Madam President,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Council on the regional crisis – not a crisis in Syria with regional consequences – requiring sustained and comprehensive engagement from the international community. The security, economic, political, social, development and humanitarian consequences of this crisis are extremely grave and its human impact immeasurable in terms of the long term trauma and emotional impact on this and future generations of Syrians. Family and community networks destroyed; Syria's reputation for secularism and tolerance eroded, with sectarianism on the rise and the long term consequences of internal displacement and significant refugee flows unknown. We are not only watching the destruction of a country but also of its people.

Madam President,

When I last briefed the Council I spoke of the impact of this crisis on all Syrians. That remains the case today with rising levels of unemployment, the currency in free fall, vital infrastructure destroyed including schools and hospitals, electricity and water supplies disrupted with damage to physical infrastructure, lack of personnel and limited investment.

WHO has repeatedly warned about the heightened risks of communicable disease outbreaks, including water-borne diseases such as diarrhea, typhoid, cholera and hepatitis. Vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles, have reappeared due to a drop in national vaccination coverage.

6.8 million Syrians require urgent humanitarian assistance, 4.2 million are internally displaced, 50 per cent of those requiring assistance are children. Syrian refugees in neighboring countries now exceed 1.7 million. High Commissioner Guterres will brief you on this in more detail. Of the 525,000 Palestine refugees hosted in Syria, UNRWA estimates that 420,000 require humanitarian assistance. And the latest assessment from WFP and FAO shows 4 million people unable to meet their basic food needs.

These statistics hide an unfolding of a human tragedy.
Despite the worsening security situation, UN agencies and partners continue to deliver assistance to people in need. In May WFP provided food assistance to 2.5 million people. Access of 2.4 million people to drinking water has been restored with UNICEF’s support. 1.7 million people have directly benefited from health interventions. A vaccination campaign by WHO and UNICEF reached more than 1 million children. Many of those who have received assistance are in areas under the control of armed opposition groups or in areas of active conflict. In May, 42 per cent of those who received food assistance lived in such areas.

Delivery through cross-line inter-agency convoys continues. Since the end of January, our teams on the ground have reached more than 1.4 million people across conflict lines. These are the most challenging of areas to reach but also where the needs are greatest.

Madam President,

It is important that recognition is given to the humanitarian work being undertaken inside Syria despite considerable constraints, but that help is insufficient to meet the needs identified. While humanitarian staff work tirelessly to assist affected Syrians, gaps in the response remain considerable. While we know where those considered most vulnerable are located, humanitarian organisations are still not able to get regular, consistent and unimpeded access to millions of affected people.

Some locations remain inaccessible due to active fighting or insecurity. But there are other areas, sometimes only a few kilometres away from our offices – including in Damascus and Homs – where we are not granted authorisation to enter. For example despite repeated requests, UN agencies continue to be denied access to 25,000 people in Moadhamiya in Rural Damascus. In Al Qusayr, with the exception of a UNICEF generator that was delivered in the vicinity of the town, the call of the Security Council on the Government of Syria to enable immediate and unhindered humanitarian access was rejected until the fighting had subsided and most inhabitants had fled.

Last month, Government forces launched an offensive in Homs. The Old City of Homs has been under siege by Government forces for well over a year. A large number of different armed groups have established positions in the area and are exposing civilians to a high risk. An estimated 2,500 civilians are trapped in the Old City and have not received any significant humanitarian assistance over the past year. They lack food, have no access to safe drinking water and their health status is deteriorating. Opposition groups have so far not enabled them safe passage to leave and the Government of Syria has refused to allow agencies to deliver assistance into the Old City.

All attempts by aid agencies to significantly assist or evacuate civilians from Homs Old City have so far failed. UN agencies have prepositioned supplies across Homs City to assist 40,000 people, should the situation deteriorate even further and access to those in need be granted.

We have also seen an escalation of conflict in Aleppo with reports suggesting that it has been difficult for people to leave the area due to insecurity combined with a lack of fuel and public transport. A UN cross line convoy arrived on Sunday, with 15 trucks loaded with vital medicines, non-food items and food. However, these supplies are insufficient
to cover deep and ever-growing needs and many civilians are still ‘trapped’ in the city. Our team reported a harrowing journey that took 4 days through some of the most insecure parts of the country.

Madam President,

We are seeing a pattern replicated across Syria. Entire neighbourhoods and their inhabitants put at risk, with Government and opposition military positions being established in residential areas. Indiscriminate attacks are repeatedly launched on towns and villages. Parties to the conflict systematically and in many cases deliberately fail in their obligation to protect civilians. Reports indicate open and blatant violation of the rules of war, with total disregard for human life and dignity, in a climate of generalized impunity. The parties must be reminded that they will be held accountable for their actions.

I have reported previously to the Council on the bureaucratic procedures imposed by the Government of Syria which have impeded humanitarian efforts. Partner UN agencies report some progress in the issuance of visas with many agencies receiving visas in shorter time frames. However others such as the DSS continue to face problems. Without sufficient security officers and advisers on the ground, humanitarian partners are restricted in their operations and reach.

Lengthy customs procedures still delay the importation and distribution of vital humanitarian goods and equipment. Two humanitarian hubs have been opened but there is no progress on the establishment of two additional hubs requested more than one year ago. Implementing capacity remains limited. There are still only 14 international NGOs allowed to operate in Syria. The number of national NGOs approved to work with UN organisations has increased to 69, but the problems persist in the number of national NGOs allowed to operate in areas with some of the greatest needs. For example in Idlib, Dara’a and Raqqa we are only authorized to partner with 3 or fewer NGOs.

For the first time in many months essential surgical medical supplies were allowed into Aleppo. We hope that distribution to all locations will be permitted. Distribution of such items has been restricted across conflict lines to opposition-held areas, in direct violation of International Humanitarian Law. The growing number of opposition groups also pose serious difficulties in negotiating access in opposition-controlled areas.

UN agencies have identified 2.8 million people in the most affected areas who have been difficult to reach with assistance over the past two years, despite their desperate situation. We urgently need to address this. We need a mix of approaches to address the humanitarian challenges which face us in Syria.

We need:
- Designating empowered interlocutors, so that agencies can engage with someone with the necessary authority to address constraints;
- Lifting bureaucratic constraints, as already mentioned;
- The granting of free passage of medical supplies and demilitarizing medical facilities.

We need:

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.
- Prior notification to civilians/aid convoys of military offensives;
- Designation of priority humanitarian routes, including across front lines, to allow safe passage of convoys.

We need:
- The use of humanitarian pauses in fighting to allow access to people;
- And as appropriate cross border operations.

And crucially we need the funding to support our work - an additional $3.1 billion to meet the needs of people in Syria and neighbouring countries for the rest of this year.

Madam President,

We have all said repeatedly that only a genuine political process can prevent Syria from sliding into deeper fragmentation and chaos. We are looking to this Council to exercise its leadership role in that regard.

I would like to conclude by echoing the Secretary-General’s call to the parties for a cease-fire during the holy month of Ramadan.

Thank you.