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

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Thank you Madame President,

I am honoured to address the Council in my new capacity as the Secretary General's Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process and Personal Envoy to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and the Palestinian Authority.

From the outset, allow me to thank President Abbas and his Government for their warm welcome and genuine interest in working with the United Nations in advancing the just cause of peace. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Government of Israel for their warm reception and for engaging on a host of important issues related to the situation on the ground. Since taking up my assignment, I have engaged with the Palestinian and Israeli leaders; with political, civil society and business stakeholders in the West Bank and Gaza; and with key partners in Egypt and Jordan in order to begin developing a better understanding of the reality on the ground and the prospects of the future.

Madame President,

The Middle East faces a vicious tide of terror and extremism that presents a serious challenge to the region, and to international peace and security. However, the inability to respond, for over 60 years, both on the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for a state and to Israel's quest for security, has fuelled a situation that is becoming more dangerous by the day.

Generations of Palestinians and Israelis have come to realise that sustainable and just peace cannot be reached through conflict, but must be the result of negotiations. Thousands of people have died so that today we may hold this truth - that peace cannot be achieved through violence, but at the negotiating table, to be self-evident.

This hard-earned belief in peace and negotiations must not be allowed to wither away. If it does, it can further destabilise the Middle East for decades. To save it, to give hope back to people, we must act to advance the prospect of a two-state solution: Israel and Palestine - living side-by-side in peace and security.

How to do this is not an academic question, but one that must be addressed to the parties on the ground, to the international community, and to the United Nations as well.

I do not underestimate the difficult decisions that both parties will have to take. Nor should we underestimate the domestic challenges that Israeli or Palestinian leaders alike will have to overcome. The region is facing a complicated security threat. However, it is precisely because of the dangers that lurk in the Middle East of today that both sides must show historic leadership and personal commitment to peace and negotiations.

I take this opportunity to call on the new Government of Israel to take credible steps, including a freeze of settlement activity, in order to promote the resumption of meaningful negotiations. Continued security cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli authorities remains a cornerstone for a peaceful resolution.

Both parties must expend every effort to build upon existing agreements, including relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the Roadmap and the Arab Peace Initiative, in order to gain momentum towards a final status agreement.

The Secretary-General stands ready to work with all in order to encourage a return to negotiations, on the basis of an agreed framework.

Madame President,

On 14 May, the Israeli Knesset confirmed Prime Minister Netanyahu's new coalition government. Its guidelines state that it will "strive for peace with the Palestinians and all our neighbours, while safeguarding the security, historical and national interests of Israel."

The Secretary-General and I will be engaging with the new Government to explore realistic options for a return to meaningful negotiations towards a two-State solution within a reasonable timeframe. However, this goal is increasingly threatened by actions on the ground that exacerbate the divisions between the sides.

We are deeply concerned to see the advancement of settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the West Bank on three occasions in the past month. On 14 May, tenders were issued for 85 housing units in Givat Ze'ev, south of Ramallah. On 6 May, the District Planning and Building Committee approved permits for 400 new residential units in the settlement of Ramat Shlomo, and, on 27 April, 77 tenders were issued for residential units in two other East Jerusalem settlements.

These announcements come at a sensitive time in which the international community is looking to Israel to demonstrate its readiness to engage with the Palestinians on building peace. There should be no illusions about the impact of these unilateral actions. They not only undermine the collective hopes of those longing for a just resolution of the conflict, but they again call into question the viability of achieving peace based on the vision of two States. Settlement activity is illegal under international law and I urge the new Israeli Government to reverse these decisions and refrain from such action in the future.

Madame President,

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, tensions continued as Israeli security forces conducted some 265 search-and-arrest operations, resulting in the arrest of 294 Palestinians. In separate incidents in late April, three Palestinian men, including a 17-year-old boy, were shot and killed after reportedly stabbing and injuring Israeli security officers at checkpoints in Hebron and Ma'ale Adumin. On 25 April, a Palestinian man was suspected of intentionally ramming his car into a group of Israeli policemen in East Jerusalem, resulting in four injured. On 11 May, an Israeli was injured in a reported stabbing attack near a West Bank checkpoint. And on 14 May, three Israeli youths were struck by a car driven by a Palestinian man close Gush Etzion.

Despite repeated objections, the Israeli government continues to demolish Palestinian homes and structures. During the reporting period, a total of 15 structures, which contained 33 residences, were demolished leading to the displacement of 25 people, including 14 children. On 4 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected a request by Palestinians from the Area C village of Susiya to freeze demolitions in the village. And on 10 May an Israeli court ordered the demolition of eight buildings in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Semiramis. The United Nations, once again, urges Israel to cease such demolitions and displacements.

The United Nations also remains concerned about the recent moves to relocate Bedouin communities near Abu Nwar in the politically sensitive E1 area of the West Bank that may be linked to further settlement construction.

Madame President,

Turning to Gaza, I cannot but recall the shock of my first very brief tour of the destruction of the Shujaiya neighbourhood. No one, and let me repeat this Madame President, no one can remain untouched by the scale of devastation, the slow pace of reconstruction, and the vast needs to rebuild lives and livelihoods. Gaza is desperate and Gaza angry. Angry at the blockade, angry at the closure of Rafah, angry at Hamas, including for imposing an illegal 'solidarity tax', at the donors for not honouring their financial commitments for reconstruction, at everyone. There is a clear moral and humanitarian imperative not just for the United Nations and the international community, but primarily for the Israeli and the Palestinian authorities to prevent the implosion of Gaza. I particularly call on the factions on the ground to ensure that Gaza remains peaceful.

Despite the fact that the agreed cease-fire, brokered by Egypt, continues to hold, some security incidents have persisted during the reporting period. Three rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza on 23 April, with one exploding in an open area in Israel while the other two dropped short and exploded inside Gaza; on 3 May, militants fired another rocket which impacted inside Gaza near the security fence; Palestinian militants also test fired 19 rockets at the sea. Thankfully, no injuries or damage were reported in any of these incidents, all of them we condemn. In response to the rocket firing, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) conducted an air strike in Gaza damaging a Hamas military site but also no casualties were reported. IDF also reportedly shot and injured nine Palestinians in Gaza: three fishermen whose boats were fired upon by the Israeli navy and six Palestinians, shot while approaching the Gaza border fence. Three militants were also killed in separate incidents where smuggling tunnels collapsed.

Madame President,

Without genuine Palestinian reconciliation and unity, all efforts to improve the situation in Gaza will face major difficulties. On 19 April, a delegation of Palestinian ministers travelled to Gaza to begin a process to reintegrate public sector employees, tens of thousands of whom have not received salaries for over a year. Discussions, however, broke down the following day.

Despite this setback, I welcome the determination of Prime Minister Hamdallah and his efforts to find a solution to the problem of public sector employees in Gaza. His commitment that no one will be left behind is an important guarantee. I encourage all factions to support these efforts. The United Nations also stands ready to work with all stakeholders and support the Government in mobilising the necessary resources for this process.

A comprehensive reconciliation must include the Government of National Consensus resuming control over the crossings into Israel and Egypt. This is key to allowing more movement of goods and people and to the eventual reopening the crossings. The responsibility for addressing these issues lies first and foremost with the Palestinian authorities. But it also partly rests with the United Nations and the international community, which must empower the Government to take up its leadership role in Gaza, including through the fulfilment of donor pledges that were made at the Cairo conference of last year.

What is clear is that no approach which divides Gaza and the West Bank should be supported – Palestine is one and the United Nations will work determinedly to advance unity through its legitimate institutions.

The United Nations ultimate objective in Gaza is to see the lifting of all closures, within the framework of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). In the absence of such a fundamental

change, the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is the only currently available option to facilitate the entry of material and to enable implementation of large-scale projects that can bring reconstruction, jobs and stability.

I can report that, as of 19 May, close to 85,000 of the 100,000 households in need of construction materials to repair their homes have received materials. In addition, 85 out of 167 projects submitted and funded by the international community and the private sector have been approved; eight of these projects are currently underway.

All of these are positive developments, but far from sufficient to address Gaza's reconstruction needs. The United Nations is working closely with the Israeli Ministry of Defence's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, with the Palestinian Minister of Civil Affairs, and donors to finalise arrangements to speed up reconstruction. I take the opportunity to thank all counterparts for their constructive engagement on these matters.

Madame President,

Turning briefly to Lebanon, Special Coordinator Kaag and members of the International Support Group for Lebanon met today in Beirut with Prime Minister Tamam Salam to discuss the current situation in the country. As of 25 May, the country will have been without a President for one year. This vacuum undermines Lebanon's ability to address the challenges it faces and it jeopardises the functioning of State institutions. Members of Parliament should fulfil their constitutional obligation to elect a President without further delay.

With almost 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon forming the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world, we again call on the international community to urgently fulfil existing pledges and increase and expedite support to Lebanon as a matter of priority. It is important that the Government and United Nations counterparts work together to promote effective management of the refugee presence in line with international humanitarian and human rights law.

The Lebanese-Syrian border remains impacted by incidents and infiltration attempts of armed extremist groups, particularly as a result of the fighting in the Qalamoun region. The Lebanese Armed Forces have committed considerable efforts to secure the border with support from the international community. On 20 April, Lebanon received its first shipment of military equipment from France financed by the \$3 billion grant from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This and other contributions by Member States are both necessary and welcome.

UNIFIL's area of operations has remained generally calm, despite the volatile situation in the Golan Heights. In their ongoing engagement with UNIFIL, both parties maintained their commitment to the cessation of hostilities and the stability of the Blue Line. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued on an almost daily basis.

Madame President,

On the Golan, clashes occurred between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition, as well as heavy fighting between different armed groups in the area of separation. Between 24 April and 5 May, fire from the Bravo side, as a result of such fighting, impacted across the ceasefire line. On 24 April, an IDF Missile Launching Unit fired four missiles eastwards, one of which crossed the ceasefire line. A couple of days later, the IDF informed UNDOF that four persons carrying equipment had crossed the ceasefire line from the Bravo side and had been killed by the Israeli security forces as they approached the technical fence. These developments have the potential to heighten tensions and jeopardise the ceasefire between the two countries.

Madame President,

In conclusion, let me return briefly to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the coming period will be critical for the future of the peace process. The United Nations has repeatedly warned that maintaining the status quo is not tenable. It will inexorably lead to the continued erosion of living conditions for Palestinians and for Israelis alike, and will undermine the security and stability of all.

My introductory meetings clearly demonstrated that, despite the prolonged absence of a political horizon, despite the sometimes poisonous rhetoric of incitement and the destructive actions of those seeking to undermine a return to talks, there remains a steadfast desire and determination to achieve an enduring agreement.

Any resolution will need a comprehensive regional solution, conceivably with support from a reinvigorated Quartet that includes greater engagement with key Arab states. While the international community has a critical responsibility to support a peace process, a lasting solution can only be achieved by the parties themselves.

Madame President,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council. I look forward to working with you and to your guidance on the way forward.

Allow me to place on record my gratitude to my predecessor, Robert Serry, for his tireless efforts in this position. I want to also thank the excellent team at UNSCO and here in the UN Secretariat, without whom our work in the field would not be possible.

Thank you.