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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
23 June 2014**

Mr. President,

1. I brief today against the backdrop of many unsettling developments in the region. Nonetheless, we should not lose sight of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. With peace negotiations suspended since the end of April and despite restraint initially displayed by both sides, the situation on the ground has turned highly volatile with several disturbing developments. Intensive search operations in the West Bank for the three Israeli students abducted near Hebron are ongoing with a corresponding increase in violence in the West Bank. The hunger strike by Palestinian administrative and other detainees since 24 April is now in its 61st day. New settlement units have been announced. And the fragile calm in Gaza was interrupted by multiple rockets fired at Israel and Israeli military response. All these issues, on which the United Nations has pronounced itself unequivocally, can only be addressed if the parties act responsibly and with restraint. Only then can any renewed attempt by the parties to find their way back to meaningful negotiations and to address the much lacking political horizon in order to avert further escalation take hold. International engagement and support to this effect should remain unwavering.

2. The reporting period also witnessed significant political developments on both sides. On 2 June President Abbas announced the formation of a government of national consensus headed by Prime Minister Hamdallah on the basis of the PLO commitments of recognition of Israel, non-violence and adherence to previous agreements. The Palestinian President added that elections would be organized within six months. On 10 June, Israel elected long-time member and two-time Speaker Reuven Rivlin of the Knesset as the next President to succeed Shimon Peres.

Mr. President,

3. The situation in the West Bank – already tense with demonstrations in support of Palestinian detainees – has worsened. In the evening of 12 June, three Israeli students – a 19-year old and two 16-year olds – were reported missing. Their abduction has been roundly condemned, including by the Secretary-General, who has expressed his outrage publicly and in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Israel blamed the abduction on Hamas, an allegation Hamas has reportedly since denied. We nevertheless find Hamas statements glorifying the perpetrators of this act to be outrageous. If Hamas involvement is corroborated this would indeed constitute a grave development.

4. Search operations by Israeli security forces have extended to the rest of the West Bank, including in major population centers. Israeli authorities also implemented tightened movement restrictions, including prohibiting men from Hebron between the ages of 20 and 50 years to cross the Allenby Bridge into Jordan, the only international crossing for West Bankers. We are concerned by reports that over 350 Palestinians have now been arrested, many injured, and four Palestinians killed, including one minor on 20 June. The rising death toll as a result of Israeli security operations in the West Bank is alarming. We condemn all killings of civilians and call for an investigation into any such deaths. Reportedly, the Israeli cabinet also voted to impose harsher conditions on detainees affiliated with Hamas who are in Israeli custody. As the search for the missing youth continues, we call for restraint in carrying out the security operations in strict compliance with international law, and avoiding punishing individuals for offences they have not personally committed. Detentions included those of reported Hamas affiliates, and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, notably Speaker Aziz Dweik, as well as over 50 Palestinians previously released as part of the so-called “Shalit deal”. Palestinian security forces continued their work to maintain law and order. Earlier on 5 June, Palestinian security forces reportedly uncovered and seized explosives, knives, flags and military uniforms allegedly belonging to Hamas in Hebron.

5. Overall, since our last briefing, Israeli security forces carried out a total of 607 search and arrest operations and detained an estimated 928 Palestinians. Five Palestinians were shot dead, including during search operations for the missing, and 291 injured, including during demonstrations against the barrier and in support of Palestinian's in administrative detention. Twelve Israeli security forces personnel were also injured. We are alarmed that there are significant increases in all of these categories since our last briefing.

6. Settler attacks, on the rise during this period, resulted in 18 Palestinians injured, including three children, and damage to Palestinian property. Palestinian attacks, mostly consisting of stone and Molotov cocktail throwing, resulted in injuries to seven Israelis. The Israeli authorities have not yet disclosed the findings of their investigation into the deaths of two Palestinian youth on 15 May.

7. Settlement activity, illegal under international law, continued apace with the announcement on 4 June of the issuance of tenders for over 1,400 new settlement units in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem, and reports that the Israeli authorities have advanced plans for some 1,000 settlement housing units following Prime Minister Netanyahu's reported decision to unfreeze planning processes for 1,800 settlement units. On 18 June, 172 units were announced in the settlement of Har Homa between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

8. Demolitions of 65 Palestinian structures resulted in the displacement of some 112 Palestinians, including 56 children. Israeli authorities destroyed or seized a total of 28 donor-funded humanitarian assistance items, including on 5 June of a water and sanitation consignment en route to a vulnerable Bedouin community in Al Ganub in the southern West Bank.

9. The Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights remain gravely concerned about the deteriorating health of those Palestinian prisoners on prolonged hunger strikes. Both have repeatedly called attention to the situation of prisoners on administrative detention and reiterate their long-standing position that administrative detainees should be charged or released without delay. The United Nations is concerned over the Government-sponsored legislative amendment before the Israeli Knesset that, if passed, would permit force-feeding and medical treatment of prisoners on hunger strike against their will under certain conditions, in contravention of international standards. The Government-sponsored bill passed its first reading in the Knesset on 9 June, despite strong objections raised by national and international medical and human rights organizations.

10. Tensions also continued around the holy sites in the Old City. Since our last briefing, access restrictions were imposed on several occasions to Palestinians, and clashes between worshippers and Israeli security forces resulted in tens of Palestinians injured and detained, including on 13 June. We call on all parties to show utmost restraint regarding the holy compound and fully respect the sanctity of holy sites of all faiths.

Mr. President,

11. In Gaza, the prevailing calm started unraveling, especially following the abduction of the Israeli students, and since our last briefing, a total of 39 rockets and four mortar shells were fired towards Israel. Two rockets exploded at launching sites and 17 dropped short in Gaza, injuring two Palestinian girls on 16 June. Three rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome system, but four mortar shells and 19 rockets landed in open areas of Israel, including two near the city of Ashkelon, without resulting in injuries. Israel conducted a total of five incursions and 38 airstrikes into Gaza, resulting in the death of a Palestinian militant and a seven year-old child. Another Palestinian civilian died on 8 June from injuries after being shot at by the Israeli Navy on 26 May. A total of 10 Palestinian militants and eight Palestinian civilians, were injured by Israeli fire. We continue to condemn indiscriminate rocket firing against civilians as well as any loss of civilian life. We further call on all Palestinian factions to adhere to the calm as per the understandings reached in the lead up to the unity agreement. Of chief importance is the need to support the Palestinian Authority's efforts to take up security functions in Gaza and to unify the security forces under one legitimate authority.

12. The persisting dire socioeconomic situation as the result of a tightened access regime and continued violence has seriously complicated prospects for the new government of national consensus in assuming its functions and delivering tangible improvements to the lives of Gazans, which the UN had pledged to support. The tension over the payment of salaries is but one manifestation of the immediate challenges as the Palestinian Authority attempts to reunify the institutions. Existing acute de-development indicators remain of concern, including rates of food insecurity at 57 percent, and unemployment at 41 percent, disproportionately affecting youth.

13. Much of Gaza's challenges still require structural solutions, which remain unaddressed. Following the abduction incident on 12 June and ensuing rocket firing, the Kerem Shalom crossing was closed from 15 to 17 June but for the transfer of fuel supplies; it has been re-opened fully since 18 June. Since our last report to this Council, there have been no approvals for the resumption of additional UN construction projects, and pre-approved work stalled as a result of the crossings being closed. Open crossings both for goods and people, access to construction material, re-establishing trade links between the West Bank and Gaza, and exports are as urgently needed as ever to kickstart the economy and create job

opportunities. Rafah was only open for seven days during the reporting period. Under the current strenuous circumstances, and though it won't be easy, the UN will continue to deliver assistance to the people in Gaza in close cooperation with the newly appointed Ministers.

14. Turning to Lebanon, the constitutional deadline to elect a new President expired on 25 May. Presidential powers transferred to the Council of Ministers under the leadership of Prime Minister Salam, in accordance with the constitution. Seven parliamentary sessions have been called so far, but the necessary quorum was not achieved. We again underline the urgency for Lebanon's leaders to ensure the election of a President without further delay and stress the importance for the government meanwhile to discharge its responsibilities effectively.

15. The security situation has remained relatively calm with the implementation since April of security plans for Tripoli and the Bekaa. However, a suicide car bomb at a security checkpoint in Dahr El Baidar on 20 June killed a member of the Internal Security Forces. The bombing coincided with an extensive police raid in Beirut's district of Hamra in which several suspects were arrested after security agencies received information about possible new terror attacks, which resulted in raising the state of alert in Beirut and elsewhere. Also in the past month, there were at least five airstrikes by Syrian aircraft in Lebanese territory and three cross-border shelling incidents from Syria.

16. Over 1,100,000 Syrian refugees are now registered in Lebanon. On 31 May, the Interior Minister announced that Syrian refugees who returned to Syria would lose their refugee status in Lebanon. Restrictions on the entry of Palestine refugees from Syria have been re-introduced.

17. The situation in Palestinian camps remains of concern, with an explosion in Ain el Hilweh on 19 May, allegedly targeting a Fatah official. Faction leaders have sought to coordinate with Lebanese authorities to address the concerns, especially in Ain el Hilweh.

18. On 17 June, the Government of Italy hosted a Ministerial Conference on Support to the Lebanese Armed Forces in Rome in the framework of the International Support Group for Lebanon. Participants from 43 delegations welcomed the announcement of new assistance to the Lebanese Army and encouraged further assistance in priority areas.

19. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line remained generally calm and stable, despite almost daily Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace.

20. Turning to Syria, on 20 June, the Secretary-General reiterated his deep concerns at the continued levels of violence and human suffering and destruction in Syria. I would like to reiterate the six points he offered on Friday as a way to help address the situation in a principled and integrated fashion.

21. Ending the violence is the most immediate priority. It is essential to stem the flow of arms and fighters pouring into the country, and to this end, to impose an arms embargo. Local ceasefire arrangements, however imperfect, are taking place and allow us to deliver much needed aid and curtail the levels of violence. We should turn these “war agreements” into “peace agreements”. Most recently, such an arrangement was reached in Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, over the weekend.

22. Second, we must do our utmost to protect the human rights, safety and dignity of the Syrian people, 3.5 million of whom are in hard-to-reach locations. The sieges must end and immediate unfettered humanitarian access across internal frontlines and across borders must be allowed.

23. Third, we desperately need new efforts to start a serious political process for a new Syria. The Secretary-General will soon name a new envoy who must be afforded full cooperation and support by all international and regional actors.

24. Fourth, any credible peace process will have to address the question of ensuring accountability for serious crimes that have been committed by all sides.

25. Fifth, while a major landmark was achieved today with the removal of the last remaining identified chemicals, finishing the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria remains an imperative. The OPCW-UN effort has been essential to reinforce the global norm prohibiting chemical weapons.

26. Sixth, and finally, the prolongation of the conflict in Syria has created fertile ground for radical armed groups, including those affiliated with Al Qaeda. Recent events in Iraq have vividly demonstrated that the Syrian conflict can have devastating impact on the neighboring countries and far beyond.

27. Recent serious incidents along the UNDOF-supervised area of separation are a further grave reminder of the risk of regional escalation caused by the Syrian conflict. Yesterday, approximately 300 meters north of UNDOF Position 52, firing from the Bravo side onto the Alpha side killed an Israeli teenager and injured three Israeli contractors – including the teenager’s father – who were carrying out work along the Israeli technical fence. The IDF retaliated with several rounds of tank fire and again with air strikes in the early hours today. UNDOF personnel in the area went into shelter and were not affected. UNDOF is currently investigating the incident. All must exercise utmost restraint, respect their mutual obligations, and halt firing of any kind across the ceasefire line.

Mr. President,

28. We are facing a moment of real crisis that is testing the region in new ways. Negative forces on multiple fronts in the Middle East continue to draw strength by sowing strife and frustrating viable options for a political solution. We should take this as a wake-up call that we are all challenged to work together to restore prospects for a durable regional peace. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, both sides have a responsibility to exercise maximum restraint in order to contain what has rapidly developed into a critical security situation on the ground, to restore the calm and to see opportunities to return to a negotiating process. 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 must work together now to build a better future for the people of the region. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I also want to express our collective appreciation to the UN’s Special Representatives and Special Coordinators, their teams, and the UN Country Teams who are working so heroically and diligently in this region, helping to address the challenges I have outlined in today’s briefing.