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PEACE PROCESS

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

Mr. President,

1. The Middle East continues to undergo a period of grave turmoil with tragic human consequences and uncertain outcome. We have seen regional tensions mounting dangerously as the brutal bloodshed in Syria continued while the fighting also crossed boundaries and UN peacekeepers in the Golan area of separation found themselves increasingly in harm's way. Ending the conflict in Syria is a matter of great urgency and must be the top priority of the international community. At the same time, it would be mistaken, and dangerous, to assume that a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is less important. Now is not the time to relent in our commitment to advancing the prospects for the resumption of meaningful talks towards the realization of the two-state solution. This is the time for concerted action in support of a substantive initiative lest we miss the slight opening that has been offered in recent months.

2. While diplomatic efforts to break the political deadlock and bring the parties back to the negotiating table have remained quiet, they are no less serious in determination. The renewed US effort and sustained personal engagement of the US Secretary of State is cause for encouragement. Underscoring Secretary Kerry's commitment, he is currently on his fourth trip in the region. We have also noted the renewed interest of regional stakeholders, particularly the important visit to Washington, on 29 April, by a delegation of Arab Ministers and leaders including the Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al Thani, and Arab League Secretary-General Al-Araby. Their visit reaffirmed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative first proposed in 2002 and, we hope, revived prospects that its promise of regional stability can become an important part of developing peace efforts. We note in this regard the positive comments on the visit by President Peres and Israeli Minister of Justice and Chief Negotiator Tzipi Livni and we encourage the Israeli government to respond to this opening of a revitalized Arab Peace Initiative.

3. The Secretary-General has also remained in close contact with the parties on these issues. In recent conversations with the two leaders he strongly encouraged the ongoing efforts toward the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and expressed his hope that they will soon lead to a substantial peace initiative with a defined political horizon. He further stressed the importance for the parties to create the conditions conducive to a resumption of meaningful negotiations and avoid actions that would risk undermining such prospects.

4. The risk to both sides is clear. As we have said before, it is crucial that both sides reverse negative trends on the ground to restore confidence in each other and in

the possibility of a solution. We register that both parties are exercising some restraint and care not to upset the fragile situation on the ground in order to support the ongoing diplomatic effort. On the Israeli side, we have noted that there were no new approvals or tenders issued for settlements in the West Bank or in East Jerusalem since March. However, there was a disconcerting exception of about 300 units pre-approved in Beit El, a settlement deep inside the West Bank, based on a decision from last year. Settlements are illegal under international law, and Israel must abide by its commitments under the Road Map to freeze all settlement activity and dismantle outposts erected after 2001. We are also concerned about reports that the Israeli government intends to legalize four West Bank settlement outposts.

5. Palestinians have shown countenance in diplomatic fora, and Palestinian Security Forces have maintained their robust performance in maintaining law and order, including in dealing with tensions on the ground. Several moments of friction illustrate the importance that both sides continue to work responsibly to defuse tensions and avoid escalation.

Mr. President,

6. Recent tensions around the sensitive issue of Jerusalem, particularly when it came to restrictions of access to holy sites, were troubling.

7. Clashes occurred on 7 and 8 May in East Jerusalem in and around the Old City in the context of what Israelis call “Jerusalem day”. Restrictions on access for Palestinians were imposed in connection to visits in the esplanade of the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount by right wing Israeli activists. This was coupled with the temporary detention of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem for interrogation over reported incitement. While his detention was short, the incident added to existing friction and drew wide criticism from Palestinian, Arab and Muslim leaders. It also led to an emergency meeting of the League of Arab States in Cairo on 12 May. Notwithstanding the increased tensions, events on the ground were relatively contained, and authorities acted with restraint. Clashes resulted in 15 Palestinian lightly injured and 23 arrested, one Israeli injured and 13 arrested.

8. Preceding these events, on the 4th of May during the Orthodox Easter, an 85-year old Coptic Egyptian cleric and two Egyptian diplomats were held by Israeli police in the Old City on their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Following the incident, Israel reportedly apologized to Egypt for the excessive use of force via diplomatic channels.

9. The Secretary-General has reiterated the importance of respect for the religious freedom of all, and for worshippers of all faiths to have access to their holy sites, while noting that religious and other leaders should also refrain from inflammatory statements. We also note the statement made by President Peres on 8 May that Israel, as per its agreement with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, will work to ensure the protection of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in the Old city and the safety of the worshippers. The events once again underscored the importance of addressing the underlying issues regarding Jerusalem which are still unresolved. It remains the view of the Secretary-General that Jerusalem – a final status issue – should emerge through negotiations as the

capital of two states, living side-by-side in peace and security, with arrangements for the holy sites that are acceptable to all.

10. On 15 May Palestinians marked what they call “Nakba Day” to commemorate the 1948 events leading to their displacement, by holding large marches and festivals in urban centers across the West Bank and Gaza. In East Jerusalem dozens of Israeli right wing extremists entered the Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount and clashed with Palestinians, resulting in some injuries and arrests. Overall events were relatively contained with clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli forces resulting in some 50 Palestinians and six Israeli security officers lightly injured.

Mr. President,

11. Clashes between Palestinians and settlers in the occupied West Bank intensified during the reporting period. In a deplorable event, one settler was stabbed to death by a Palestinian on 30 April at the Tapuah junction in the northern West Bank. This was the first Israeli to be killed by Palestinians in the West Bank since September 2011. The killing triggered numerous incidents of settler violence against Palestinians and their property, primarily in the Nablus governorate. Overall for the reporting period a total of 46 Palestinians including 12 children and one woman were injured by settlers, while 11 settlers were injured by Palestinians. Clashes between Palestinians and settlers also resulted in extensive material damage, including to vehicles and Palestinian orchards, with some 1,400 Palestinian trees vandalized.

12. Israeli security forces carried out a total of 368 search and arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, including in Area A, resulting in 439 Palestinians injured and 454 Palestinians arrested. 18 members of Israel security forces were also injured. The large majority of casualties resulted from clashes during Palestinian demonstrations, including against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

13. The reporting period also witnessed continued demolitions of Palestinian homes and property in Area C and in East Jerusalem. In total 57 structures were demolished, leading to the displacement of 75 Palestinians including 41 children. The ongoing demolition of homes, livelihood-related structures and essential infrastructure is of serious humanitarian concern and should stop.

14. The United Nations continues to monitor with concern the condition of Palestinian prisoners. Despite the release of two hunger strikers, four other Palestinians have reopened their hunger strikes. Five Jordanian prisoners in Israeli jails are also reportedly on hunger strike. On 14 May, Israel renewed the administrative detention of 4 Palestinian Legislative Council members for another six months. We reiterate our position that the use of administrative detentions must be on an exceptional base only. Those detained must be charged and face trial with judicial guarantees, or released without delay. The last visit by families of Gaza prisoners took place on 20 May and included some 80 relatives, among them children.

Mr. President,

15. Six months ago yesterday, the parties agreed to a ceasefire understanding in the Gaza Strip – which makes today a good opportunity to take stock and look ahead. The ‘understanding’ brought a marked improvement during the first three months of its implementation. No rockets from Gaza landed in Israel, and there was some relaxation of remaining closures, notably the extension of the fishing limit from 3 to 6 nautical miles. However, three months of hopeful trends were followed by a reversal as subsequent developments have threatened the improvements made. According to Israeli authorities, 33 rockets and five mortar shells landed in Israel from Gaza during the past three months. 11 Palestinian civilians were injured in the buffer zone over the same period.

16. On 30 April, an Israeli air strike for the first time since 21 November of last year killed a Palestinian militant, allegedly involved in firing rockets. Since 21 March, the fishing limit was brought back to three nautical miles, leading to shooting in the vicinity, and arrests, of Palestinian fishermen trying to cross the limit. And since 27 February, Kerem Shalom, the only functioning crossing for goods from Israel into Gaza has periodically been closed for 13 days in response to rockets, resulting in shortages of some basic food stuffs, cooking gas, and losses in export cash crops.

17. The ceasefire understanding reached on last November continues in our view to represent the best opportunity to start changing the negative dynamics in Gaza. All must exert maximum effort to preserve the ceasefire and its basic tenets- namely adhering to a full calm and lifting the remaining closure on Gaza. We continue to support Egyptian efforts in this regard. Following the above worrisome developments an uneasy calm has returned and the announcement yesterday by the Israeli authorities that the fishing limit has been re-extended to six nautical miles is an encouraging step.

19. Among the many long-term challenges facing the people of Gaza identified by the UN in our “Gaza 2020” report last year, the lack of safe drinking water and the decline of the aquifer are perhaps the most pressing. Desalination will be necessary to improve this situation. The UN with funding from Japan has installed a desalination plant with a capacity of 50 cubic meters per hour—the thirteenth desalination plant installed by the UN.

20. This example illustrate how UN programming in Gaza continues apace and makes a difference. The first phase of UN reconstruction projects has totaled some US\$ 450 million worth of projects approved by the Government of Israel, and the UN continues to work in concert with other members of the international community to scale up reconstruction efforts, while also pursuing the policy changes that will be required if a sustainable Gazan economy is to be re-established. We also continue to call Israel to permit unrestricted entry of construction material, particularly aggregate, iron bar and cement into Gaza. Restrictions should also be lifted on trade, including transfers to and from the West Bank, imports from and exports to Israel and other countries. .

21. In a separate development, we welcome the release today of the seven Egyptian servicemen captured in the Sinai and the subsequent reopening of the Rafah crossing.

22. On the 14th of May Fatah and Hamas delegations met in Cairo to advance the implementation of existing reconciliation agreements. Reportedly, the factions recommitted themselves to consultations on the formation of a national consensus government headed by President Abbas, as prescribed for in previous agreements. Those consultations should start within a month and lead to a government in the next three months, after which elections, including for the Palestinian National Council are to take place within another 90 days. On 16 May, President Abbas visited Cairo where he met with President Morsi to discuss Palestinian reconciliation as well as the Middle East Peace Process.

Mr. President,

23. The Secretary-General remains deeply alarmed at the escalating violence in Syria. The humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, with every third Syrian now in need of urgent assistance. One of every four has been uprooted from her or his home. Syria's neighbours, as generous and hospitable as ever, are reaching their limits in hosting now over 1.5 million registered refugees. While we recognize the impact on host countries we stress the importance of keeping open borders for refugees fleeing violence, consistent with international humanitarian obligations. Communities in Syria, including the Palestinian refugee population, who are amongst the most vulnerable, are under immense stress. Despite the best efforts of UNRWA's staff to keep schools and health clinics opened, often at great personal risk, half of Syria's Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA are now internally displaced. Some have fled to neighboring countries, in particular an estimated 54,000 to Lebanon. UNRWA's emergency operation has reached many, but much more needs to be done. It is the responsibility of the warring parties to ensure the protection of the civilian population.

24. Amidst this growing tragedy and the spreading chaos, United Nations priorities are clear. We will continue to ensure that the millions of Syrians in need receive life-saving help. The Secretary-General is grateful to the donor community for its generosity and we urge it to do even more. Humanitarian workers also need access; we need to think of better and more practical ways to deliver assistance.

25. However, humanitarian relief is not a long-term answer. This is why the Secretary-General welcomed the initiative of the United States and the Russian Federation to bring the Syrian parties to a negotiating table, and is fully devoted to helping the Syrians find a political solution. The weeks ahead will be critical and we urge everyone to cooperate.

26. Finally, the Secretary-General also remains gravely concerned about the allegations of the use of chemical weapons. The mission he established to investigate the claims has been doing what it can to gather and analyze available information. Amid

mounting reports on the use of chemical weapons, we once again urge the Government of Syria to allow the investigation to proceed without further delay.

Mr. President,

30. Lebanon is increasingly under pressure. The war in Syria, including the unprecedented refugee crisis, puts a growing strain on its economy, political dynamics and security. The humanitarian emergency, and its long-term implications, as well as the continuing political deadlock require close international attention and support.

31. The past month has seen repeated incidents of shelling from Syria into Lebanese territory that have caused casualties. On 19 May, up to eight rockets were fired from Syria in the town of Hermel, prompting President Sleiman to again call on the parties in Syria to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and avoid military acts against Lebanese border areas. A new incursion by Syrian forces into Lebanese territory was reported around Ras Baalbek. There was also increased focus on the involvement of Lebanese fighters in Syria, notably from Hizbullah in the battle between the Syrian government and opposition forces in the town of Qusayr. President Sleiman had earlier called on all Lebanese to abide by the policy of disassociation and the Baabda declaration. The Secretary-General strongly supports President Sleiman's leadership and reiterates his call on all Lebanese to act responsibly and refrain from involvement in the conflict in Syria.

32. Following the fighting in Qusayr, violence broke out on 19 May between Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods in Tripoli and spread to other areas of the town. At least nine people are reported to have been killed, including two members of the Lebanese security forces, over 70 people have been injured. The Lebanese army has been deployed to contain the fighting.

33. Given the scale of the challenges facing Lebanon, it is vital that a new government be agreed on without delay. We encourage all parties to continue to engage positively with Prime Minister designate Salam in order to reach early agreement, which is also essential to ensure timely parliamentary elections. Consideration of arrangements for the elections due next month resumed in Parliament on 15 May. The temporary suspension of the current electoral law expired on 19 May. Now is the time to intensify efforts to agree to a way forward and avoid an institutional vacuum.

34. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line remained quiet. However, airstrikes around Damascus on 3 and 5 May and Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace in that period markedly increased tensions. On 5 May, Lebanon lodged a complaint with this Council against intensified incursions by the Israeli Air Force.

35. Hizbullah, which had denied responsibility for a drone shot down on 25 April by the Israeli Air Force over Israeli waters, announced on 9 May its readiness to receive new weaponry from Syria. It also offered support for opening a new front on the Syrian Golan, occupied by Israel since 1967.

36. The Secretary-General has remained actively engaged with international and

regional leaders to call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and prevent escalation, in respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region and adherence to all relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. President,

38. Let me come to the conclusion. In conclusion, the events recorded in this month's briefing again attest to the mounting risks for regional stability. It is imperative for everyone to work collectively to avert those risks, preserve stability and contribute to lay peaceful foundations for a better future in the Middle East, to which so many of its peoples aspire.

39. As the efforts underway to develop a meaningful initiative to achieve the negotiated two state solution are likely to reach a critical point in the coming weeks, we sincerely hope that the leaders on both sides will demonstrate this time their commitment and realize that this is a moment of opportunity they cannot afford to lose. This also applies to regional stakeholders who can play an important role to achieve peace through a revitalized Arab Peace Initiative. Let me affirm that the United Nations stands ready to contribute to a return to meaningful negotiations in the period ahead, including through the Quartet and broader engagement with all parties.