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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
22 OCTOBER 2013**

Mr. President,

1. The Council meets today at a moment of heightened Middle East diplomacy. Discussions are ongoing on both immediate crises and longstanding sources of tensions in the region, from the Syria catastrophe to the Middle East peace process to questions regarding nuclear proliferation. We believe that last month's General Assembly high level session in New York reaffirmed the importance of the United Nations as a forum for engagement between states and for real diplomatic progress when there is international unity as opposed to division. While the challenges on each front should not be underestimated, it is important to maintain and even increase the momentum behind diplomacy. We encourage and remain committed to supporting this Council and its members in fully exploring all opportunities at hand to resolve peacefully, through dialogue, the difficult issues that bedevil peace and security in the region.

2. Central to many statements by world leaders in the General Debate was the need to shape more favorable dynamics across the region and to address urgently the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The test will be whether and at what pace current efforts can be sustained and gain traction in response to these concerns and expectations. Many have acknowledged the opportunity, at this juncture, to save the two-state solution and realize the vision of a viable, independent Palestinian state living side by side in peace with a secure Israel.

3. For the first time in seventeen months, on 27 September the Quartet Principals met in New York. They were joined by the Israeli and Palestinian chief negotiators for a joint briefing on the progress of the negotiations. Minister Livni and Mr. Erekat reiterated their personal and official commitment to reaching a comprehensive permanent status agreement and asked for the Quartet and the international community's support. Both stressed that their shared objective is to end the conflict based on a vision of two states for two peoples.

4. The Quartet reaffirmed its determination to lend effective support to their efforts during the prescribed timeframe. Acknowledging the leadership of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the Quartet commended their efforts and their commitment to remain engaged in the negotiations. Quartet partners stressed the importance of reversing negative trends on the ground, in order to advance the direct talks. Quartet Representative Tony Blair briefed the group on the Palestinian Economic Initiative, which aims to bring transformative economic growth to the Palestinian economy running in parallel with the renewed negotiations. The Quartet discussed the humanitarian needs of Gaza's residents and emphasized the importance of increased access into Gaza through legal crossings, while welcoming recent steps taken by Israel in this regard. In discussing the importance of international support for the negotiations, the Quartet commended the Arab League for its constructive role and recognized that many others in the international community have made important contributions. The Quartet Envoys will meet again soon as part of their now monthly meetings to report on progress. Since the Quartet meeting, negotiators have picked up the pace of talks and have stated their commitment to abide by the understanding of not revealing the contents of such discussions. It is encouraging to see an intensified dialogue that demonstrates both sides are taking ownership.

5. On 25 September, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee met at the Ministerial level and expressed its full support for the on-going peace negotiations. The Secretary-General called on donors to step up efforts to assist the Palestinian Authority stressing that, "the situation is volatile and the status quo is not sustainable. In the long term it is damaging to both the Israelis and the Palestinians." Most participants welcomed the positive gestures announced by Israel, including the easing of restrictions, as yielding visible improvements on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Mr. President,

6. Despite the welcome intensification of negotiations, there have been worrisome developments on the ground that we cannot ignore. I wish to reiterate the United Nations

unequivocal call on all to refrain from violence and incitement, reinforce calm and reverse negative trends in order to preserve the tentative opening in the political process.

7. During the reporting period, Palestinians shot and killed two Israeli soldiers in apparently unrelated incidents on 20 and 22 September. President Abbas publicly condemned these incidents, and Israeli and Palestinian security officials held coordination meetings to prevent an escalation of violence. Palestinians injured seven Israeli soldiers, including one on 17 October when a Palestinian attacked an Israeli military base with a bulldozer prior to being shot dead. Israeli security forces carried out a total of 334 operations. One resulted in the killing of an Islamic Jihad militant in the Jenin refugee camp. Demonstrations, including against the barrier, resulted in numerous injuries. Israeli forces injured at least 290 Palestinians during the reporting period, including 114 children and two women. 311 Palestinians were arrested.

8. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) reported numerous incidents of stone and Molotov cocktail thrown at both civilian and military targets. It announced the arrest of Palestinian terror suspects and the confiscation of weapons and improvised explosive devices. Palestinian security forces, continuing their work to maintain security in the West Bank, safely defused three unexploded devices. Intra-Palestinian clashes with armed militants during a large security operation on 5 October in Jenin refugee camp resulted in several injuries including to Palestinian security personnel and about 100 arrests.

9. Settlement activity is an obstacle to peace and against international law. Clashes between Palestinians and settlers were also ongoing. In an incident still under investigation, a Palestinian beat to death one Israeli settler, a retired IDF colonel, in the Jordan Valley on 11 October. In another Palestinian attack, five Israeli settlers were injured, including a nine-year old girl, on 5 October in the settlement of Psagot near Ramallah.

10. Israeli settlers injured eight Palestinians, including three children. So-called "price tag" attacks included the desecration in two instances of tombstones in Christian cemeteries in Jerusalem and a mosque in the Palestinian village of Burqa on 10 October. On 6 October, Israeli security forces reported the arrest of 14 Israeli minors from Jerusalem, allegedly involved in such

attacks in recent months. Multiple incidents of settler attacks against Palestinian farmers and orchards damaged over 1,080 trees and saplings. This is of particular concern given the olive picking season currently underway -- a source of livelihood for thousands of Palestinians. We welcome enhanced efforts in recent years by the Israeli military to provide protection for Palestinian farmers and facilitate access to their olive groves at this time of year, and we urge that such efforts be expanded year round.

11. In a worrying development, clashes broke out on the Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount between Israelis and Palestinian worshippers, in what Palestinians see as growing provocations on that holy site. This drew sharp criticism, including from the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. Incitement from any quarter must cease and the sanctity of holy sites of all faiths must be respected.

12. The demolition of a total of 58 structures displaced the 48-member Bedouin community of Makhoul, the third such incident of collective demolitions in recent months. On the 3rd of October, the Israeli military demolished the tents subsequently established by the community, some with assistance provided by international humanitarian agencies. Such incidents reinforce the United Nations conviction that Palestinians require access to a fair planning and zoning regime so as not to resort to the building of structures without an Israeli permit that lead to demolitions. We also remind Israel of its obligations to facilitate humanitarian assistance to communities in need.

13. We welcome the recent implementation by the IDF of some of UNICEF's recommendations from their March 2013 report, "Children in Israeli military detention." We encourage further measures to improve the treatment of Palestinian children in Israeli military custody.

Mr. President,

14. The calm in the Gaza Strip is showing worrying signs of erosion. On 13 October, the IDF announced that it had uncovered a mile-long tunnel constructed with slabs of concrete, from

Gaza into Israel—the third tunnel discovered in a year. Hamas' senior leadership claimed responsibility for the construction, suggesting its potential use for kidnapping operations to facilitate the release of Palestinian prisoners. We condemn the construction of such tunnels, which are in violation of the November 2012 ceasefire understanding. The use of hundreds of tons of cement in the construction of the tunnel, when cement is critically needed for civilian goals in Gaza, is also deeply disturbing. Furthermore, in rejecting Hamas' stated justification for the tunnel, the United Nations continues to reject any incitement to violence or attempted denial of Israel's right to exist.

15. In another violation of the November ceasefire understanding, Palestinians launched a total of five rockets and one mortar shell into Israel, with no injuries or damage, while another nine rockets reportedly dropped into Gaza. Israel conducted seven incursions into the Gaza Strip. Israeli forces shot one Palestinian militant dead on 30 September and injured another on 17 September. Three Palestinian civilians were reportedly injured by Israeli live fire in the border area.

16. Following the tunnel discovery, the Government of Israel temporarily suspended the transfer of construction material through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza. We fully recognize Israel's legitimate security concerns but we remind Israeli officials of the needs of Gaza's residents, including for construction material for civilian use that must enter Gaza through legal crossings. The people of Gaza suffer from the rise in food insecurity, a significant energy problem affecting the health, water and sanitation sectors, and from restrictions imposed on movement of people for medical and educational reasons, with Rafah crossing open for 16 out of 36 days during this period.

17. We are grateful for Turkey's donation of USD 850,000 to the Palestinian Authority for the purchase of fuel to generate electricity for essential health and sanitation services in Gaza, to be implemented with United Nations assistance. While longer-term engagement will be needed to address structural issues afflicting service provision to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, this is a welcome stop-gap measure to provide a safety net and mitigate the humanitarian situation in

Gaza. Turkey also donated 10,000 metric tons of flour to UNRWA, a critical contribution to the agency's emergency food assistance.

18. On the 2nd of October a man convicted of murder was executed in Gaza. The United Nations position against such executions is well-known.

Mr. President,

19. At a complex juncture for the Middle East, we remind Member States that UNRWA continues to face serious financial difficulties. A deficit of \$48 million in its budget for education, health and poverty mitigation work threatens the provision of essential services to more than 5 million Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. In a special meeting chaired by the Secretary-Generals of the UN and League of Arab States on the 26th of September, participants agreed to sustain and increase support to the agency. Reports of Palestine refugees fleeing Syria being lost in boat that capsized off Egypt, and an increase in the death toll of Palestinian refugees in Syria from the escalation of fighting in Deraa, Yarmouk and other camps in Rif Damascus, underline the urgent need to address the extreme vulnerability of Palestinian refugees in the current conflict and thus uphold the promise of sustained engagement with UNWRA.

Mr. President,

20. In Lebanon, security continues to be affected by cross-border shelling and shooting from Syria, leading to the injury of at least three soldiers on 28 September. President Sleiman condemned a missile attack by a Syrian helicopter on the border town of Aarsal on 7 October. Progress has been made in the investigations into the bomb attacks in the southern suburbs of Beirut on 15 August and in Tripoli on 23 August, leading to several arrests. The Lebanese army and security forces deployed heavily around the southern suburbs of Beirut to assume security responsibility in place of Hizbullah and also in Tripoli. In a welcome development, nine Lebanese pilgrims who had been held in captivity for 17 months in Syria were released on 19 October and returned to Lebanon. At the same time, two Turkish pilots who had been abducted

on 9 August in Beirut were also released.

21. In the light of the multiple impacts of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, the Secretary-General on 25 September on the margins of the General Assembly convened the inaugural meeting to launch an International Support Group for Lebanon. The high-level meeting reaffirmed the international support for Lebanon's stability and policy of disassociation, for President Sleiman and the institutions of the State, and encouraged assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, to refugees and host communities, and to the Lebanese government. We anticipate an expansion of the International Support Group to embrace additional countries and organizations that share the goal of helping Lebanon, and we welcome the World Bank's recent meeting on Lebanon.

Mr. President,

22. The tragedy in Syria continues to test our collective resolve and ability to end the violence there. While important progress has been made on the chemical weapons file, it will by no means bring an end by itself to the appalling suffering of the Syrian people. The Secretary-General continues to insist that the only way to bring peace to Syria is an inclusive and Syrian-led political process. We are working hard to convene the Geneva conference in mid-November. Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi is in the region on a tour that will include visits to Syria and key states who can bring influence to bear on the prospects for peace. I returned late last week myself from visits to London and Moscow where the focus was on convening the Geneva Conference. The conference will aim to help the Syrian sides launch a political process, which would lead to an agreement on how to fully implement the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 and establish by consent a new transitional governing body with full executive authority. We highly value the Security Council's strong support to this effort, as was reflected in resolution 2118 of 27 September. We are working at all levels and hope that a common vision for a political solution can soon emerge among the Syrians, in the region and globally. We continue to call on all who truly wish to work for peace and a new democratic Syria to focus not on military actions or transferring arms to either side of the conflict but rather on ensuring the holding and the success of this conference. With a political process, however difficult it will be, there is hope that a new Syria will emerge. Without it, there is little on the horizon but the

further destruction of Syria and the further destabilization of the region as a result of this conflict.

23. The situation in the Golan continues to be volatile with ongoing heavy clashes between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF) and armed members of the opposition occurring inside the area of separation jeopardizing the ceasefire between Israel and Syria. On 9 October, the Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that SAAF artillery fire had hit an IDF position wounding two IDF soldiers and the IDF was going to retaliate. UNDOF asked the IDF not to take such action and also asked Syrian authorities to stop the SAAF from firing towards the ceasefire line to prevent escalation between the two sides. Subsequently, the IDF fired at a Syrian position in the area of limitation on the Bravo side, wounding two SAAF soldiers. Upon inspection of the location, UNDOF observed the impact of artillery fire on the Alpha side.

Mr. President,

24. In conclusion let me return to where I started, with an acknowledgment of the emerging opportunities for diplomacy before us across a range of issues that foment tension across an interconnected region. On the Middle East peace process, we should do all we can to take advantage of the opening that now exists. This can only help the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, and the entire region. After 20 years of talks and too many negative developments on the ground, we don't need lengthy negotiations. What we, and the parties, need are decisions, the right decisions, and leaders who are committed to usher in an agreed political solution. The United Nations, through the Quartet, alongside broader engagement with all relevant partners, stands ready to contribute to what we all so fervently hope to see come to fruition: the creation of two states for two peoples living side by side in peace and security. Despite the difficult regional context and the challenges on the ground between Israel and Palestine, this is not an opportunity that either can afford to lose.