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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Attaf	(Algeria)
<i>Members:</i>	China	Mr. Fu Cong
	Denmark	Ms. Lassen
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Greece	Mr. Sekeris
	Guyana	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Panama	Mr. Ruiz-Hernández
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Hwang
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Kabba
	Slovenia	Ms. Fajon
	Somalia	Mr. Fiqi
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Falconer
	United States of America	Ms. Shea

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: I would like to warmly welcome the Secretary-General, the Ministers and the other high-level representatives present in the Chamber. Their presence today attests to the importance of the subject matter under discussion.

In accordance with rule 37 of the Security Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Viet Nam to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite Her Excellency Ms. Varsen Aghabekian, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Observer State of Palestine to the United Nations, to participate in this meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and 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 also invite His Excellency Mr. Maged Abdelaziz, Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States to the United Nations; His Excellency Mr. Stavros Lambrinidis, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations; and His Excellency Mr. Ahmad Faisal Muhammad, Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to participate in the meeting.

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

I give the floor to His Excellency Secretary-General António Guterres.

The Secretary-General: I thank the presidency of Algeria for convening this briefing.

The Middle East is in a period of profound transformation, rife with uncertainty but also possibility. It is clear that the region is being reshaped, but it is far from clear what will emerge. We have a responsibility to help ensure that the people of the Middle East come out of this turbulent period with peace, dignity and a horizon of hope grounded in action.

I am just back from Lebanon, where I met with the Lebanese leadership and the United Nations family, including our peacekeeping troops. A new dawn is rising in Lebanon, with a Government hopefully in place soon — one that all Lebanese will feel represented by — and a State that will be able to guarantee security to all its citizens. The United Nations, including the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon and the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL), is fully committed to supporting the Lebanese people on that path.

Despite enormous pressure, and with considerable risk, our peacekeeping forces stood their ground for peace to help deliver a cessation of hostilities. Here, from the Council, I want to reiterate my profound gratitude and admiration to the women and men of UNIFIL, and I also extend my deep thanks to the troop-contributing countries.

During my visit to southern Lebanon, I saw first-hand the dramatic human impact and destruction caused by the conflict. Israelis were also victims, suffering loss and displacement. I fervently hope all from both sides will soon be able to return to the areas in which they lived and resume their daily lives, and we will do all that we can to relieve the suffering and support recovery.

I can report that the cessation of hostilities is fragile, but it is holding. UNIFIL troops are undertaking vital efforts to nurture that process. They are working closely with the Lebanese Armed Forces. It is vital that the Israeli presence in the south end as defined in the agreement and that the Lebanese Armed Forces be present in the totality of Lebanon. In that regard, since 27 November, UNIFIL has carried out more than 730 missions in cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces, facilitating their redeployment in more than 50 positions. UNIFIL has also facilitated 39 humanitarian missions, in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces, the Lebanese Red Cross, various United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Our peacekeepers need strengthened capacities, including for clearing mines and disposing of unexploded ordnance, together with adaptation of the conduct of operations within their mandate.

Resolution 1701 (2006) is clear: the area between the Blue Line and the Litani River must be free of all armed personnel, assets and weapons — other than those of the Government of Lebanon and UNIFIL. The parties must fully implement resolution 1701 (2006), respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon and end the violence once and for all. The United Nations will continue to support all efforts to transform the cessation of hostilities into true peace.

In Gaza, at long last, the ceasefire and hostage release deal offer a ray of hope. I commend Egypt, Qatar and the United States for their steadfast efforts to secure that deal. Yesterday the first three female hostages were released as part of the first phase, and 90 Palestinian prisoners were also released by Israel.

While many challenges lie ahead, we should appreciate the long-overdue relief that this moment provides to Palestinians in Gaza and to the hostages reunited with their loved ones. We are doing our part to ensure the rapid scaling-up of humanitarian deliveries. More than 630 trucks with humanitarian aid entered Gaza yesterday, at least 300 of them to the north.

I want to repeat that nothing justifies the appalling 7 October 2023 terror attacks by Hamas, and nothing justifies the dramatic levels of death and destruction inflicted on the Palestinian people in Gaza. We have been relentless in calling for an immediate ceasefire, for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and for immediate action to protect civilians and ensure the delivery of life-saving aid. Now the parties must make good on their commitments and fully implement the deal. I urge the parties to ensure that that deal leads to the release of all hostages and a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

For its part, the United Nations will do all it can to advance these efforts, — in particular to scale up humanitarian aid across Gaza, fully aware of the significant obstacles, challenges and constraints that we still face. Specifically, the ceasefire must translate into at least four simultaneous actions on the ground.

First, United Nations entities — including the backbone of our humanitarian response, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East — must be able to perform their functions without hindrance. The United Nations must have rapid, safe and unimpeded access through all available channels and crossings to deliver food, water, medicine, fuel, shelter and materials to repair infrastructure across Gaza, including the north. Other humanitarian organizations, including local and international NGOs, and the private sector must also have

unimpeded safe passage. Visas, permits and other enabling conditions must be in place quickly to allow a surge of desperately needed relief.

Secondly, scaling up the delivery of aid and essential services demands safe conditions and a conducive operating environment. We require the necessary technical, protective and communications equipment. In order for us to do our work, the parties must coordinate with the United Nations system in a timely and effective manner. That also includes the restoration of public order and safety to prevent the looting of humanitarian supplies.

Thirdly, people must be able to access life-saving aid. That includes medical evacuations for those who need it, and I urge Member States to take in those patients. Sufficient commercial supplies must also be allowed to enter Gaza in order to meet the overwhelming needs of the population.

Fourthly — and fundamentally — civilians must be protected, and those seeking to return to their communities must have safe passage. Explosive ordnance must be removed. The recovery of human remains must be conducted with dignity and respect. I urge the Security Council and all Member States to support all efforts to implement this ceasefire, bring about a permanent cessation of hostilities, ensure accountability and create the conditions for recovery and reconstruction. The international media must also be allowed into Gaza to report on this crucial story on the ground.

We must seize the opportunity presented by the ceasefire deal to intensify efforts towards addressing governance and security frameworks in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority has said that it stands ready to assume its role and responsibilities in Gaza. I urgently call for collective support for the creation of security and governance arrangements that will enable Gaza to be reunified politically, economically, socially and administratively with the West Bank.

Regrettably, the situation in the West Bank continues to worsen — with clashes, airstrikes and unabated illegal settlement expansion and demolitions. I am deeply concerned about an existential threat to the integrity and contiguity of the occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza and the West Bank. Israeli administrative changes over the past two years have streamlined and accelerated the settlement approval process. As a result, control over many aspects of planning and daily life in Area C of the West Bank has been transferred to Israeli civilian authorities. Senior Israeli officials openly speak of formally annexing all or part of the West Bank in the coming months. Any such annexation would constitute a most serious violation of international law.

It is clear that greater stability in the Middle East requires irreversible action towards a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security, in line with international law, the relevant United Nations resolutions and previous agreements, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States. The United Nations will continue to support every effort to advance peace, stability and a more hopeful future for Palestinians and Israelis and the broader region.

Finally, with respect to that broader region, allow me to say a few words about Syria.

For centuries, Syria has been a crossroads of civilizations. Now it stands at a crossroads of history. Following the fall of the brutal previous regime and years of bloodshed, there is a possibility of promise for the people of Syria. We cannot let the flame of hope turn into an inferno of chaos.

The United Nations is committed to working with Syrians and the international community to support a Syrian-led process that ensures a credible and inclusive political transition, in line with the key principles of resolution 2254 (2015). I welcome the steps taken by Member States showing solidarity with Syrians. But much more significant work in addressing sanctions and designations will inevitably

be necessary, particularly in the light of the country's urgent economic needs. Advancing an inclusive political transition is the most effective means to ensure that Syria receives more support. As Syria travels a new path and seeks to rebuild its institutions and political systems, we will support an inclusive process in which the rights of all are fully respected and that paves the way towards a united and sovereign Syria with its territorial integrity fully re-established.

In Lebanon, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, Syria and beyond, let us keep working for peace and security. As the region is undergoing a profound transformation, we must spare no effort to help shape it in the form of more justice, dignity, human rights and peace for all the people of the Middle East.

The President: I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

I now call on the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Observer State of Palestine.

Ms. Aghabekian (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important meeting on the Palestinian issue at the ministerial level. I also thank you, Minister Ahmed Attaf, for presiding over this meeting, which reflects the attention you have paid to the Palestinian issue and the fact that it is among your priorities on the agenda of the Security Council. I would also like to express our appreciation to the delegation of brotherly Algeria for the important efforts it is making to support the Palestinian people and their just cause and for all it has done to encourage the Security Council to adopt a firm position with regard to a ceasefire in Gaza. On behalf of the State of Palestine and its people and leadership, I would also like to thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his noble principled position. I also thank all United Nations staff members, especially those who are working on the ground and providing assistance and relief to our people, in the catastrophic humanitarian situation we are witnessing. I would also like to thank Their Excellencies, the Ministers participating in this meeting.

We are addressing the Security Council today with our hearts heavy with pain and anger because of what the Palestinian people, most of whom are children and older persons, have been subjected to in the Gaza Strip, including killing, displacement, siege, starvation and the deliberate destruction of everything. As for the West Bank and East Jerusalem, our land is being looted, our properties and holy sites are being desecrated and our rights are being violated through the crimes committed by the occupation forces and settlers, without any accountability.

The occupation Government's practices, measures and laws in the occupied territories are illegitimate and are aimed at undermining the two-State solution, weakening the official institutions of the State of Palestine, preventing the Palestinian people from exercising their right to self-determination and the realization of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. They disregard the resolutions of international legitimacy adopted by the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and international tribunals, the most recent of which is the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the *Legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem* (see A/78/968), which calls for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation, including an end to settlements.

We hope that the glimmer of hope, for which we have worked with our brothers and friends over the past 15 months to reach a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, through the commendable mediation efforts of Qatar, Egypt and the United States, will hold and succeed, leading to a complete and permanent ceasefire, without a return to aggression, the full withdrawal of the occupation forces from the Gaza Strip, the establishment of a political process based on the resolutions of international legitimacy leading to the end of the occupation and the implementation of the

advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, in accordance with the General Assembly resolution calling for the end of the occupation within one year (General Assembly resolution ES-10/24).

Since the first day of the aggression, the State of Palestine has worked tirelessly to demand an immediate ceasefire to prevent the worsening of the humanitarian situation and prevent displacement and land annexation and has repeatedly warned about the danger of the occupation forces' invasion of the Gaza Strip and called for protecting civilians from the scourge of war and destruction, regardless of the parties to the conflict. In that regard, we commend the positions of Egypt, Jordan and other countries that have rejected any attempts to displace Palestinians from their country, whether in Gaza or the West Bank. We also stressed the need to stop practices that undermine the two-State solution, including the expansion of settlements and the crimes perpetrated by the settlers in broad daylight. We have called for preserving the historic and legal status quo of the Christian and Islamic holy sites in the occupied city of Jerusalem.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all the countries and peoples that supported our efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including among the members of the Security Council and General Assembly, and all those who worked to stop the genocidal war against our people and hold Israel accountable for its crimes, including the States that supported us before international tribunals, in particular South Africa, which referred the case to the International Court of Justice to bring an end to the crimes of genocide against our people.

Since the first moment of this aggression, the State of Palestine has undertaken intense diplomatic efforts, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, who has made hundreds of calls and convened hundreds of meetings with regional and international parties to end this bloody aggression and went several times to the Security Council with the help of a number of Council members, led by Algeria, the Arab representative in the Security Council, and to the resumed the emergency special session of the General Assembly, demanding the implementation of relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolution 2735 (2024). That resolution calls for an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages and prisoners, the delivery of urgent humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip, the prevention of the displacement of Palestinians and the return of displaced persons to their places of residence. It also calls for the withdrawal of the occupation forces from the entire Gaza Strip, enabling the Palestinian Authority to assume its full responsibilities in the Gaza Strip and reunite the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under its Administration, and for a return to a political process that would end the illegal occupation and lead to the independence of the State of Palestine and the realization of the two-State solution, in accordance with the resolutions of international legitimacy.

In that context, we affirm that the Gaza Strip is an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territory and that the State of Palestine has legal and political jurisdiction over the Gaza Strip and the entire Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem. We reiterate our total rejection of any attempts to annex our land or displace our people, which constitute blatant violations of international law and the principles enshrined by international legitimacy. We reaffirm the imperative of adhering to our legitimate rights and national identity, which unite our people everywhere in the world. That requires the unity of our land and our people under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) — the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people — and everyone's commitment to the PLO's political programme and international obligations and to working under one system, one law and one legitimate army.

Accordingly, we affirm that the Palestinian Government is ready to assume responsibility for the administration of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, in

cooperation with friendly and brotherly countries and organizations, including the restoration of basic health and educational services, water and electricity, while ensuring the return of the displaced to their homes and preparing for the reconstruction phase. We are also committed to managing the crossings in cooperation with the European Union and Egypt, in accordance with the Agreement on Movement and Access of 2005. In that regard, we note that we welcome any assistance in the area of training and equipping the Palestinian police and security forces. We look forward to the assistance of brotherly and friendly States in all areas to lift the Gaza Strip and its people out of the humanitarian disaster they are experiencing. We emphasize here the importance of the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is indispensable and irreplaceable. The Israeli occupation authorities have no right to prevent UNRWA from exercising its duties to serve the Palestinian refugees in the occupied territory and in all its areas of operations where our Palestinian refugees are present, in particular given that the Agency was established and its mandate and tasks defined by United Nations resolutions, and the Israeli occupation authority has no right to disrupt or stop its work.

We would like to express our deep appreciation to the countries that have supported our position and helped our people during this difficult time. We call on the international community to provide further urgent humanitarian support and to cooperate with the Palestinian Government to enhance its ability to fulfil its role and shoulder its responsibilities. However, we emphasize the importance of finding a lasting and comprehensive political solution to the Palestinian issue and peace in the Middle East. We therefore commend the efforts of all countries participating in the global alliance for peace, which was formed in September 2024 in New York under the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the European Union and the Kingdom of Norway.

We also commend the efforts of the Arab Islamic Committee, led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has toured the world in order to mobilize efforts, stop the aggression and implement the two-State solution in accordance with the resolutions of international legitimacy. It has also sought to obtain international recognition for the State of Palestine and its full membership in the United Nations, so as to bring an end to the Israeli occupation and ensure the establishment of the independent State of Palestine on the lines of the 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and solve the refugee problem in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). That will provide an opportunity to achieve peace and stability not only between Palestinians and Israelis but for all countries of the region, so that they can live in security, peace and good-neighbourliness. In that context, we look forward to the convening of the international conference for the implementation of the resolutions of international legitimacy related to the Palestinian issue and the two-State solution, which will be held in June in New York. We call on all participating countries to take practical and decisive steps to end the occupation, support the independence of the State of Palestine and achieve a just peace.

Our people are struggling for a just and comprehensive peace that guarantees security for all. We therefore reiterate our call before the Council to grant the State of Palestine full membership in the United Nations and to adopt the Arab Peace Plan presented in the statement by President Abbas in September 2024 to the General Assembly and supported by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the countries participating in the conference of the global alliance for peace. The Plan would allow the State of Palestine to gain its independence on its territory occupied since 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and would allow everyone to live side by side in peace, security and good-neighbourliness.

The President: The presidency of the Security Council gives the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mrs. Shapir Ben Naftaly (Israel): On 7 October 2023, Hamas perpetrated the worst massacre against the Jewish people since the Holocaust. More than 1,200 lives were brutally taken, and more than 250 people were abducted. Amid that darkness, the unity and resilience of the Israeli people shines through. It is that unity that has driven Israel's determination to achieve the objectives of this war: bringing all the hostages home, dismantling Hamas' military and governing capabilities and ensuring that Gaza will never again pose a threat to Israel.

For 472 days, hostages have been subjected to unimaginable suffering — among them the three women released yesterday. Romi Gonen, aged 24, was abducted from the Nova music festival after witnessing the murder of her best friend. Injured, she was taken to Gaza, where she received practically no treatment for her severe wounds. Emily Damari, a 28-year-old British Israeli, was taken from her kibbutz, Kfar Aza, after a terrorist invaded the kibbutz and massacred her neighbours. In the last message before her abduction, she wrote that terrorists were in her neighbourhood, shooting near her apartment. Doron Steinbrecher, 31, a veterinary nurse, was also kidnapped from kibbutz Kfar Aza after being trapped in her home. A video later emerged showing her pale, thin and visibly suffering in captivity. Those women, who endured unimaginable suffering, are heroes. They embody the strength and resilience of the Israeli people, standing as eternal symbols of courage in the face of inconceivable cruelty.

Yet even as we see the first hostages finally returning home, the joy of their return is overshadowed by the immense pain that remains. Families have endured months of psychological torture, forced to watch staged videos of their loved ones, broken and afraid. Hamas has weaponized fear and grief as tools of control. Their propaganda videos of hostages are calculated acts of terror. They serve as tools of psychological warfare, amplifying fear and grief to deepen the suffering of the hostages, their loved ones and the entirety of Israeli society. The suffering of our hostages has extended beyond the psychological to include physical violence and abuse, the deprivation of basic needs such as food and medical care and conditions that violate every norm and concept of human decency. For the past 472 days, these innocent people have known only misery, violence and torture at the hands of Hamas.

Hamas' brutality has not stopped at kidnapping. It has extended to the execution of hostages and all kinds of immeasurably cruel acts. We will never forget any of the victims of those atrocities, and their memory will strengthen our fight to ensure justice and security for all our people, among them Kfir Bibas, who just two days ago celebrated his second birthday. Yet for that little boy, his brother Ariel, his parents, Shiri and Yarden, still held in captivity, there have been no celebrations — just as they were none for his first birthday — only captivity and suffering.

The Security Council must confront an uncomfortable truth: it called for the release of those hostages, but those calls were ignored by Hamas. The Council adopted resolutions and demanded their release, while Hamas — a terror group that heeds no international norm or law — violated those resolutions without being held accountable or paying any price. Yet it was Israel that was scrutinized in this very Chamber while no measures were adopted against those who had kidnapped babies and elderly persons. By failing to hold Hamas accountable, the Council has set a dangerous precedent. That failure represents a profound lapse in judgment throughout the international community. It signals to the world that terrorist organizations can operate with impunity, exploiting innocent lives as bargaining chips without fear of meaningful repercussions. That precedent emboldens not just Hamas but any group that seeks to emulate its tactics. The global ramifications of that inaction are staggering; it threatens the very foundations of international security and justice.

Some of the consequences of that failure may be salvaged. Israel demands that the Council take the most basic moral step to unequivocally condemn Hamas and to finally designate it as the terrorist organization that it is.

It was Hamas that initiated the war with its brutal attack on 7 October 2023, and its fellow Iranian proxies across the region followed suit, joining the attacks against Israel. For the past 15 months, the Houthi terrorist regime, guided and funded by Iran, launched hundreds of rockets and uncrewed aerial vehicle attacks against Israeli population centres. On our northern border, 63,000 of our citizens were forced to evacuate as a result of Hizbullah firing more than 22,000 rockets, missiles and anti-tank munitions at their homes. We will continue to enforce the ceasefire understandings with Lebanon and will respond to any violation. The State of Israel maintains its right to act against any threat to its security.

With regard to the developments in Syria, Israel is taking all the necessary steps to defend and ensure the security of the communities in the Golan Heights and the entire civilian population. The State of Israel has no interest in a conflict with Syria, and neither does it have it any intention of interfering in its internal affairs. But we will not tolerate a situation that endangers our civilians and allows Iran to re-establish itself in the region and transfer weapons to Hizbullah.

We now stand at a turning point for the entire region. Iran's proxies have suffered devastating losses. Through the bravery and determination of our soldiers, Israel has not only weakened Hamas but also fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The Iranian regime's network of terror — from Hizbullah in Lebanon to the Houthis in Yemen — has faced significant setbacks, with capacities diminished and positions isolated. Arch-terrorists such as Hassan Nasrallah, Mohammed Deif, Yahya Sinwar and Ibrahim Aqil have been eliminated. Israel's actions have sent clear messages: the days when terror groups could operate with impunity are over; the days when Iran could freely sow chaos and terror throughout the Middle East are over.

It is therefore clear that Israel's decisive and necessary response to the 7 October 2023 massacre is what forced Hamas to the negotiating table. Without the courage and sacrifices of our forces, the hostages would still be languishing in captivity without any hope of freedom. That progress has come at a heavy cost. Israel has agreed to release convicted terrorists, who are responsible for heinous crimes, to bring our people home. That was a decision that no nation should have to make. Yet we made it because we hold life sacred. The deal is not a conclusion: it is a step in the demanding journey to ensure the return of every single hostage. Each decision that we make reflects the profound moral weight of balancing justice with the imperative to save lives. The hostage release deal reflects Israel's unwavering resolve to meet the war's objectives. We are steadfast in our commitment to dismantling Hamas' capabilities to ensure that Gaza is no longer a threat and to return every hostage to their families.

We recognize and deeply appreciate the steadfast support of our allies, in particular the United States. The principled leadership and unwavering backing of both the Biden and the Trump Administration have been instrumental in navigating these challenging times. The partnership represents the shared commitment to combating terror and upholding the values of freedom and security. Their support is a testament to the strength of alliances built on mutual respect and a common vision for a safer world.

In conclusion, Hamas has turned Gaza into a fortress of terror, sacrificing civilians to shield their operations. It has weaponized schools, mosques, hospitals and United Nations facilities, transforming them into instruments of war. That barbarity demands a resolute and united response from the international community.

Failing to act decisively against Hamas sends a dangerous message to other terrorist organizations that such tactics are permissible. It is a test of our collective will to uphold international law and human dignity. The families of the hostages and the people of Israel know that this moment is only the beginning. The war will not end until every hostage is returned and Hamas' ability to terrorize is dismantled. We will not rest until every one of them is back home. We will not stop until the threat of Hamas is eliminated. And we will never forget the price that has been paid by the innocent.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs, National Community Abroad and African Affairs of Algeria.

(spoke in Arabic)

I express my deepest appreciation and praise to His Excellency the Secretary-General for his valuable briefing and accurate analysis of the developments in the Middle East, including with regard to the challenges that we must all address and everything that the situation demands of us.

We attend today's meeting with a sense of cautious optimism and apprehension, a sense of anticipation and looking forward to bringing the war against Gaza to an end, following the announcement of a ceasefire deal in the beleaguered Palestinian territory. The deal was long awaited, as Israel pursued its project in Gaza and the wider region. It was concluded despite the artificial obstacles that were contrived, some overtly and others behind closed doors. It is a deal whose absence has long frustrated the entire international community, which is pinning all its hopes on it alleviating the injustice and suffering of the Palestinians, ending the stagnated political process to specifically address the Palestinian cause and so as to bring peace and restore stability to the Middle East in general.

We are grateful to the international mediators who worked tirelessly to broker the deal after 15 months of a war whose catastrophic toll cannot be described in words or numbers. Gaza is no longer Gaza in the aftermath of the crimes that claimed the lives of more than 46,000 martyrs, most of whom were women and children. Gaza is no longer Gaza in the aftermath of the massive destruction that it has witnessed and that razed hospitals, shops, schools, universities and even mosques, churches, shelters and graveyards to the ground. Gaza is no longer Gaza after demolishing all its resources and infrastructure and eliminating its various social and economic lifelines, in addition to impoverishing the people of Gaza and depriving them of the most basic needs for a life of dignity and survival. And despite that disastrous toll, the Palestinian people chose to emerge in Gaza and throughout the occupied territory to celebrate the ceasefire and assert to the entire world that oppression did not and will not hijack their will or undermine their determination, that injustice did not and will not weaken their resilience or undermine their attachment to their land and that oppression, no matter how brutal, did not and will not undermine their persistence to restore their full national rights, in accordance with international legitimacy.

The ceasefire deal in Gaza represents precious hope for this proud people — hope in life, hope in alleviating injustice and suffering and hope in controlling their present and determining their destiny. Since the Council has been unable to provide justice to the Palestinian people and ensure the realization of their rights, it is fitting today for the Council not to miss this historical moment and opportunity to uphold its full responsibility, entrusted to it in the Charter of the United Nations. That responsibility is not limited to addressing the impact of the aggression suffered by Gaza over the long previous months, but also includes ensuring that the heart of the conflict is addressed and achieving the national Palestinian project.

The international community can no longer tolerate the ongoing situation in the Middle East, which has lasted for nearly 80 years, with one tragedy followed by a

greater tragedy, and the Nakba followed by a worse and more bitter Nakba. Palestine's destiny cannot continue to endure hopes dashed immediately and prospects and opportunities rapidly and regularly lost. Accordingly, we must realize and be fully aware that the ceasefire deal is not an end but a beginning, that it is no more than an opportunity, the success or failure of which will depend on how well we seize this moment and build upon it. This deal is only a means that — we sincerely hope — will deliver us to a greater and more noble goal: to definitively resolve the Palestinian question and achieve a lasting, fair peace in the Middle East.

Accordingly, we call on the Security Council to focus its efforts during this present period on three main levels.

First, it must strengthen the deal and monitor its implementation, in all its content and dimensions and through all its phases. The interrelated processes emerging from this deal require the Council to provide strong support for international mediation as it monitors implementation of the full and permanent ceasefire and the lifting of the restrictions imposed on relief efforts in order to complete the exchange of prisoners and hostages and to achieve the full withdrawal of Israel's occupying forces from Gaza.

Secondly, the Council must guarantee that the next-day arrangements in Gaza take into consideration the will of the Palestinian people, reflect their consensus and protect the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people in order for the Palestinians to achieve their goals on the ground. Gaza is not a land without an owner or people. The future of the land must be determined by the Palestinians, first and foremost, without foreign intervention that could deepen divisions among the Palestinian people and move them further away from national reconciliation. In that context, we emphasize the need for the next-day arrangements in Gaza to respect the unity of the Palestinian people, the integrity of the territory upon which the Palestinian State will be built and the unity of the destiny of the Palestinian people. The arrangements must also afford great importance to the plans to reconstruct Gaza and the need to accelerate those plans.

Finally, on the third level, we must build upon the ceasefire deal in order to revitalize a serious political process, under the auspices of the United Nations, in order to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The ceasefire in Gaza will not be comprehensive or final or permanent unless it is supported by a meaningful, visionary, bold and sincere political process that prioritizes achieving a final settlement for the Palestinian question that is in line with the two-State solution, which, more than ever before, is agreed upon internationally.

On the basis of the requirements of those three levels, Algeria, under the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Abdelmadjid Tebboune, and in line with its traditional role and active contribution to all international efforts, will guarantee the needs of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip as soon as the illegal blockade is lifted through participating in relief efforts and providing support for the building of field hospitals, as soon as circumstances allow, as well as through our continued support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, which suffered an injustice and false accusations and was threatened. However, its *raison d'être* continues.

Secondly, we will support Palestinian reconciliation and national unity. That reconciliation is necessary and must be achieved in order to guarantee an end to division, whose greatest price was paid by the Palestinian people themselves.

Thirdly and finally, we must protect the two-State solution, which is enshrined in international legitimacy, by maintaining the pillars of an independent sovereign Palestinian State and enabling it to become a fully fledged Member of the United

Nations, with global recognition at the international conference that will be held later this year.

(spoke in English)

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I call on the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia.

Ms. Fajon (Slovenia): I want to start by thanking you personally, Mr. President, for the organization of this high-level debate and for the work of your country on the Council. I also thank the Secretary-General for his remarks and his commitment.

The Middle East has been swept up in a windstorm of changes that will undoubtedly transform the region. All of us sitting here today must shoulder our responsibilities and offer our support in navigating those changes. The stakes are too high for inaction. After yesterday's silencing of the guns and first exchange of hostages and prisoners, we feel relief and a sense of hope that a different future is possible for the Middle East. Slovenia warmly welcomes the ceasefire agreement in Gaza. We urge all parties to uphold their commitments to this fragile truce. We thank the mediators who have made that outcome possible. The Council must now focus on ensuring that the ceasefire evolves into a pathway towards lasting peace, built on trust, justice and reconciliation.

The world's most challenging problems require a global response. I travelled to New York directly from Kyiv. In the third year of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, much of the world is holding back. Slovenia has always been vocal at this table when it comes to unjustified wars, violations of international law or the Charter of the United Nations and the suffering of civilians, including women and children.

After almost three years in office as a Foreign Minister, I have never hesitated to criticize the brutal killing of civilians. I am proud that Slovenia recognized an independent and sovereign Palestine. I trust we were on the right side of history. People in Gaza deserve to live without bombs and guns. People in Israel deserve to live in security. As members of the Council, it is our responsibility, indeed duty, to work tirelessly towards a lasting and just peace in the Middle East, in Ukraine and other conflicts around the world.

In another recent development in the Middle East, a new chapter is starting to be written in Syria. The Council has a clear role in supporting an inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, in line with the key principles of resolution 2254 (2015). We also have a renewed hope for a permanent ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel, with the Council's role as custodian of the framework under resolution 1701 (2006). Slovenia calls for strict adherence to that framework, while emphasizing the importance of de-escalation along the Blue Line. I look forward to visiting Syria and Lebanon in the very near future. Both countries are on the path to a more hopeful future. We are ready to stand with them.

However, the Middle East will never truly turn a new page as long as the suffering, the hatred and the fear persist. To end them, we need leadership for people, leadership for peace and leadership for multilateralism.

First, we need leadership for people. The plight of civilians, particularly in Gaza, which could amount to genocide, remains a heartbreaking reminder of the cost of conflict. Civilians are protected by international humanitarian law, and under no circumstances are they the legitimate targets of attacks. We reiterate the vulnerable situation of children and women in this conflict, but today I also want to highlight the suffering of those who are most often overlooked. Many of them lost their land decades ago, and now they have lost their homes, the generations they created and

the dignity they held onto despite all the odds. After a life of hardship, older persons in Gaza are facing the worst circumstances, with no food to put on the table and no doctor to ease their pain. The plight of civilians, including older persons in Gaza, is another broken promise of leaving no one behind. I sincerely hope that the ceasefire in Gaza gives them a chance to finally experience peace. It is now time to give them and the generations after them a chance to see a new Gaza, one that is rebuilt full of hope, a Gaza that is reunified with the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, under the Palestinian Authority. But first, the ceasefire must translate into safe, direct and uninterrupted humanitarian access and an immense scaling up of aid.

Secondly, we need strong leadership for peace, in Gaza and in the region. With vision and commitment, leadership for peace must uphold international law, particularly international humanitarian law and human rights law. That requires accountability for grave violations that have taken place, through appropriate legal mechanisms. Peace cannot take root without accountability. Leadership for peace must be built on dialogue, on cooperation and on the normalization of ties. It cannot perpetuate or fuel proxy exchanges or further escalation. Unconstructive and divisive rhetoric, provocations and incitement must become a relic of the past.

Thirdly, we need leadership for multilateralism. This Organization was built on the premise that the path to peace cannot be walked alone. In the Council, we often encounter obstacles, but the hard work of diplomacy in this Chamber never stops. Slovenia remains convinced that the Security Council must also lay the groundwork for the two-State solution. Equally, we underline the role the whole membership should play in making peace in the region a truly lasting one, including through an international peace conference under United Nations auspices. I restate our willingness to host a meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution.

I thank the Secretary-General for his leadership in this crisis and for the work of the United Nations system. That includes the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) — the irreplaceable backbone of humanitarian action there. In the light of the responsibilities conferred on all Member States through the Charter of the United Nations, I once again use this opportunity to call on the Government of Israel not to implement the legislation affecting UNRWA. In this moment of hope, it is time to find ways for cooperation and to rebuild the lives of civilians in Palestine.

Leadership is never easy. The pursuit of long-lasting solutions involves a lot of difficult decisions, sometimes with no short-term gains in sight. It is now time to make those difficult decisions, placing peace as the collective interest of the membership of this Organization. As we navigate these transformative times, let us remember that peace is not an unattainable dream. It is within our reach, provided we choose cooperation over conflict, justice over impunity and hope over despair.

At the beginning of the year, I assure the Council that Slovenia will not approach conflicts on the basis of geography, but rather on that of principles. We will continue believing in solving problems through dialogue rather than aggression, and we believe in building trust and peace.

The President: I now call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Kabba (Sierra Leone): I congratulate Mr. Ahmed Attaf, Minister for Foreign Affairs, National Community Abroad and African Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Algeria, on Algeria's presidency of the Security Council, and I thank him for convening this high-level open debate at such a critical moment. I extend my gratitude to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, for his important briefing, and I commend his leadership and tireless efforts in addressing the complex challenges arising from the escalation of the conflict in the Gaza Strip.

His commitment to advancing peace in the occupied Palestinian territory, Israel and the broader Middle East region is deeply appreciated.

I would like to begin by expressing my deepest condolences to the families of all victims, both Palestinian and Israeli, of the tragic violence that erupted since 7 October 2023. The scale of the violence, the immense loss of life and the suffering endured by innocent civilians serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need for peace, stability and the protection of human dignity. We also pay tribute to the service and ultimate sacrifice of more than 350 United Nations and humanitarian workers who have lost their lives in the Israel-Hamas conflict in the Gaza Strip. We stand in solidarity with all humanitarian and front-line personnel.

For 15 months, the Security Council and the international community have been focused on the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip, which has claimed more than 46,000 civilian lives, including the lives of approximately 18,000 children. Reports, including the 12 January 2025 situation report of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the Secretary-General's response to General Assembly resolution ES-10/26, have exposed the horrific realities faced by civilians in Gaza. The violence has been marked by repeated violations of international law, including international humanitarian law. Those violations are manifest in the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, the indiscriminate and systemic attacks against civilians and civilian objects and the denial of access to urgently needed humanitarian aid, which is essential for preserving and protecting lives.

The impact of the conflict has been disproportionately felt by women and children. Many children who have survived are now orphaned, displaced or maimed, with their education interrupted. Women have been stripped of their livelihoods, privacy and dignity. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that between 7 October 2023 and 8 January 2025, 816 Palestinians were killed, including 498 in 2024 alone. That situation cannot continue. The international community must demonstrate a collective commitment to ending the cycle of violence.

At this critical juncture in the conflict, with the promising prospect of achieving a lasting ceasefire, the release of hostages, the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza and the beginning of Gaza's reconstruction, Sierra Leone would like to emphasize three key points.

First, Sierra Leone welcomes the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas. We commend Egypt, Qatar and the United States for their mediation efforts, which have led to a ceasefire, the release of hostages and an increase in humanitarian delivery in Gaza. That is a positive step that must be fully leveraged by both parties in good faith and with right intentions. Echoing the words of the Secretary-General, we call on all relevant parties to uphold their commitments and ensure the full implementation of the agreement. We encourage Israel and Hamas to comply fully with their obligations under the ceasefire deal and to carry out their respective duties within the specified timelines. We also welcome the release of three Israeli women hostages and 90 Palestinian prisoners as part of the ceasefire arrangement.

Secondly, we support the increase in humanitarian assistance to Gaza, as the humanitarian situation remains utterly dire. The conflict has left more than 2 million people in desperate need of food, medical supplies and shelter. As displaced civilians return to their homes, they will require essential supplies to build their lives. Humanitarian organizations, including the World Food Programme (WFP), have emphasized the need for all border crossings to remain open and operational, allowing aid to reach those in need. For efficient and effective aid delivery, the World Food Programme has underscored the critical role of the United Nations Relief and

Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in reaching all those in need at this critical juncture. In collaboration with UNRWA, the WFP has the capacity to provide life-saving food to at least 2 million people in Gaza over the next three months. UNRWA remains the only organization with the logistical and human resources to address the severe needs of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. In the light of recent legislation enacted by the Israeli Government on 28 October 2024, we urge the Government of Israel to comply with its international obligations and to allow UNRWA to continue its vital work unhindered, delivering life-saving services to millions of Palestinians.

Thirdly, the diplomatic momentum gained must be preserved and expanded to facilitate future dialogue aimed at achieving a political settlement based on the two-State solution. While the efforts to secure a ceasefire and the release of hostages are important steps towards alleviating immediate suffering, they represent only a fraction of the long-standing and unresolved issues at the heart of the Palestine-Israel conflict. The situation remains fragile, and both Palestinians and Israelis continue to live in fear and uncertainty. The events of the past 15 months remind us all of the consequences of occupation and the elusive nature of peace in the Middle East. They highlight that there is no viable alternative to a two-State solution, which will allow for the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside the existing Jewish State, with both States living side by side in peace, stability and security. That important work must start with the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, which must be comprehensive, addressing the infrastructural, economic, political and administrative conditions necessary for establishing effective governance.

On a broader regional scale, we acknowledge that, while the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas is just as crucial to reducing violence in Gaza, it also holds a broader temporary reprieve for civilians and opens a window for diplomatic efforts. All regional actors must seize this opportunity to work towards peaceful solutions to address the underlying issues fuelling conflict in the region.

Sierra Leone continues to call on all parties to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law, while ensuring the protection of civilians, the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and the prevention of further violence. We emphasize the importance of accountability for violations of international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Finally, Sierra Leone reaffirms its commitment to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, based on the principles of international law and respect for the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. We remain firmly supportive of the two-State solution, which is the only viable framework for resolving this conflict and ensuring the security and sovereignty of both Israel and Palestine.

The President: I now call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Somalia.

Mr. Fiqi (Somalia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the brotherly People's Republic of Algeria for holding this important meeting and to congratulate it on its assumption of the presidency for this month. This meeting reflects a deep awareness of the gravity of the humanitarian and political situation in the Gaza Strip and a deep awareness in general of the Palestinian cause. I also thank the Secretary-General for his informative briefing, which painted a detailed picture of the scale of suffering, the challenges faced by the Palestinian people today and developments in Lebanon and Syria.

Over the past 15 recent months, we have witnessed a tragic escalation in the Gaza Strip that has left thousands of innocent civilians dead, destroyed vital infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, and turned the daily lives of Gaza residents into constant, unbearable suffering. That painful reality places us all in front of a moral, humanitarian and political responsibility that calls for urgent and comprehensive

international action to end the suffering of the defenceless Palestinian people and ensure respect for their fundamental and inalienable rights.

The announcement of the ceasefire agreement, which was the outcome of tireless efforts undertaken by the brotherly State of Qatar and the brotherly Arab Republic of Egypt, in cooperation with the friendly United States of America, is important and welcome. The agreement highlights the importance of diplomatic action in resolving conflicts and reflects what can be achieved through political will and constructive cooperation. However, the agreement must be seen as the first step in a long and arduous process to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace.

Yesterday and today we have witnessed emotional scenes where signs of joy and relief were evident on faces of the peoples of Palestine, especially in the Gaza Strip, and of Israel, following the entry into force of the ceasefire agreement, moments that brought together families that had been separated for more than 15 months, where they were able for the first time to hug their loved ones who had been detained by Hamas or in Israeli prisons. Those images, full of human emotion, clearly confirmed to us to what extent peace is vital as guns were silenced to give space for hope and reconciliation. We welcome the agreement, which was not just a truce but a glimpse of hope towards a better future. From the bottom of our hearts, we express our hope that it will be built upon, making this moment a starting point towards establishing a comprehensive and lasting peace that heals the wounds of the past, restores confidence and trust and gives the people of the region a real chance to live in dignity, security and prosperity.

The greatest challenge we face today is not only that of establishing a ceasefire, but also how to address the root causes of the conflict, foremost of which is ending the occupation, lifting the blockade on the Gaza Strip and ensuring the rebuilding of Gaza to restore the hope of its residents. Rebuilding is not just a physical process of repairing what was destroyed by the war, but a comprehensive process that requires investing in people, supporting local communities and strengthening economic and social infrastructure to ensure a more just and stable future.

The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza imposes on us a collective responsibility to ensure the urgent, secure and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip. In that context, we stress the importance of continuing the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which represents a lifeline for millions of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA's mandate, established by General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), is not a matter that can be amended except by a decision of the Assembly. Therefore, we call on all parties to avoid taking any steps that might affect the Agency or exacerbate the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Building real peace requires more than just a cessation of hostilities; it requires collective will to find sustainable solutions. In that connection, we call for the establishment of an effective international mechanism to ensure the full implementation of ceasefire agreements and prevent a return to the cycle of violence. We also emphasize the importance of supporting the legitimate Palestinian leadership and strengthening Palestinian national institutions to enable them to play their role in responding to the aspirations of the Palestinian people for freedom and independence.

In conclusion, the establishment of peace and stability in the Middle East requires a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue, based on the resolutions of international legitimacy and the Arab Peace Initiative, which guarantees the realization of the vision of two States and the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State on the borders of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The Federal Republic of Somalia reiterates its unwavering solidarity with the brotherly Palestinian people and calls on the international community to redouble its efforts to end the Israeli occupation and achieve a just, comprehensive and sustainable peace that guarantees the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and restores dignity and stability for the region as a whole.

Mr. Ruiz-Hernández (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): Panama respectfully welcomes the delegation of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, headed by His Excellency Mr. Ahmed Attaf. We also extend our appreciation to Secretary-General António Guterres for his valuable briefing on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

The date 7 October 2023 marked a dark chapter in contemporary history. The terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas, which took the lives of 1,200 Israeli civilians, constitutes a flagrant violation of international law and the basic principles of humanity. Panama unreservedly condemns those cowardly acts, which perpetuate cycles of hatred and destruction.

We underscore that the people of Israel have the inalienable right to live in security within recognized borders. However, the legitimate but devastating military response that has followed has plunged the region into a humanitarian tragedy of historic proportions. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 46,000 lives, including 18,000 children, have been cut short. Those figures are a heartbreaking cry that demands immediate action. We cannot ignore the humanitarian catastrophe that is plaguing millions. Panama welcomes the recent ceasefire agreement as a beacon of hope amid the suffering. We recognize the diplomatic efforts led by Egypt, the United States and Qatar in mediating the agreement, which offers vital respite for both sides. However, we know that the cessation of hostilities is not an end in itself — it must be the starting point towards a comprehensive and lasting political commitment.

In our capacity as a non-permanent member of the Council, we reiterate that respect for international law, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, is non-negotiable. From resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) to the two-State consensus, the Council has charted the path to peace. The coexistence of Israel and Palestine, based on secure and recognized borders, remains the only possible horizon. We call for the roots of the conflict to be addressed. Recognizing Israel's right to exist in security is as essential as ensuring the implementation of the Fourth Geneva Convention in the Palestinian territory.

We also unequivocally condemn Hamas — a terrorist organization that has instrumentalized the suffering of the Palestinian people to advance its agenda of violence, which constitute cowardly acts that do not reflect the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian population. Without security for Israel, peace will be unattainable. However, without justice and dignity for the Palestinians, stability will be illusory. Regarding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Panama recognizes its vital role in the provision of essential services to Palestinian refugees. Despite the challenges and controversies, we reiterate our support for the Agency, which represents a pillar of hope for millions. The heroism of its humanitarian workers must not be tarnished by those who, from the shadows, exploit humanitarian structures for vile purposes.

History has taught us that military solutions cannot guarantee peace. The ceasefire must become a platform for inclusive political dialogue, backed by the international community. Panama urges all parties to act with restraint and responsibility, while prioritizing a solution that promotes dignity and mutual respect. Panama reaffirms its commitment to the resolutions of the Council and to the construction of a peace that transcends differences — a peace that not only puts an end to the conflict but

also inaugurates an era of peaceful coexistence and shared prosperity for the entire region. Peace is not a remote ideal but an immediate right. May the Council act courageously, guided by humanity, to sow the seeds of a more hopeful future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Mr. Falconer (United Kingdom): I am grateful to the delegation of Algeria for convening today's important meeting.

The ceasefire agreement offers hope for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and for the world. I too would like to thank Egypt, Qatar and the United States for their tireless efforts to achieve it. The hostages have endured unimaginable suffering at the hands of Hamas since they were so cruelly taken on 7 October 2023. I welcome the release of three of them, including dual British national, Emily Damari, bringing their horrific ordeal to an end. The remaining phases of the ceasefire must now be implemented in full and on schedule, including the release of all remaining hostages.

Civilians in Gaza are enduring suffering that almost defies belief. More than 46,000 Palestinians have been killed, including many children. Winter has only worsened the dire situation, with children dying from hypothermia and the imminent risk of famine in northern Gaza. This deal opens the way for them to begin to rebuild their lives. The United Kingdom and our partners have been pressing at every opportunity for an immediate ceasefire and the release of the hostages. The Foreign Secretary did so last week during his visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Those intense diplomatic efforts must continue in the days and weeks ahead. We must build confidence on all sides to help to sustain the ceasefire, progress through all its phases and turn it into a lasting peace that assures the security of Israelis and Palestinians alike. The United Kingdom will focus all our efforts on keeping up that momentum, until every hostage is released, the aid promised to Gaza reaches those in need and Palestinians are free to return to their homes and to rebuild their lives. It is essential that the surge of assistance be properly coordinated, with the right level of access and security to reach those in need. As the Foreign Secretary has said, Israeli legislation means that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) faces a cliff edge in its ability to support Palestinian refugees across the West Bank and in Gaza. We urge Israel to refrain from endangering UNRWA's ability to operate.

This agreement is a crucial first step towards a sustainable peace and a credible pathway to a two-State solution. Millions of people are relying on us to build on this process and end their agony. We must not let them down.

Mr. Sekeris (Greece): Calls for peace in the Middle East have been far too many in the Chamber, and they have been repeated far too many times in its history.

My country, Greece, warmly welcomes the long-awaited ceasefire and hostage release agreement. As fragile as it may seem, it might be a turning point for establishing enduring stability in the region. It is now time to fully deliver on the deal so that all Israeli hostages finally rejoin their loved ones and the Palestinian people finally stop counting their dead.

Words fail to convey the accumulated pain and suffering endured by the people in this turbulent region — one very close to home. Words are insufficient to convey the horror experienced by Israeli families having lost loved ones to the terror of Hamas or that of innocent civilians, including thousands of children, who have lost their lives in Gaza. It is finally time to silence the guns and for peace to prevail. Yesterday we were overjoyed that three female hostages — Romi Gonen, Doron Steinbrecher and Emily Damari — finally joined their families in Israel after being held captive by Hamas terrorists since 7 October 2023. It is now key to ensure that negotiations on the next phases succeed. It is time to accelerate discussions to advance post-conflict planning for the governance and security of Gaza for the longer-term to secure a safe

and prosperous future for the Palestinians and all the people in the region. Inspired by the heritage of a region that is the birthplace of so many of the world's religions, we are believers in the prospect of a two-State solution, of Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace and security. We are believers in the positive culmination of the peace process, which remains on our collective horizon, as a beacon at the far end of a long, dark tunnel, hanging by a thread, unless our collective voice strives to keep it alive, for alive it must stay.

The past few weeks have allowed for hope on the region's horizon. The guns seem to be widely silenced along the Lebanese-Israeli border, and Lebanon has overcome its political impasse, having elected a new President and soon, it appears, with a Government with a mandate to bring about positive change. The culmination of those positive developments seems to have led us back to the core of the region's turmoil, to Gaza and the Palestinian question, where the long and commendable mediation efforts of the United States, Egypt and Qatar have finally been successful. We thank them for their tireless efforts, agreeing with the outgoing President of the United States, who said citing the Bible "blessed be the peacemakers". For while it may require strength to preserve a conflict, it will take tremendous courage to transcend it. Let the destructive cycle of violence finally end, let tensions cool and let us turn to the day hereafter, to reconstruction, reconciliation and the creative activities of peacetime.

We should be hopeful but not naive. We should remain cautious of the difficulties on the ground. This fragile agreement must hold, and we call on all sides to do their part to uphold it. The humanitarian situation on the ground is most concerning. In that context, the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is irreplaceable. As highlighted by the Secretary-General's recent letter (S/2024/892), there is no alternative to its accumulated experience of providing a wide spectrum of valuable, essential services to Palestinians for over 75 years. Obstructing the Agency's capacity to operate within its mandate is not helpful at this stage and could even be detrimental. Its role will be indispensable for implementing the humanitarian aspects of the agreement. It is therefore crucial that the recommendations of the Colonna report be diligently and fully implemented. That could even be a catalyst in terms of the much-needed cooperation between the Agency and Israel.

Greek support to UNRWA has not ceased. Likewise, Greece is committed to supporting humanitarian initiatives, such as the Cypriot Amalthea plan, which has recently allowed for the provision of more than 1,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Gaza through the port of Ashdod to alleviate some of the pain and to save some of the lives, for, as it is stated in the Talmud, whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.

Consistent with its long-established relations with the Palestinians and the Arab world and being a strategic ally of Israel, Greece will do its utmost as a bridge-builder during its tenure at the Council. What we have witnessed since Hamas unleashed its terror on 7 October 2023 has been a tragedy. May it be the end of the tragedy. May we see the release of all hostages and the ceasefire preserved. May it evolve into long-term peace. And may we see the peace process revived with a view to a viable two-State solution.

Mr. Akram (Pakistan): It is a pleasure to see you, Mr. Foreign Minister, presiding over this important meeting of the Security Council. Pakistan congratulates you on Algeria's successful presidency and for convening and participating in this timely debate on the grave situation in the Middle East, especially in Palestine. We also thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his insightful briefing and his wise recommendations.

Over the past 15 months, we have witnessed widespread destruction and massive human suffering caused by Israel's wanton attacks in Gaza, killing more than 46,000 persons, mostly women and children. We have witnessed the most egregious violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, which many have concluded amount to genocide. Israel's war has spread to the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Yemen.

The wreckage caused in the Middle East is the consequence of Israel's expansive, illegal and unacceptable conception of its so-called right to self-defence. It is also the consequence of the impunity that Israel has enjoyed in conducting attacks and aggression that are lacking in any legal and moral proportionality, against the helpless Palestinians, whose territory it occupies in flagrant violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law. After defying the resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly, the injunctions of the International Court of Justice and the appeals of its friends and patrons, Israel has finally agreed to a ceasefire arrangement on account of a particular deadline. That ceasefire could have been achieved many months ago and could have saved thousands of lives, in particular in Gaza.

We have all welcomed the announcement of the ceasefire. Pakistan appreciates the patient mediatory efforts that have been made by Qatar, Egypt and the United States to achieve the agreement on a cessation of hostilities in Gaza. In particular, we extend our admiration to His Excellency Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani, Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, for the resilience and diplomatic skill with which he steered the parties towards the conclusion of the agreement. Pakistan hopes that all stages of the ceasefire agreement will be fully implemented and that the ceasefire will become permanent. We are concerned by Israel's threats to resume its military attacks in Gaza. We also hope that the Palestinians will be able to agree on arrangements for Gaza's inclusive and effective governance.

First, the international community must now urgently address the humanitarian crisis created by Israel's destruction and blockade of Gaza and its deliberate strategy of starving its population. All crossing points must be opened, and all United Nations and other humanitarian agencies must be allowed to provide humanitarian sustenance to the besieged, displaced and suffering Palestinians in Gaza. Israel's attempts to shut down the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the agency which provides a critical lifeline to the Palestinians, must be vigorously opposed by the Security Council and the international community. Pakistan will do all it can to assist the besieged and suffering Palestinians in Gaza.

Secondly, the displaced Palestinians must be helped to return to their homes, including in north Gaza, and to restore their devastated lives.

Thirdly, Israel must be obliged to withdraw its forces from Gaza, as envisaged in the ceasefire agreement. Its presence is illegal and must be ended to ensure the restoration of peace in Gaza, the rehabilitation of its displaced people and the prompt reconstruction of Gaza.

Fourthly, the international community should assist the Palestinians to develop a concrete plan for Gaza's reconstruction as envisaged in resolution 2735 (2024), which was initiated by the United States. The plan should be implemented expeditiously with adequate international support.

Fifthly, and most importantly, the international community, including the Security Council, must work to restore international legitimacy and sustainable peace in Palestine and the wider Middle East. Accountability for the crimes committed in the brutal war must be an essential element in restoring international legitimacy.

The most critical step in building sustainable peace is the revival of the political and diplomatic process to achieve a two-State solution between Israel and the Palestinian people. That must be based on two fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations, endorsed by several resolutions of the Security Council and the international Court of Justice, namely, the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the non-acquisition of territory through the use of force. Despite the expansionist ambitions of some Israeli politicians, despite the devastation and destruction wrought by Israel's war machine and despite the scepticism of some intellectuals, the two-State solution remains the most promising, equitable and, we believe, feasible framework for durable peace among Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab and Muslim world. Indeed, Israel's existence, flowing from General Assembly resolution 181 (II), can be legitimized only if there exists a separate and sovereign Palestinian State. The alternative is prolonged and brutal military occupation, revived violent resistance and perpetual conflict in the Holy Land, which would continue to afflict the entire Middle East and poison the relations between Israel and the Arab and Muslim world.

An inclusive political process is essential to advance the realization of the two-State solution. Pakistan will work to promote such a solution as a member of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. This outcome should be made politically inevitable. The State of Palestine must be recognized by all United Nations Member States and admitted as a full member of the United Nations. In that context, we welcome the General Assembly's decision, in resolution 79/81, to convene a high-level international conference in June 2025 on the implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions pertaining to the two-State solution.

To achieve comprehensive peace in the Middle East, it is also essential to simultaneously address other threats to peace and security in the region, as the Secretary-General mentioned.

Pakistan welcomes the agreement, facilitated by France and the United States, for a cessation of hostilities in Lebanon. We congratulate President Joesph Aoun on his election and Mr. Nawaf Salam on his designation as Prime Minister of Lebanon. Israeli forces must withdraw from south Lebanon within the stipulated 60 days. The Lebanese army is ready to deploy there in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006). Israel must halt its continuing attacks on Lebanon, which are blatant violations of the 26 November agreement.

Pakistan supports the stabilization of Syria through an inclusive political process and governance. Terrorism must not be allowed to re-emerge in or from Syria. We must uphold Syria's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Israel must withdraw immediately from the separation zone established under the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces. It must also withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, in accordance with resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 497 (1981).

We call for a halt to the Israeli and other air strikes against Yemen, as well as an end to the attacks from Yemen on international shipping. We hope that a ceasefire in Gaza will help to end these attacks and revive the interrupted political process in Yemen.

The Council must also be concerned about the reported contemplation of further Israeli attacks against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Today, despite the hostile rhetoric, there is an opportunity to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on equitable terms. This window of opportunity must not be missed, as such a move would contribute significantly to realizing durable peace and security across the entire Middle East.

The Israeli Prime Minister has proclaimed that Israel “has changed the face of the Middle East”. But Israel has not — and cannot — change its soul, which continues to seek justice and peace. Even in this altered strategic landscape, the Arab and Muslim peoples will not relent in their quest for peace with justice and for equal rights for the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination and statehood.

Ms. Lassen (Denmark): I thank Algeria for calling for this important and very timely meeting.

The Middle East stands at a crossroads, undergoing a profound transformation that will reshape its future for years to come. After endless months of brutal war, we now have a long-awaited ceasefire and hostage agreement between Israel and Hamas. Hostages, who have languished in Hamas captivity for over 15 gruelling months, will finally return to their families, and we are relieved that the first three female hostages were freed last night. The Israeli people can slowly begin to heal the deep scars of Hamas’ horrific terrorist attack on 7 October.

At the same time, after more than 15 months of unimaginable suffering in Gaza, the ceasefire should pave the way for an immediate scale-up of humanitarian operations so that basic life-saving aid reaches the civilian population, so that infrastructure is rehabilitated and materials for basic shelters are provided to the many displaced people who lost their homes during the war. The ceasefire will finally silence the guns. The ceasefire, we hope, will lead to a durable and lasting peace and lay the foundation for the steps towards a two-State solution. We thank the United States, Egypt and Qatar for their tireless efforts in negotiating this deal.

Elsewhere in the region, we witnessed the fall of the Al-Assad regime in Syria. We welcomed a ceasefire in Lebanon. We congratulated Lebanon on the election of a new President and the designation of a new Prime Minister. Those developments give cause for hope.

That was also the impression of Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, when he visited Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan and Lebanon last week. In his talks with the region’s leaders, he felt a cautious optimism that positive shifts are happening. Put simply, these changes offer a rare opportunity to lay the foundations for a just peace and a stable region — a peace that this region has been yearning for over decades and so strongly deserves.

This is no time to hesitate. We must take full and immediate advantage of the ceasefire, dramatically scale up humanitarian assistance and support the resumption of basic services across Gaza. All parties must ensure that aid is allowed to move into and within Gaza freely.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) continues to play a truly crucial role in that regard. There is no alternative to this United Nations Agency, on which other humanitarian organizations rely for its infrastructure, staff, common services and last-mile support. UNRWA must be allowed to carry out its full mandate in all areas.

International law and core humanitarian principles make it perfectly clear — as an occupying Power, Israel has an obligation to ensure that Palestinians receive basic services. We urge the Israeli Government to abide by these obligations and immediately and without delay ensure the facilitation of full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian assistance into and throughout the entire Gaza Strip.

We must not lose sight of the worrisome developments in the West Bank. Denmark is deeply concerned about the latest increase in violence and reiterates that the expansion of settlements, in clear violation of international law, undermines the prospects for a two-State solution.

In conclusion, it is high time to lay the foundations for peace. Now is the time to commit to lasting peace through a two-State solution through which Palestinians and Israelis alike can live in peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition. Now is the time to support peace in Lebanon in all ways possible and benefit from the new dawn rising, as the Secretary-General stated. Now is the time to support the people of Syria rebuilding their country in a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and inclusive manner. Now is the time for a just and brighter future with freedom and dignity.

We must match the enormity of this moment with ambition and action and make good on the promise of the Charter of the United Nations to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. The peoples of the Middle East deserve it.

Mr. Fu Cong (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank the Algerian presidency for convening today's high-level open debate and welcome Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf, who is presiding over the proceedings. I thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his briefing.

Yesterday a ceasefire in Gaza materialized, which China welcomes. We look forward to this pivotal moment being leveraged to put the Middle East on the right track towards de-escalation. This ceasefire is overdue and has come too late. For 15 months, Gaza was subjected to sustained, wanton and indiscriminate shelling and bombing, leaving a trail of over 46,000 deaths and 2 million people languishing in a humanitarian catastrophe and plunging the wider region into turmoil. This ceasefire is but the first step, and it is incumbent upon the international community to work harder on the following important tasks, without which bloodshed and death will not cease and there will be no prospect for peace between Palestine and Israel, or shared stability in the wider region,

First, a permanent ceasefire in Gaza must be achieved.

Secondly, the humanitarian plight in Gaza must be alleviated.

Thirdly, arrangements must be made for post-conflict governance in Gaza.

Fourthly, the political prospects of the two-State solution must be revived.

Concerning the achievement of a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, once a ceasefire is in place, no conflict should be allowed to restart. We note Israel's statement that, should phase-two talks collapse, it may resume military operations in Gaza, with the backing of a certain country. We admit that we find that deeply concerning. The current ceasefire ought to be the foundation for a permanent one. It must not turn out to be only a pause before a new offensive. The three-phase deal should be implemented continuously and comprehensively. We hope that the United States, as the guarantor, will ensure that through tangible action.

With regard to alleviating the humanitarian plight in Gaza, the catastrophic humanitarian conditions there are beyond imagination. The suffering of the Palestinian people must be eased without delay. Israel, as the occupying Power, must fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian law, lift all restrictions on humanitarian access, ensure the secure and orderly distribution of humanitarian supplies in Gaza at scale and ensure that displaced persons can return home safely. There is no substitute for, or alternative to, the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in humanitarian operations in Gaza. Deeply concerned by the Israeli legislation against UNRWA, we call on Israel not to go ahead with its implementation and to revoke those laws as soon as possible.

Concerning the mechanisms and arrangements for post-conflict governance in Gaza, the Strip is an inalienable part of the State of Palestine. Arrangements for post-conflict Gaza should be decided inside Palestine, through consultation. The

international community should help the intra-Palestinian groups to close ranks in order to support the unified and effective management of Gaza and the West Bank, under the leadership of the Palestinian Authority. Any attempt to change the demographics and territory of Gaza is unacceptable. After 15 months of unbridled and indiscriminate bombing and shelling, Gaza is the epitome of devastation. It is uninhabitable. Reconstruction must start as soon as possible to give its people some way of returning to their lives. International support for rebuilding Gaza is essential, and UNRWA should be able to play its crucial role in the process.

As far as reviving the political prospects for the two-State solution is concerned, while independent statehood for the Jewish people was long ago achieved, the Palestinian people continue to be treated with indifference and to suffer from historical injustice. The 15-month-long conflict has also proved once again that lasting peace in the Middle East is possible only through the implementation of the two-State solution, in which the two States, Palestine and Israel, live side by side in peace. The international community should work towards relaunching the two-State solution with the greatest sense of urgency and provide strong support and assurances to that end. China welcomes the efforts of Saudi Arabia, the European Union, Norway and others to revive the two-State solution and supports the holding of a larger, more authoritative and more productive international peace conference to work out a timetable and road map for the implementation of the two-State solution.

It is worth noting that Israel's prolonged occupation of the Palestinian territories, including settlement activities and settler violence in the West Bank, is more than a violation of international law and Security Council resolutions. It also erodes the foundations of the two-State solution. Even more dangerous are the attempts to annex the West Bank, which would bury every last prospect for peace in the Middle East.

To uphold the primacy of international law and to preserve the basic conditions for independent Palestinian statehood, we call on the international community to take all measures necessary to put an end to unilateral actions that violate international law.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that the ceasefire, belated as it already is, must not turn out to be a mere hiatus before a fresh round of conflict. The international community must intensify its coordinated efforts without delay in order to facilitate the relaunching of the political process for the implementation of the two-State solution. China always stands ready to maintain its constructive contributions and tireless efforts to restore peace in the Middle East and to bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question.

Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett (Guyana): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, and the delegation of Algeria for convening this timely debate. I also thank the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. António Guterres, for his comprehensive briefing, and indeed for his leadership and strident advocacy for peace in the Middle East.

We are at a critical crossroads for both the Israeli and Palestinian people, and for the Middle East as a whole. The war in Gaza has been at the centre of the violent turbulence in the region since 7 October 2023. With the first phase of the recently agreed ceasefire taking hold, hope is at an all-time high across the world, and among the Palestinian people in particular.

Allow me to thank the Governments of Egypt, Qatar and the United States for their tireless efforts. We call on the parties to fulfil their commitments under the ceasefire agreement, while prioritizing the well-being of civilians. Guyana urges the parties to continue negotiations between them in good faith in order to progress towards a permanent end to the war in Gaza and the release of all hostages.

The people of Gaza simply cannot afford another day of war. They must be guaranteed the space, time and resources to reconstruct their lives. Guyana therefore

urges the Council and all Member States to ensure that hostilities do not resume in Gaza. We must also take all steps to ensure full compliance with the orders of provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice in 2024, and with the Court's advisory opinion regarding Israel's continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory (see A/78/968).

In the immediate days ahead, the focus must continue to be on ramping up the supply of critical humanitarian assistance to people in the Gaza Strip, while providing food and critical healthcare services to those in dire need and addressing the situation of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have been displaced from their homes. Children must be returned to the classroom, having endured more than a year of learning loss. International solidarity and support are as critical now as they have been throughout this war, and Guyana urges all Member States to scale up the level of their support for recovery efforts in Gaza. It is also crucial for the United Nations and aid agencies to be able to carry out their work without impediment.

As the tide shifts in Gaza with the implementation of this first phase of the ceasefire deal, the tide is also shifting for Palestinians on another front. The legislation adopted by the Israeli Knesset on 28 October 2024 on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is set to enter into force in a few days. Should Israel proceed with enforcing the legislation, that would collide with the space that the ceasefire deal has created for scaling up humanitarian assistance to Gaza. As the Secretary-General has asserted, while a number of United Nations entities other than UNRWA have been operating and will continue to operate in the occupied Palestinian territories, those entities cannot replace UNRWA's operations. The extent of UNRWA's operations over its more than 70 years cannot be replicated by any other agency.

Guyana wishes to recall that UNRWA's operations were intended to be temporary. However, after more than seven decades, the impediments to Palestinian statehood have not been removed, preventing a duly elected Government from assuming its role and ensuring the proper functioning of the State and its institutions. Guyana therefore urges the Council and all Member States to safeguard UNRWA's role in the occupied Palestinian territories until the Palestine refugee question is definitively addressed, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions. We further urge Israel to refrain from implementing the legislation, as doing so would hinder the work of the United Nations, especially at this critical time for Palestinians in Gaza.

We must continue to work towards a permanent settlement of the Palestinian question, in line with the two-State solution. The Palestinian people should not be made to endure further cycles of violence, as we have seen since 7 October. Close to 47,000 Palestinians, the majority of them women and children, have lost their lives in this war. Many more have lost their homes and their livelihoods, and Gaza now has the largest number of child amputees in modern history. Images of the destruction in the Gaza Strip show endless grey heaps, with more than 90 per cent of buildings estimated to have been destroyed or damaged. Palestinians must now rebuild once again, and the support of the international community will be critical. Notwithstanding the enormity of what is before us, there is no time like the present for the United Nations to secure a lasting and just solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We must seize the moment and end this conflict and the suffering of generations of Palestinians. It is a question of self-determination and justice for the Palestinian people.

In conclusion, freedom for the Palestinian people in an independent State of their own and a secured Israel are not elusive. As we meet today, amid glimmering hope and cautious optimism, Guyana believes that the ceasefire agreement could be the first step towards advancing those twin endeavours, forging a lasting peace for

the people of Palestine and Israel and the wider Middle East. As a Member of the United Nations and of the Council, we stand ready to do our part.

Mr. Hwang (Republic of Korea): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

The whole world is witnessing a pivotal transition in the Middle East. Finally, the dawn of hope has arrived in Gaza, with the release of three Israeli hostages yesterday. We wholeheartedly welcome the long-awaited agreement to secure a ceasefire and the release of hostages. We appreciate the persistent efforts by the mediating countries, namely, the United States, Qatar and Egypt. Syria is charting a new political path with the fall of the Al-Assad regime, after 14 years of civil war. Lebanon overcame its political vacuum by electing a new President, following the cessation of hostilities across the Blue Line.

However, alongside that optimism, we now stand at the most critical juncture. There remain numerous unresolved key issues and deeply rooted challenges. I would like to stress the following points today.

First, the Gaza ceasefire agreement must be faithfully implemented by all parties. Hamas must release the hostages. Israel should withdraw from populated areas. Both parties must cease all military operations in Gaza. We urge both parties to fully commit to maintaining the negotiations in order to transition to the next phase of the deal. Policymakers in Israel should reject any pressure to prolong or resume the armed conflict. And Hamas must keep in mind, throughout the negotiating process, that their terrorist attacks on 7 October 2023 cannot be justified under any pretext.

Secondly, there should be no hindrance to humanitarian aid flowing throughout Gaza. Parties to the conflict must facilitate the entry and delivery of assistance. All crossings into Gaza should be opened, and measures necessary to restore law and order must be implemented. In that vein, we reiterate that Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law, as explained in the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice in July 2024 (see A/78/968), do not end at the border crossings. It is Israel's legal obligation to meet the basic needs of civilians in Gaza and to facilitate humanitarian aid by third parties.

The operations of all humanitarian actors must be ensured and facilitated, considering article 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. We recognize that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has been playing a vital role in delivering humanitarian aid and providing social services in Gaza. In that connection, we hope that the unilateral implementation of national legislation of Israel will not jeopardize this historic opportunity to improve the situation in Gaza.

Thirdly, this pressing momentum should rekindle the peace process between Israel and Palestine. The Middle East peace process, stalled for decades, needs to be resuscitated to promote long-term peaceful coexistence. In order to move towards a better future for all, a smooth transition to legitimate and stable governance in Gaza under a reformed and revitalized Palestinian Authority (PA) is essential. The international community, including Israel, should support the PA in restoring its governance in Gaza and enhancing stability in the West Bank, with a vision to realize the two-State solution, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Peace and security in the Middle East is an interconnected puzzle made up of interlinked pieces. All players in the region — not only those in Israel and Palestine — should focus on constructing peace and stability. Developments in Lebanon and Syria should lead to the rebuilding of State institutions in due course, alongside active support from the international community, including the United Nations. The mandates of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force should be respected and complied

with, and the safety of peacekeepers must be guaranteed at all times. The Houthis in Yemen, who have been exploiting regional volatility, must reverse their stance and join efforts to revitalize the Yemeni-led political process. Therefore, we reiterate our demand that all State and non-State actors cease all attacks across the region. Any acts that violate the territorial integrity of neighbouring countries, provoke opposing parties or sow more seeds of retribution must stop.

Seizing this crucial momentum, let us now collectively chart a brighter tomorrow for all in the region. The Republic of Korea will maintain its engagement in all efforts to achieve that vision.

Ms. Shea (United States of America): I thank Secretary-General Guterres for his briefing earlier.

A ceasefire and hostage release deal was long overdue. Thanks to the efforts of Qatar, Egypt and the United States, the sides have reached an agreement consistent with resolution 2735 (2024) to end the conflict that Hamas set in motion more than 470 days ago. This deal will halt the fighting in Gaza, surge much-needed humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians and, most importantly, reunite the hostages with their families after more than 15 months in captivity. It is the result not only of the extreme pressure that Hamas has been under and the changed regional equation after a ceasefire in Lebanon and the weakening of Iran, but also of dogged and painstaking diplomacy.

The conflict should have ended long ago. We must never forget the lives taken as a result of the brutal Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 and the horrors endured by countless innocent people in the war that followed. We cannot allow Hamas to continue playing spoiler on behalf of the Palestinian people any longer — not after it started the conflict through its barbaric attack on 7 October 2023 and its deplorable behaviour ever since.

We have seen Hamas cynically weaponize the suffering of Palestinians by using civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, to store caches of weapons, house fighters and coordinate attacks. We have also seen Hamas play the victim, making appeals to the international community on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza while at the same time actively making decisions and employing tactics that put them in danger. We can no longer allow Hamas to dominate the Palestinian political landscape in Gaza.

We welcome the Palestinian leadership's recent statements emphasizing how Hamas is placing the interests of Tehran over that of the Palestinian people and thereby bringing about the destruction in Gaza. Israel's fight is with Hamas, not with the Palestinian civilians the terrorist group falsely claims to represent but often put in harm's way. No one benefits from a deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza — least of all the millions of Palestinian civilians mired in a conflict they did not start and are powerless to stop.

Now is the time for all parties to ensure critical aid reaches those in need throughout Gaza. We urge countries to support this effort through funding and resources and to help scale up much-needed humanitarian aid.

As we all know, the work to finalize a ceasefire was difficult. It took far too long to reach an agreement to end the bloodshed. In the near future, the region's leaders will need to make difficult choices to help forge a new reality. The United States-, Qatari- and Egyptian-mediated ceasefire is a starting point towards a future that provides equal measures of security, freedom and dignity for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Despite the horrific toll of the conflict that Hamas unleashed, we have a historic opportunity to dramatically transform the Middle East. It is long past time for the

fighting to end and the work of building peace and security to begin, to help people begin rebuilding their lives.

The United States will do everything in its power to help Israelis and Palestinians seize this moment together and find peace through this agreement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We welcome you, Sir, presiding over the quarterly open debate of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. We note the active role of the Algerian delegation, which voices the Arab world's aspirations in the Security Council, in keeping the attention of the Security Council focused on various important aspects of that topic.

We thank the Secretary-General for his briefing on the situation in the Middle East, where the bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been raging for more than 15 months. We have just recently heard reports of an agreement reached between Israel and Hamas on a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. As far as we know the agreement was approved by both parties and a few hours ago it entered into force. We hope that the results attained through mediators will last. Nonetheless, this is a reason not only to rejoice, but also to take stock of this sad situation. We must not forget that the inhabitants of Gaza paid for this with their lives. During the past 15 months, Israel's military operation in Gaza killed at least 47,000 Palestinian civilians; the exact figure will be known only once the rubble is cleared. Such civilian casualties have not been seen since the Second World War. That bloodshed should have been stopped much earlier, but each attempt by the Security Council to adopt a resolution with a call for an immediate ceasefire came up against Washington's veto. Referring to its so-called "quiet diplomacy", Washington did everything it could to ensure that the Security Council did not interfere with Israel's actions on the ground.

From the very beginning of the crisis in Gaza in October 2023, Russia, along with like-minded countries, consistently sought to establish a lasting ceasefire and put forward the first draft resolution calling for that (see S/PV.9439). We also insisted on the urgent delivery of humanitarian assistance to all in need. Knowing that, despite those efforts, the Security Council was unable to implement its mandate because of the actions of one permanent member is a bitter pill to swallow.

As far as we can tell, the latest deal is not fundamentally different from the one that was discussed back in December 2023. That begs the question: was the fine-tuning of the details really worth the tens of thousands of lives that were lost since then in Gaza? Frankly speaking, that understanding does not spark joy in us, even though Russia welcomes the fact that a deal has been concluded.

Yesterday we saw the start of the agreement's first phase which provides for the release of 33 hostages held in the Gaza Strip in exchange for a group of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons. The implementation of the first phase will help to assess the sustainability and viability of the entire agreement. It is a cause for cautious optimism that, despite some difficulties at the initial stage, 19 January saw the release of the first Israeli hostages and of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. Pursuant to the provisions of the agreement, from that moment on, hostilities ceased on the Gaza Strip and the process of the phased withdrawal of Israeli forces started. We note the beginning of the withdrawal of Israeli armoured vehicles from Rafah and the return home of thousands its residents. However, let us look at today's front page of the New York Times which has photos of the houses to which Palestinians are returning to. Those are not houses but just a pile of ruins.

We also note that the agreement provides for an increase in the amount of food, fuel and medicine supplied to meet the Gazans' need. According to Rik Peeperkorn, World Health Organization Representative for the West Bank and Gaza, it will take many years and at least \$10 billion to rebuild the health system in Gaza. Less

than half of Gaza's hospitals are currently operational. The issue of delivering the adequate amount of humanitarian assistance to Gaza should become a priority of the work of the Council. The Security Council resolutions can now be carried out properly so members should focus on implementing them.

We commend the efforts of the mediators — first and foremost, Qatar and Egypt — whose painstaking and persistent work made it possible for this important agreement to be reached. We note that, at the final stage of the negotiations, representatives of the new American Administration also got on board, which — as we understand it — ultimately helped to break Israel's unwillingness to come to an agreement.

We trust that the implementation of the agreement will pave the way for the stabilization of the situation in Gaza and bring home those who were temporarily and repeatedly displaced, who number in the hundreds of thousands, if not more. We also hope that the agreement will help to rebuild the Gaza Strip, which is currently lying in ruins and resembles scenes from a post-apocalyptic film, and to reunite Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners with their families. We expect that Russian citizen Alexander Trufanov, who is currently in the Gaza Strip, will be among those released.

We have repeatedly stated that a ceasefire in Gaza is a precondition for stabilizing the entire region. The implementation of the agreement gives a glimmer of hope not only for a lasting normalization of the situation around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also for creating the conditions for long-term improvements in the situations in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Furthermore, there is now an opportunity to create conditions for streamlining a comprehensive political settlement process for the Palestinian question on a universally recognized international legal basis, the ultimate aim of which is to establish an independent Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living in peace and security with Israel. Only by implementing the two-State solution, endorsed by Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, will it be possible to break the vicious circle of violence and bring genuine lasting peace to the region. As recent years have shown, no agreement that bypasses the issue of a just settlement of the Palestinian question will ever bring about sustainable peace in the region.

However, that is still a long way off. The past few months of war have highlighted the problem of a lack of mutual trust and have fuelled radicalization on both sides. The long-awaited deal is fragile, and any provocation may well jeopardize its implementation. In particular, it is important for Israel to cease its practice of building new settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory or expanding the existing ones and for it to comply with Security Council resolutions. What is also pertinent is how and by whom the ceasefire will be monitored. From both sides of the barricades, we are already hearing the voices of those who are not satisfied with the agreement and are just waiting for the right moment to accuse their opponents of violating their obligations pertaining to it.

The entire international community is duty bound to protect the ceasefire and amplify the voices of those Palestinians and Israelis who champion peace, not war. For our part, we will closely monitor the implementation of the terms of the deal and support any initiatives aimed at establishing an unconditional and comprehensive ceasefire, ensuring safe and unimpeded humanitarian access and relaunching negotiations on a universally recognized international legal basis, including decisions by the Security Council and the General Assembly.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): Allow me first of all to thank the Algerian delegation for convening today's meeting and the Secretary-General for his briefing.

France welcomes the entry into force of the agreement on a ceasefire and hostage release in Gaza, made possible thanks to the efforts of the United States, Qatar and Egypt. We call on the parties to implement it in its entirety. The agreement should allow for the release of all hostages, including our two compatriots Ofer Kalderon and Ohad Yahalomi, and the massive delivery of aid to the civilian population. In view of the urgent situation, all access points must be opened without delay. The work of international organizations and humanitarian actors must be facilitated by Israel, in accordance with international law and the orders of the International Court of Justice. The United Nations must be able to deliver aid freely. France reiterates its full support for the irreplaceable work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in the occupied Palestinian territory.

The future of the Gaza Strip must be part of a future Palestinian State. We must prevent Hamas from regaining a foothold in the Strip and must therefore prepare for the return of the Palestinian Authority, which is responsible for administering the territory. We must also ensure Israel's security. No massacre such as the one committed on 7 October 2023 can ever happen again.

France calls for the ceasefire to be an opportunity to set in motion an irreversible process for implementing the two-State solution, with security guarantees for both Israelis and Palestinians — the only way to ensure a just and lasting peace. France is committed to that, within the Security Council and in all forums. In June 2025, we will co-chair, along with Saudi Arabia, an international conference for the implementation of the two-State solution. We call on the Israelis and Palestinians to take the only path that will guarantee them a future of peace and security.

Implementing the ceasefire agreement should make it possible to write a new chapter in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the election of President Joseph Aoun and the appointment of Mr. Nawaf Salam to the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers are a source of hope. France hopes that a strong Government capable of bringing Lebanon together in all its diversity will be formed as soon as possible. There is an urgent need to fully implement resolution 1701 (2006) to achieve a long-term solution along the Blue Line that ensures respect for the security of Israel and Lebanon. In Yemen, the peace process must resume, under the aegis of the United Nations Special Envoy, and France urges the Houthis to stop their destabilizing actions.

The President: I now give the floor to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Colombia.

Mr. Murillo (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): For the Government of Colombia and for me in particular, it is our honour to participate in the important debate that brings us together today and even more so on a day that is highly symbolic for us and is celebrated in the United States and around the world — Martin Luther King Day, which marks the birth of a great peacebuilder.

We welcome the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria's convening of and invitation to this open debate and acknowledge the important work that it has carried out this month in its presidency of the Security Council, as well as its support and that of other members of the Council for peace in Colombia. The international community and this forum in particular have witnessed Colombia's unwavering commitment to the search for peace and reconciliation, within and beyond our borders, even amid numerous difficulties — because peacebuilding is obviously difficult. However, we are talking about peace and not war.

Colombia is closely following the situation in the Middle East and in particular in Syria, where it is expected that a new internationally recognized Government will be formed that will take into account all the ethnic, cultural and religious groupings in the country. The war unleashed in 2011 in Syria has been one of the most devastating situations that humankind has faced in recent years. Syria became a

kind of testing ground for geopolitical confrontations, with no respect or thought for the civilian population — a war that lasted 13 years, has killed an estimated 620,000 people and caused 7 million people to become internally displaced persons and more than 6 million refugees. It is something that we cannot accept, and we must, as an international community, prevent it from happening again anywhere else. Colombia reiterates its willingness, good offices and capacity to coordinate, with the countries of the region and the international community, all the necessary efforts in Syria to build a country that can protect its civilian population and be a source of stability.

In the case of Palestine, now, we are confronted by a heart-rending state of affairs, which demands immediate and coordinated action by the international community. We are absolutely categorical in underscoring that the population of Palestine, which, for decades has lived amid the horrors of war, is now facing a genocide and a war that has intensified to unimaginable levels and has spread throughout the region.

My country again calls on the warring parties to engage in negotiations that lead to a permanent ceasefire, full respect for human rights and international humanitarian law in the Gaza Strip, with a particular focus on safeguarding the rights of women and children. In that vein, Colombia acknowledges the role of the good offices of the United States, Egypt and Qatar in securing the recent agreement to implement a ceasefire between the parties that includes the release of Israeli hostages, and we call for the unconditional release of Colombian-Israeli citizen Elkana Bohbot and all the hostages so that they can return to their families. By the same token, the Palestinian prisoners held by Israel must be released. It is our hope that that will be the starting point for achieving a stable and lasting peace. Unimpeded access to humanitarian aid is urgent and mandatory.

We have emphasized that the lack of a substantive solution to the Palestinian question is putting to the test multilateralism as a principle of international relations and the ability of the United Nations, in particular that of the Security Council, to fulfil its primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, more than 45,000 people have perished, and approximately 130,000 have been wounded since the war began. Also before us is the hardship of forcible displacement inflicted on thousands of families on a daily basis as a result of the war's military operations and evacuation orders. Accordingly, we support many of the solutions put forward, including the Kingdom of Norway's proposal, which the General Assembly has approved, for the International Court of Justice to issue an advisory opinion on Israel's legal obligations vis-à-vis the activities of the United Nations, other international organizations and third States in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Colombia will continue to maintain that only a substantive solution — necessarily involving the two-State solution set out in the 1993 Oslo accords — is urgently required and is the best avenue for guaranteeing the right of the peoples of Israel and Palestine to coexist in peace. In the process, the sovereignty of both States must be reaffirmed and the secure and internationally recognized borders must be established, in line with the resolutions adopted by the United Nations. Colombia stands ready to contribute to peacebuilding and, to that end, is offering its good practices in that area and in that of conflict resolution, as appropriate and as necessary. Moreover, as our President, Gustavo Petro Urrego, has said, our country is fully available to provide humanitarian aid to persons affected by the armed conflict and the war.

Lastly, we echo the appeal of the Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, for the territorial integrity of Lebanon to be guaranteed and for attacks on its population to end. It is our moral and legal duty to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable and to strive tirelessly for a world in which tolerance, peace and mutual respect prevail. It is our duty to safeguard life, build peace and protect the planet.

The President: I now give the floor to the Minister for International Relations and Cooperation of Namibia.

Mr. Mushelenga (Namibia): Allow me from the outset to congratulate the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria on assuming the presidency of the Council this month.

I wish to align my statement with the statement to be delivered on behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in which Namibia has the honour of serving as Vice-Chair.

May I also take this opportunity to thank the Secretary-General for presenting the latest update on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

I join the preceding speakers in welcoming the ceasefire agreement reached between Israel and Hamas as an immediate path to halting the bloodshed and allowing humanitarian aid to reach those in desperate need. The devastating consequences of the war in Gaza have preoccupied the Council and the General Assembly in their work for the greater part of the past 15 months. The toll on human life and infrastructure has set a precedent in terms of levels of violence and destruction in an ugly chapter in human history that should never be condoned anywhere. The escalation of violence over the past 15 months has been characterized by flagrant violations of international law and gruesome atrocities, including genocide, the wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and the tragic loss of thousands of innocent Palestinian lives.

Over the period, aspersions have been cast on the ability of the Council to carry out its core mandate of maintaining international peace and security. Namibia commends the General Assembly for its consistent efforts to ensure that, when the Council was paralysed, the membership of the General Assembly made its presence felt and made strong and consistent calls to bring the war to an end. That substantiates and validates the call to reform the Council so that it is more representative, as the need to do things differently has never been more urgent.

Namibia commends the mediation efforts of Egypt, Qatar and the United States and hopes that the ceasefire prepares a foundation for a just peace and a scaling-up of humanitarian aid and ends the prolonged programme of annexation and settlement expansion. Namibia's position on the conflict remains grounded in our unwavering commitment to international peace, justice and respect for international law.

The consequences of the war will reverberate for generations to come. For that reason, Namibia underscores the dire need to address both the immediate crisis and the underlying causes of the conflict. The cycle of violence cannot be broken through military means alone. Sustainable peace requires addressing the root causes of the conflict, including the occupation, the blockade and the denial of fundamental rights to the Palestinian people. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is alarming, and it is our fervent hope that the scaling-up of humanitarian assistance will be prioritized as a matter of urgency and in accordance with the humanitarian aid protocols agreed to as part of the ceasefire agreement. Unhindered access for humanitarian aid must be guaranteed to provide life-saving assistance to the people of Gaza, including food, water, medical supplies and the restoration of essential services to alleviate their immense suffering. Namibia demands that Israel rescind, with immediate effect, its legislation against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, as such legislation violates international humanitarian law.

Namibia further calls on Israel to uphold its obligations under international law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and necessity. Alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law must be thoroughly investigated, and those responsible must be held accountable.

This crisis must serve as a reminder of the urgent need to return to a credible, inclusive and negotiated peace process aimed at achieving a just and lasting solution. That includes the unconditional realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination and the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, based on the pre-1967 borders and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

Following the request by the General Assembly for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice regarding Israel's obligations in relation to the presence and activities of the United Nations, international organizations and third States, Namibia encourages all Member States to actively engage in the impending Court proceedings by submitting written statements and observations. This is a critical opportunity to reaffirm the principles of international law and underscore the importance of accountability, cooperation and the protection of international organizations as they fulfil their mandates by contributing to this process. Member States can help clarify the legal responsibilities of all parties involved and strengthen the international community's commitment to upholding justice and the rule of law.

The people of Palestine have endured immense suffering for far too long — a suffering that no nation and its people should ever endure. Namibia stands in solidarity with the Palestinian people and reiterates its call for the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, to fulfil its mandate in maintaining international peace and security. We also urge Member States to act in unison and with urgency to ensure that the rights, dignity and aspirations of the Palestinian people are upheld.

As a nation that has experienced the painful legacy of occupation and emerged triumphantly attaining liberty, Namibia firmly believes that the arduous road to peace in the Middle East is approaching its ultimate destination. It requires political will, mutual respect and a commitment to human rights and dignity for all.

In conclusion, the war in Gaza is a stark reminder of the consequences of decades of unresolved conflict and unfulfilled promises. Posterity will judge us for our inaction in the face of injustice, and we will forever stand condemned for committing sins of omission. This war is a test of the international community's resolve to uphold the principles of justice, human rights and peace.

Therefore, in keeping with the resolve of world leaders reaffirming the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, as set out in the Pact for the Future (General Assembly resolution 79/1), we are duty bound to reflect on what more we can do to bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

The President: I now give the floor to the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs of Libya.

Mr. Elbaour (Libya) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, on the presidency of the Security Council this month. I would like to wish you every success in managing the work of the Council. We would like to commend Algeria, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ahmed Attaf, for having convened this high-level meeting on this important matter.

There have been meetings for more than a year calling for a ceasefire. Today we are meeting following an announcement of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, which came into force yesterday after 471 days of destruction, killings, and displacement. That amounts to 67 weeks of bloody combat, air raids and bloodshed, with the world watching one massacre after another in the Gaza Strip without being able to end the aggression, the killings, displacement or the starvation of the besieged Palestinians in Gaza.

Such actions ran counter to all human values and international laws and conventions, which, unfortunately, failed to prevent the occupation's brutality against every thing Palestinian. Nothing survived in the ugliest manifestation of sabotage and destruction by war machines for 471 days before reaching the ceasefire agreement, which we reached today. A huge toll was taken on a besieged people without shelter, food or healthcare.

Today we are delighted that this agreement has been reached and that the guns were silenced. We are delighted that children, women and the elderly in Gaza expect that they are going to be able to spend a night without bombing or air raids, even though they do not have a roof over their heads. The Gaza Strip has shown the inability of the international community to maintain international peace and security, to prevent wars, to protect civilians, to guarantee human dignity and human rights, to deter the aggressor and to hold criminals accountable. Those are the very values on which the United Nations was founded; those are the rules on which the Security Council was established.

While my country welcomes this ceasefire agreement, concluded on 15 January, we commend the sincere efforts by Qatar and Egypt and the constructive mediation by the United States of America. In that connection, we should recall that there is a need for everyone to commit to the implementation and sustainability of that agreement and to follow international monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure that the painful chapters that we have recently experienced do not happen again in the Gaza Strip.

The whole Middle East region is facing economic, humanitarian, political and even military repercussions because of the situation in Gaza. The situation is even worse in the Gaza Strip, which was the theatre of war, displacement and starvation. In that regard, we must stipulate that this ceasefire agreement in and of itself cannot bring an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. We need to support the ceasefire and accompany it with urgent international action in order to improve the devastating humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. As the international community, we need to act in order to coordinate our work, and we need to provide urgent humanitarian support and assistance for the people in Gaza because it is currently a scene of debris and rubble. The Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip have become homeless.

We have failed the Gazan people. We did so during the war, and today we need to stand side by side with them as the international community. We must do so in order to repair what was destroyed by the war. In these difficult circumstances, we are also confronting provocative actions by the occupying Power, which said that it wanted to suspend the activities and operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in the occupied Palestinian territories. That decision is not just a political or administrative measure, but a direct attack on the rights of the Palestinian refugees and a systematic attempt to undermine their cause and their right of return, which is guaranteed by internationally legitimate decisions.

In that context, we call upon the Security Council to ensure that the occupying Power honours its commitments pursuant to international law, the Charter of the United Nations and relevant United Nations resolutions. The international community needs to protect UNRWA's mandate and provide it with the necessary financial resources so that it can provide essential services, without obstacles or restrictions, to the refugees in the Gaza Strip and all occupied Palestinian territories.

In conclusion, the current agreement should not be viewed as an end point, and we should not view 7 October 2023 as the start of the conflict, as some attempt to portray it. Rather, that date needs to be placed in its appropriate context, as a result

of the continued consequences of the conflict. Therefore, this agreement must be seen as a step that paves the way towards a new stage, in which a durable solution can be found to the Palestinian question, putting an end to their suffering for decades. This painful experience clearly shows that ignoring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people just leads to more escalation that threatens international peace and security and that putting an end to the Palestinians' suffering serves everyone.

My country believes that the Palestinian people's struggle and patience in the face of all forms of discrimination and displacement must end. The deferred international commitment to finding a solution to the Palestinian cause must be fulfilled through recognition of the right of Palestinians to establish a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the unwavering position of the Libyan State in its support for the Palestinian cause, standing by the brotherly Palestinian people and doing what we can to support them. My Government stresses that true peace can only be achieved by enabling the Palestinian people to enjoy their rights to self-determination, restoring their full rights, bringing an end to their suffering and establishing their State.

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

Mr. Nasir (Indonesia): I thank Algeria for convening this important meeting, and I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

The issue before us has lingered on the Security Council's agenda for more than 70 years, yet Israel's injustices against the Palestinian people remain unresolved. In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, illegal settlements are expanding with growing violence and impunity. The Council's failure over the past 15 months has obliterated Gaza, with a catastrophic humanitarian disaster. We therefore sincerely welcome the ceasefire agreement in Gaza and the start to the release of hostages and Palestinians held arbitrarily. Although it comes at a devastating cost of tens of thousands of innocent lives, we thank the mediators that have helped to bring about the ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire is a vital first step towards attaining peace in the Middle East. The Council must safeguard the agreement so that every phase is upheld. The Council must help to break the cycle of violence.

The international community must focus on two priorities following the ceasefire agreement in Gaza: first, ending the humanitarian catastrophe; and, secondly, developing a comprehensive political plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In that regard, we fully support the Secretary-General's call for sustained humanitarian relief for the people of Gaza. Humanitarian aid must flow freely and without obstruction in a sustained manner. Humanitarian workers must be fully allowed to operate safely. Reconstruction efforts in Gaza must be prepared, including by lifting the 18-year-old blockade that has strangled its economy. The role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is indispensable in those efforts. We must restore and strengthen its capacity. The Council must shield the Agency from persistent threats and misinformation campaigns.

Beyond addressing the immediate humanitarian needs, we must work towards a just and comprehensive political plan, with a two-State solution at its core, in which an independent Palestinian State lives side by side in peace and security with Israel. Any other alternative will only lead to apartheid and subjugation. A peace process imposed by a select few will also fail.

That is why the international community must unite to foster genuine dialogue and negotiations that address the root cause of colonialism and historical injustice in Palestine, including the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Such a process must place Palestine on an equal footing, guided by international law and internationally agreed parameters. The upcoming High-level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-

State Solution must serve as a turning point. The Council must create conditions conducive to ensuring the success of the Conference.

Finally, it is time for the Council to prove its relevance. Continuing to leave this agenda item unresolved is not just unconscionable, but also a clear demonstration of the urgent need to expedite reform of the Council. We give our heartfelt support to the five new members of the Council. Our expectations are clear — please be guided by humanity and leave no stone unturned in advancing the Palestinian cause. To the five permanent members of the Council: it is time to end the Council's paralysis and restore the Council's honour. History will judge us, whether the Council rises to the occasion or fades into irrelevance.

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

Mr. Shiaan (Maldives): I thank Algeria, the President of the Council for the month of January, for convening this quarterly open debate.

Maldives aligns itself with the statements to be delivered by the representatives of Djibouti, on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Uganda, on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries.

Maldives welcomes the ceasefire deal that has been reached and that is now in effect, 15 months after the genocidal war in Gaza began. The cessation of hostilities is a critical step towards halting the ongoing devastation and loss of innocent lives, particularly of children, women and the elderly. The people of Gaza have endured immeasurable hardship, and this ceasefire is a glimmer of hope for relief and recovery. It is our hope to see the return of displaced people and an inflow of much-needed humanitarian assistance.

Maldives commends the role of the countries that facilitated the negotiations that led to this crucial ceasefire agreement. The international community must now ensure the ceasefire agreement is enforced. This ceasefire represents not just a moment of respite, but a critical juncture at which Israel can demonstrate its commitment to the values enshrined in international law, in particular international humanitarian law.

As such, Maldives calls on Israel to pay reparations to the State of Palestine for the death and destruction caused over the past 15 months. In Gaza, relentless aerial bombardments and the extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, schools and critical services, have left long-term repercussions for the population, and severe restrictions on humanitarian access have drastically intensified human suffering. Recent United Nations reports underscore a surge in civilian casualties, especially among children, and ongoing shortages of food, water and energy. It is crucial that the international community not only support the ceasefire, but also take immediate and meaningful action to address the humanitarian needs on the ground. We call for urgent and scaled-up support for Palestine to ensure a sustainable recovery from prolonged Israeli attacks.

Beyond the occupied Palestinian territory, the wider regional context compounds those challenges. In Syria, the decade-long conflict remains unresolved, and recent briefings to the Council highlight a persistent humanitarian crisis, particularly in the north-west, where millions urgently need assistance. Although limited cross-line operations have occurred, gaps in humanitarian cover persist. Millions of displaced Syrians still lack basic necessities, a lack exacerbated by economic instability and insufficient medical resources. We therefore call for a renewed international approach, one that supports the Special Envoy's political track, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), to pave the way for sustainable peace in Syria.

Despite the Council's multiple meetings on this crisis, urgent challenges persist in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon. We need a comprehensive and coordinated

strategy, one that enforces accountability, respects international humanitarian law and addresses the root causes of conflict. The Maldives firmly believes that a just and lasting peace in the Middle East can be achieved only through the establishment of an independent and sovereign State of Palestine based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. We look forward to the upcoming United Nations conference on Palestine in June, which will offer a vital opportunity for the international community to renew commitments, intensify diplomatic efforts and develop a clear path to end the crisis and secure a sustainable peace for the Palestinian people.

The President: I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than three minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Flashing lights on the collars of the microphones will prompt speakers to bring their remarks to a close after three minutes.

I now give the floor to the representative of Egypt.

Mr. Mahmoud (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Group of Arab States, and I beg your pardon, Mr. President, for the length of the statement.

We meet today as the situation in the Palestinian territories is undergoing a positive transformation. We hope that transformation will take root, following the success of the efforts by Egypt, Qatar and the United States to conclude a three-phase agreement on the exchange of prisoners and detainees and a return to sustainable calm, leading to a permanent ceasefire. The agreement also includes the safe and effective entry and distribution of humanitarian aid, the rehabilitation of hospitals, the return of internally displaced persons to their places of residence and the facilitated departure of sick and injured Palestinians for treatment. In that connection, we would like to commend the efforts of the ministerial committee tasked by the extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit to stop the aggression against Gaza.

Yes, mediation efforts did succeed in putting an end to the killing and destruction of unarmed civilians in the Gaza Strip, albeit at a steep humanitarian cost, after more than 45,000 Palestinians were killed, the infrastructure of the Gaza Strip and its medical and educational sectors was destroyed, humanitarian and United Nations staff and journalists were targeted and crimes were perpetrated against the Palestinian people. It is no exaggeration to say that we have seen Israel annihilate all the necessities of life in Gaza. Upon cursory inspection of the aerial photographs, we encounter a level of destruction comparable to that visited upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the images reveal a people in dire need of humanitarian support after suffering unparalleled horrors.

We should not regard the current deal as the endpoint, as has been suggested. Rather, it is only a beginning on which it is necessary to build a new phase in which the aim is to establish a lasting and comprehensive peace in the region and to spare the region additional successive rounds of escalation. We present here the Arab Group's vision for the coming phase.

First, the Arab Group calls for the full implementation in good faith of all phases of the ceasefire agreement and for all parties to abide by it, not to withdraw from it and to refrain from any violations or further aggression against the Gaza Strip under any pretext. The Arab Group calls on the international community to support efforts to implement and consolidate the agreement and not to accept any Israeli pretexts or motives that would allow a slide back into relaunching military operations.

Second, the Arab Group stresses the need for Israel to abide by the resolutions taken by the Security Council and the General Assembly and decisions taken by the International Court of Justice since the beginning of the crisis. The Arab Group also

stresses Israel's full and sole political and legal responsibility for the destruction of the Gaza Strip, and it demands that Israel be held accountable for the crimes and violations committed against the Palestinian people. The practices of starvation, killing civilians and other atrocities, some of which were broadcast live, must not go unpunished without accountability and compensation that restores some of the rights of the victims. It is not right for voices to be raised in calls for international law, justice and human rights to be upheld in situations pertaining to one particular people or race, while falling silent when it pertains to the brotherly Palestinian people. We are no less human than anyone else, and neither is Israel a State above international law.

Third, in view of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, we call for the delivery of aid and the implementation of early-recovery projects to commence immediately. That is an obligation incumbent upon Israel under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the customary international law set out in the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1977. An entire generation of children has been deprived of education for more than a year and subjected to an unprecedented level of killing, maiming and psychological trauma, in violation of *jus cogens* and of the principles of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, civilians are suffering from near total deprivation of basic services, such as water, electricity and health services, as most health facilities have been damaged or destroyed. We also call on the international community to uphold its responsibility to mobilize the necessary resources to launch a wide range of reconstruction projects, in coordination with the Palestinian National Authority and with a major role for the United Nations and its agencies and bodies, especially the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The silent killing of civilians must be stopped.

Fourth, we emphasize the central and irreplaceable role of UNRWA in the lives of the Palestinian people and its central role in providing humanitarian support to the people of the Gaza Strip during the war. We express our appreciation for the sacrifices it has made to perform that role. We stress the centrality of UNRWA's role in providing stability and delivering services until the establishment of a Palestinian State. Therefore, we call for the Agency to be protected from Israeli schemes aimed at ending UNRWA's work in the areas of operation in the Palestinian territories. We also call for pressure to be placed on Israel, the occupying Power, to compel it to comply with its international obligations, including under Article 105 of the Charter of the United Nations and the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, and to allow UNRWA to operate without restrictions.

Fifth, the Arab Group reaffirms that the Palestinian people's cause is that of a people's right to self-determination and of bringing an end to the Israeli occupation. Its cause does not concern Gaza alone — it extends to all Palestinian territories. We therefore call for an end to the escalation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem resulting from continued settlement policies and from the granting of protection to Israeli settler terrorism. We also call for an end to the policy of demolishing Palestinian homes and facilities, preventing Palestinians from accessing their resources and restricting the exercise by the Palestinian Authority of its powers. We warn of the danger of continued incursions into Al-Aqsa Mosque or endeavouring to change the status quo of the holy sites in Al-Quds Al-Sharif or compromising the Hashemite Jordanian custodianship.

Sixth, we call on the international community to heed the lesson that neglecting the legitimate rights of the brotherly Palestinian people will lead only to successive rounds of escalation which threaten international peace and security. Therefore, Israel must show responsibility and abandon its delusions of expansion, occupation and displacement and engage immediately in a negotiation process that grants the

Palestinian people their legitimate right to an independent State on the borders of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. We call on all parties to participate in the high-level international conference on the settlement the Palestinian question and the implementation of the two-State solution scheduled to be held in June.

Seventh, the Arab Group notes that in order to achieve peace and stability in the region, Israel must also withdraw from all Syrian territories occupied since 1967. In Lebanon, the Arab Group welcomes the ceasefire agreement and calls on all parties to implement it and to end Israel's aggression against Lebanon. Israel must withdraw from the Palestinian territories in accordance with the 60-day deadline stipulated in the agreement and commit to the full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon within its internationally recognized borders.

The Arab Group welcomes the election of General Joseph Aoun as President of the Lebanese Republic and the appointment of Judge Nawaf Salam to form a new Government in Lebanon and urges the international community to support Lebanon in its efforts to rebuild and the United Nations, which will play a critical role in supporting Lebanon during this phase. The visit of Secretary-General to Lebanon last week was proof of the Organization's support for Lebanon and its people.

In my national capacity, I would like to reiterate Egypt's firm position in support of Palestinian rights. Egypt has spared no effort since the beginning of the current crisis to stop the aggression and save the Palestinian people. Egypt has engaged with Qatar and the United States in tough negotiations to end the war. Egypt has also organized international meetings, most recently on 2 December 2024, to mobilize humanitarian assistance for Gaza and has made every effort to ensure the delivery of assistance, to host and provide treatment to its Palestinian brothers and to unify the Palestinians. Egypt reiterates its readiness to host an expanded international conference on the rebuilding of Gaza.

I also underscore Egypt's commitment to its strategic choice of peace in the region 47 years ago. We chose peace from a position of strength, confidence, righteousness and justice to establish a just peace, stability and cooperation in the region. Egypt looks forward to working with all parties to revive the Middle East peace process within a specific time frame to end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian State, as that alone will guarantee the security of all peoples in the region and their equal rights to a decent and secure life for everyone. Egypt will continue tirelessly to coordinate with the partners to ensure the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and calls on all Security Council members to uphold their responsibility and moral duty to the Palestinian people not to fail them. We warn against refusing to recognize reality and facts. We have a genuine opportunity before us for a new beginning and we must not lose it.

In conclusion, as the President of Egypt, Mr. Abdel Fattah Al Sisi stated:

"Egypt will always be loyal to the Palestinian people and support a just peace, and it will be a true partner in achieving peace and defending the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."

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

Ms. Al-Thani (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to congratulate your country, Mr. President, on its assumption of the presidency of the Council for this month, and I welcome you, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, National Community Abroad and African Affairs of Algeria. We also thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

We are meeting today a few days after the announcement, in Doha, of an agreement that puts an end to the conflict in the Gaza Strip, which has lasted

more than 15 months; caused immense human suffering and extensive destruction; displaced most of its population and left 160,000 victims among the disappeared, wounded and killed.

In order to alleviate this human suffering and stop the bloodshed, the State of Qatar has made significant efforts, since the conflict began, to mediate, which culminated in the two parties reaching, on 15 January, an agreement that came into effect yesterday. Under the agreement, which consists of three phases, each of which lasts 42 days, there will be an exchange of detainees, hostages, a return to normality and the delivery and distribution of large amounts of humanitarian assistance throughout the Gaza Strip. The agreement also stipulates the restoration of hospitals, the provision of equipment and fuel. The agreement on the details of the second and third phases will be finalized during the implementation of the first phase. The State of Qatar expresses its thanks to the Arab Republic of Egypt and the United States of America. The three countries, as guarantors of the agreement, issued a statement confirming that they will work together to ensure the parties implement their obligations and ensure the full continuation of the three phases. The State of Qatar has spared no effort in its endeavours over the past 15 months. In November 2023, we were able to stop the fighting and ensure the release of more than 100 hostages and hundreds of Palestinians detainees. We have continued to meet with partners and parties to the conflict in an effort to reach an agreement that puts an end to the war and restores hope to the region.

Today we call on the Security Council to assume its responsibilities to monitor the ceasefire agreement and adopt a binding resolution on the implementation of the agreement.

It is now time to coordinate regional and international efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and United Nations support in delivering it. The State of Qatar will make every effort to provide support to the affected families and alleviate the suffering of the people. Under the directives of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Amir of the State of Qatar, it was announced today that a land bridge will be established to supply fuel to the Gaza Strip. During this stage, the role played by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is central, and therefore, we caution against the banning of the Agency's activities by the occupation authorities.

With regard to Syria, the State of Qatar affirms its unwavering position in support of the Syrian people and reiterates its strong links with the Syrian Arab Republic after 13 years of interruption due to the former regime's brutal suppression of the Syrian people. The State of Qatar welcomes the measures taken by the new Syrian Administration to protect civilians, stabilize State institutions, provide public services and facilitate the return of displaced persons and refugees. The State of Qatar is committed to continuing to support its Syrian brothers. The current humanitarian situation requires the support of the international community and the lifting of sanctions as the reasons for the sanctions' imposition no longer exist. The State of Qatar stresses the importance of the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and condemns the incursion of Israeli forces into the buffer zone, which must be immediately reversed.

With regard to Lebanon, the State of Qatar welcomes the election of Mr. Joseph Aoun as President of the Republic of Lebanon and the appointment of Nawaf Salam to head the Government. We hope that this will enable the Lebanese people to achieve their aspirations of development and prosperity. The State of Qatar will continue its ongoing support for sisterly Lebanon and renews its permanent position in support of its unity, sovereignty, security and stability.

We also welcome the ceasefire agreement in Lebanon and expresses our hope for the commitment of all parties to it and to fully implementing resolution 1701 (2006). Moreover, we hope that the agreement will pave the way towards a broader consensus to maintain durable peace and stability. We also underscore the need for respect for the mandate of UNIFIL and safety of its personnel.

The only path towards stability and prosperity in the region remains a comprehensive and just solution to the Palestinian question based on international law, resolutions of international legitimacy, ending the occupation, halting settlement activities and affirming the vision of a two-State solution — one underscored by resolution 2334 (2016) and whose parameters were reiterated in the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice of July of 2024 (see A/78/968), which should be respected. It is necessary to reject any measures that would undermine a sustainable solution to the Palestinian question, including attempts to annex Palestinian territory and violate holy sites. The state of Qatar hopes that the ceasefire agreement will mark the beginning of a new phase of serious work on solving the Palestinian question. Qatar also stresses the importance of supporting Palestinian reconciliation during the next stage. The issue of the governance of the Gaza Strip after the war is purely a Palestinian matter.

In conclusion, we reiterate the state of Qatar's unwavering position on the justice of the Palestinian question and the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to establish their independent, fully sovereign State along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and its recognition as a fully fledged Member of this international Organization.

The President: There are still a number of speakers remaining on the list for this meeting. Given the lateness of the hour, I intend, with the concurrence of members with the Council, to suspend the meeting until 3 p.m.

I would like to sincerely thank the interpreters for their understanding and for having generously given us some of their time to allow more speakers to deliver their statements on this important issue.

The meeting was suspended at 1.30 p.m.