As delivered

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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,

I regret to inform you that the violence which has been erupting in Israel and Palestine since October of last year shows no sign of relenting.

Some recent incidents may point to a new troubling phase in the conflict. On 31 January a Palestinian security officer traveling in an official vehicle opened fire at a checkpoint near Ramallah and injured three Israeli soldiers. This was one of the three incidents to date involving a member of the Palestinian security forces. Although he was acting independently, such incidents can be potentially harmful to the relationship between both security forces. On 3 February a complex attack took place at Damascus Gate that resulted in the death of an Israeli border policewoman. In a worrying advancement in weaponry and tactics the three assailants, all of whom were killed, carried semi-automatic weapons, pipe bombs and knives. Just a couple of hours before this session, two Palestinians reportedly stabbed and seriously injured two Israelis near a supermarket southeast of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank.

As tensions persist, Israelis continue to grapple with the fear of terrorism and Palestinians continue to be killed and injured in clashes across the West Bank. Once again, the United Nations strongly condemns all acts of terror and violence. This spiral of violence which has to date taken at least 137 Palestinian and 19 Israeli lives cannot be reversed by security means alone. It must be addressed at the political level with leaders showing a political horizon to their people and standing up to incitement and the radicals among their own constituents.

Mr. President,

Only genuine progress towards just peace that allows the people of Israel and the people of Palestine to live side by side in safe and secure borders will end the bloodshed and counter the rise of extremism. Against the backdrop of radicalisation, terror, sectarian violence, war and tectonic geo-political shifts in the Middle East, peace and security for Palestine and Israel is an imperative now more than ever.

Over the last year the United States, Russia, the European Union and the Secretary-General, as part of the Middle East Quartet, have engaged actively in seeking a way forward out of the deadlock. Quartet envoys have travelled to the region to meet with Palestinian and Israeli leaders. We have consulted with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and most recently Norway. Since September of last year the Quartet Principals have met three times.

We have sought how not only to preserve the two-state solution, but to create the conditions that would allow the parties to return to meaningful negotiations on resolving the final status issues

and ending the occupation that began in 1967. This includes steps on the ground, consistent with prior agreements that both parties can take to strengthen Palestinian institutions, security and economic prospects, while upholding security for Israelis.

We have voiced our common concern that the current trends on the ground – including continued acts of violence against civilians, ongoing settlement activity, and the high rate of demolitions of Palestinian structures – are dangerously imperiling the viability of a two-state solution.

The commitment of the Middle East Quartet to remain engaged with the parties and to work with key international stakeholders, the region and the UN Security Council is unequivocal. This is why at their latest meeting in Munich the Principals agreed that the Quartet should prepare a report on the status quo, including recommendations on the way forward. The report should focus on the dangers of continuing on the current trajectory, identify the impediments to the two-state solution on all sides and point the way towards restoring a political horizon. Ultimately this report should also help build international consensus for the way ahead.

Mr. President,

Collective international efforts to help establish a political horizon will all be for naught, absent genuine Israeli and Palestinian motivation to address the chronic realities endangering the two-state solution. From the outset, significant policy shifts by Israel, including increasing Palestinian investment and economic activity in Area C, are required to strengthen Palestinian institutions, economy and security prospects.

Israel's settlement enterprise continues to be an impediment to peace. While 2015 may have seen a slower overall pace for settlement planning and construction, the reality is that Israel continues to push forward the consolidation of its control of the West Bank. Several moves since the beginning of the year -- such as the classification of new "state land" in the Jordan Valley and the approval of several plans in settlements – also appear to point towards an increase in settlement activities.

During the past few weeks alone, Israeli authorities in Area C and East Jerusalem demolished 201 Palestinian-owned structures including 79 which were donor-funded. As a result, 320 people were displaced. Since the beginning of 2016, Israel has demolished, on average, 29 Palestinian-owned structures per week, three times the weekly average for 2015. These actions run directly counter to the idea of peace.

Separately, we also remain deeply concerned about the deteriorating condition of Mohammed Al-Qiq, the Palestinian journalist on hunger strike for over 85 days to protest against his administrative detention. I take this opportunity to once again join the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights and call for all persons subject to administrative detention to be either charged or released immediately.

Mr. President,

The challenge of getting back to an environment conducive to peace also falls heavily on the shoulders of the Palestinians. Advancing genuine reconciliation on the basis of non-violence, democracy and PLO principles is a key priority. I welcome the recent unity talks in Qatar and urge all sides to continue their discussions and implement previous agreements, particularly those brokered by Egypt. The formation of a National Unity Government and long-overdue elections are vital to laying the foundations of a future Palestinian state.

The issue of incitement runs to the heart of the current climate of tension and fear. It is essential that authorities on both sides do more to address this scourge. I am particularly concerned that some Palestinian factions continue to glorify violence and terror. Such acts only contribute to tensions and violence.

Governance reforms must also remain a central commitment for the Palestinian Authority.

Mr. President,

Volatility persists in Gaza amidst a tenuous security situation. The collapse of another four tunnels -- bringing the total to date this year to five -- and the continued test firing and launching of rockets at Israel indicate that Hamas continues to directly threaten the security of Israel. Such actions risk not only people's lives but the fragile reconstruction process in the devastated Strip.

The population of Gaza is squeezed from all sides. With little prospect of seeing public sector salaries paid, increased informal taxation and a strangled economy, tensions are rising. I have just returned from Gaza where I visited the Shujaiya neighborhood that had been devastated during the conflict in 2014. It was encouraging in fact to see the visible positive changes and new construction, as life is reborn out of the rubble. But I am too well aware that work is yet to start on the homes of some 74 per cent of families displaced in 2014.

Rebuilding their houses however will not be enough. We must secure peace and focus on building Gaza for the future. This means providing clean water and sufficient energy, creating jobs and a sustainable economy, restoring free movement for people and goods and, above all, ensuring integration between the West Bank and Gaza under a single democratic and legitimate Palestinian Authority.

Mr. President,

Briefly turning to Lebanon, in a positive sign, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Salam resumed sessions on 28 January and 2 February and approved several decrees. However, I remain deeply concerned that the presidential vacancy impairs Lebanon’s ability to address the many challenges facing the country. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I call on Members of the Lebanese Parliament to convene urgently and elect a President.

The recent Syria Donors Conference in London yielded important commitments of international support to reinforce Lebanon’s stability in the face of the refugee crisis. The United Nations will continue to work closely with Lebanon to monitor and implement commitments on the basis of the Government’s “Statement of Intent”.

With respect to UNIFIL, at the first tripartite meeting since the 20 December and 4 January incidents, Israel and Lebanon concurred on the need to maintain calm and stability and to ensure security along the Blue Line. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace however continued on an almost daily basis.

Turning briefly to the Golan, the situation in the vicinity of the ceasefire line continues to be of concern as fighting between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups, and between different armed groups themselves continues. These developments have a potential to escalate the situation in an already tense regional environment.

Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

In closing, let me return to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and appeal to the leaders of both peoples and all international stakeholders. There are clear avenues out of the current political morass but they require unity of effort and bold, creative and courageous work of many. The cold reality for the Israeli and Palestinian people is that all have failed them. The conflict has now arrived at a pivotal point: Israelis and Palestinians must now actively shape their future – with the dedicated support of the international community -- before the opponents of peace decide their fate for them.

Thank you.