been directed at unarmed Palestinian civilians, is of deep concern. On 23 January, a 22 year old Palestinian woman was killed while walking on

her college campus south of Bethlehem. On the same day a 15 year old boy was shot dead by soldiers near the Arroub refugee camp.

8. Settlement activity continued with Israeli authorities giving final approval for the construction of 90 housing units in the settlement of Beit El. The Secretary-General has repeatedly stressed that settlements are illegal under international law. Israel should heed the calls of the international community to stop such activity. We are also looking into media reports that the Israeli government authorized drilling in the search of oil in the occupied Syrian Golan.

9. Clashes between Palestinians and Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank resulted in injuries of ten Palestinians including two women and two children, while one teenage Israeli settler was injured by a Palestinian on 29 January. We deplore attacks under so called "Price Tag" violence, which included the desecration of ten Muslim tombstones in the Mamila cemetery in West Jerusalem on the 14th of February.

10. Since the last briefing, Israeli security forces demolished 30 structures in the occupied West Bank, resulting in the displacement of 89 Palestinians, including 49 children. We now have figures for the month of January during which at least 139 Palestinian owned structures, including 59 residential structures were destroyed by the Israeli authorities, mainly in Area C and the remainder in East Jerusalem. This is the highest number of such demolitions in a single month in over two years.

11. Planning efforts to benefit Palestinian communities in Area C continue. Unfortunately, none of the 32 plans submitted to Israeli authorities, some since June 2010, have yet been approved. We call upon the Government of Israel to facilitate tangible progress if community-based planning is to be adopted as a constructive approach for many of the Palestinians concerned.

12. Palestinian demonstrations continued to be organized against the Barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Palestinians attempted to set up a number of encampments near the wall, to protest land confiscation, which were quickly dismantled by Israeli forces. A number of Palestinians were injured during demonstrations against the Barrier as well as in solidarity demonstrations with prisoners on hunger strike mentioned earlier. The Secretary-General stresses the importance for protests to remain non violent and for the right to peaceful protest to be fully respected.

Mr. President,

13. Regarding Gaza, we are deeply troubled by today's rocket attack into Israel. There is no justification for such attacks, which not only target innocent civilians indiscriminately but which risk triggering a renewed spiral of violence that will only bring suffering to Palestinians and Israelis alike. We continue to condemn all indiscriminate rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. We also urge Israel to demonstrate maximum restraint.

14. It is important for both sides to maintain their commitment to the ceasefire brokered in November 2012, and it is the responsibility of the de facto authorities in the Gaza Strip to prevent any recurrence of today's attack. Until today's Palestinian rocket attack, this was the longest period without projectiles fired from Gaza in recent years, and both sides should work to consolidate the calm that prevailed before today. In the past month, Israeli forces conducted three incursions into Gaza and a total of 14 Palestinian civilians were injured by Israeli fire, mostly while attempting to approach the border fence. On 21 February a Palestinian fishing boat was shot by Israeli forces, resulting in injuries to a fisherman and damage to the boat.

15. It is essential that today's rocket attack not be repeated and not interrupt efforts to strengthen the understandings reached in November with the assistance of Egypt. The mechanism established in the Egyptian-brokered understanding is being implemented and UNSCO remains engaged with the concerned parties and the Egyptian mediation. Israel continued to allow gravel for commercial use through the Kerem Shalom crossing. Israel has also allowed Palestinian farmers access up to 100 metres from the fence with Israel and Palestinian fishermen have been able to access up to six nautical miles from shore.

16. While such steps are welcome, we continue to advocate for a further extension of the fishing limit to 12 nautical miles, which is necessary for a significant increase in the catch of the fishermen, but still below the 20 nautical miles provided for in the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian interim agreement. We also call for unrestricted entry of all construction materials. Further measures to lift the closure should include transfer of goods between Gaza and the West Bank, as well as exports to Israel and beyond.

17. To further advance this important agenda and address Israel's legitimate security interests, it is essential that parallel efforts continue to enforce the calm and prevent the smuggling of weapons into Gaza. There have been reports of Egyptian authorities closing large numbers of tunnels from the Sinai entering Gaza. Separately, Egypt has permitted further entry of construction material through the Rafah crossing for a range of Qatar funded projects.

18. I would like to reiterate that the full implementation of resolution 1860 includes the important step of overcoming the Palestinian political divide in ways that can advance the potential for a two-state solution. In this regard, the Palestinian Central Election Commission was able to conduct voter registration from 11 to 20 February in both the West Bank and Gaza, for the first time since 2007, a result of the Cairo accord on reconciliation. A total of 450,000 new electors were registered, including 350,000 in Gaza, which represents a very high turnout. The updated Palestinian voter register should be available shortly and, to this end, the United Nations encourages Israeli authorities to authorize the transfer of registration forms from Gaza to Ramallah.

19. Recent opinion polls suggest a popular demand for inclusion in a democratic process, including the holding of the long-overdue Palestinian general elections. Negotiations and ending the divide between the West Bank and Gaza under the leadership of President Abbas and adherence to the PLO principles remains essential for achieving the two-state solution. The parties are expected to meet again soon in Cairo to commence consultations on government formation. The United Nations remains of the view that negotiations and reconciliation is not an

“either-or” proposition and should be made compatible by advancing both in a mutually reinforcing way.

Mr. President,

20. Turning to developments in the region, Syria continues to be a source of extreme concern for the United Nations. We are reminded every day of the heavy toll the civilians in Syria are paying. Citing the appalling number of civilian casualties, the Secretary-General strongly condemns the reported ballistic missile strikes in Aleppo as well as the series of bombings in Damascus. Let me repeat again the Secretary-General’s call for the need to end immediately the supply of arms to both sides in this brutal conflict. And let me be clear, perpetrators of serious crimes will be held accountable. There is no statute of limitations for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

21. In its latest report, published last week, the independent Commission of Inquiry of the UN Human Rights Council concluded that both government and opposition forces have become increasingly violent and reckless with human life. Both have committed abuses amounting to war crimes – although the scale of the abuses committed by the Government side significantly exceeds those of the opposition. Hospitals, bakeries and bread lines have been targeted. Whole neighbourhoods have been razed. Syria’s rich cultural heritage is being destroyed.

22. As predicted, the war has also taken on sectarian overtones, permeated by opportunistic criminality, and aggravated by the presence of foreign fighters and extremist groups as well as some actions by the Government, including its affiliated *shabbiha* militia. This is simply an appalling picture. There should be no room in the future Syria for those who hold contempt for the beliefs, practices, and symbols of other religious traditions or who cite secularism as a pretext for trying to monopolize power predominantly in the hands of one group. There is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on any grounds. All communities must be assured that their rights will be respected.

23. Regrettably, the warring parties remain locked in a military logic which is bound to bring more death and destruction. In this context, the proposal for dialogue from Mr. Moaz al-Khatib, President of the Syrian National Coalition is a positive development. The Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States as well as the Joint Special Representative have welcomed this initiative. They called on all parties to engage, at the earliest, in talks based on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, with a view to ensuring a political transition that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, preserve the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian nation, and bring to an end the bloodshed, the humanitarian disaster, and the destruction of Syria. The Secretary-General is encouraged by statements from Security Council members supporting Mr Al-Khatib’s proposal.

24. The humanitarian situation is becoming worse in Syria as Under –Secretary-General Valerie Amos will brief the Council tomorrow. She will provide to you more details on the United Nations’ efforts to address the tragic humanitarian consequences of the conflict that has left over 4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including 2 million internally

displaced, and has led to more than 900,000 people to flee to neighboring countries, including 150,000 this month alone.

25. The situation in the Golan also remains precarious, posing risks to the ceasefire between Israel and Syria and the safety and security of civilians and UN personnel. In recent days, the Area of Separation saw a spike in these confrontations. Allow me to reiterate that the primary responsibilities for the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the area of separation and the areas of limitation on the Bravo side rests with the Syrian Government. Countries with influence should also impress upon the armed members of the opposition the importance of ensuring the freedom of movement and the safety of UNDOF personnel.

Mr. President.

26. Concern remains high about the ongoing impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon. While the overall situation in Lebanon remains stable, tensions have increased in the north-eastern border areas. On 1st of February an operation by the Lebanese Armed Forces near Aarsal resulted in the deaths of a man wanted for terrorism and of two Lebanese Armed Forces soldiers. On 16 and 22 February, there were again tensions in border areas as a result of cross-border shelling, the deaths of Hizbullah fighters and threats of escalation. On 24 February, further fighting along the border resulted in at least two Lebanese deaths, prompting President Sleiman publicly to react, stressing the need for continued commitment to Lebanon's dis-association policy and urging the Syrian side to refrain from shooting or firing missiles towards Lebanon's territory.

27. We are concerned at any actions that risk drawing Lebanon into the conflict in Syria. Continued reports of arms transfers to and through Lebanon are contrary to international obligations. We call on all sides to respect the integrity of the border and Lebanon's sovereignty, as well as on all Lebanese parties to honour their commitments of the Baabda Declaration of June 2012.

28. On the 4th of February, a Lebanese court issued arrest warrants for Syrian General Ali Mamlouk and an unnamed aide for their alleged involvement in a terrorist plot in Lebanon along with former Minister Michel Samaha. On 20 February, a judge issued indictments against all three suspects.

29. The situation along the Blue Line remained generally calm. However, there was an increase in Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace, notably ahead of the airstrike in Syria on the 30th of January. The Secretary-General called on all concerned to prevent tensions or escalations and to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries in the region.

30. On 21 February, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon announced the postponement of the start of the trial provisionally scheduled for 25 March. A new tentative date is expected to be set soon. The eighth anniversary of the assassination of the late Rafik Hariri on 14 February underlines the need to achieve justice for past assassinations and attempted ones, including in the past year.

31. Meanwhile, consensus has not yet been reached on a draft law for the Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled for June. Free, fair and credible elections in a timely fashion are important for Lebanon's stability and continued political advancement. All parties are therefore encouraged to work to ensure that elections take place on a consensual basis within the legal and constitutional timeframe.

Mr. President,

32. In conclusion, let me emphasize that it is our strong belief that we need to inject new life in the Israeli-Palestinian political process now. We know that there are negative forces on both sides, such as those who fired today's rocket from Gaza into Israel, who draw strength from stalemate and paralysis. Both sides have a responsibility to marginalize these forces by creating the conditions, including trust, for a successful negotiating process. It is now my hope that the shared sense of frustration translates into a shared sense of urgency. Given the lack of confidence that unfortunately characterizes the Israeli-Palestinian relationship today, we cannot underestimate how difficult it will be to develop a serious and substantial political initiative, with a realistic and not unlimited timeframe, and one that is collectively supported by all stakeholders. But it is our view that one cannot expect progress this year without the articulation of a credible political framework to achieve the negotiated two-state solution that we all hope for and that will best serve the interests, rights and aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis alike. This is a time for renewed impetus and political will to end the conflict and the occupation that has already scarred the lives of far too many Israelis and Palestinians for far too long. We need to act now, first and foremost for the sake of the younger generations. They deserve a future of peace.

Thank you.