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PEACE PROCESS BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**20 APRIL 2017**

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to again address the Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. I took note of the Presidency's interest this month in discussing a number of issues pertaining to the Middle East and North Africa region. I will therefore highlight some of them in my presentation and defer to my fellow UN envoys who regularly brief the Council for greater detail on many of these challenges.

Madam President,

Today a perfect storm has engulfed the Middle East and continues to threaten international peace and security. Millions have been displaced in the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. In many countries, societies have fractured along ethnic or religious lines. Non-state actors have taken control of territory and terror attacks have spread indiscriminately striking civilians of all origin and confession.

From the onset, I would like to pay tribute to the countless victims of these senseless acts of violence and call on the international community to show its full and unwavering commitment to defeat terror and incitement; to support the forces of moderation against extremism; to untangle the Gordian knot of political, economic and foreign forces that are driving the myriad of conflicts in the Middle East.

Madam President,

Developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict continue to resonate across the region. The question of Palestine remains a potent symbol and rallying cry that is easily misappropriated and exploited by extremist groups. Ending the occupation and realizing a two-state solution will not solve all the region's problems, but as long as the conflict persists, it will continue to feed them.

Sporadic violence has continued in recent weeks as five Palestinians and one Israeli were killed in various acts of violence. Among the fatalities were two Palestinian teenaged boys, shot by Israeli security forces outside Ramallah, as well as a British woman who was murdered by a Palestinian man in Jerusalem.

In March, Israel approved the establishment of a new settlement and declared some 240 acres as "state land" inside the occupied Palestinian territory. These moves further undermine the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state in the West Bank. Tenders for close to 2,000 housing units, the vast majority in major population centres close to the 1967 lines, were also issued.

I take note of recent reports that Israel has adopted a policy of restraint by which construction will be advanced "almost exclusively" in the built up areas of settlements, but it is too early to determine how this policy will manifest itself on the ground.

Settlement construction is illegal under international law and I urge for all such activities to be ceased.

On the Palestinian side, multiple worrying developments are further cementing the Gaza - West Bank divide and dangerously increasing the risk of escalation.

In April, the Palestinian Government reduced payments to thousands of Palestinian Authority employees in the Gaza Strip. It is important that the burden of decisions to reduce expenditures are fairly distributed and made with due consideration to the harsh conditions under which people in Gaza live.

Four months ago Palestinians in Gaza went to the streets when people were left with only a few hours of electricity per day. The situation was temporarily resolved with the help of Qatar, however a more serious crisis is now unfolding as electricity is down to less than 6 hours per day. The social, economic and political consequences of these developments should not be underestimated. I call on all parties to come together and ensure the vital issue of energy for Gaza is resolved once and for all.

Meanwhile Hamas continues to tighten its iron grip over Gaza by forming an administrative committee that is seen by many to be a direct challenge to the legitimate Palestinian government. Following the assassination of one of its militants, it temporarily put in place a series of restrictions preventing Palestinians and internationals from leaving and banning fishing for two weeks.

On April 6th three Palestinians were executed by Hamas in gross violation of international law and without a fair trial. These actions were condemned by the Secretary-General and I am deeply concerned that further extrajudicial executions are anticipated in Gaza.

On 7 April, armed clashes between the newly formed Palestinian joint security forces and members of Islamist militants with links to al-Qaeda, erupted in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh Palestine refugee camp. At least nine people were killed. I want to note that young Palestinians in refugee camps across the region remain particularly vulnerable to extremists and religious radicals as living conditions in these communities remain extremely harsh.

On 17 April, an estimated 1500 Palestinian prisoners and detainees began an open-ended hunger strike to protest their conditions in Israeli prisons.

I am also concerned by today's report of an attempt to smuggle explosive material from Gaza into Israel via medical material. These actions will only exacerbate existing tensions.

Madam President,

Turning to some broader regional dynamics, several states in the region continue to bear a massive burden from the flood of Syrian refugees. While the international community must do more to stand in solidarity with Syria's neighbors by increasing assistance and burden

sharing, the underlying causes of displacement must be addressed through a political solution to the ongoing crisis.

In Syria, a democracy deficit, systematic repression, and wholesale human rights violations, including by the Government – which holds the primary obligation to protect the human rights of all citizens in the country – have combined with a prolonged conflict to create a fertile ground for sectarian polarization, radicalism and violent extremism. One of the greatest contributions we all can make to the defeat of listed terrorist organisations such as ISIL and Al Nusra Front is to achieve a comprehensive and credible political settlement to the Syrian conflict and a political transition that is inclusive, democratic and participatory. Such an outcome would also help to enable a more unified international counter-terrorism response.

I would like to briefly touch upon the recent reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. If confirmed, this abhorrent action would amount to a serious violation of international law and present a threat to international peace and security. This is an area in which the Security Council has the primary responsibility and I hope it can unite to send a strong collective message that the perpetrators of such attacks will be held accountable.

In Lebanon, on 12 April, President Aoun decided to adjourn the tenure of the Lebanese Parliament for one month. It is hoped that this will allow time for Lebanon's leaders to agree on an electoral law, in accordance with the Constitution. The Council will soon receive the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Resolution 1559 (2004), which called on the disbanding and disarming of all militias. Recognizing the vital progress achieved in restoring Lebanon's institutions to their full functioning, it will be essential for Lebanon to seize the current momentum to counter the maintenance and alleged increase of weapons outside the authority and the control of the state.

Libya, as Special Representative Kobler briefed the Council yesterday, has made important strides in the fight against ISIL, which no longer holds territory in that country. However, the stalled implementation of the Libya Political Agreement is contributing to a political and security vacuum, putting Libya's population and its neighbours at risk of further destabilization. Armed groups have committed grave violations and abuses of human rights. It is critical that the political process is resumed with the support of the international community.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the security forces supported by the international anti-ISIL coalition are making progress in retaking Mosul. I welcome the efforts of the Government of Iraq to secure and rebuild destroyed areas and to advance the national reconciliation process. This will be essential for depriving ISIL of legitimacy, access to resources and support.

Madam President,

Across the region, social exclusion and marginalisation, particularly in areas of prolonged and unresolved conflicts, tend to provide fertile ground for the rise of violent extremism. Unity across ethnic and religious lines, reconciliation and a fair sharing of resources would help heal wounds and isolate extremists.

Listed terrorist organizations and other non-State actors, including armed groups such as Hezbollah, have thrived in the climate of weak governance and the absence of human rights that pervade the region. It is estimated that over 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 Member States have travelled to the Middle East in recent years to join such groups.

Their presence over expanses of territory and accumulation of resources and weaponry pose an increased threat to regional and international peace and security. Some foreign fighters have already returned to their home countries spreading violence in their own communities.

Members of the Security Council,

The humanitarian and social impact of the conflicts in the Middle East is catastrophic. In Syria, hundreds of thousands have been killed since 2011 and approximately half of the population is displaced. Over five million Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR with nearly three million in Turkey, over one million in Lebanon and more than 650,000 in Jordan, putting a huge socio-economic and security strain on these societies.

In Iraq, over 334,000 people are currently displaced in total as a result of fighting in Mosul. Let me note that most of them people who have lived for two years under the barbaric rule of ISIL. Owing to intensive efforts by the Government and humanitarian partners, operations have kept pace with growing needs, but capacities are strained.

In Yemen — the poorest country in the Middle East, the situation continues to deteriorate as 18.8 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, including a shocking 10.3 million who require immediate help. More than two million are internally displaced and over two million children are acutely malnourished.

I urge the Security Council and all stakeholders to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the brutal effects of these conflicts, as required under international humanitarian law. Regardless of the causes, whether defense or counter-terrorism, the abuse for human rights in the conduct of any conflict can never be justified. It only serves to reinforce the fundamental drivers of extremism and violence.

Madam President,

The complexities of the region's conflicts means that political solutions based on justice, dignity and social cohesion are required to achieve and sustain peace.

Developments on the political front continue. In Yemen, Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed is consulting with key regional and international actors in an effort to build support for the framework for peace talks, as well as to mitigate the effects on the civilian population of the military hostilities.

On 12 April you heard from Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, who underscored that there can only be a political solution to the bloody conflict in Syria. I reiterate his urgent call for the Council to unite behind the UN-convened intra-Syrian talks in Geneva on political transition as per Security Council resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

Efforts to revive engagement between Israelis and Palestinians to achieve a negotiated and sustainable peace must also be intensified. In this regard, I am encouraged by ongoing efforts by Egypt, Jordan and the United States to advance the prospects for peace.

On March 29th the League of Arab States convened in Jordan for their 28th Annual Summit where the leaders of 22 countries once again endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative.

Madam President,

In closing, let me reiterate the words of Secretary-General Guterres that the region requires a surge in diplomacy for peace. Member States, especially through a united Security Council, will have to assume the leading role, including by advancing the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions.

In today's world there can be no justification for terrorism, nor for the glorification of those who commit it. But without justice, dignity and the protection of human rights, communities will continue to fracture and provide fertile ground for extremists.

To this end the fragility of states must be addressed. Governments need to respond to the legitimate demands of their people and strengthen social cohesion and reconciliation. This is the first line of defense against extremism. Efforts to strengthen the voices of moderation, and build religious tolerance must also be strengthened.

Divisions within the region have opened the door to outside interference and manipulation, breeding instability and sectarian strife. Multilateral approaches and cooperation are necessary to address interlinked conflicts, cross-border humanitarian impacts and violent extremism.

Let us not forget that behind the images of savagery, behind the shocking statistics of human suffering, there are millions fighting every day not only for their own survival, but for the true humane essence of their cultures and societies. They are the true faces of the Middle East, and we must do all we can to help them prevail.

Thank you.