

**Secretary-General's remarks
to Security Council open debate on the Situation in the Middle East**

New York, 20 January 2014

Thank you for organizing this important meeting on the situation in the Middle East.

Before I start let me say just a few words on the situation around the talks on Syria. You will be aware of the latest developments concerning the Geneva Conference on Syria. Intensive and urgent discussions are under way, and I will have more to say about the situation later in the day. For the moment, let me just appeal again for all involved to keep the needs of the Syrian people foremost in mind.

I have just returned from the region, including my fifth visit to Iraq. The country is again facing serious threats to its stability. I discussed my concerns with many Iraqi leaders and urged all sides to remain committed to political dialogue and uphold respect for the rule of law and human rights.

I was reassured by their pledge to hold parliamentary elections as scheduled on 30 April.

Today, I reiterate my message to Iraqi political leaders to fulfil their responsibilities to ensure inclusive dialogue, social cohesion, and concrete political progress.

I also visited Kuwait. I am extremely grateful to the many countries that pledged generous funding at the Second International Humanitarian Pledging Conference on Syria. In addition I had a meeting with the Emir of Kuwait and I am encouraged by the improving bilateral relations between his country and Iraq. We also discussed the importance of Security Council resolution 2107 (2013).

Turning to Lebanon, I commend President Sleiman's leadership to uphold the country's disassociation policy. This is vital to prevent the Syrian crisis from exacerbating tensions in Lebanon as we have seen with recent acts of terrorism and bombings.

Nine years after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, last week's opening of the trial of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is a reminder of the fight to end impunity in Lebanon.

Violations of Lebanon's border with Syria continue, including a worrying escalation of rocket firing and airstrikes into Lebanon's Bekaa region. Refugees continue to cross into Lebanon in large numbers, now totalling over 860,000 - a six-fold increase over last year.

The situation in the UNIFIL area remains relatively stable thanks to the cooperation of the Lebanese and Israeli authorities to contain recent incidents. All must build on the stability that has prevailed along the Blue Line under resolution 1701.

The Security Council and the International Support Group for Lebanon have called for generous support for the humanitarian response and stabilization efforts, as well as for the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has pledged \$3 billion in assistance to the Lebanese Army.

I welcome the momentum to form a government, and encourage all parties to ensure that Presidential elections are held on time. The people of Lebanon look to their leaders to work together to steer their country through this difficult time.

2014 will be a decisive year to help Israelis and Palestinians draw back from a perilous and unsustainable status quo.

US Secretary of State Kerry has worked diligently to lay out a framework on all core issues to address Israeli and Palestinian aspirations in a fair and balanced manner and to allow for continued negotiations towards a final status agreement.

I also pay special tribute to Jordan for its essential role.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders will be required to make bold decisions and painful compromises for peace. They must prepare their peoples for these necessary steps.

The failure of political progress could fuel a downward spiral on the ground. I am alarmed by recurrent violence and incitement from all sides, as well as continued settlement activity which is illegal under international law.

Building settlements is not consistent with building a long-lasting peace agreement.

Both parties must act responsibly and with restraint. Gaza also remains a cause for concern. Ultimately, a sustainable two-state solution requires Palestinians to overcome their divisions.

UNRWA will begin 2014 with an expected end-of-year shortfall of \$67 million under its Regular Budget. I encourage all Member States to explore ways to strengthen their cooperation with UNRWA and provide additional funding, in particular, to its regular budget.

I hope that the parties will reach a framework understanding. It must be fair, and consistent with principles on all core issues outlined in UN Security Council resolutions, the Madrid principles -- including land for peace -- the Road Map and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

Palestinians must be able to realize their legitimate aspirations to statehood, self-determination, dignity, and freedom, including an end to the occupation that began in 1967 with a just solution to the plight of refugees, and a resolution of the status of Jerusalem.

Israelis must be able to live in peace and security, within a recognized border, paving the way for their increasing integration in a stable and secure region.

The realization of the Arab Peace Initiative will yield socioeconomic, trade, and security benefits for all the peoples of the Middle East.

For Palestinians a comprehensive peace settlement holds the promise of becoming a fully recognized Member State of equal standing. There is no substitute for negotiations to achieve this end.

Only then can the United Nations relationship with Palestine truly transform to fully implementing and completing the Palestinian state-building agenda.

For Israel, too, only a negotiated solution will bring security and recognition in the region and beyond. Israel would be in a position to reap the full benefits of all forms of cooperation within the United Nations system. The UN and its members will in turn greatly benefit from what Israel has to offer.

I do not underestimate the difficulties, but the risks of inaction or surrender are far greater. We face possibly the last attempt to salvage the two-state solution. Quite simply, this is too important to fail.

My message to President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu is clear:

If you are prepared to take the bold decisions required, I will push ahead on the positive agenda of peace dividends for both sides and ensure the United Nations works towards realizing the legitimate aspirations of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples within the framework of a comprehensive regional settlement. We must make the most of the prospect that Secretary Kerry has unlocked to see the creation of two states living side-by-side in peace and security that their peoples so desperately desire and deserve.

Thank you.