Madam President,

This debate appropriately coincides with the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people. Indeed, the Palestinian people, who have endured a serial tragedy over sixty years, deserve the full solidarity and support of the international community. The United Nations, which has played a central role in the recent history of Palestine, certainly must demonstrate such solidarity with the long-suffering Palestinians. They have suffered decades of foreign occupation, repression and humiliation. They have been subjected to targeted killings, collective punishment, arbitrary detention and countless other violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

2. Pakistan has consistently and vigorously supported the just and legitimate struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination and against foreign occupation. The Palestinian people must be assisted to realize their rightful quest for the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable State with Al-Quds-al-Sharif as its capital.

3. As President Musharraf has repeatedly stated, Palestine is the core issue on the Middle East. It is this conflict which has, over the years, spawned the ever-widening circle of Israel's confrontations with all its Arab neighbours and the wider Arab and Islamic world. It is this conflict which has contributed most significantly to the anger and frustration among the people of the Arab and Islamic world. The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential for peace and stability throughout the Middle East region. It is also essential to end extremism and eliminate terrorism.

4. Despite the visible implications for peace and security in the Middle East, Israel has persisted, so far, in pursuing actions and policies that have rendered a solution more difficult. Hope was briefly aroused by the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza last year. But it was soon extinguished – paradoxically – pursuant to democratic elections in Palestine. The Palestinians, and their elected government, was quarantined, physically and fiscally; Gaza soon reoccupied; Palestinian legislators and Cabinet Ministers abducted and imprisoned. Meanwhile, Israel continued the construction of new settlements in the occupied West Bank and the illegal separation wall. It rejected negotiations, even with President Abbas. The Quartet’s road map disappeared off the political map.

5. We see hope in the recent ceasefire declared by the Palestinians and Israelis. We hope this will be sustained and extended to encompass all occupied territories. We trust that for Tel Aviv this is not a cosmetic step designed to coincide with high-level visits to the region.

6. It is Pakistan’s hope that there will be an urgent endeavour to provide focus and momentum for a just solution to the core issue of Palestine. Only thus, can the international community achieve its other aims of promoting peace in other areas of the Middle East.
7. Building on the ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Israel and the Palestinians should take additional confidence-building measures. Israel should release Palestinian prisoners, including Cabinet members and legislators; remove checkpoints and other obstacles to facilitate access and movement of civilians and humanitarian workers; halt and reverse construction of the separation wall; freeze settlement activities and dismantle outposts; release customs and VAT payments to the Palestinian Authority; and accept negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas.

8. To the Palestinians, we appeal that they take firm steps to stop maverick rocket attacks, secure release of the captured Israeli soldier, achieve internal cohesion and establish a national unity Government, with powers delegated to the Palestinian Authority, and to President Abbas, to negotiate peace with Israel. In that regard, we welcome the efforts underway for establishing a unity government.

9. Such confidence-building measures could pave the way for resumption of the peace process with the support and, as necessary, the intercession of the Security Council, the Secretary-General, the Quartet, and all others who are in a position to assist the peace process. Pakistan remains ready to contribute to such a process. We also support the call, reiterated by the OIC, to convene an international conference aimed at achieving a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. The basic framework and elements for such a comprehensive peace are already present in previous agreements, the relevant Security Council resolutions, including 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative, and the Quartet’s Road Map.

Madam President,

10. We are confident that genuine progress on Palestine will contribute to progress on other aspects of the Middle East crisis – including the Israeli-Syrian dispute over occupied Golan; the stabilization of Lebanon; staunching the complex and chaotic conflict in Iraq; and reduction of tensions throughout the region. This will require determined and visionary diplomacy, especially by those who wield power and influence with the principal parties. Such diplomacy is essential if we are to defy the dire predictions of disaster in the Middle East that abound today.

I thank you, Madam President