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Seventy-eighth year

9290th meeting

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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Afonso	(Mozambique)
<i>Members:</i>	Albania	Ms. Dautllari
	Brazil	Mr. Parga Cintra
	China	Mr. Geng Shuang
	Ecuador	Mr. Montalvo Sosa
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Gabon	Ms. Bongo
	Ghana	Mr. Agyeman
	Japan	Mrs. Shino
	Malta	Mrs. Frazier
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
	United Arab Emirates	Mr. Abushahab
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Kariuki
	United States of America	Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of Israel to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. Wennesland.

Mr. Wennesland: Before turning to the Secretary-General's report, I would like to note the beginning of the holiday period, when the holy month of Ramadan coincides with Passover and Easter. I extend my good wishes to those who are observing these upcoming holy days. At the outset, I remind all that the status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem must be respected. This should be a period for safe and peaceful religious reflection and celebrations for all. I urge all sides to refrain from unilateral steps that escalate tensions. I call on all leaders to engage to this end and refrain from provocative actions and messages at this sensitive time. I ask for calm.

I turn now to the Secretary-General's twenty-fifth report on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 8 December 2022 to 13 March 2023. Resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and to fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard. Settlement activities have, nevertheless, continued during the reporting period.

On 27 December, Israeli settlers took control of a parcel of agricultural land leased by a Palestinian family from the Greek Orthodox Church since 1931 in the Silwan area of occupied East Jerusalem. The settlers maintain that they had purchased the land from the Church, a deal the Church rejected as fraudulent.

On 2 January, the Israeli Government informed the High Court of Justice that it intends to legalize, under Israeli law, the outpost of Homesh, built on private Palestinian-owned land, including by repealing part of the 2005 disengagement law. Relevant legislation is currently being advanced in the Knesset. On the same day, the Court gave the Government 90 days to explain why the outpost should not be evacuated.

On 12 February, the Israeli Government announced that it authorized nine outposts in the occupied West Bank and that the Higher Planning Committee would convene within days to advance settlement housing units. The Committee subsequently advanced plans for over 7,200 settlement housing units, with approximately 4,000 located deep in the occupied West Bank. Nearly 1,000 of these are in outposts that are in the process of legalization under Israeli law.

Following multiple postponements, a meeting of the Higher Planning Committee's Subcommittee for Objections on sensitive E1 settlement plans has been rescheduled for 12 June.

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Israeli authorities, citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, demolished, seized or forced people to demolish 331 structures. These actions displaced 388 people, including 89 women and 197 children. A total of 61 structures were donor-funded.

On 7 February, Israel's High Court of Justice gave the Government until 2 April to submit its response to a petition to implement demolition orders for Khan al-Ahmar. The deadline was subsequently extended to 23 April. A hearing is set for 1 May.

On 7 February, Israeli authorities postponed the demolition of a multi-story building housing 74 Palestinians in Silwan in occupied East Jerusalem.

Resolution 2334 (2016) calls for immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including all acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation

and destruction. Unfortunately, daily violence increased significantly during the reporting period.

Eighty-two Palestinians, including one woman and 17 children, were killed by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, security operations, attacks against Israelis and other incidents. In all, more than 2,680 Palestinians, including 123 women and 320 children, were injured. Of that number, 308 were injured by live ammunition, while 2,100 became injured from tear gas inhalation. In addition, 4 Palestinians were killed and 89 injured, including 14 women and 12 children, in a growing number of attacks by Israeli settlers, who also caused damage to Palestinian-owned property.

Thirteen Israeli civilians, including one woman, three children and one foreign national were killed, and 49 Israelis, including two women, seven children and six Israeli security forces personnel, were injured by Palestinians in shooting and ramming attacks, clashes and other incidents. The majority of them were stone-throwing attacks against Israelis, including settlers, which resulted in injuries or damage to Israeli-owned property. One Israeli security forces personnel was shot and killed by a fellow soldier in the context of a stabbing attack by a Palestinian.

Israeli security forces carried out 1,084 search-and-arrest operations in the West Bank, resulting in 906 Palestinians arrested, including 133 children. Israel currently holds 967 Palestinians in administrative detention — the highest number in over a decade.

The high number of fatal incidents during the reporting period precludes us from detailing all of them, but allow me to highlight a few.

In four Israeli search-and-arrest operations in Palestinian cities in Area A — on 26 January in Jenin, 6 February in Jericho, 22 February in Nablus and 7 March in Jenin — 33 Palestinians, including a woman, an elderly man and four children, were killed by Israeli security forces amid armed exchanges. Of those killed, Palestinian militant groups have claimed 21 as members. The death toll in Nablus, with 11 Palestinians killed, was the highest recorded by the United Nations in a single West Bank incident since 2005.

The reporting period has also been marked by a spate of violence against civilians, including acts of terror.

In occupied East Jerusalem, six Israelis, including a child and one foreign national, were killed in a Palestinian shooting attack outside a synagogue on 27 January, the highest death toll in an attack against Israelis since 2005, and three Israelis, including two children, were killed in a ramming attack on 10 February in occupied East Jerusalem. Shooting attacks by Palestinians killed three Israelis, including one dual national, in other parts of the West Bank on 26 and 27 February and seriously injured three others, one of whom later succumbed to his wounds, in Tel Aviv on 9 March.

In separate incidents, two Palestinians were shot and killed by Israeli settlers in the course of carrying out stabbing attacks on 11 and 21 January. On 11 February, a third Palestinian was shot by an Israeli settler at close range in a confrontation on the edge of a Palestinian village near Salfit. Following the 26 February killing by a Palestinian of two Israelis from the Har Bracha settlement in Huwwara, hundreds of settlers descended on the West Bank town and neighbouring villages, carrying out, with Israeli security forces present, arson and other attacks. Amid the violence, one Palestinian man was shot and killed, 387 others, including 137 women and 89 children, were injured — one with live ammunition and 377 with tear gas — and extensive damage to Palestinian private property was reported.

In the aftermath of fatal incidents in the West Bank, Palestinian armed groups launched seven rockets from Gaza towards Israel. One fell short within the Strip, one landed in an open space inside Israel, and five were intercepted by the Israeli air defence systems. In retaliation, the Israel Defense Forces conducted two air strikes against what it said were militant targets in Gaza, with no reported injuries.

Resolution 2334 (2016) calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric. Unfortunately, such acts continued and intensified.

Some Fatah officials and social media pages, as well as those from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, praised and glorified perpetrators of attacks against Israelis and called for additional attacks. One senior Fatah official called Israel a fascist enemy that loves to murder and spill blood.

An Israeli minister conducted an inflammatory visit to Jerusalem's holy sites. Several Members of the Knesset praised the attacks by settlers against

Palestinians and their property in Huwwara, and an Israeli minister said Huwwara should be wiped out by Israeli authorities. Another Member of Knesset called Israeli-Arab colleagues supporters of terrorism and vowed to ban them from the Knesset, while another said they were inhuman and likened them to livestock.

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse the negative trends on the ground that are imperilling the two-State solution. Notwithstanding some positive steps, negative trends on the ground continued.

On 6 January, the Israeli Government approved a series of measures against the Palestinian Authority (PA), including the transfer of some \$39 million in Palestinian Authority tax revenues withheld by Israel to families of Israelis killed in Palestinian attacks. That measure was in response to the 30 December adoption of General Assembly resolution 77/247, requesting an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice relating to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. On 16 January, 39 members signed a joint statement reconfirming support for the International Court of Justice and noting deep concern regarding the Israeli Government's punitive measures.

The Israeli Government announced, on 29 January and 12 February, that following acts of terrorism by Palestinians against Israelis, it would take steps in response, including reinforcing security forces and broadening operations, strengthening and expanding Israeli settlements and taking punitive measures against the perpetrators and their families.

Following a 1 February announcement by Israel's National Security Minister of new restrictions on Palestinian security prisoners, prisoners launched a mass civil disobedience campaign and announced their intention to begin a hunger strike from tomorrow if restrictions were not eased.

On 2 February, Israel's Finance Minister announced that Israel would double — to approximately \$30 million — the monthly deductions from tax revenues that it withholds based on its law mandating the withholding of what it says the Palestinian Authority pays to perpetrators of attacks against Israelis and their families. The PA's difficult financial situation has resulted in ongoing cuts to public sector salaries. Since early February, Palestinian teachers have conducted

strikes demanding salary increases to compensate for the rising cost of living.

On 15 February, the Knesset-approved legislation enabling the revocation of citizenship of Israeli citizens or residents imprisoned for terrorism-related offences who have received money from the Palestinian Authority connected to those offences.

On 23 February, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office announced an agreement between Defence Minister Gallant and Finance Minister Smotrich on the division of responsibilities between them. That agreement reportedly grants Smotrich expanded authority over settlement-related activities and civil affairs in the occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the United Nations continued to deliver vital humanitarian and development assistance to Palestinians in Gaza and remains engaged with all parties in order to reduce access restrictions to support the Gaza economy and basic service delivery. During the period, a higher flow of people and goods through the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings was witnessed, with Israeli-issued worker and business permits standing today at more than 20,500 — the highest number in years. As at 9 March, the Israeli authorities had enabled 44 previously restricted commodities to enter Gaza without special coordination.

In its resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council also called upon all States to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. No such steps were taken during the reporting period. Resolution 2334 (2016) also called upon all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.

On 12 February, the League of Arab States convened in Cairo a high-level conference on Jerusalem, on the theme "Resilience and development". In its final communiqué, participants called for the establishment of a committee of legal experts tasked with helping to bring justice to the Palestinian people and financing a mechanism to support small and medium-sized enterprises.

On 26 February, senior Jordanian, Egyptian, Israeli, Palestinian and United States officials met in Aqaba, Jordan. In a joint communiqué, Israeli and Palestinian participants reaffirmed their commitment to all previous agreements between them and to work

towards a just and lasting peace. The parties committed to steps to de-escalate the situation on the ground, pause unilateral measures and prevent further violence, including through upholding the status quo at the holy sites.

On 20 February, the Security Council adopted a presidential statement reaffirming, inter alia, its commitment to the two-State solution; its opposition to unilateral actions, including settlement expansion, and its condemnation of violence against civilians, including acts of terrorism (S/PRST/2023/1). On 4 and 8 March, respectively, five European Union (EU) countries, plus the United Kingdom, and all 27 EU member States issued statements condemning the increasing violence on the ground and calling for de-escalation.

In conclusion, I would like to share the Secretary-General's observations concerning the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016):

"I remain deeply troubled by continued Israeli settlement expansion, including the recent authorization of nine illegal outposts and the advancement of more than 7,000 settlement housing units, as well as the potential settlement advancement in the E1 area, which is crucial to the contiguity of a future Palestinian State. Settlements further entrench the occupation, fuel tensions and systematically erode the viability of a Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution. Israeli settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law and of Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. I call on the Government of Israel to cease all settlement activities immediately, in line with its obligations under international law. The demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, including the significant increase of such activity in occupied East Jerusalem, entail numerous human rights violations and raise concerns about the risk of forcible transfer. I call on the Government of Israel to immediately end that practice, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

"I am deeply disturbed by the intensifying cycle of violence that threatens to plunge Palestinians and Israelis deeper into deadly crisis, while further eroding any hope for a political solution. I condemn all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, which have led to an increase in the tragic loss of life. I reiterate that the perpetrators

must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice. There can be no justification for terrorism or glorification of such acts, which should be clearly condemned by all. I call on leaders on all sides to help calm the situation, avoid spreading inflammatory rhetoric and speak up against those seeking to incite and escalate the situation.

"Israeli security forces operations in the occupied West Bank and subsequent clashes have led to a staggering number of Palestinians killed and injured. I reiterate that the security forces must use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable to protect life, and must promptly and thoroughly investigate all instances of death or injury resulting from its use, holding those responsible to account. I am particularly appalled that children continue to be killed and injured in large numbers. Children must never be the target of violence, used or put in harm's way. I remain deeply concerned by the increase in levels of settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank, sometimes in the proximity of the Israeli security forces. I am particularly appalled by the recent brutal sequence of events in Huwwara. All perpetrators must be held accountable. I urge Israel, as the occupying Power, to abide by its obligations under international law to protect the Palestinian population against all acts or threats of violence.

"It is critical to de-escalate the situation and move towards re-establishing a political horizon. The statements made by European Member States, the presidential statement and the joint communiqué from Aqaba are welcome calls for calm. If implemented, the steps outlined in Aqaba could be an important start to reversing negative trends on the ground.

"I am also particularly concerned about steps, incitement and provocations that could escalate tensions in and around the holy sites in Jerusalem. I call upon all to refrain from such actions and to uphold the status quo, in line with the special and historic role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as custodian of the holy sites in Jerusalem.

"In Gaza, a fragile calm continues, but the risk of escalation persists. Despite improvements in access and movement, much more remains to be done to alleviate the dire humanitarian situation and improve the economy, with the ultimate goal

of lifting the debilitating closures, in line with resolution 1860 (2009).

“The absence of intra-Palestinian unity continues to undermine Palestinian national aspirations. I call upon all factions to take concrete steps towards reuniting Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, under a single, democratic Government. Gaza is and must remain an integral part of a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.

“I am concerned by the critical condition of the Palestinian economy, which is affecting the Palestinian Authority’s ability to deliver services and pay public sector salaries. The implications of Israel’s announced increase in monthly deductions from Palestinian clearance revenues add to an already very difficult situation. I urge the parties to work together to find urgent and sustainable solutions. I call on the international community to redouble efforts to strengthen the Palestinian Authority’s fiscal and institutional health.

“I call on all Member States to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East with sustainable funding sources to protect the delivery of vital services to millions of Palestine refugees. That is crucial for stability throughout the region.

“I remain committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis in resolving the conflict and ending the occupation in line with international law, the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions and bilateral agreements in pursuit of the vision of two States — Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestine — living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

“Lastly, there is no substitute for a legitimate political process that will resolve the core issues driving the conflict. Efforts to manage the conflict are not a substitute for real progress towards resolving it. I urge Israelis, Palestinians, the States of the region and the broader international community to take steps to re-engage on meaningful negotiations and, ultimately, peace.”

The President: I thank Mr. Wennesland for his important briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mrs. Thomas-Greenfield (United States of America): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing.

The United States remains deeply concerned about the sustained violence in Israel and the West Bank. Last year was the deadliest since the second intifada, and 2023 is on track to surpass that staggering level of violence. The United States is troubled by the escalation of violent attacks on Israelis by Palestinians and violent attacks on Palestinians by Israeli settlers in the West Bank. We reject all such acts of violence as well as incitements to violence. Let me also underscore that accountability and justice should be pursued with equal vigour and resources in all cases of extremist violence.

We continue to urge the parties to de-escalate and to refrain from unilateral actions and unhelpful rhetoric that serve only to inflame tensions, especially as we approach the confluence of religious holidays in April. That is why the United States joined the meeting in Aqaba on 26 February, as well as the follow-on meetings in Sharm El-Sheikh on 19 March with Israel, the Palestinians, Jordan and Egypt. We applaud the commitments of the parties and the steps taken to restore calm. Those meetings are an affirmation that both sides can seek calm and find a way forward. The United States will continue supporting those efforts and all efforts to restore calm and promote peace. We call on the members of the Security Council and on parties in the region to join us. As the holy month of Ramadan and the Passover and Easter holidays approach — a time of heightened religious sensitivity — we urge all the parties to maintain peace. This should be a time of fellowship and observance of faith, not a moment to fuel conflict.

The United States continues to believe that a two-State solution remains the best way to ensure that Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in peace and security. And even though the prospects for a two-State solution feel remote at the moment, we must preserve our horizon of hope. The road ahead will not be easy. But if the parties commit to peace and dialogue, a brighter future is possible — one of equal measures of freedom, security and prosperity for all.

Ms. Dautllari (Albania): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his account of the events. I would like to start on a positive note and commend the parties for the understanding reached at the meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh last Sunday. We are encouraged by the level of participation, which has not been seen in nearly a decade. We are hopeful that the meetings in this kind of format will continue and will help to ensure de-escalation and lower the tensions on the ground, especially now that the region is approaching the period of religious festivals. We further commend the United States and Jordan for their role in facilitating the meeting, as well as that of Egypt in organizing and hosting. We hope that the engagement of the parties under the Aqaba format will help them to refrain from taking action that would only worsen the situation.

Besides the commitment of the Israelis and Palestinians to engaging in lowering tensions, there is also another reality. The situation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza remains an issue of great concern. The events in Jenin and Nablus have affected many civilians. The sad reality is that in the course of the past three months we have witnessed an increase not seen in years in the death toll of civilian victims from both of the parties. We are deeply disturbed by the fact that children have been also innocent victims of the increasing violence and call for such trends to be stopped immediately.

The protection of civilians is an obligation under international humanitarian law, and it must be fully observed by all and in all circumstances. Albania strongly condemns the terrorist attacks on Israel and all acts of terror against civilians, which are unacceptable and should not be tolerated. Since the beginning of 2023 we have witnessed an alarming increase in the number of terrorist attacks on synagogues in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, including on civilians. Those acts must be condemned and the perpetrators brought to justice. Nothing can justify terror or terrorist acts, and we will support Israel's right to self-defence using proportionate measures.

Albania is also deeply concerned about the violent attacks committed by settlers in the West Bank. Demolitions and acts of violence against private properties must be stopped and those responsible must be held accountable. People cannot and must not be allowed to take the law into their own hands. We reiterate our principled position that settlements are illegal under international law, and that any decision to further

expand them will not contribute to the desperately needed revival of the prospects for a political horizon. That is what the parties need — a political horizon for peace and an avenue for dialogue. And as the parties themselves agreed on Sunday, we welcome their intention to cooperate with a view to consolidating a basis for direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians aimed at achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace. We therefore call on the parties to refrain from taking unilateral steps and to focus on confidence-building measures. While the whole region is preparing for celebrations, we reiterate the vital importance of peaceful coexistence between the three Abrahamic religions. The status quo of the holy sites must be upheld as agreed, and with respect for Jordan's custodianship and special role.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm Albania's full support for a negotiated two-State solution in which a secure and safe Israel lives side by side in peace and security with a democratic Palestinian State, and with Jerusalem as their future shared capital. We believe that only a solution based on two States for two peoples will ensure that both sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, are able to live as neighbours in safety and security.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), on Israeli settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory. We listened with concern to Mr. Wennesland's assessments regarding the continued stagnation of the Middle East peace process as Israel intensifies its unilateral steps to create irreversible facts on the ground, expanding illegal settlement building while continuing to forcibly evict Palestinians, destroy their homes and expropriate their property, alongside the decisions by the Israeli leadership to legalize outposts in the occupied territory.

Since the beginning of the year, we have witnessed violent raids by the Israel Defense Forces in Jenin, Jericho, Nablus and Huwwara, resulting in the killing of more than 150 Palestinians, including 18 minors. Against that backdrop, there has been a sharp increase in attacks by settlers and cases of the disproportionate use of force, which is resulting in deaths and injuries among civilians on both sides. Mass arbitrary detentions are being reported on a daily basis. The situation in the Old City around Jerusalem's holy sites continues to be

extremely tense, particularly now for Muslims in the context of the holy month of Ramadan.

At the same time, we also reaffirm Israel's right to ensure its security. In the context, we call on the parties to refrain from using provocative and hateful rhetoric, which can only make the situation more difficult. In particular, we consider the recent remarks made in Paris by Israel's Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, to be extremely dangerous and irresponsible, as well as insulting to the Palestinian people.

We cannot help but be concerned also by the Knesset's adoption of laws that deprive Israeli Arabs of citizenship, leading to their subsequent deportation to the occupied Palestinian territories for alleged terrorist activities, and that deny medicine and medical care to Palestinian prisoners.

The ongoing violence in the occupied Palestinian territories and the erosion of the international legal basis for settlements as a result of Israeli unilateral actions are a reminder of the danger of a continued vacuum in the negotiation process. We must acknowledge that the situation will remain volatile until the parties reach mutually acceptable agreements on all final status issues, based on the universally recognized international legal basis of the Middle East peace process and the two-State formula, which we have consistently supported. In that context, we would like to reaffirm our position of principle that the establishment of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 constitutes a violation of international law and is one of the main obstacles to the resumption of direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, to which there is simply no alternative. We also attach key importance to overcoming the division among the Palestinians, which is among the key reasons that the peace process continues to stall.

Recently, it has become clear that among the factors preventing a just peace for the Palestinians are the actions of the United States, which seeks to monopolize the peace process and reformat it as it sees fit in order to impose an economic peace on the Palestinians rather than meet their legitimate aspirations to establish their own independent State. That confirms once again the harm of the back-room schemes that Washington is advancing, in circumvention of the Security Council and without regard for internationally recognized solutions, and then imposing them on the parties to the conflict.

In conclusion, I would like to stress once again the need for the continued comprehensive support for Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and neighbouring countries that is provided by international humanitarian agencies, led by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, whose activities have not just humanitarian, but also political dimensions with an important stabilizing effect on the countries in the Middle East.

Mr. Kariuki (United Kingdom): I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing.

We commend Israeli and Palestinian officials for their engagement in Aqaba, Jordan, on 26 February and in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, on 19 March, and we thank Jordan and Egypt for hosting those events. The commitments to desist from provocative unilateral actions and to pursue further actions in support of de-escalation are critical ahead of the convergence of Easter, Passover and Ramadan in the coming weeks. It is also critical that both parties abide by the commitments made and take forward the promised confidence-building measures, including the commitment to support the historic status quo governing Jerusalem's holy sites and all those who worship there. Let me make four points.

First, the Palestinian Authority must resume security cooperation with Israel, fight against terror and incitement, and maintain security in Area A. We also condemn indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza. While Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence, unilateral incursions that result in the deaths of innocent Palestinians only escalate tensions. Israeli security forces must operate in accordance with international law, show restraint in the use of live fire and conduct thorough investigations into the deaths of Palestinian civilians.

Secondly, Israel must also cease the approval of settlements and the legalization of outposts, as well as the evictions of Palestinians in the occupied territory, particularly in East Jerusalem. The United Kingdom opposes the repeal of the disengagement law by the Knesset, which is a unilateral measure that further undermines prospects for a two-State solution and damages any renewed efforts at de-escalation.

Thirdly, settler violence has gone unchecked for too long. The United Kingdom condemns all forms of violence by settlers, including the fatal attacks perpetrated against innocent Palestinians in Huwvara. We urge the Israeli security forces to provide appropriate

protection to the Palestinian civilian population, as they are obliged to under international law, to investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of settler violence, and to end the culture of permissiveness and impunity.

Fourthly and finally, the inflammatory rhetoric and the incitement to violence on the part of certain Israeli political leaders only serves to drive settler violence. The United Kingdom condemned the Israeli Finance Minister's comments calling for the Palestinian village of Huwvara to be wiped out and his recent comments that deny the existence of the Palestinian people, their right to self-determination, and their history and culture. The United Kingdom extends its full support for Jordan and its sovereign territory. All Israelis and Palestinians deserve peace and security, particularly during the holy festivals of Easter, Passover and Ramadan. That will require political will, good faith, strong cooperation and meaningful actions by both Israelis and Palestinians.

Mr. Parga Cintra (Brazil): I thank Mr. Wennesland for his briefing and would like to express Brazil's gratitude for his efforts aimed at restoring calm and promoting dialogue among all parties, always having peace as the ultimate goal.

Brazil remains deeply concerned about the situation in Israel and Palestine. We are especially worried about the upcoming religious holidays, as the holy month of Ramadan will coincide with Easter and Passover. In an already tense scenario, without a genuine commitment from all parties to create the conditions for the celebrations to take place in peace and tranquillity, we truly risk seeing an escalation of violence. Peaceful celebrations are in everyone's interest. All parties must exercise maximum restraint and avoid provocations, including extremist rhetoric. We welcome the emphasis in the joint communiqué of the 19 March meeting held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, on the necessity of the active prevention by both parties of any actions that would disrupt the sanctity of the holy sites. We also stress the importance of the commitment made to maintain unchanged the historic status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem, and of the recognition of the relevance of the Hashemite custodianship.

Brazil thanks Egypt, Jordan and the United States for the diplomatic efforts to bring together Israeli and Palestinian authorities to reflect on ways and means to de-escalate tensions and pave a way forward towards a peaceful settlement. The meeting held in Sharm

El-Sheikh following the Aqaba, Jordan, meeting is a welcome development against a grim backdrop. As recognized by the parties, the need to pursue confidence-building measures in order to enhance mutual trust, create a political horizon and address outstanding issues through direct dialogue cannot be overemphasized. We welcome the fact that a follow-up mechanism has been established. We will pay close attention to those commitments, and this time around we expect them to be indeed implemented. An assessment of their impact involves the de-escalation of violence, which has affected civilians, including children. All violations of international humanitarian law must immediately stop. The principle of making a distinction between civilians and combatants must be upheld. Terrorism is deplorable in all its forms and manifestations.

Israel must immediately cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in compliance with resolution 2334 (2016). As one of the main obstacles to peace, the continued expansion of settlements, in flagrant violation of international law, threatens the viability of a future Palestinian State and is a constant source of violence and hatred. We also call on Israel to stop the continued demolitions and seizures of Palestinian structures, as well as the displacement of Palestinian families. All forms of settler-related violence must also immediately cease.

Brazil considers the agreement on the establishment of a mechanism to take the necessary steps towards improving the economic conditions of the Palestinian people and to significantly enhance the fiscal situation of the Palestinian National Authority to be another important element of the of the Sharm El-Sheikh joint communiqué. Intra-Palestinian reconciliation, together with the improvement of living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza, which will only be possible with sustainable economic growth, are important steps towards peace.

We once again emphasize the role played by poverty, food insecurity and the lack of hope in providing the perfect breeding ground for extremist forces. Peace depends — and we emphasize this — on the commitment to the promotion of human rights for all. The situation in Gaza is particularly concerning, as the blockade continues to aggravate humanitarian conditions and hinder development efforts. Brazil also remains worried about the chronic financial

challenges faced by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which has been providing much-needed humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees. We must not undermine the role that has been played by UNRWA throughout the years to maintain stability on the ground.

Before concluding, I would like to reaffirm Brazil's long-standing commitment to the two-State solution, with Palestine and Israel living side by side in peace and security, within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders. We remain committed to the idea of peace and to the achievement without delay of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of international law and relevant United Nations resolutions. In that regard, we are ready to support all initiatives that aim to open up a horizon for sustainable peace.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Switzerland remains extremely concerned about the high level of violence and the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East. The number of civilian casualties on both sides continues to rise. One month ago, the Security Council adopted presidential statement S/PRST/2023/1, calling on the parties to create the necessary conditions for bringing about peace. That call was reiterated on 19 March in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. Switzerland welcomes the efforts to de-escalate the situation and urgently calls on the leaders of all parties to resolutely commit to achieving that.

The statements of the Israeli Finance Minister denying the existence of the Palestinian people are unacceptable. We call on Israel to abide by previous agreements towards the establishment of a two-State solution, as well as the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan, as it has just committed to do. Hateful provocations and speech by all parties must stop immediately.

The protection of the civilian population is imperative. Switzerland is concerned about the operations of the Israeli security forces in the West Bank, which frequently result in a large number of Palestinian casualties. We condemn the acts of violence committed against Palestinian civilians by settlers, including in Huwvara. We also condemn the acts of violence committed by Palestinians against Israeli civilians, including the 9 March incident in Tel Aviv. Violence must be unequivocally condemned by Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Moreover, 16 children have been killed since the beginning of the year. Children should never be targeted for violence or put at risk. We recall that the allegations of the disproportionate use of force and acts of violence by all parties must be investigated and not go unpunished. We urge the parties to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Switzerland notes with concern the expansion of the Government's authority over settlement-related activities and civil affairs in the occupied territory. Under international humanitarian law, Israel must refrain from taking measures that would introduce permanent changes, in particular demographic and administrative changes in the occupied territory. Switzerland condemns the repeal of several provisions of the disengagement law, which run contrary to the commitments made in Sharm El-Sheikh. The settlements are illegal and create a major obstacle to peace based on a two-State solution, as resolution 2334 (2016) also states. In that regard, Switzerland is concerned about the developments in Khan Al-Ahmar, Masafer Yatta and East Jerusalem, which are likely to further fuel current tensions. We call for the restoration of Palestinian political unity. Indeed, the continued weakening of the Palestinian Authority and the loss of legitimacy of its institutions are obstacles to peace. In that context, we observe with concern the increased activity of armed groups.

With the approach of the religious holidays, Switzerland calls for restraint so that everybody can celebrate in peace. We urge the relevant authorities to minimize the risk of tensions around the holy sites and to ensure respect for the status quo on the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including by preventing any action that would violate their sanctity. We also take note of Israel's announcement to ease movement restrictions in preparation for Ramadan. We call for their effective and sustainable implementation. Switzerland encourages the parties to pursue the path of dialogue and the resumption of meaningful peace talks by addressing the root causes of the conflict. We remain at their disposal.

Mr. Agyeman (Ghana): We are grateful to Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his briefing to the Security Council on the overall situation in the Middle East, with emphasis on Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem. We also thank the Special Coordinator

for highlighting the detailed measures being undertaken to restore calm in the region.

Ghana has followed with keen interest the recent positive developments in the Middle East, in particular the first in-person high-level talks between senior Israeli and Palestinian officials for some years, which were held in Aqaba, Jordan, on 26 February and subsequently in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, last Sunday, aimed at encouraging dialogue, the de-escalation of violence and the defusing of tensions in the region. We welcome the commitment of the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to working closely together without delay to prevent further violence and restore security cooperation in the occupied West Bank, which the Palestinian Authority had suspended last month in the aftermath of the deadliest attacks in recent history by the Israeli army. We also note the positive developments in the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and encourage a rapprochement between those two countries in order to reduce regional tensions and promote regional stability. We are grateful for the roles that the Governments of Jordan, Egypt and the United States, as well as the Government of China, have played recently in the region.

Notwithstanding the positive developments, there are situations of concern. The first is the repeal by the Israeli Parliament of certain clauses in the 2005 disengagement law, which ordered the evacuation of Jewish settlements, thereby allowing for Jewish residents to return to four settlements in the occupied West Bank. The second concerns statements made by notable and high-ranking Israeli politicians that undermine and threaten the prospect of the widely accepted two-State solution. The third is related to the escalation of settler-related activities and the fact that violence persists. Fourthly, the destruction of infrastructure and property in both the occupied Palestinian territories and in East Jerusalem continue unabated. Those drivers of instability have worsened the security situation and the already dire humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and beyond.

We deplore the high level of violence perpetrated against civilians and children on both sides. Ghana is particularly concerned about the near daily raids in the Palestinian refugee camps, the human rights abuses, the violations and the detentions without charge or trial in Palestinian cities and villages, especially in the north-western part of the West Bank, where fighting between the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian

militias has been raging for almost a year, and in Gaza and East Jerusalem.

As we approach the holy month of Ramadan, which this year coincides with Passover, we appeal to both the Israeli and Palestinian parties to respect the commitments that they made in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh to establish a mechanism that will prevent violence, incitement and any disruptive action at Jerusalem's holy sites. We urge Israel to respect its commitment to refraining from establishing new West Bank settlements for four months, as well as to halting the authorization of outposts for a period of six months. We call on both parties to show maximum restraint and refrain from further unilateral actions by establishing a joint civilian committee that works to promote confidence-building economic measures.

We wish to reaffirm our demand that all parties to the conflict fully comply with international humanitarian law, including the protection of the civilian population, the Charter of the United Nations and the many relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016).

In conclusion, we reiterate our position that the paths for lasting peace and stability in the Middle East can be achieved only through the internationally negotiated two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side on the basis of the 1967 borders. However, the realization of the goals of the Middle East peace process require the Security Council and the wider international community to sustain the engagement of the parties, whose good-faith efforts are required to resolve this decades-long conflict.

Mr. De Rivièrè (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Tor Wennesland for his briefing. I will make four points.

First, France is extremely concerned about the ongoing deterioration of the situation on the ground and the continuing violence, which is reaching an unprecedented level. France strongly condemns all violence against civilians. It has cost many Palestinian civilians their lives since the beginning of January. France firmly condemns the indiscriminate violence committed by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians. We strongly condemn the terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of at least 14 Israelis this year. We reaffirm our commitment to the security of Israel and its citizens. France expressed its deep concern following the recent Israeli army operations in the West

Bank. We call on Israel to protect Palestinian civilians in accordance with its international obligations.

Secondly, the cycle of violence must end. France calls on all actors to exercise the utmost restraint at the start of this period of religious holidays. France welcomes and supports the efforts of the United States, Egypt and Jordan, which enabled the parties to meet for the first time in many years in Aqaba and Sharm El-Sheikh. We note the commitments made by the parties to de-escalation. It is crucial that those commitments be followed up on the ground not only in terms of halting the settlements, demolition and evictions, but also in terms of tax transfers and the Palestinian Authority's security rights. We recall the importance of respecting the historical status quo of Jerusalem's holy sites and Jordan's particular role in that regard.

France recalls its commitment to the treaties concluded by Israel with its neighbours, in particular the Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, signed in Wadi Araba, as well as to the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living within secure and recognized borders on the basis of the 1967 lines, with both having Jerusalem as their capital.

Thirdly, a lasting de-escalation can take place only if the settlement policy stops. That policy is contrary to international law, as recalled in resolution 2334 (2016). In that regard, we are particularly concerned about the amendment of the Israeli 2005 disengagement law, which could pave the way for the legalization of unauthorized settlements in the northern West Bank.

The demolition of Palestinian structures continues in Jerusalem and the West Bank, as do evictions of Palestinian families. France calls on the Israeli authorities to review their decision to expel Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and the Old City of Jerusalem. In the Palestinian territories, as elsewhere, France will never recognize the illegal annexation of territories or the legalization of unauthorized settlements.

Fourthly, such unilateral measures, which are in violation of international law, make the prospect of a two-State solution increasingly remote. They serve the momentum for annexation, thereby further destabilizing the situation on the ground.

The Security Council has the duty to uphold the two-State solution. It has a responsibility towards the parties. Previous agreements must be respected,

particularly with regard to the provisions relating to Area C. A political horizon must be restored. That is the only way to implement the two-State solution. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live in peace and security. France remains fully committed to that goal.

Mr. Montalvo Sosa (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Mr. Tor Wennesland for his briefing this morning. We reiterate our full support for his efforts to reduce tensions and bring the parties together in an increasingly complex environment, which continues to concern us.

In presidential statement S/PRST/2023/1, which we adopted a month ago, the Security Council condemned all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terrorism, and called on the parties to refrain from provocative actions and incitement and from making inflammatory statements. Since then, acts of violence against civilians regrettably again took place in Nablus, Huwvara, Jenin and other places. It is imperative that such acts be investigated, and that all perpetrators be brought to justice and be held accountable. We recall that there is no justification whatsoever for non-compliance with the obligations under international humanitarian law.

We have also witnessed further provocative acts and gross statements of incitement to violence. We know that the leaders' conduct and statements influence the actions of other individuals. We therefore call on them to show responsibility, restraint and a genuine commitment to peace.

We make a special call for caution during the sensitive period of the religious holidays. We particularly call for respect for the status quo of the holy sites of Jerusalem and Jordan's role as their custodian. Acts of provocation at those sites should be prevented at all costs.

We welcome the high-level meetings that took place at the end of February in Aqaba, Jordan, and this past Sunday in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, with the participation of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt and the United States. It is particularly encouraging that, according to the joint communiqué issued after the most recent meeting, the parties agreed to establish a mechanism to curb and counter violence, incitement and inflammatory statements and actions, which will present a report at an upcoming meeting in April. We thank those who facilitated the meetings, and we look forward to the implementation of the

agreements reached so as to defuse tensions and prevent violence. We call on the parties to show consistency between their stated intentions and actions.

Finally, we hope that those meetings can thereby serve as a basis for the beginning of a path leading to a political, peaceful, lasting and just solution for the parties, in accordance with international law, with the existence of two States, Palestine and Israel, on the basis of the 1967 borders.

Mr. Abushahab (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank the Special Coordinator, Mr. Tor Wennesland, for his briefing and his continuous efforts.

I would like to begin by noting Sunday's meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh following the Aqaba summit. We hope that the constructive engagement between the two parties at this critical time will contribute to reducing the alarming levels of escalation across the occupied Palestinian territory. While last year was the most violent year in two decades, the beginning of this year unfortunately suggests that the worst is yet to come.

To truly de-escalate the situation on the ground, the parties must commit to the Sharm El-Sheikh joint communiqué and fully implement its parameters, especially putting an end to unilateral measures, before the situation gets out of control. We commend the tireless efforts of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Arab Republic of Egypt and the United States of America to build trust between the parties and help reduce tension. Such steps are important as we enter the holy month of Ramadan, which coincides with the period of important Jewish and Christian religious observances. Even in the absence of the current unrest, this critical period of the year has in the past often been marked by high tensions that can and must be avoided. That also makes it even more important to maintain the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip following recent clashes.

This cycle of violence is not new; rather, it is the outcome of a series of illegal practices and attempts to manage the conflict rather than work towards its resolution. It is the responsibility of the international community to refuse the normalization of this ongoing escalation. We must also send an explicit message underscoring the importance of fully implementing relevant Council resolutions in order to create an environment conducive to relaunching a serious and credible peace process.

With regard to our discussion today, we emphasize the need for Israel to reverse the recent passing of a bill that allows settlers to return to four settlements in the northern area of the occupied West Bank. We also underscore the importance of compliance in relation to Israel's recent commitment to not discussing any new settlement units for four months and to stopping the authorization of any settlement outposts for six months. It is imperative for Israel to fully cease all settlement activities, since they constitute flagrant violation of international law and Council resolutions.

We further demand that Israel immediately stop all settler violence and hold perpetrators to account to deter further attacks, which have escalated and tripled over the past two years. The situation has grown increasingly alarming following the heinous attacks carried out by settlers against the people of Huwwara village in Nablus, causing significant damage. The United Arab Emirates, as part of its humanitarian effort to assist the brotherly Palestinian people, recently announced the allocation of \$3 million in support of efforts to reconstruct the village.

Israel must fulfil its responsibilities in accordance with international law and international humanitarian law. Its repeated raids of Palestinian cities and villages, such as its recent storming of Jenin and Nablus, must end. Those raids have resulted in numerous deaths and injuries, whose numbers have risen sharply since the beginning of this year.

We also reiterate the need to stop the demolition of Palestinian property, whose rate this year as compared to the same period in 2022 has increased by 68 per cent. That increase has serious implications, foremost of which is the forced displacement of people, particularly in East Jerusalem.

We also stress the need to maintain the existing legal and historical status quo of Jerusalem and its holy sites as well as respect the Hashemite custodianship over the Islamic and Christian holy sites in East Jerusalem. Further, we call on all parties to refrain from provocative rhetoric and statements that could incite hatred and violence. The United Arab Emirates rejects all practices that contradict humanitarian values and principles. In that regard, we condemn inflammatory statements, including those by the Israeli Minister of Finance, who called for the village of Huwwara to be wiped out and denied the history and existence of the Palestinian people. We also condemn his use of a

map of Israel that includes lands from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Palestine.

In conclusion, the United Arab Emirates stresses its continued support for the two-State solution, which establishes an independent Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side with Israel in peace, security and mutual recognition. We hope that calm and harmony will prevail in the upcoming holiday period.

Mrs. Shino (Japan): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his briefing.

The perpetual cycle of violence and instability in Palestine has continued unabated and even intensified since the beginning of this year. Japan is seriously concerned by the recent violent attack that occurred in the Jenin refugee camp on 7 March, which resulted in several deaths and injuries. This follows a series of attacks, including the one in Jenin this January and in Nablus recently.

Moreover, Israel's continued settlement activities in the West Bank remain deeply disturbing. The Israeli Government must stop its settlement activities, demolitions and evictions, as these constitute violations of international law and go against relevant Security Council resolutions.

At the same time, we condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including the killing of two Israelis in Huwwara on 26 February, as well as shootings of Israelis in several cities. We also condemn the rampage against Palestinians in Huwwara carried out by some Israeli settlers. This pattern of violence must not continue.

Japan calls for an immediate cessation of violence and for all parties to exercise maximum restraint and avoid any unilateral actions that could escalate the situation further, in accordance with presidential statement S/PRST/2023/1 and the Aqaba joint communiqué, both adopted in February. In this context, Japan is seriously concerned and disturbed by the Israeli Finance Minister's provocative remark on Sunday, and resolutely rejects it.

The international community has been making intensified efforts to ease tensions. Japan welcomes the holding of last weekend's five-party meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh and appreciates the continuing efforts made by the parties concerned to stabilize the situation. For Japan's part, Prime Minister Kishida expressed

concern over unilateral measures taken by both sides and conveyed Japan's readiness to contribute to the easing of tensions toward the realization of a two-State solution in his telephone conversation with Israeli President Herzog on 14 March.

Japan has consistently supported the peaceful coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace and security. Japan calls on all parties to engage in meaningful constructive dialogue. Direct negotiations remain the only viable path towards peace and stability in the region.

Mrs. Frazier (Malta): I begin by thanking Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing.

A little over a month ago, the Security Council adopted presidential statement S/PRST/2023/1, the first such product since 2016, which underlined, among its key points, opposition to unilateral measures that impede peace, condemned all acts of violence against civilians and underlined the elements set forth in resolution 2334 (2016). Regrettably, in recent weeks, we continue to witness alarming patterns of violence, terrorism and loss of life, disregarding the provisions of both the resolution and the presidential statement and threatening further escalations.

Malta is deeply concerned about the persistent negative trajectory of developments and we are particularly appalled by the number of child victims on both sides of the violence. In that context we deplore the casualties resulting from the Israeli operations in the West Bank, which left several Palestinians dead, including children. We urge the Israeli authorities to exercise restraint in the use of live ammunition and search-and-arrest operations. We once again underscore the fact that targeting unarmed non-combatants and children is unacceptable.

We also remain disturbed by the increasing incidence of acts of terrorism, including most recently the terrorist attack that took place in Tel Aviv on 9 March and for which Hamas has claimed responsibility. Malta unequivocally condemns any act of terror or incentivizing of terrorism, for which there can be no justification, and recalls the obligation of the Palestinian Authority to renounce and confront terrorism. We strongly condemn but also express concern about the acts of terrorism carried out by young Palestinian teenagers. Along the same lines, Malta condemns the horrific settler violence within the occupied Palestinian territory. We are profoundly concerned about the

increase in such behaviour. Escalations such as the retaliatory arson attacks that terrorized the town of Huwwara on 26 February should not be repeated and those involved must held accountable.

Malta reiterates that Israel's continued construction and expansion of settlements, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinians within the occupied territory are concerning. Such acts constitute unilateral actions that violate international law and Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016), and obstruct the viability of an independent, contiguous Palestinian State. We also underscore that any indiscriminate firing of rockets into Israel by armed groups in Gaza is a violation of international law and completely unacceptable.

In the face of those troubling developments, Malta remains convinced that dialogue is the key foundation for de-escalation. We commend the parties involved in the communiqué of the Al-Quds Conference on Resilience and Development held in Aqaba, as well as the Sharm El-Sheikh communiqué, and call on the parties to abide by the positive agreements made. That is of paramount importance as the period of religious festivities approaches. And especially during that period, we underscore the urgent need for parties to refrain from unilateral actions or incitements through attempts to alter the status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem. The special role of Jordan as custodian must be respected as crucial to upholding the peaceful coexistence of all three monotheistic religions in the region.

Malta would like to recall the most recent joint statement on behalf of the 27 European Union member States, issued on 8 March, stating that we need to consider new perspectives for peace. In that regard, we welcome the constructive commitments made with our partners and the Arab League to revive the Arab Peace Initiative.

Malta's position on the Palestinian question remains clear. A just and comprehensive resolution to the Middle East conflict must be based on a two-State solution, along the pre-1967 borders, addressing the legitimate aspirations of both sides, with Jerusalem as the future capital of the two States, living side by side in peace and security, in line with the relevant Security Council resolutions and internationally agreed parameters.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): Ramadan is around the corner. I would like to take this

opportunity to extend my best wishes to all my Muslim friends. I also sincerely hope that Muslims in the occupied Palestinian territory can celebrate Ramadan in peace and tranquillity.

I thank Special Coordinator Wennesland for his briefing. I would like to make three points.

First, we should oppose violence and incitements to violence and end the conflict and confrontation. The security situation in the West Bank has been deteriorating for some time and violent conflicts have been escalating. China is concerned about those developments. We condemn all violence against civilians and support the Special Coordinator in maintaining close communication with Palestinians and Israelis and in his efforts to facilitate peace talks and ease tensions. We call on the parties concerned to avoid provocations and incitement in order to prevent a further escalation of tensions. As the occupying Power, Israel should fulfil its obligations under international law to protect the people in the occupied territory, prevent its security forces from using excessive force, curb settler violence, thoroughly investigate related incidents and hold the perpetrators accountable. At the same time, Israel's legitimate security concerns should also be taken seriously.

Palestine and Israel are permanent neighbours. The two sides can and must break the cycle of violence and achieve common security through dialogue and cooperation and achieve common security. Recently, thanks to the efforts of Jordan, Egypt and other countries of the region, Palestine and Israel have reached some consensus, while reaffirming their commitment to easing the situation on the ground, preventing the escalation of violence and realizing a just and lasting peace. We hope the consensus will be translated into responsible and constructive policies and actions that improve the situation on the ground.

Secondly, we should abide by international law and cease unilateral measures that aggravate tensions. China is deeply concerned about Israel's decision in February to legalize nine settlements in the West Bank, after which it approved the construction of more than 7,000 new settlement housing units and yesterday amended legislation to allow Israeli settlers to return to four settlements. We urge Israel to fulfil its obligations under the relevant Security Council resolutions and stop its settlement expansions, forced demolitions of Palestinian homes, threats of evictions against the

Palestinian people and unilateral changes to the status quo in the occupied territory. China calls on the parties to work earnestly to safeguard the historical status quo of religious sites in Jerusalem and respect Jordan's custodianship of the sites. During religious festivals in particular, they should remain calm and exercise restraint to prevent violence, threats and provocations against Muslim believers and further bloodshed.

Thirdly, we should honour international commitments and advance a two-State solution. The situation on the ground remains volatile and clashes between Palestinians and Israelis continue. The fundamental reason for the entire situation lies in the stalled Middle East peace process and the delays in implementing a two-State solution. Last month the Council issued its first presidential statement (S/PRST/2023/1) on the Palestinian-Israeli question in nearly nine years, while reaffirming its firm support for the vision of a two-State solution. The international community should move with a sense of urgency and take practical steps to promote such a solution, including by convening a larger, more authoritative and influential international peace conference and pushing for a swift resumption of peace talks between Palestine and Israel. Countries with influence on the parties should assume their responsibility to play a constructive role. For its part, the Council should also be poised to take meaningful action to discharge its duties under the Charter of the United Nations.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate China's firm support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with full sovereignty, on the basis of the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital. We are ready to work with the international community to make unremitting efforts to achieve a swift, comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question.

Ms. Bongo (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland for his briefing and reiterate my delegation's support. I welcome the presence among us of the Permanent Representative of Israel and the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

My country expresses its deep concern about the status quo observed on the ground during the period under review, which does not ease tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, despite numerous calls, particularly by the Council, for de-escalation and the launch of a dialogue by the international community.

The 26 February settler attacks against Huwvara, which led a Palestinian death and the destruction of Palestinian property, are unacceptable. Similarly, the 9 March terrorist attack in Tel Aviv, which led to injuries and claimed the life of a young Israeli, and the clashes in Jenin on 16 March, where four Palestinians, including a teenager, were killed by Israeli fire, are real tragedies.

My country deplors all of this violence, which has persisted for too long. No cause can or should legitimize recourse to terror. We reiterate our position on the right of Israel to security, but insist that it be exercised pursuant to international humanitarian law.

At the same time, the pursuit of the settlement policy and bellicose rhetoric do not ease, but instead harden tensions and fuel divisions. We therefore call on all parties to show restraint and to take all necessary measures to restore confidence. The involvement of the countries of the region and of those with influence over the parties is critical.

In that regard, my delegation welcomes the 19 March meeting, in Sharm El-Sheikh, of Jordanian, Israeli, Palestinian and American political and security officials, under the auspices of the Arab Republic of Egypt, within the framework of the agreement reached on 26 February in Aqaba, Jordan, aimed at restoring calm in the Palestinian territories and in Israel. We urge the parties to respect the commitments made and will continue to follow closely the process of those negotiations.

Gabon reiterates its commitment to the two-State solution, Palestinian and Israeli, living side by side, on the basis of the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital.

We also draw the Council's attention to the particularly worrisome economic situation of the Palestinian Authority, which has been aggravated by the freezing of tax funds collected by Israel from Palestinian Authority workers on behalf of the Authority. Urgent measures must be taken for its economic recovery. There can be no prosperity in the region unless it is shared by the Palestinian Authority. That is also a factor for peace that must be taken into account.

At the same time, we should all be concerned about the humanitarian consequences of this conflict. Its destabilizing impact on the countries of the region calls for a more resolute mobilization of the international

community, particularly in favour of financial support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

In conclusion, the international community must not allow, on either side, growing despair and acceptance of violence, in all its forms, as inevitable. The history, complexity and longevity of this conflict must not lead to fatalism.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Mozambique.

Mozambique expresses its appreciation to Mr. Tor Wennesland, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his valuable update on the situation in Palestine and for his efforts to reach a settlement on this important issue.

We are deeply concerned about escalating violence carried out by Israel against innocent and unprotected civilians in the Palestinian occupied territories. On the other hand, we are witnesses to the establishment and expansion of settlements and to all unilateral measures taken by Israel with the aim of altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Palestinian territory. We reiterate our position that those measures are contrary to international law and to General Assembly and Security Council resolutions.

We believe that Israel's compliance with the relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly those calling for a two-State solution, is crucial as a condition for the two peoples to live side by side in peace and security. We believe in negotiated solutions for the current Israel-Palestine conflict. Both Israelis and Palestinians are called to refrain from unilateral initiatives and actions that could further aggravate the prevailing tensions and violence.

The humanitarian situation in the occupied territories continues to be worrisome and deteriorating. Civilians continue to be the main victims of the cycle of violence unfolding following recent decisions to settle and seize land, as well as to demolish civilians' homes.

Mozambique is concerned about the growing insecurity, death and injuries among Palestinian civilians. The most vulnerable, mainly young people and women, must urgently be protected. We believe that the Council has a responsibility to act collectively in order to help settle this conflict.

In that regard, we welcome the efforts of international partners to exert positive influence to encourage respect for the rule of law and democracy in Palestine by creating the necessary conditions for the holding of presidential and legislative elections in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

We call for increased, predictable and sustainable support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and for the World Food Programme.

In conclusion, we encourage the parties to pursue the path of dialogue, working together in a constructive manner towards a lasting peace, in full respect of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and in promotion of coexistence and the two-State solution, in accordance with resolutions 242 (1967) and 2334 (2016).

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): Allow me, at the outset, to commend the brotherly nation of Mozambique for its able leadership of the Security Council and for holding this important meeting.

Allow me also to stress that the report of the Secretary-General presented by Special Coordinator Wennesland demonstrates once again persistent breaches of the Charter of the United Nations and of Council resolutions, notably in relation to the unlawful acquisition of Palestinian territory by force through settlements and their associated regime and its continued denial of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to life.

We, the Palestinian people, do exist. We, the Palestinian people have existed on that land for a long period of time. We, the Palestinian people, will continue existing on that land. We have thrived and suffered; we have lived and died; and we have witnessed joy and heartaches. We have accumulated personal memories and endured collective tragedies. We were, we are and we will be the Palestinian people. We have endured dispossession, displacement, discrimination and the denial of our most fundamental rights and our very existence, but we have not and we will not disappear.

It took a lot of bloodshed and suffering for us and for the Israelis to move from reciprocal rejection to

mutual recognition. It took decades. It took effort and commitment. It took sacrifice and courage. We thought we had charted a new path — and yet, 75 years after the Nakba, an Israeli Minister is yet again denying our very existence. The statement by the Israeli Minister was not about the past — which would have been grave enough — but about a vision for the future, which is infinitely more dangerous. He denies our existence in order to justify what is to come. That statement was not made in a vacuum. It was not part of a theoretical exercise. It was made as the unlawful annexation is more clearly under way than ever. It was made as more Palestinians are being killed every day. Last year was the deadliest year in the West Bank in more than 15 years, and yet somehow the past three months were even worse.

How does one justify killing Palestinians in the streets? How does one justify keeping 2 million of them under an inhumane blockade for more than 15 years? How does one justify colonizing their land, demolishing their homes and forcibly displacing families and communities? How does one justify burning their villages and humiliating their elders and their children? One has to dehumanize them in order to justify such acts. Not all Israeli officials go as far as denying our existence. Some are content with denying our rights. Some are content with denying our humanity. Some are content with denying our connection to the land that we love.

Again, it took us decades to move from reciprocal rejection to mutual recognition. Everything we have accomplished, collectively, is being undone and destroyed before our very eyes. We must respond collectively. The Palestinian side has decided to leave no stone unturned to try and prevent things from going down a path that we all know only too well. We are being unreasonably reasonable in order to try and prevent the bloodshed and to try and find a way back towards a different horizon — one where hope is still possible. That is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of wisdom that has been acquired at great cost. In that connection, we express our appreciation to all those regional and international actors making efforts to shape such a horizon. Again, our people exist, and there is no force on Earth that will deny us our existence and our connection to our beloved homeland of Palestine. They deserve freedom. They have waited and suffered long enough. It is time to move forward, to live and let

live, to end the occupation, and to all live in freedom and peace and security.

The holy month of Ramadan is upon us, as is Easter. We welcome it with families and communities holding funerals and with thousands of Palestinian prisoners entering a hunger strike to ensure their most basic rights and respect for their human dignity. Some worshippers turn to Haram Al-Sharif in their tens of thousands — and on Fridays in their hundreds of thousands — while others turn to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre around Easter time. They are unsure if they will be able to access those holy sites and pray in peace there, free from assault and provocations. Our people — the Palestinian people — need the Council's solidarity and support to preserve them from more agony and loss. As we approach the religious holidays for the three monotheistic religions, we are reminded of what makes that land holy. Its story, its significance and its identity lies in its diversity. It cannot tolerate exclusiveness or exclusion, monopoly or intolerance. Its vocation is to serve as a model for humankind and as a beacon of freedom, justice and peaceful coexistence. Let us live up to that vocation.

I came to the Council a few months ago (see S/PV.9174) with a warning about where we believed things were heading on the ground. We came again and again, asking for protection for our people, long before what happened in Huwara and what happened in Jenin, Nablus and Jericho. We came asking for international engagement, saying that on the ground the two-State solution is becoming an illusion and annexation is the only reality. We came with a warning about what that would mean, not only for our people but for all peoples. We came to say that an apartheid had emerged instead of peace, and unfortunately the subsequent events confirmed our statements every time.

I tell Council members today that every effort must be mobilized to stop annexation, the violence against our people and all other provocations. We should all fear the fire that we cannot extinguish. We all have a duty not to wait, but to act now with all means at our disposal in order to prevent a fire that will devour everything it encounters.

Seven years ago, the Council adopted resolution 2334 (2016). If it had been implemented, we would have achieved peace. The Council, guided by the Charter of the United Nations, has adopted resolutions grounded in international law. It is the responsibility of

the Council — and also of every State Member of the United Nations — to actively pursue the implementation of those resolutions, first and foremost resolution 2334 (2016). The trends identified and condemned in that resolution have continued unabated. They must be stopped and reversed. The alternative is more pain, more blood and more hate. No one can afford that. There are many who say that what it would take to achieve justice and peace is just too much to ask. We call on them to think about what failing to do so would entail. The price is infinitely higher — it is whatever political capital is needed to uphold international law and the resolutions of the United Nations in order to advance a just and lasting solution. Freedom is worth it. Peace is worth it.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Erdan (Israel): A disturbing pattern seems to have developed here. Over the past months, closed debates on the situation in the Middle East have been opened at the request of the Palestinians, and numerous emergency meetings have been held at their behest. It seems that the quarterly debates focused solely on condemning Israel are not enough for the Palestinians. Just as they have rejected every single peace plan ever put on the table because 100 per cent of their absurd demands were not met, here, too, the Palestinians wish to exploit 100 per cent of the debates, including those they are not invited to, in order to bash Israel.

Despite the incessant falsehoods that the members of the Security Council hear from the Palestinian representative and his constant distortions of reality, I would like to make one thing very clear to everyone. Israel is unquestionably the most vibrant liberal democracy in the Middle East. No democracy is perfect, and people may make mistakes, but there is no denying that when any acts of violence are committed or laws are broken, the State of Israel acts to bring those responsible to justice. That is how a democracy that is committed to liberal values, human rights and coexistence functions. Those who take the law into their own hands are brought to justice. That is the reality in Israel.

That being said, I ask each of the members of the Council to look at the Palestinian representative and think about the terror authority that he represents. The Palestinians truly have no shame. They distort every occurrence in Israel — events that do not represent

Israel's values or norms in the slightest — and falsely portray them as a widespread phenomenon. Sitting here and regurgitating fabrications is not going to solve the conflict. On the contrary, these repetitive lies and open debates — for the media, of course — serve only one objective, to perpetuate the conflict. That is the sole purpose of the Palestinian Authority — eternalizing the conflict in order to delegitimize the very idea of the Jewish State and its existence. That is why the Palestinians have rejected every peace plan and why they rejected the partition plan back in 1947. That has been and continues to be the Palestinians' only goal. Just look at what happens on the ground. While Israeli law enforcement investigates acts of violence, the Palestinian Authority glorifies terrorists who spill innocent Israeli blood.

To the Palestinian representative, I say shame on him for his audacity in daring to condemn the words of an Israeli Minister who apologized and clarified what he meant. Meanwhile, his own President and the rest of the Palestinian leadership regularly incite terrorism, never condemn the murders of Israeli civilians, praise Palestinian terrorists and actively attempt to rewrite facts and the truth by erasing Jewish history. Let me give one or two examples, because they are never mentioned here. In honour of International Women's Day earlier this month, Laila Ghannam, the Governor of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, visited the mother of Nasser Abu Hamid, a terrorist responsible for the murder of 10 Israelis. Ms. Ghannam called her a living role model for Palestinian women and a proud symbol of sacrifice. Mahmoud Al-Aloul, Vice-Chairman of the Fatah Central Committee and President Abbas's deputy, justified the recent terror attack in Huwwara in which two Israeli civilians, the brothers Hillel and Yagel Yaniv, were murdered at point-blank range by a Palestinian terrorist. He called that atrocity a natural reaction. There is nothing natural about murdering innocent civilians.

Only a month ago, President Abbas himself decided, not for the first time, to erase historical facts, claiming that the only people with any historical rights to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall — yes, that is what I said, even the Western Wall — are the Palestinians. Of course that is a sick lie that completely distorts history. The Temple Mount, as everyone here knows, was the site of a Jewish temple long before the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Western Wall was the western wall of our holy temple. Those are the facts, and they are indisputable.

But I have never heard anyone here condemn President Abbas — or perhaps condemnations are reserved only for Israeli ministers.

While Israel's leadership condemns incitement from all sides, the Palestinian Authority incentivizes terror through its despicable pay-for-slay policy. In 2021 alone, the Palestinian Authority paid more than \$175 million — money donated by many of those here — to terrorists and their families. That sick practice still continues. By the way, President Abbas has said many, many times that if he had only a dollar left he would pay it to the terrorists who murder Israelis. But the Council's silence is deafening. While Israel mourns victims of terror, masses of Palestinians celebrate the murders of innocent Israelis in the streets. Following the terror attack in Tel Aviv a week and a half ago in which three Israelis were shot — and one of whom tragically succumbed to his wounds yesterday — candies were distributed in many Palestinian cities. It can be seen on television, no need to wait for Tor Wennesland to report it.

The Holocaust denier President Abbas and the rest of the Palestinian leadership not only refuse to condemn terror attacks on innocent civilians, they praise them. Do Council members not see the correlation between the Palestinians' words and the escalating attacks and violence? The Council was just briefed on yet another biased anti-Israel resolution — resolution 2334 (2016). But even though the resolution singled out Israel, it could not ignore the facts of terrorism and incitement. Even those who drafted that biased resolution understood that reconciliation is impossible while the Palestinian leadership's calls to murder innocent Israeli civilians continue. Those two things cannot happen simultaneously. Is that not obvious? So why does the Security Council never address that crucial issue?

Over the past three and a half months, 15 innocent Israelis have been murdered and 70 injured, and the Palestinians have perpetrated more than 1,000 terror attacks. Yet that is not the focus of today's debate, just as the Palestinian Authority's incitement and its glorification and funding of terror are never the focus of such debates. And the Palestinian Authority does not just play an active role in the rising wave of terror, it plays a passive role as well. New terror groups such as the Lions' Den have sprouted up in Palestinian cities such as Nablus and Jenin, and yet the Palestinian Authority has decided that when violent terrorism grows, it is acceptable not only to stoke the fire, but also

to sit back, do absolutely nothing and watch it burn. But Israel will not remain idle, as the Palestinian Authority does. Israel takes action against those who choose the path of violence to threaten our citizens. That is why Israel is forced to carry out defensive measures in those Palestinian cities. That is the only reason. Israel must do the work that the Palestinian Authority refuses to do to thwart terror attacks.

Yet, as the Palestinians are dead set on encouraging more violence and allowing it to ensue, Israel has shown its willingness to sit down at the table and even to take significant steps. In order to de-escalate the current situation, senior officials from Israel and the Palestinian Authority met in Aqaba, Jordan, in February and once again in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, on Sunday. Israel is at the height of a wave of terror. In fact, the Palestinian terrorist who murdered Hallel and Yagel Yaniv in Huwwara carried out that brutal attack on the very same day that the meeting in Aqaba was being held. Those meetings resulted in mutual commitments, which Israel is dedicated to upholding. But there are two sides to every agreement, and we expect the Palestinians to do the same. The Palestinian's terror campaign against Israelis must be stopped. It is the Palestinian Authority's responsibility to halt the violence, just as it is their responsibility to end the incitement. Those commitments must be upheld.

Regarding Israel's decision to repeal the disengagement law in northern Samaria, we do not see it as an act of provocation. It is the righting of a historical wrong. The new law in Israel merely permits Israelis to enter areas of northern Samaria, the birthplace of our heritage — a place we unilaterally decided in the past to bar ourselves from entering. Israelis can now once again visit the cradle of our religion. Nonetheless, the State of Israel has no intention of building any new communities there.

Moreover, as the month of Ramadan is upon us, Israel, as it does every year, has also taken steps to safeguard the freedom of worship for Palestinians and joint family celebrations. Palestinian worshippers can pray freely on the Temple Mount, and Palestinian families can visit their relatives in Israel and abroad. The State of Israel understands the importance of this holy month and is taking all possible measures to ensure that this year, as in all other years, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs can pray on the Temple Mount in peace. That is something that the Palestinian representative always omits.

The supposed focus of these meetings is the situation in the Middle East, and as surprising as it may seem when listening to these debates, the Middle East extends far beyond the borders of Israel, and the region has become a powder keg on the verge of being ignited. As we speak, an axis of evil is being strengthened. The most violent terror organizations across the Middle East — Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Hizbullah — are holding meetings in order to discuss how to work together to fulfil their ultimate goal of destroying Israel. In recent days, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's leader, sat down with delegations from Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Beirut. The focus of those talks was how to expand terror in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem throughout the month of Ramadan. While pious Muslims spend this holy month fasting, those terror armies plot the murder of Jews. Yet the world is silent.

However, those terror organizations are not acting alone. Each of those murderous groups is backed, funded and armed by the most threatening and destabilizing entity in the region — the Ayatollah regime of Iran. Beyond being the world's number one State sponsor of terror, Iran is galloping forward with its dangerous nuclear programme at an unprecedented speed. It pays no heed to the international community's calls and condemnations, and it does not care about the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Ayatollahs do whatever they please. Everyone now knows that they want nuclear weapons, and they are on the verge of attaining them. The regime has enriched uranium to 84 per cent, and it does not hide its intentions. The Iranian goal is to annihilate the State of Israel — but that, as we all know, will be only their first step. That ruthless regime oppresses women, murders protesters in the street, destabilizes the region, funds and arms terror and supplies attack drones to be used in Ukraine. Yet look at this debate. Council members should open their eyes and open their ears. This is a debate on the situation in the Middle East — the whole Middle East. Then why are we not talking about the radioactive Shiite elephant in the room? Why have we allowed these discussions to get hijacked by the Palestinians while the region is about to explode?

I beg Council members to think deeply about my words — to think, but also to act — because one day it will be too late. This cannot continue. Iran's crime cannot continue. The alarm clock has been ringing for years, but the international community has been hitting the snooze button for far too long. The time has come to wake up and kick into high gear. The Ayatollah regime and their terror proxy armies must be stopped. Do not allow the true threats to the region to be sidelined with Palestinian lies. The time to act is now.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.