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ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL

BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

25 June 2013

Mr. President,

1. As the human tragedy in Syria continues to unfold, the whole region is feeling the reverberations with neighbors such as Jordan and Lebanon absorbing much of the humanitarian impact. And a resolution is not yet in sight. Earlier this month G8 leaders reached an understanding on achieving a political solution in Syria, and committed to bringing the Syrian sides to the negotiating table. The Secretary-General reiterated his readiness to convene the Geneva Conference on Syria as soon as possible. He further welcomed the announcement of additional contributions of USD 1.5 billion in humanitarian aid, critical in saving lives.
2. On the same day, in his message to the International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace in Beijing, the Secretary-General stressed that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and safeguarding the two-state solution was no less urgent. The current regional turmoil makes it all the more imperative to build on the opening created by the diplomatic push from the United States and create a positive momentum towards Israeli-Palestinian peace which can provide a stabilizing horizon and hope for the whole region. However, there are so far only too few encouraging signs on the prospects of breaking the deadlock. The United Nations has consistently pointed out the risks of the prolonged impasse and the consequences of inaction.
3. The United Nations has welcomed the determined reengagement of the United States. In March the US President underlined that peace is necessary, just and possible. We as the international community bear a great responsibility in transforming this possibility into reality. Secretary Kerry's several rounds of visits since – he announced that he would visit Jerusalem and the region for the fifth time this week – provide the first real opportunity, since October 2010, for a serious effort to reach a final status agreement. While US engagement is central, we are convinced of the need for a broader regional and international engagement in support of any peace effort. We also welcome the reaffirmed willingness by Arab States to revive the Arab Peace Initiative. We hope the Israeli Government will respond positively.

Mr. President,

4. However much the parties need to reengage in negotiations as the only way to achieve the two-state solution, there must be a substantive and well prepared framework, as well as a credible timeline in order for the talks to have a chance of success. There is also a need for a conducive environment on the ground, including confidence building steps. However, while substantive progress is urgently needed,

rushing the parties back to the table without having the necessary framework in place and buy-in from both sides would be counter-productive. What is also not needed are unhelpful statements regarding the prospects for the two-state solution. Rather, progress necessitates serious political commitments by both leaders – Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas – who should show statesmanship, recognize a partner in each other, and finally negotiate and achieve a two-state solution, a vision they both agreed on. The current window of opportunity, however narrow, should not be lost.

Mr. President,

5. The de-facto settlement restraint observed earlier this spring has seen signs of unraveling. The Secretary-General has been particularly troubled by reports that planning for hundreds of housing units in the settlement of Itamar, deep into the West Bank, has advanced to the next stage, as is also the case in the outpost of Bruchin. We also note with disappointment that according to data released by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, during the first quarter of 2013 there were 865 'building starts' of housing units in settlements, representing a 176% increase compared to the equivalent period in 2012 and a record of seven years. These are unhelpful decisions that undermine progress towards the two-state solution. The Secretary-General reiterates that settlement activity is illegal, and calls on Israel to abide by its commitments under international law and the Road Map.

6. A new Palestinian Cabinet was sworn in on 6 June under the leadership of Rami Hamdallah to carry on the administration of the affairs of the state until a national consensus government is formed. However, in an apparent sign of disagreement about certain competencies, Prime Minister Hamdallah tendered his resignation on 20 June, but stayed on as caretaker until a successor is named. This creates renewed uncertainty for a Government still considerably relying on international support and facing a critical period ahead. The United Nations looks forward to continuing to work with the Government of Palestine and President Abbas in support of their state-building agenda and ongoing efforts aimed at a resumption of meaningful peace negotiations. The continued viability of the Palestinian Authority remains a core interest of the United Nations.

7. One fiscal factor fuelling concern in this regard is the Palestinian Authority's total government debt of reportedly US\$4.2 billion and its deficit which reached US\$ 612 million at the end of May. Donor support has decreased over the past years, and the United Nations is concerned about possible further cuts. Continued donor funding is essential to allow the Palestinian Government to tighten fiscal policy in a manner that does not harm the private sector or essential social spending.

8. Important meetings took place during and in the margins of the World Economic Forum on the Dead Sea in Jordan last month. The "Breaking the Impasse" initiative was unveiled, which we welcome as a serious expression by influential business leaders and public opinion from both sides of their wish for a two-state solution, and an urgent appeal to their leaders to realize it now. At the same event, Secretary Kerry announced a large-scale initiative intended at spurring economic growth through private investment for the West Bank and Gaza. These are hopeful signals. However, it is absolutely crucial that progress is made on the political track,

absent which sustained growth and private investment will remain elusive, and Palestinian accomplishments on the state-building agenda will be difficult to sustain.

9. The United Nations continues to help address the humanitarian and development needs of Palestinians in Area C, where lifting Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement, access to land and water, planning and building would unleash growth potential. We continue to engage the Israeli Government on a series of infrastructure projects in Area C and we are in the process of securing funding for the works supporting the agricultural sector. To more effectively address development needs in Area C, it is imperative that Israeli authorities authorize the 32 plans submitted for approval, some since June 2010.

Mr. President,

10. Tensions on the ground are also mounting. Violence between Palestinians and settlers continued in the West Bank. A total of five Palestinians, including one woman, were injured by settlers, while six settlers, including four women, were injured by Palestinian stone throwing. Yesterday an Israeli bus was shot at near Nablus without resulting in injuries. Settler violence against Palestinian property under the so called “price tag” attacks also increased sharply and resulted in extensive material damage. Such attacks also targeted Christian sites, including the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem and the Orthodox cemetery of Jaffa.

11. Between 14 and 16 June, Israeli right-wing activists reportedly beat and injured three Palestinian women in West Jerusalem, including a 75-year-old. On 17 June, the tires of 28 cars were punctured in Abu Gosh, a village inside Israel populated also by Arab citizens of Israel, and racist slogans were spray painted on walls. Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly protested such acts as running counter to Jewish commandments and the values of the people of Israel. The day before, the Israeli Government strengthened the state’s law enforcement ability to combat “price tag” attacks by declaring their perpetrators an “illegal association”. It is hoped that this measure will contribute to preventing such attacks which must not go unpunished.

12. The security situation remained comparable to the last reporting period and security coordination between Palestinian and Israeli security forces continued despite some clashes. Israeli security forces conducted a total of 457 search and arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, resulting in 162 Palestinians injured, including 58 children and eight women. Two members of the Israeli security forces were also injured. 455 Palestinians were arrested by Israeli security forces, including a Hamas PLC member on 6 June in Ramallah. On 11 June Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel has foiled five suicide attacks since the start of the year.

13. The majority of injuries resulted from clashes during Palestinian protests in the occupied West Bank, including against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Demolitions of Palestinian property in Area C and in East Jerusalem continued, albeit at a slower pace, with a total of 24 structures demolished, leading to the displacement of 55 Palestinians, including 23 children.

Mr. President,

14. In Gaza a relative calm returned this month – until it was shattered during the night of 23 June when six rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, reportedly by Islamic Jihad. Two were intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system and four landed in southern Israel without causing injuries or damage. In response, Israel conducted three airstrikes into Gaza yesterday, targeting sites allegedly linked to weapon storage and rocket launching, causing no casualties. Israel also closed the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings for Palestinians. We condemn rocket fire into civilian areas, and urge Israeli restraint. All must abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians.

16. We continue to worry about the state of human rights and freedoms in Gaza. This includes our deep concern about four death sentences passed by military courts in Gaza, between 9 May and 20 June, and two executions carried out on 22 June, outside the Palestinian legal framework. We call on de facto authorities in Gaza to refrain from carrying out further executions.

17. Despite our ongoing efforts, we unfortunately must report further encroachment on freedoms in Gaza, namely increasing impediments on humanitarian operations. Along with inappropriate taxation requests, exit restrictions have recently been imposed by the de-facto authorities on Palestinian staff of the United Nations, NGOs and other organizations, to the point where some staff have not been able to leave Gaza. We call on the de facto authorities to rescind these restrictions, and hope that a solution can be found quickly.

18. Such measures impair the delivery of much needed assistance to the Palestinians, as does continuing violence. The only possible way forward is the full implementation of the ceasefire understanding reached on 21 November under Egyptian auspices, which calls for a full calm and a full lifting of the closure. We urge the parties to adhere to its terms to preserve advances and prospects to implement Security Council Resolution 1860 in full. Our immediate goals continued to include extending the fishing limit to at least eight nautical miles, allowing the entry of construction material, and permitting exports to Israel and transfers from Gaza to the West Bank, while we continue to carry out sizable programmes that address pressing needs.

19. In this regard, I would note that preliminary results of a joint United Nations survey indicate that food insecurity affects some 1.6 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and has increased to now include 34 per cent of households in 2012.

20. Against such a concerning backdrop, I would nevertheless like to highlight a moment of joy that lifted the spirits of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza alike, when on 22 June a young Gazan refugee, Mohammad Assaf, won the “Arab Idol” televised song contest, watched by millions throughout the region and beyond. Following his victory, Mr. Assaf was named as goodwill ambassador to the Palestinian diaspora by President Abbas and as the first Regional Youth Ambassador for Palestine Refugees by UNRWA.

Mr. President,

21. Turning to Syria, let me emphasize that the overall situation continues to deteriorate, as a result of continued violent military confrontation. Direct involvement by Hezbollah fighters inside Syria has given new momentum to the Syrian Government's military approach and contributed to sectarian and political tensions throughout the region. Statements of increased military support to both sides in the conflict only promise further escalation. The Secretary-General has repeatedly stressed his opposition to the transfer of arms and fighters to either side inside Syria.

22. In the meantime, the conflict is taking a heavy toll on the civilian population in Syria. Over 93,000 people have been reported killed. Civilians continued to flee to neighbouring and regional countries, where the number of refugees from Syria is now close to 1.7 million. United Nations agencies estimate that there are over 6.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including more than 3 million children. The situation of Palestine refugees in Syria also remains of utmost concern. More than 60,000 have fled to neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan. There are urgent needs in all sectors of humanitarian assistance.

23. The Independent Commission of Inquiry continued to document serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and reiterated in its report of 4 June, that war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross human rights violations continue apace.

24. The Secretary-General insisted that there is no military solution to the conflict. Only a political solution can bring the violence and the suffering of the Syrian people to an end. The Secretary-General continues his engagement with Member States and regional organizations in building on the diplomatic opportunity offered by the understanding reached between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and United States Secretary of State John Kerry on 7 May in Moscow. In this context, Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman are exploring ways to ensure the success of the Geneva Conference on Syria which would allow the Syrian parties to jointly determine the full implementation of the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012. To this effect, they met with Russian and United States representatives in Geneva today.

25. With regard to the alleged use of chemical weapons, the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic has so far remained unable to conduct its fact-finding mission inside Syria due to the lack of authorization by the Syrian Government for access. Several additional allegations of the use of chemical weapons have been brought to the Secretary-General's attention by Member States. The Mission will continue to monitor developments and collect available information. The Head of Mission, Åke Sellström, visited some capitals and is currently pursuing other options for fact-finding activities outside of Syria, including in neighbouring States.

26. This Council has been briefed in detail last week on the tense situation in UNDOF's area of operations in the Golan, which we continue to monitor with concern. We have repeatedly called for all violations of the disengagement agreement to cease, and urged the parties strictly to abide by their obligations. We remain fully

committed to UNDOF's mandate and are actively looking for a replacement for the departing Austrian troops,

Mr. President,

27. The negative impact of the conflict in Syria on Lebanon has been more sharply evident in recent weeks. On 25 May, Hizbulah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged Hizbulah's role in the fighting alongside the Government in Syria, while other Lebanese elements are also reported to provide support to the other side. Fighters from other countries also reportedly participate in the conflict. Threats of retaliation from Syrian opposition elements and calls by Lebanese Salafi sheikhs for jihad in Syria highlight the very real danger of the threat of a spread of the Syrian conflict to Lebanon. President Sleiman reiterated his calls for all concerned to adhere to the Baabda Declaration. The Secretary-General expressed deep concern at the increased participation in the fighting in Syria by Hizbulah and reiterated the paramount importance for all Lebanese leaders to prevent a dangerous spillover of the conflict in Lebanon and to adhere to the Baabda Declaration as essential for Lebanon's stability and security. On 20 June, President Sleiman called on Hizbulah fighters to "return to Lebanon".

28. During this period, over sixty shells and rockets were launched from Syria into Lebanon, causing one fatality and a dozen injuries. On 26 May, two rockets were fired into Shiite neighbourhoods in the southern suburbs of Beirut wounding four people. On 21 June, another rocket was fired into the southern Beirut area of Alley. On 5 and 12 June Syrian army helicopters fired missiles in the Arsal region of Lebanon. The Lebanese Armed Forces stated that their units in that area had taken the defensive measures necessary to react immediately to any further violation. On 18 June, in a letter for transmission to the President of the Security Council, President Sleiman protested the infringement by the conflicting Syrian parties of Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

29. The violence in Tripoli, which started on 19 May, continued causing 36 fatalities, including two members of the Army, and wounding 200 others. Tensions in the northern Bek'a valley are high, with attacks and clashes on 27 May and 6 June that left three Lebanese soldiers and two gunmen dead. Attacks in Arsal on 11 and 16 June resulted in five fatalities. In a serious development, violence also erupted in the southern city of Sidon where on 23 and 24 June armed clashes between supporters of a Salafist cleric and the Lebanese Armed Forces left at least 16 soldiers dead and 50 others wounded. This includes at least two soldiers killed in a related attack on Army checkpoints at the entrances to the Ein el-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp outside Sidon. The Secretary-General condemned the attacks on the Lebanese Armed forces, stressing the need to fully respect the authority of the State and its institutions, in particular the Lebanese Armed Forces, under the leadership of President Sleiman. He also reminded all concerned in Lebanon of their responsibility to avoid conflict and uphold the principles of mutual respect and coexistence.

30. On 31 May, a majority of the Parliament of both political blocs voted to extend its mandate by 17 months, thereby postponing the elections scheduled for 16 June until a date to be set prior to November 2014. Appeals against the extension

were put before the Constitutional Council but due to a lack of quorum the Council was not able to consider the appeals. The extension of Parliament's mandate is therefore confirmed. Prime Minister designate Tammam Salam is resuming consultations aimed at forming a new government.

31. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line remained broadly quiet but fragile. UNIFIL was able to control some tension between Lebanese civilians and troops of the Israel Defense Forces along the Hasbani/Wazzani river area. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis and in some instances intensified, notably from 3 to 5 May.

Mr. President,

32. The Middle East is living dangerous and tragic days, as the scourge of war is, once again, destroying lives and burying hopes. It is a trying period for the United Nations, and our collective ability to live up to the values and principles of the Charter is put to a hard test. But however difficult the task, this Council and the United Nations at large cannot give up and cannot let a sense of collective impotence erode our sense of responsibility. Resolving conflict and finding a way towards peaceful coexistence and mutual respect of all is possible. But it requires courageous and mutual compromises at the national, regional and international levels, and a commitment to settling conflicts through peaceful means, not war or violence. This is true in Syria as elsewhere. It is critical that all act responsibly and contribute to reverse the negative dynamics at play in the region. The current situation of unresolved conflict and prolonged occupation in the West Bank and Gaza is the cause of much suffering on the Palestinian side, but is no good for Israel either. We, at the United Nations, are deeply convinced that achieving the two-State solution, ending the occupation started in 1967 and ending the conflict as envisaged by relevant resolutions of this Council are in the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians. Leaders have a choice to make – and a responsibility before their people and future generations. The United Nations will continue to do all it can to help the search for peace and the realization of the universal and legitimate rights of all people in the region.