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

26 MAY 2017

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

On the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, allow me to extend my warmest wishes to Muslims and wish them *Ramadan Kareem*.

Mr. President,

This briefing unfortunately follows on the heels of the despicable terrorist attacks in Minya and in Manchester. I offer my deep condolences to the families of the victims and to the Egyptian and British Governments and people. There is no justification for terror.

On his recent visit to the Middle East, U.S. President Trump pressed for a common approach to addressing the scourge of extremism and terrorism. He also made it very clear that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is critical to combating this threat and to achieving peace in the region. I welcome his personal engagement and that of Arab, Israeli and Palestinian leaders to advance this goal.

During the past month, the complex dynamics on the ground are however creating an explosive environment.

Mr. President,

In Gaza we are walking into another crisis with our eyes wide open.

I am today warning the Security Council that unless urgent measures are taken to de-escalate, the crisis risks spiraling out of control with devastating consequences for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Since Hamas established an Administrative Committee in March, a parallel institution to run governmental affairs in Gaza, the intra-Palestinian political tug-of-war has led to a significant deterioration in relations between Fatah and Hamas. The result is a significant worsening of the humanitarian crisis which risks exploding into another conflict that can only begin to be resolved by compromise, by the implementation of intra-Palestinian agreements and an ending of the closures.

In April, the Palestinian Government upheld its decision to reduce salary allowances to nearly 60,000 public sector employees in Gaza. While the Government needs to ensure its fiscal sustainability under increasingly difficult economic conditions, it is important that reforms or decisions to reduce expenditures are fairly distributed and made with consideration to the harsh conditions in Gaza.

Gaza is also in the midst of an unprecedented energy crisis. The power plant, that supplies 30 per cent of Gaza's electricity, stopped functioning on 16 April, due to a dispute between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas over taxation on fuel.

The lines supplying power from Egypt into Gaza are often down for technical reasons. This leaves Israeli power lines, which provide some 60 per cent of Gaza's electricity, as the only reliable energy source. Meanwhile the Palestinian Government has decided to cap its purchase of electricity from Israel for Gaza. If implemented, this decision will further reduce electricity supply to Gaza by some 30 per cent, plunging its population into a spiral of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Since April, the majority of Palestinians in Gaza are receiving about four hours of electricity per day.

How long do you think they can survive if this is further reduced to two hours of electricity per day?

Who will pay the price of the ensuing violence and escalation?

It will not be those who live a life of exemptions and privilege.

The price will be paid by poor Palestinians, by women and children, by people already traumatized by conflict, who have been held hostage for a decade now. They are the ones who will not have access to electricity, to water, to health services and sanitation.

No one has interest in another conflict in Gaza. And everyone has a responsibility to avoid it.

For months, the UN has warned that without addressing the structural problems of Gaza's electricity supply we would face a humanitarian crisis.

Those warnings are now a reality.

Let me illustrate to you what that reality looks like.

Hospitals are now forced to postpone elective surgeries and have already reduced 80 per cent of cleaning, catering and sterilization services. Had it not been for the timely UN humanitarian intervention on April 27 to provide emergency fuel for generators some 51 surgical and obstetric operation theaters, five hemodialysis centers and a number of emergency departments would have had to close.

Since mid-April desalination plants are functioning at 15% of their capacity and drinking water is supplied for a few hours every 2-4 days.

As we speak 100,000 cubic meters of raw sewage are discharged into the Mediterranean Sea on a daily basis. This is the equivalent of 40 Olympic-size swimming pools of sewage. Untreated. Daily. An environmental disaster for Israel, for Egypt and Gaza is in the making.

Food prices are soaring as the price of water for irrigation has gone up by 65 per cent. The manufacturing sector is grinding to a halt and over half of private industry workers have been suspended.

The UN is working determinedly to mitigate the humanitarian impact of this crisis. A UN-managed emergency fuel operation is delivering fuel to essential services for water, health and

sanitation – but our reserves will run-out in the coming weeks. It can only temporarily alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable, but is no substitute for a sustainable solution. Defusing the current energy crisis will require compromise on all sides, including tax concessions on fuel for the power plant and a profound reform of how energy is supplied in Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority, Hamas – which has controlled Gaza for a decade – and Israel, all have obligations for the welfare of Gaza's residents and must live up to their responsibilities to address the crisis and overcome political impasse.

Over the past weeks, I have engaged with the parties and our international partners to find both a solution to the immediate electricity challenges, but also to address the broader political challenge of returning Gaza to the control of the legitimate Palestinian authorities.

In another troubling development, allow me to join the High Commissioner for Human Rights in condemning yesterday's executions of three men in Gaza in contravention of international law. These executions bring to 28 the number of death sentences carried out since the Hamas takeover in 2007, with nine just in the last year.

Mr. President, Members of the Council,

Turning to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in recent weeks we have seen more tragic examples of the human toll that this conflict inflicting, with 6 Palestinians killed in various acts of violence.

I am also very concerned by the ongoing hunger strike by Palestinian detainees protesting against their conditions in Israeli jails, which, on the eve of the Ramadan, has now entered its 40<sup>th</sup> day. According to reports, the Israel Prison Service has evacuated at least 60 hunger-striking prisoners to hospitals because their medical condition had worsened, while another close to 600 prisoners have been moved to infirmaries set up in the prisons.

Reports of punitive measures against the hunger strikers, including restricted access to lawyers and the denial of family visits, are alarming. The right of detainees to access a lawyer is a right that should never be curtailed.

I call for a re-doubling of efforts to end the strike as soon as possible. The crisis must be resolved in line with International Humanitarian Law and Israel's human rights obligations.

All actors should exercise maximum restraint, responsibility and take the necessary steps to avoid escalating tensions.

Mr. President,

On 4 May the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee met in Brussels to discuss the key socio-economic challenges faced by the Palestinian Authority. Regrettably, a number of key issues remained unresolved between the parties on access and movement, energy, water and fiscal sustainability. While many of the solutions are technical, ultimately, the decisions to implement them are political.

I am encouraged that in recent weeks the Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Finance have come together in an effort to move these issues forward. Their fruitful consultations, the first meeting of the Joint Water Committee in seven years and the progress in the implementation of last year's landmark Electricity Agreement are positive steps that need to be encouraged and supported.

I also take note of recently announced Israeli measures designed to help the Palestinian economy in the West Bank. These steps reportedly include the proposed zoning of land in Area C adjacent to several Palestinian cities, for their residential, industrial and agricultural use; development of industrial zones in Tulkarem and Hebron; as well as expanding the hours of operation of the Allenby Bridge Crossing. These are positive steps that also need to be substantially expanded if they are to achieve the desired effect.

Mr. President,

Before closing, let me turn very briefly to Lebanon and the Golan. Regrettably, the Lebanese Parliament has not yet reconvened following its one-month adjournment of 12 April. Agreement on an electoral law remains elusive, less than a month before Parliament's tenure ends on 20 June. I continue to hope that negotiations can be finalized in time to avoid institutional instability and to allow for the holding of elections in accordance with the Constitution.

In the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic has been maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in Syria and against the backdrop of continued military activity across the ceasefire line. This has included incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire as well as Israeli air strikes in Syria targeting Hezbollah.

Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the full return of UNDOF to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

Mr. President,

In closing, allow me to say a few words on efforts to advance the prospects for peace. As the conflict has ebbed and flowed, the key messages to both sides from the United Nations, including through its role in the Quartet, and the broader international community, have remained clear, consistent and firm.

Above all, Israel's almost 50-year occupation and settlement enterprise are untenable and must end through meaningful negotiations that address all final status issues. Their perpetuation is sending an unmistakable message to another generation of Palestinians that their dream of statehood is destined to remain just that, a dream, and to Israelis that their desire for peace, security and regional recognition also remains unattainable.

Still, much can and must be done. Israel can undertake transformative steps to improve the daily lives of Palestinians, to empower the Palestinian leadership, and to move meaningfully towards a negotiated resolution of the conflict, in accordance with international law and Security Council resolutions.

Palestinians, too, should heed the repeated calls to combat violence and incitement. Internally, they must also rise to the challenge of forging a genuine reconciliation – critical to advancing peace and fulfilling their national aspirations.

This summer will mark ten years since the 2007 Hamas violent take-over of the Gaza Strip. The past decade has seen Gaza's infrastructure, its basic services and private sector gradually debilitated, its economy weakened with real GDP per capita and employment decreasing, and the gender gap continuing to grow. Gaza faces a downward spiral of de-development. The

widening socio-economic gap between Gaza and the West Bank further highlights the need to end the drivers of this inhumane and volatile situation. Deteriorating conditions only fuel anger and instability, strengthen extremists and undermine chances for a serious political process.

If Israelis and Palestinians hope to extract themselves from the immeasurable burden this conflict has wrought, they must be willing to take the painful steps that will ultimately lead to peace. Neither side can afford another missed opportunity.

Thank you.