Mr. President,

Allow me at the outset to congratulate you on the assumption of the President of the Council for this month. Permit me also, to congratulate Ambassador Churkin of the Russian Federation on a successful Presidency of the Council for the month of January.

2. We thank you for convening this meeting on this most important issue at this crucial and delicate time. Since the Council last convened a public meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, notable developments have taken place in the region, which is now long used to living in hope and despair side by side.

3. While there was hope in the respite in violence brought about by the ceasefire in Gaza, this proved to be short lived when yet again the region was thrown into despair by Israeli actions in and around the Haram Al-Sharif Compound. We fully support the statement delivered by the NAM and OIC.

4. Although media reports claim that the controversial construction work near the Al-Aqsa Masjid is to be put off to allow public consultations, preparatory excavations still continue, much to the anguish of Muslims the world over. These actions are illegal and play with the emotions of the Muslim world, and threaten peace and security in the region.

5. The Al-Aqsa Masjid is the third holiest place for Muslims – the site of the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). We are distressed that, already the historic road connecting the Bab-al-Maghariba with the Al-Aqsa Compound has been demolished, in addition to two rooms adjacent to the Al Buraq Wall. The excavation work undermines the foundations of Al-Aqsa and could threaten it with collapse.

6. Since 1968, the Security Council has adopted 16 resolutions, in particular resolution 465 (1980), which repeatedly declared that measures and arrangements taken by Israel which aim at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the Holy City of Jerusalem -Al-
Quds Al-Shareef - are null and void and without any legal validity what so ever.

7. These acts undermine the efforts that the International Community is undertaking to resume the peace process. They also prejudice the final status negotiations by creating new realities on the ground.

8. We call on the Council to fulfill its responsibilities and to take urgent action to end the Israeli violations against the Al-Aqsa Masjid. We call on Israel to respect the Council’s resolutions and international law, particularly international humanitarian law. We strongly urge the Israeli side to halt all work at the site and take all necessary precautions for the preservation of the Holy places.

9. While these Israeli actions pose new obstacles to peace, the Muslim world has been engaged in sincere endeavours to promote peace in Palestine and the Middle East with the active intercession of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Fatah and Hamas have reached an agreement in Mecca to form a National Unity government.

10. Security Council and the Quartet should welcome this development. A Palestinian Unity government willing to negotiate peace with Israel is a positive development. This should lead to an end to the economic boycott of the Palestinian government. It should lead to concerted efforts to ensure the stability of the Palestinian Authority and enhancing its capacity to preserve peace and promote development.

Mr. President,

11. The Israeli-Palestine issue is at the heart of the multiple challenges that confront the Middle East. A comprehensive, just and lasting solution based on Security Council Resolutions 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 is urgently needed.

12. In the context of the increasing and multiple threats to peace and security in the Middle East, President Musharraf recently visited several Islamic countries to consult their leaders on ways and means to address and overcome the threats arising from the Palestinian problem, the Israeli-Syrian difficulties (over Golan) as well as the phenomenon of violent resistance to the injustices suffered by the Muslim world. A core group of Muslim
countries has been constituted to evolve a comprehensive approach to the multiple crises besieging the Middle East, including providing fresh impetus to resolving the long standing Arab-Israeli conflict. The President of Pakistan has explained this new initiative to the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates, where it has found general support and understanding. We hope that a group of leading Muslim countries will soon meet at a high-level to bring their collective weight to bear in favour of a just and fair solution to the Palestinian question and other problems afflicting the Middle East. The Security Council should actively support these efforts.

Thank you.