Mr President and distinguished representatives,

The conflict in Syria continues to grind on, day by day, month by month. A conflict where there can be no victory on the battlefield, a conflict which will not end by the use of force. All that this relentless and senseless fighting provides are hollow advances or retreats, leaving behind utter devastation for the civilians left in its wake. I don’t need to paint a picture, you have seen them along with the rest of the world, an outraged world – not an indifferent world, but an indignant, furious world that can’t understand why you, the Security Council, can’t fix it.

So, we must be clear: 13.5 million people are caught in a protection crisis that threatens their lives on a daily basis. It affects so many because we have seen time and again a complete disgraceful disregard for the rules of war, subjecting civilians to the horrifying reality of bombs raining down on schools, hospitals and residential areas every day.

The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in urban areas is unconscionable, with the utmost consequences for civilians in the immediate and long term. We know this. Those fighting know this. Those who support the different parties know it too. And, for sure, those civilians who have suffered years of war know this. When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, 92 per cent of people killed or injured are civilians. Ninety-two per cent. And those who might be lucky enough to survive the bombs, but whose homes are destroyed and are forced to flee face a whole new set of protection challenges – from mines and unexploded ordinance, to forced conscription, sexual abuse and violence, to restrictions on basic rights such as freedom of movement.

It is our duty as fellow human beings to stand up and say enough. To demand an end to these practices. To stop the needless death, and to help those whose lives have already been destroyed.

Mr President,
Each month, the United Nations and humanitarian partners do all in our power, in the face of extreme difficulty, to reach those who are most in need. Again my admiration and tribute to the courage and persistence of the humanitarian aid workers on the ground – from the United Nations and our international and. Particularly, national partners – knows no bounds. And they are not a target – or shouldn’t be – but sadly in Syria today they are.

So far this month we have reached the hard-to-reach locations of Talbiseh and Ar-Rastan in northern Homs with convoys, and reached besieged East Harasta, in rural Damascus. Despite our best efforts, we continue to have supplies consistently removed from our trucks before we can even deploy. Nearly 200,000 treatments have been forcibly removed this year alone. The removal of these treatments is the removal of life-saving aid for those in need – treatments, medicines, a chance at life – and it must be brought to an end. We must be able to deliver based on need.

Further, the United Nations and humanitarian partners continue to be delayed and blocked by bureaucratic restrictions that limit our ability to reach civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Delays in facilitation letters continue to slow the process for deploying inter-agency cross-line convoys. This need not be a cause for delay; they are not for the thousands of facilitation letters that are approved each month to areas where regular programming deploys. For example, WFP requested 1,795 facilitation letters to provide aid and only had three that did not receive a positive response from authorities. Although the most egregious bureaucratic restrictions are from the Government of Syria, we are increasingly seeing other groups operating in non-government controlled areas also implementing procedures that slow or impinge upon humanitarian principles. I call for all parties to the conflict to allow needs based, unhindered, and sustained access to humanitarians. They must also be safe. I am also placing on the record here before you today – asking you to do something about it – my specific concern regarding recent security threats against humanitarians delivering aid.

While we were eventually successful in delivering to East Harasta on 19 June, an attempted convoy two days earlier illustrates the bureaucratic and security challenges faced by the United Nations and humanitarian partners. Delays in loading the convoy resulted in a late departure from the warehouse, slowed only further by long forced stops at checkpoints. After sitting for hours at the last Government of Syria checkpoint, the green light to remove the barriers and allow the trucks to cross was only given as evening approached. The security risk of waiting additional hours in the darkness while the barriers were removed was too great, so the decision was made to abort and return the next day. At that point, the convoy came under sniper fire as unknown gunmen lying in wait attacked. A SARC driver was hit, and another grazed by sniper fire as the convoy began its return to Damascus.
I can report that, thankfully, the injured driver survived and is in stable condition. My thoughts and wishes go out to him and his family. I condemn such acts in the strongest terms, and call for accountability for those responsible. Those who deliberately direct attacks against humanitarian workers are committing war crimes.

The impact of the shots fired goes beyond any single person. They are an attack on the entire humanitarian community, and ultimately a clear effort to prevent the delivery of aid to those in need. The safety of humanitarians going about their work is critical because in so many parts of Syria, they are the only life-line for survival for communities trapped, injured and deprived by the conflict.

Mr President,

Changes in the access landscape have been shaped by the signing of local agreements between the Government of Syria and non-State armed opposition groups. These are agreements reached without the United Nations’s involvement. While the result of these agreements often means increased freedom of movement, commercial access, and greater humanitarian access, they should not be viewed as entirely positive developments. They usually also include the relocation of those who fear reprisal or conscription, often to areas where they face serious security and protection concerns.

As a result of these changes, two towns have been removed from the list of besieged locations. The first is the town of Madaya, in rural Damascus. Following an agreement reached as part of negotiations regarding the objectionable tit-for-tat arrangement for the Four Towns of Foah, Kefraya, Madaya and Zabadani, access has improved in Madaya. The UN was able to conduct an assessment visit on 8 June, and the 25,000-30,000 civilians who remain in the town are now able to move in and out of the town by public transportation and private vehicle.

Second, the Al-Wa’er district of Homs city, where I visited in 2015, is also being removed from the besieged list. After reaching a local agreement in March, more than 19,000 individuals moved from the area to Idleb, Jarabulus and northern rural Homs. On 20 May 2017, the Governor of Homs announced that the evacuation process was completed, and the area was again under Government of Syria control. As a result, access to the area has also re-opened, and the United Nations, SARC and NGOs are able to deliver to the area. An estimated 17,500 individuals remain in the area.

There are now 11 besieged locations, with a total population of 540,000 people. Of these, seven are besieged by the Government of Syria, one by both the Government of Syria and non-State armed opposition groups, two by non-State armed opposition groups, and one by ISIL. I call for
safe, unhindered and sustained access again to all those in need, but in particular for these 540,000 people who are trapped and desperate for our assistance.

Mr President,

Notwithstanding the access challenges that remain in Syria, I would also like to acknowledge an important positive development on access. Earlier this month, WFP was able to successfully deploy a convoy of trucks from Aleppo, through Menbij and to Qamishli in Hassakeh governorate. This is a key development, as it will allow us to deliver at scale to north-east Syria, an area that has been short of supplies since the closure of the cross-border access point with Turkey in December 2015. While we have been able to deliver assistance via an air bridge from Damascus, the operation was expensive. The annual savings by moving the mode of delivery from air to land are equivalent to providing food aid for 100,000 people for one year. And as needs increase, we should now be able to deliver at scale.

This is particularly important with growing needs in north-east Syria due to anti-ISIL operations in the area. We have reports of civilian deaths by airstrikes in the region – such as one that resulted in the death of a reported 59 people, leaving another 70 wounded in Abu Kamal in eastern Deir er-Zor governorate on 15 May. At the same time, civilians in these areas face continued threats from ISIL. In Abu Kamal, the airstrike was followed by reported retribution attacks by ISIL against those they accused of providing coordinates.

We have similar concerns in Raqqa city, where on 6 June Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by coalition forces, began the operation to take the city from ISIL, and have in the last days fully encircled it. OHCHR [the Office for the High Commissioner for Refugees] reported yesterday that at least 173 people have been reportedly killed by air and ground strikes since 1 June. Reports of conditions inside the city are extremely dire, with limited access to food, water and basic services. While nearly 25,000 have fled the city since the latest phase of operations began, there are an estimated 50,000-100,000 remaining in the city. People fleeing fighting in Raqqa face a number of protection risks, including punitive measures by ISIL, threats posed by mine contamination, family separation, forced recruitment at checkpoints, and concerns related to those displaced who enter camps and have identification taken or withheld, and movement restricted. People are terrified, and they do not know where to go for safety. We must do more to see civilians caught up in this fight protected. Surely you can imagine being someone caught up – not by your fault – and just not knowing what decision to make for your children.

The United Nations and humanitarian partners are responding to the needs of those who leave as part of its broader response in the north-eastern region. Between 8 and 15 June, food assistance was delivered to more than 94,000 beneficiaries, while 24 tons of medicine were also dispatched
to hospitals in Al-Hassakeh and Qamishli towns, as well as to camps in Mabrouka, Ein Issa, and Al-Karama in Raqqa and Hassakeh governorates.

Mr President,

The signing of the memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas on 4 May created an opportunity to improve the situation of many civilians in Syria. It is critical that de-escalation succeeds, and that we see a sustained calm in these areas. That there has been a temporary reduction of violence in some areas is a positive development. However, other areas are seeing not only continued but even an increase in fighting.

I am particularly concerned for the situation of civilians in Dar’a where intense aerial bombardment and fighting has resulted in civilian deaths and further damage to civilian infrastructure. The fighting is also reaching close to the southern border, and has resulted in the delay of some cross-border humanitarian shipments from Jordan. Despite the insecurity causing delays, the United Nations and its partners have been able to continue cross-border deliveries to those in need. Please never for a second underestimate the sheer courage it takes to persist in the deliveries by those humanitarian aid workers there on the ground, not us sitting comfortably round this table; we owe them protection as well as our limitless thanks and financial support.

I would also highlight that we are delivering aid to those in the Berm, and have now reached 75 per cent of the population at Ruqban since the second cycle started in early May. Access to both Berm areas is in large part due to the strong support we receive from the Government of Jordan. I would like to thank them for their positive collaboration and look forward to their increased support to ensure that lifesaving assistance continues to be delivered to the people in need.

As the United Nations and humanitarian partners are working on the ground to reach those in need, I remain hopeful that the results of the meeting in Astana next week will bring about a positive development and see a sustained reduction of fighting, and along with that improved and unhindered humanitarian access to these areas.

Mr President,

In conclusion, I repeat my call for this Council to act now to protect civilians – for those sitting around this table who are active in the conflict to incorporate protection of civilians fully into your military planning. For those with influence on the parties to the conflict, prioritize protection of civilians in all engagements with them. These are legal obligations under the laws of war, and they cannot be bent, broken or avoided. Accountability is key. Of course, wherever possible the evidence is being collected, photographed, documented, preserved and stored for the
appropriate courts in due course – preferably soon to defer this continued flagrant, blasé disregard for life and the law.

I call on all members of this Council to do more to ensure humanitarian access, allowing us to reach those in need. While the besieged population has lowered again, their needs remain high. And those who have moved to other hard-to-reach areas continue to require our urgent and sustained support as well.

Immediate steps must be taken to ensure against further attacks on humanitarian workers. This is not solely a matter of humanitarian protection; it is about ensuring that those in need can continue to be reached. One important step in this regard is to end the bureaucratic delays that leave convoys vulnerable by waiting at checkpoints or operating at night. Another is to ensure there is no impunity for such attacks. I also call for those with influence to identify and, where possible, help secure the release of the 29 missing and detained United Nations staff members in Syria.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to see a sustained reduction in violence that is so necessary for progress on any front. Ending the fighting will ease the burden on civilians and create an environment conducive for assistance. Now is the time. It was time last month, the month before, the year before. More delay is, hauntingly, more deaths, more maimed, injured, scarred in body and in mind for the rest of their time on this earth. Will I be saying the same thing next month? Yes, if you sit on your hands or wring them impotently. This is in your hands, but together, jointly. Please hold hands, each other’s hands and let’s not just say “no more”; in the name of humanity, let’s deliver no more death for Syrians.

I thank you, Mr. President.