Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

This month marks the eighth year since the Syria crisis began. Eight years of lives being uprooted. Eight years of families being torn apart. Eight years of children being needlessly exposed to traumatic violence.

And eight years on, the humanitarian crisis in Syria is far from over. United Nations assessments indicate that 11.7 million people require humanitarian assistance and protection inside the country in 2019. More than 5.6 million Syrians live as refugees across the region. And while violence has decreased in many locations, in others, recent weeks have seen increasing numbers of civilians killed and injured.

Mr. President,

The situation in Idlib and surrounding areas in the north-west of Syria remains of grave concern.

The agreement to establish a demilitarized zone announced by the Russian Federation and Turkey on 17 September last year, was followed by a reduction in violence across much of the north-west. But recent weeks have seen an alarming spike in civilian casualties and new displacement, with increased shelling along frontlines, an intensification of air strikes, and a growing number of attacks involving improvised explosive devices in urban areas, including Idlib city. Residential areas in Aleppo city have also been targeted with mortar and sniper fire.

Last month alone, 90 people were killed, of whom nearly half were children. At least 86,000 people have also reportedly been displaced by this latest upsurge of violence. Health facilities, including a hospital in Saraqeb city which had been deconflicted with the parties through established procedures, and schools are reported to have been hit.

Last August, the Secretary-General spoke about the “growing risks of a humanitarian catastrophe in the event of a full-scale military operation in Idlib”. Today these risks continue to loom large.
Humanitarian organizations continue to respond to needs in Idlib and to prepare for the possibility of further deterioration. But, as we have stated previously, a full-scale military onslaught in the area would overwhelm humanitarian response capacities.

We therefore reiterate the Secretary-General’s call for all parties to exercise restraint and to prioritize the protection of civilians. It is critical that respect for international humanitarian law and human rights are at the centre of the parties’ military efforts to address the challenging situation on the ground in the north-west.

Mr. President,

Tens of thousands of displaced people – the vast majority of whom are women and children – have continued to arrive at Al Hol camp in Hassakeh Governorate from south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

Most new arrivals are in extremely poor health, with many showing signs of distress and suffering from trauma injuries, malnutrition and fatigue. They have undergone a grueling journey of hundreds of kilometres in open trucks, in many cases after an extended period of exposure to intense hostilities, and after years of living in a situation of extreme deprivation and human rights abuse under ISIL rule.

Since early December, it is estimated that more than 140 people have died either on the way to Al Hol or shortly after arrival in the camp, of whom some 80 per cent are children under the age of 5.

The population of Al Hol now exceeds 72,000 – an increase of more than 25,000 over the past month – with indications that more people could still be on the way. The UN and its humanitarian partners have rapidly mobilized a major relief operation and continue to scale up the response, in many cases redirecting capacities and stocks from other parts of the country.

Food, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, non-food items, health, and protection services are now being provided for the new arrivals. In line with humanitarian principles, needs-based assistance is also being provided to women and children from third countries, including family members of suspected foreign fighters.

But the situation remains extremely challenging, with the rate of new arrivals far exceeding the capacity of the site. Expansion efforts are underway. It is critical that Member States continue to support humanitarian organizations impartially providing life-saving assistance in Al Hol.

Mr. President,

The situation in Al Hol and in south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor presents a number of complex protection challenges. Among them is the notable absence of adult males and adolescent boys over the age of 15 in the camp. The parties have clear obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to treat all persons within their power humanely and to allow
persons deprived of their liberty to communicate with their families. Special protections are also provided to all children under the age of 18, including those affiliated with fighters.

In Hajin, Baghouz and other areas most directly affected by counter-ISIL operations, extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure is reported, and high levels of explosive hazard contamination will represent an additional serious obstacle to the safe return of the tens of thousands of civilians displaced from the area. Rapid mobilization of explosive hazard clearance capacities is needed, in line with the parties’ obligations under international humanitarian law.

Mr. President,

The United Nations welcomes efforts in support of durable solutions for the more than 41,000 people who remain stranded in the Rukban makeshift settlement. Some 95 per cent of the people surveyed by United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent teams last month expressed a desire to leave the settlement, although most also highlighted various protection concerns.

Movement out of Rukban has taken place in recent days. Some 362 people left the settlement on 23 March, passing through a Government checkpoint and transit site, and arriving, on 24 March, at a collective shelter in Homs city, where they received humanitarian assistance from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, with United Nations support. Further gradual movement is expected in the coming weeks.

Discussions are ongoing with the main parties involved, including the Government of Syria, the Russian Federation, the United States and the Government of Jordan to further clarify the process and to address the concerns that have been raised by people in Rukban.

The United Nations continues to reiterate the importance of a carefully planned, principled approach that ensures respect for core protection standards and does not expose vulnerable, and in many cases traumatized, displaced people to additional harm. All movements must be voluntary, safe, well-informed and dignified, with humanitarian access assured throughout.

In parallel, the United Nations also continues to strongly advocate for additional humanitarian assistance for those who remain in Rukban. Deployment of a third convoy has therefore been requested, to allow essential needs to be met ahead of the Ramadan period which begins in early May. Food, medicines and other life-saving supplies delivered in February are already running low, and replenishment of stocks will become increasingly urgent over the coming weeks.

Mr. President,

Earlier this month, the Secretary-General noted that “As the conflict enters its ninth year, Syrians continue to suffer from one of the worst conflicts of our time”. The Secretary-General appealed for protection of civilians in Idlib and broader respect for international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as highlighting the importance of continued improvements in sustained humanitarian access.
The scale of the humanitarian challenges facing the people of Syria remains staggering by any measure. International support for efforts to respond to the needs of millions of Syrians remains critical.

At the Third Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region on 14 March, international donors pledged a record $7 billion, to meet needs inside Syria and ensure support for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries.

The Conference was a resounding demonstration of the international community’s continued solidarity with the people of Syria, and with Syria’s neighbours, who continue to host millions of refugees, at great economic cost.

We reiterate our thanks to the donor community for the new funding announced in Brussels and for the billions more that have been provided since the crisis began, saving countless lives. Close to $2.2 billion were provided against the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan alone, covering 65 per cent of the requirements requested for operations inside Syria. We appeal for the pledges made in Brussels to be quickly converted into contributions for 2019.

We commend the Government of Turkey for its hospitality in hosting close to two-thirds of the total number of registered Syrian refugees, and for facilitating help to millions more inside Syria, including through cross-border operations authorized by the Security Council.

In addition, we express our appreciation to the Governments and people of Jordan and Lebanon, hosting the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the world, as well as those of Iraq and Egypt, where efforts towards inclusive policies are making a huge difference to refugees’ lives.

Humanitarian organizations have shown that they can deliver. An average of 5.5 million people were reached with assistance inside Syria each month last year, from Damascus and through cross-border channels.

Continued international engagement and support will allow us to build on this in 2019, sustaining and further strengthening what is one of the largest and most complex aid operations ever implemented.

We remain firmly committed to implementing principled, needs-based humanitarian action across all areas of Syria, working with Syrian counterparts and communities. Protection, saving lives and restoring dignity will remain at the centre of our efforts.

Thank you, Mr. President.