High Commissioner, Thank you.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address this important session of the Human Rights Council, and speak before such a distinguished panel of Syrian civil society representatives and Human Rights Defenders.

As we enter the 7th year of the conflict, 13.5 million Syrians require protection and assistance. Needs have reached unprecedented levels of complexity, scale and severity. Since 2011, over half of all Syrians have been forced to flee their homes – 6.3 million of whom are internally displaced. The protection of civilians is a significant concern across all Governorates.

At the end of January 2017, nearly 650,000 people were living in 13 areas under siege without benefit of regular assistance and with no freedom of movement. Indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and medical facilities, by all parties to Syria’s conflict, have been extensively documented. In 2016, the UN verified 38 attacks on education facilities and personnel, while there were confirmed reports of 338 attacks on health care facilities across Syria killing dozens of health care workers.

The protection of civilians is a central concern in all humanitarian operations in Syria. However, preventing and responding to violations of International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in such a context is uniquely challenging for humanitarians.

We reach millions of Syrians via regular and cross-border programming each month. However, humanitarian agencies are too often unable to deliver life-saving assistance and protection services in a timely and sustained basis to the 4.7 million people who live in besieged and hard to reach areas; this includes over 1.3 million people in areas controlled by ISIS.

Indicative of our access challenges, last month, for the first time since the establishment of the International Syria Support Group and its Task Force on Humanitarian Access, not a single inter-agency cross-line convoy of the 20 we requested was accomplished.
The Emergency Relief Coordinator has repeatedly called for all parties to respect the laws of armed conflict. Advocacy by humanitarians on the ground continues but is more often private than public. In such a complex setting, it is essential to ensure strong strategic leadership on questions of human rights.

The focus of today’s High Level Panel discussion on human rights in Syria is arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and enforced disappearances. Like everyone in the humanitarian community, I am appalled by reports from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the OHCHR and others, of the murder, torture and inhuman treatment of Syrians, by all sides, particularly of those who are deprived of their liberty.

Neutral and impartial international humanitarian agencies, such the ICRC, must be given immediate and unhindered access to detainees and detention facilities in order to prevent further abuses, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances.

In this respect, I would like to take this opportunity to bring to the attention of Member States our serious concerns about the situation of Syrians involved in humanitarian activities inside Syria.

As part of the Whole of Syria approach, over the course of 2016, humanitarian partners reached a combined 11.2 million people in Syria with multi-sectoral assistance. Cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan continues to represent a core element of the humanitarian response. The majority of humanitarian assistance is provided by a wide array of NGO partners on the ground.

Thousands of Syrians, working for either national or international NGOs, many in partnership with the UN, serve in areas under opposition control. They have played, and are playing, a critical role in not only providing humanitarian assistance but have been deeply involved in maintaining essential services such as health and education.

They have also suffered hundreds of casualties along the way. At least 66 humanitarian workers were killed and 114 wounded in the first nine months of 2016 alone.

Today, as conflict lines shift, the future safety, freedom and well-being of humanitarian workers, medical and civil defense staff needs to be guaranteed. The Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria continues to document cases of arbitrary arrests of humanitarian workers suspected of
supporting armed groups, most recently during the evacuation of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, where three humanitarian workers were reportedly arrested.

There are credible reports from partners operating outside the Government’s areas of control that humanitarian programmes are being shut down. Last month, in the south of the country, many NGO staff were reportedly unable to flee the advance of ISIL-affiliate Jaysh Khalid Bin al-Walid (JKBW) and have since gone radio silent.

In 2015 and 2016 alone, eighteen staff covered by the UN Security Management system were arrested in Syria. As of today, one UNDP national staff remains in detention and 27 UNRWA Area Staff are arrested, detained or missing. While we have secured the release of many of our UN national staff, ongoing arrests and detention of UN staff is a matter of great concern and indicative of the protection risks that all humanitarian workers face.

I urge Member States and UN agencies to consider how they can ensure the safety, security and freedom from arbitrary detention and future well-being of humanitarian personnel. Attacks that kill and injure aid workers must immediately cease. It is also vital for the future of Syria to retain, protect and capitalize on the significant human capacity that has developed over the last 6 years through humanitarian programmes.

Thank you.