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

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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Two weeks ago, the Secretary-General addressed the Security Council on the crisis in the Middle East and the threats to international peace and security.

He spoke of a region that is plagued by sectarian divisions, by imploding states and exploding extremist groups.

A region in which anger and frustration quickly turn to terror, violence and radicalism.

A region where the battle between moderation and radicalism is the battle for the future of millions of people.

What happens today in the Middle East has immediate implications for the rest of the world.

Outside interference is transforming domestic conflicts into regional wars. In Syria, we see confrontations between several national armies, their proxies, various armed opposition groups, militias, foreign fighters, and multiple groups of terrorist organizations.

Humanitarian crises are escalating and spreading across borders. In Yemen, we are witnessing the worst humanitarian disaster of our time.

Old wounds continue to bleed and deepen as we speak, risking the outbreak of another war. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues with no prospect of a political resolution and Gaza is about to explode.

Gross violations of international law, including human rights law and humanitarian law have become the hallmark of the region.

Today, the risk of miscalculation grows, increasing the danger of a wider conflagration, as violence spills across borders.

In this highly charged and dangerous environment, whether in Syria, in Yemen or in Gaza, one word becomes critical – de-escalation.

De-escalation of the dangerous military buildup. De-escalation of the inflammatory and provocative rhetoric.

Everyone in the Middle East needs to step back from the brink.

There is no military solution to the conflicts of the region.

Mr. President,

Among these complex conditions, my counterparts in the region and I regularly emphasize in our briefings to this Council the rapidly shifting regional dynamics. The United Nations is working tirelessly to prevent further deterioration, while supporting national political processes region-wide.

We in the field need the international community to continue supporting multilateral mechanisms promoting security, stability and development in the region. We see the need for more multilateralism that blends the humanitarian and developmental interventions with preventive diplomacy and crisis management.

As stated by the Secretary-General, the changing nature of conflict means prevention should be at the centre of our efforts.

It is most certainly needed when dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although the urgency of the grave situation in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere has understandably focused international attention, Palestine remains a central part of the regional quagmire.

Until the occupation ends and a two-state solution is achieved through meaningful negotiations based on relevant UN resolutions, the conflict will remain one of the key drivers of extremism and a persistent threat to regional security.

Mr. President,

Gaza is coming apart as we speak under the pressure of an explosive combination of negative humanitarian, security and political factors.

If another conflict between Hamas and Israel were to erupt, this would have devastating consequences for Palestinians in Gaza. It could undermine the relative stability of the West Bank and have repercussions for Israel and the region as well. I say this with a heavy heart and in the hope that all of us will do our utmost, in the spirit of preventive diplomacy.

For the last four weeks, tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza have converged on the border with Israel in the context of the “Great March of Return” protests. Demonstrations are expected to continue and culminate around the 15th of May and could spread to the West Bank and beyond.

Since March 30th, during these demonstrations, 35 Palestinians have been killed and large numbers have been injured by Israeli security forces. No Israeli casualties have been reported.

There has also been an increasing number of dangerous incidents at the fence, including the planting of improvised explosive devices - at least one of which has detonated - the throwing of Molotov cocktails and attempts to breach the fence. Israel has accused Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other militants of using the protests, women, children and the elderly, as a cover to infiltrate into Israel and to commit terrorist attacks.

As these protests continue, tension and the potential for serious incidents and further casualties will increase.

I have engaged in an intense effort with all sides to reduce risks of friction and welcome the efforts, particularly of Egypt, and others to the same effect.

Israel must calibrate its use of force and minimize the use of live fire. Lethal force should be used only as a last resort.

Hamas and the leaders of the demonstrations must keep protestors away from the Gaza fence and prevent all violent actions and provocations.

The Secretary-General has been vocal in reiterating these messages and calling for restraint as he has repeatedly called for all incidents to be investigated.

Children, who should be particularly protected, are at grave risk. Sadly, to date, we have witnessed at least four who have been shot dead by Israeli live fire.

I take this opportunity to reiterate Mr. President, in the strongest possible terms, that civilians, particularly children, must not be intentionally put in danger or targeted in any way.

Everyone must ensure that civilians are able to exercise their right to demonstrate peacefully.

I welcome recent reports that the Israeli Defence Forces have established a team to examine the use of force during the current protests, including all incidents of fatal shooting, and reiterate the importance of conducting a proper independent investigation for results to be credible.

Mr. President,

In other incidents, two Hamas militants were shot dead, on March 30th, in an exchange of fire near Gaza's fence and five rockets and mortars were fired towards Israel in the last month. On 12 April, one person was killed by an Israeli airstrike after a group of Palestinian militants targeted an Israeli aircraft with machine gun fire. At least three additional militants were killed by ISF in separate incidents. And on 15 April, Israel announced it had sealed the fifth Hamas tunnel in the past six months leading from Gaza into its territory.

The Israeli Security Forces also foiled an attempt in the West Bank to smuggle ten pipe bombs that were reportedly intended for an attack on Israel's Independence Day.

I have said repeatedly, all militant activity in Gaza, including the digging of tunnels and the firing of rockets, must cease. It threatens the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike, increases the risk of a new escalation of hostilities, undermines calls for lifting the closures, and ultimately damages the prospects for peace. I call on all member states to join the United Nations in condemning such actions.

Mr. President,

On top of the security risks escalating in Gaza, the humanitarian situation continues to rapidly deteriorate. Starting in March of last year, and without prior notice, the Palestinian Authority reduced salary benefits of thousands of public sector employees in the Strip by over 30 per cent.

One year later, in March 2018 it suspended the payment of salaries to some 20,000 civil servants in Gaza.

The impact of this decision is devastating.

Gaza's already faltering public service will move further towards a total collapse. Hospitals and clinics, schools, water and wastewater treatment facilities, garbage collection, transportation and other critical services will be critically impacted.

I have engaged with the Palestinian government on the destructive impact of such decisions that pressure ordinary families who are already struggling to make ends meet.

This is why I call on the Palestinian Authority to resume payment for public sector salaries in Gaza without delay.

We must immediately deal with the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding.

Israel must relax movement and access restrictions on Gaza to enable the economy to recover, with due consideration of its legitimate security concerns. In this context, I take note of the decision to increase the fishing zone from six to nine nautical miles and urge that the zone be extended further and on a permanent basis. I also note our continued engagement with Israel and the Palestinian Authority on the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism.

I want to assure the Council that the United Nations is working intensely with partners to prioritise energy and water initiatives discussed in the AHLC format, as well as in our donor meetings in Cairo and Washington. The long-term goal of increasing energy supply must be pursued alongside immediate and short-term projects in the Gaza Strip.

I urge all stakeholders to support the USD 540 million UN humanitarian appeal for 2018, 75 per cent of which targets the most pressing humanitarian needs in Gaza.

Mr. President,

Compounding the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in Gaza are the stalled efforts to restore Palestinian Authority control over the Strip. Despite the best efforts of Egypt the implementation of the Cairo Agreement has come to a halt.

I again urge all Palestinian factions to engage with Egypt and redouble their efforts to enable the legitimate Palestinian Authority to be fully empowered in Gaza.

Mr. President,

The combination of the security, development and humanitarian deterioration that we see in Gaza, coupled with the political impasse, make the Strip a powder keg.

Notwithstanding the tragic developments in the rest of the region, we must do everything possible to prevent another war in Gaza.

It is imperative that the international community and the Security Council support the efforts of the United Nations and key stakeholders to address the security, humanitarian and political challenges that I have outlined.

The tragic events in Gaza have reinforced the growing risks of implosion and explosion, with potentially grave consequences elsewhere in the region. Palestine refugee camps in the occupied Palestinian territory, in Lebanon, in Jordan and in Syria are highly vulnerable.

In this context, the situation of UNRWA is particularly worrying. Even with the welcome pledges of some USD 100 million last month in Rome, the recent USD 50 million pledged by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates respectively, and the USD 10 million contribution just announced by Japan, operations of UNRWA are funded only into the summer.

Shutting down or reducing services at this critical time would further destabilize the region.

The ability of half a million Palestinian refugee students across the Middle East to start the new school year, must be protected.

Just in Gaza, UNRWA serves as a lifeline for more than one million people, half of the population, who are at risk of losing access to health services, education and food. Without those services, we should anticipate a dramatic increase in social unrest, poverty, hunger, and psychosocial problems to the population. Not just in Gaza, but across the region.

I again appeal to Member States to ensure funding for UNRWA.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, there have been no settlement plans approved or tenders issued in the reporting period. Settlement construction and the demolition of Palestinian-owned structures in Area C has however continued.

The United Nations considers all settlement activities illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

According to OCHA in Area C of the West Bank, 35 structures were demolished, including a school in the Hebron community of Khirbet Zanuta. The only school of the al-Muntar Bedouin community is also at risk of being demolished.

Meanwhile, attacks against Palestinians and vandalism of property are also increasing. On 13 April, a mosque in the West Bank was badly damaged in an apparent hate crime and arson attack.

Mr. President,

Turning to Lebanon, let me note that preparations for the first parliamentary elections in nearly a decade continued on track. The United Nations in Lebanon is engaging with stakeholders to ensure that credible and inclusive elections are followed by swift government formation. This is important in order to safeguard the country's stability and sustain the positive momentum from the recent Rome II and CEDRE conferences. UNSCOL remains engaged with regional stakeholders to defuse tensions and prevent the risk of conflict spilling over including into Lebanon.

The situation in South Lebanon and along the Blue Line remains calm but tense. Israel proceeded with construction south of the Blue Line in several locations outside of the Lebanese "reservation" areas. Tension increased on the 8th and 12th April with Lebanese demonstrations north of the Blue Line in the vicinity of the works. UNIFIL maintained close liaison with the parties including at the tripartite level to prevent misunderstandings and miscalculations.

Mr. President,

I would like to close with a few words on Gaza, the peace process and their regional impact.

What is happening today in Gaza is an injustice that no man, woman or child should have to endure: the deplorable living conditions; the consequences of the continued, suffocating closures, the control by Hamas; and the mounting risk that Gaza could trigger a new conflict building up.

People should not be destined to spend their lives surrounded by borders they are forbidden to cross, or waters they are forbidden to navigate. They should not be destined to live under the control of Hamas, which invests in military activities at the expense of the population.

I firmly believe there is a way out. These challenges are political, they are man-made and, thus, resolvable if all sides firmly commit to supporting practical solutions that can be implemented quickly, effectively and sustainably.

But Gaza is only part of the story.

We must also step-up our efforts to support the parties in advancing a sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace on the basis of the two-state solution.

The prospects for peace are slipping further and further away, emboldening extremists and deepening polarization and mistrust on all sides.

With tensions mounting across the region, the lack of progress should worry us all. The fires of the Middle East continue to expand and shift, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a perpetual source of oxygen for militants and radicals across the region.

Establishing a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the conflict would eliminate a chronic source of instability and violence from the region.

The United Nations will continue to expend every effort in pursuit of that objective.

Thank you.