



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8609th meeting

Thursday, 29 August 2019, 10.10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Ms. Wronecka	(Poland)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Yao Shaojun
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
	Equatorial Guinea	Mrs. Mele Colifa
	France	Mrs. Gueguen
	Germany	Mr. Schulz
	Indonesia	Mr. Djani
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Duclos
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	South Africa	Mr. Mabhongo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Hickey
	United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/674)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/674)

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, and Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2019/674, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018).

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: I again want to start today with the situation around Idlib, on which we have briefed the Security Council many times over the past four months. The Secretary-General issued another statement on 20 August expressing deep concerns about the continued escalation. He strongly condemned the continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on health-care and educational facilities, and urged the parties to fully respect international humanitarian law.

On 21 August, the Secretary-General issued his latest report (S/2019/674), which you just referred to, Madam President, on the implementation of the Council's resolutions on Syria. The report covers the period up to the end of July.

In summary, according to conservative estimates, more than 500 civilians have been killed, and many hundreds more injured, since the start of the escalation in north-west Syria in late April. The World Health Organization and UNICEF report that 43 health-care facilities, 87 educational facilities, 29 water stations and seven markets have been impacted by fighting since April. The Secretary-General's report reminds us that those attacks have been confirmed using tried and tested systems, whereby the United Nations receives reports from partners on the ground and reviews them against at least two other independent sources.

I believe Geir Pedersen, in his statement, will touch on recent military and political developments in the area. I want to give the Council a few examples of the humanitarian consequences that we have seen since my deputy last updated Council members on 14 August. Over the weekend from 16 to 18 August, an additional 44 civilians were reportedly killed owing to air strikes, including 16 children and 12 women. Attacks also reportedly impacted two schools in Hish, one in Ma'arat Hurmah and one in Hazarin. On Monday, 15 civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed in air strikes on seven communities in Idlib. And this morning we received reports that yesterday 17 more people, including three women and seven children, were killed by air strikes and that a health-care facility in Ghadqa town was damaged.

Over the past three weeks, since the collapse of the conditional ceasefire on 5 August, dozens of communities have emptied out in northern Hamah and southern Idlib. Satellite imagery shows that entire towns and villages have been razed to the ground. Most of those who can are fleeing northwards, further into Idlib governorate and closer to the Turkish border. Those who stay behind are covering in basements or in what is left of their homes.

Approximately 576,000 individual displacement movements have been recorded by United Nations-supported systems since May. In order to give the Council a sense of scale, that is three to four times the number recorded during the violence in eastern Ghouta early last year, and almost 75 per cent more than was seen during the offensive in southern Syria in mid-2018. Many of those people are living in the open air, frequently protected only by a plastic sheet. Approximately 100 schools have been turned over for displaced people, compromising their ability to provide education for children.

On 22 August, following advances in many areas of northern Hamah and southern Idlib, the Syrian authorities announced once again the opening of the Morek-Souran crossing point for civilians wishing to leave the area. We understand that the Syrian authorities have stationed buses in the area and that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has been asked to prepare for possible population movements.

There are two shelters with a capacity of 150 families identified in Souran to receive people. The United Nations and humanitarian partners have mobile teams ready to respond in the area should civilians decide to use the crossing point. From the information available to us, however, it appears that relatively few people are opting to move in that direction, compared to the much larger number of people preferring to move north and west further into Idlib.

One dimension of the Idlib conflict that we have not covered much in our previous briefings, but is covered by the Secretary-General's latest report, is the impact on agricultural activities in northern Hamah and southern Idlib governorates. Traditionally, large parts of the agricultural area in Idlib, considered to be among of the most fertile land in the country, are cultivated for wheat. Shelling, air strikes and widely reported fires have contributed to the destruction of crops and damage to farming equipment. Much of the harvest has been lost, and the capacity to prepare the soil for the new planting season is compromised.

I and other United Nations officials have repeatedly called on the parties and the Council to ensure respect for international humanitarian law. The rules are clear. The parties must at all times apply the principles of distinction and precaution in the conduct of hostilities and take all the necessary steps to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure from attacks and the effects of violence. People's homes, hospitals, schools, water systems and markets must be protected. There can be no reason, rationale, excuse or justification for the destruction of civilian areas on the scale seen in Idlib today.

In the months ahead, the board of inquiry, the establishment of which was announced by the Secretary-General, will investigate incidents in north-west Syria that damaged or destroyed facilities that have either been de-conflicted or received humanitarian support from the United Nations.

Despite all the challenges, the humanitarian community is doing everything it can to respond to the needs of the estimated 3 million people in and around Idlib. With some 15,000 aid workers on the ground, humanitarians continue to provide shelter materials, food assistance and health services to the population, including newly displaced people. More than 1 million people receive general food assistance every month.

The people of Idlib are reached exclusively through the cross-border operation — because, as I have said before, that is the only way they can be reached for as long as access from within the country is impeded. It is for that reason that the renewal of resolution 2165 (2014) later this year will be crucial.

Let me update the Council now on Rukban. Dire conditions and the lack of assistance, coupled with the hope for durable solutions, have led many people to leave. Another joint United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent assessment mission took place last week. The purpose was to determine the number of people wishing to leave Rukban and those wishing to stay. The mission informed everyone in the camp about plans for future assisted voluntary departures and assessed the needs of those wishing to stay.

As per our agreement with the Syrian authorities, another mission is planned to Rukban within the next couple of weeks to facilitate the transport of those who said they wanted to leave Rukban for shelters in Homs. All movement must be voluntary, safe, well-informed and dignified, with humanitarian access assured throughout. The agreement is that in the same mission the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent will provide critical humanitarian assistance to those who decide to remain in Rukban.

Let me turn now to Al-Hol. There are currently some 68,600 people in that camp. Approximately 40 per cent of them are Syrians, 45 per cent are Iraqis and 15 per cent are other foreign nationals. Some 94 per cent are women and children, of whom 67 per cent are under the age of 18. Most have been exposed to violence and trauma under the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. They are now living in extremely difficult conditions and face an uncertain fate. That includes the risk of being denied repatriation, rehabilitation, reintegration or a fair trial, and the risk of becoming stateless despite having citizenship or a claim to citizenship.

Solutions to those difficult issues need urgently to be found. The United Nations has repeatedly called

on all Member States to take the measures necessary to ensure that their nationals are repatriated for the purposes of prosecution, rehabilitation and/or reintegration, as appropriate, in line with international law and standards. In that effort, it is important that all children under 18 be considered primarily as victims and be duly protected and assisted.

The United Nations has taken note of statements released by the United States and Turkey with regard to their plans to coordinate the establishment of a so-called safe zone in north-eastern Syria. The United Nations is not a party to, and has not been consulted on, that agreement. I must emphasize that any measures taken must ensure the safety and welfare of civilians, including by protecting them from violence, forced displacement or loss of livelihoods, and that sustained, unimpeded and safe humanitarian access to civilians in need must be guaranteed, including through the cross-border programme for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners.

The United Nations and humanitarian agencies run a large relief operation all across Syria, reaching 6 million people in the period covered by the Secretary-General's latest report. Humanitarian assistance provided by United Nations agencies included food for an average 3.6 million people per month and more than 2.1 million health treatments to people around the country. The response this year, however, is significantly less well-funded than it was at this stage in 2018. I would therefore ask all those who made pledges at the Brussels Conference in April to take early action to implement them.

Finally, let me return to Idlib. Three weeks from now it will be one year since the signing of the memorandum of understanding on Idlib — an agreement that called for restraint and aimed to prevent further escalation in north-west Syria. Yet one year on, the bombing and fighting go on in plain sight, day in and day out. Three million people, two thirds of them women and children, count on the Council's support to make the violence stop. I told members last month (see S/PV.8589) what some of them said to me. We cannot turn back the clock on what has happened. But Council members can take meaningful action now to protect civilians and ensure full respect for international humanitarian law. It is within the Council's power to do that.

The President: I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: The scale of violence and instability in Syria is extremely alarming. We have an ever-rising civilian death toll, millions displaced, untold tens of thousands detailed or missing, large parts of the Syrian territory fragmented among various actors, confrontations between States on multiple axes and a resurgent Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant stepping up its guerrilla attacks. But we do not yet have the launch of a real political process. Those dynamics can and must change. Let me highlight the dangers before us and the prospects for launching the political track. Let me also underline the importance of the support of the Security Council if we are to begin to shift the dynamics.

Let me highlight five major immediate concerns regarding the situation on the ground. Let me start with the situation in the north-west. Despite an attempted Russian-Turkish reinstatement of the ceasefire announced in early August, hostilities in and around Idlib quickly resumed. A major Government offensive retook the southern tip of the de-escalation area, pro-Government air strikes, shelling, rockets and mortars continue. More civilians have been killed, as Mr. Lowcock just highlighted, and many more have fled their homes. More health facilities and other civilian infrastructure have been hit, including markets, schools, camps for internally displaced persons and water stations. Towns have been almost entirely depopulated as civilians, including women and children, flee shelling and are stranded without shelter, food or water.

Turkey reported that one of its military convoys into Idlib faced aerial attacks. Meanwhile, its observation post in Morek has been encircled by pro-Government forces — a reminder that the situation risks sparking international conflict. President Putin and President Erdoğan met on Tuesday, 27 August, and indicated that they had reached a common understanding on how to stabilize the situation based on the September 2018 memorandum of understanding. We can only welcome that high-level diplomacy and that statement and hope that it will bring calm to Idlib. But let me express the gravest concern that the violence is, so far, not abating.

No one pretends that there is an easy solution to the challenge of countering the Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham or groups such as Huras Al-Din and foreign terrorist fighters. Their attacks must cease. But counter-terrorism cannot put 3 million civilians at risk. They have the right to

protection under international human rights law and international humanitarian law. The actions killing and displacing them must stop now. The situation in Idlib needs a predominantly political solution.

Secondly, let me turn to the situation in the north-east. Tension flared in July with troop concentrations on the Turkish side of the border. Advances in United States-Turkey talks in August helped avert conflict. We are closely following developments, as the first steps appear to have been taken to implement those interim understandings. But, as the Secretary-General said, a concrete political settlement is needed — one that respects Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity, takes into account legitimate Turkish security concerns, provides for the well-being of the diverse Syrian population in that area and allows their voices to be heard.

Thirdly, with regard to Israeli-Iranian tensions, Israel confirmed that it conducted air strikes on the outskirts of Damascus on 24 August. Israel said its aim was to pre-empt drone attacks staged from Syrian soil, which it stated were being planned by Iranian Al-Quds Force operatives and Shiite militias in Syria. Syrian State media said that Syrian air defence systems had intercepted hostile rockets before they reached their targets. Hizbullah said that two of its fighters were killed in the strikes and has threatened to retaliate from Lebanon. Such escalatory actions are extremely worrisome. I urge all parties and, indeed, all States in the area, to respect the sovereignty of Syria by refraining from attacks and provocations and showing maximum restraint in actions and rhetoric alike.

Fourthly, in south-west Syria, reports of detentions, demonstrations, disappearances and assassinations are a source of serious concern. Mr. Lowcock just highlighted the challenges in Rukban and Al-Hol and I really have nothing to add to that.

Fifthly, let us remember that Syrian families face multipronged dangers of violent conflict, terrorism, displacement, conscription, arbitrary detention, torture, separation, gender-based violence and myriad other protection issues. Syrians also face unprecedented levels of poverty, economic shortcomings and a sense of hopelessness. Millions of Syrian refugees continue to see obstacles to a safe, dignified and voluntary return.

It should be clearer than ever that there is no military solution to the situation in Syria. A nationwide ceasefire, stipulated in resolution 2254 (2015), has

never been more relevant and necessary, including as a matter of international peace and security. And it is clear that only a political process and, ultimately, a political solution can restore Syria's sovereignty, protect the rights and future of all Syrians and begin to address the deep divisions within Syrian society.

That is why, even amid the fighting, I have spared no effort in discharging my mandate to facilitate intra-Syrian negotiations that begin a process to develop a new constitution, pursuant to which free and fair elections, under United Nations supervision, shall take place, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). I have been carefully consulting the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission in order to establish a solid agreement on a credible, balanced and inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee, convened under United Nations auspices in Geneva, that can serve as a door-opener to a broader political process. I thank both the Government and the opposition for the substantive and open dialogue each has with the United Nations.

Throughout, it has been clear that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Nonetheless, there is a strong understanding on two equal co-chairs, one nominated by the Government and the other by the opposition; United Nations facilitation through my good offices; a 75 per cent voting threshold, while striving for consensus; a large body of 150 members and a small body of 45 members; and a clear commitment to guaranteeing the safety and security of the committee members and their relatives.

In early July, I held productive talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Moualem and the leadership of the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission on all remaining details of a package to resolve outstanding names and agree on terms of reference and core rules of procedure. The package is nearly finalized. The outstanding differences are, in my assessment, comparatively minor. I am convinced we can conclude negotiations. I am in contact with both the opposition and the Government. I have also conveyed my readiness to return to Damascus in the very near future as part of completing the work. I am quietly hopeful that the United Nations will be in a position to announce an agreement before the start of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly.

The Governments of Russia and Turkey have been of particular assistance and are fully supporting the

United Nations leadership of the negotiation process on the constitutional committee. I will be visiting Iran shortly and look forward to its continued support. I have no doubt that the summit of the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran planned for mid-September can contribute to the efforts under way.

I appreciate the strong support provided by the United States and several European and Arab countries for the overall United Nations effort, as well as the active support of the European Union. I look forward to visiting and holding consultations in Washington, D.C., later this week. I continue to strongly urge the United States and the Russian Federation to deepen their own direct dialogue, building on the efforts they have made during the year.

In recent months, I have heard some Syrians react with scorn at the notion of progress on the constitutional committee in Geneva while violence surges and no progress is being made on other files. I have found the insights from a broad range of Syrian civil society and Syrian women, including via our Civil Society Support Room and Women's Advisory Board, to be extremely important in that regard. They reveal an underlying reality: a viable process cannot just be about meetings in Geneva. It needs to address real-life problems for Syrians from the outset. To be a meaningful door-opener and to be the moment that turns the page towards a new Syria, the launch of a constitutional committee should be accompanied by measures that have real impact on the ground.

Real action on detainees, abductees and missing persons could be one such measure, if done in a meaningful way and on a meaningful scale. During the reporting period, a fourth simultaneous release operation took place under the umbrella of the Iran-Russia-Turkey-United Nations working group. I am pleased that, owing to the strong insistence of the United Nations, there was clear progress in terms of respect for basic provisions of international humanitarian law. For the first time, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was allowed to act as a neutral intermediary, and members of my team observed the operation, too.

But that and all other release operations to date have been vastly insufficient in scale. In line with resolution 2254 (2015), all sides should engage in unilateral releases and move beyond one-for-one exchanges. I believe that women, children, the sick and the elderly must be

released at scale. The Government and the opposition must collect, protect and manage information they have on individuals they are holding, monitoring or seeking. Again, an internationally recognized neutral intermediary, such as the ICRC, could play a key role in supporting all sides, including families, with the compilation of information on detained and missing persons, as well as in keeping that information safe and handling it confidentially.

With the support of the ICRC, my team has developed procedures for conducting searches for missing persons in Syria in line with international humanitarian law and in the true spirit of resolution 2474 (2019), unanimously adopted by the Council in June. Those procedures will be put on the agenda of the next working group meeting. My invitation for that meeting to take place in Geneva, as part of the working group's rotating consultations, still stands.

International players have the responsibility to deepen their dialogue too, as well as to support the United Nations-facilitated process as we work directly with the Syrian parties. I have no doubt that the Astana format and the small group format will continue. The United Nations takes a practical approach to working with such important groupings. But the time has come to bring together the will embodied in both of those formats and in the permanent membership of the Council in a very practical way, namely, a group of key players in a common forum in Geneva, supporting a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process facilitated by the United Nations in the discharge of its mandate from the Council. If the Syrians are to overcome their mistrust and division and move step by step along the path towards healing Syrian society and restoring Syria's place in the international community, a common international support format for Geneva will be absolutely key. I ask for the Council's support in making that happen.

I am deeply conscious of the profound grief and suffering of the Syrian people everywhere and of the need to end this conflict for the sake of Syria, the Syrian people, the region and the world. We are entering a crucial month for the parties to engage with the United Nations in finalizing the constitutional committee and key international players to stabilize Idlib, the north-east and regional tensions, as well as to come together behind the United Nations effort. That could enable the United Nations to convene a constitutional committee, accompanied by the first steps to overcome deep mistrust, build confidence and offer some hope after

a long period of darkness. It will not be easy, but this is the one path towards a better future for Syria and a step-by-step implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

The President: I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium): I deliver this statement on the humanitarian situation in Syria on behalf of the three co-penholders, namely, Kuwait, Germany and Belgium.

We would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his important briefing today on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The Secretary-General stated last week that he was “deeply troubled by the continued escalation in north-west Syria and the prospect of an offensive deeper into Idlib, which could trigger a new wave of human suffering, possibly impacting up to 3 million civilians ... [and] strongly condemns continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on health-care and educational facilities.” (SG/SM/19705)

Over the past four months, the ongoing military campaign using continuous air strikes, shelling and — reportedly — barrel bombs has caused immense human suffering and taken an enormous toll on the population. It has caused death, displacement and destruction. As described once again in detail by Mr. Lowcock for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) during its briefing, over 500 civilians — including many children — have been killed. Over 400,000 people have fled the violence once or several times, not knowing where to spend the night, with camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) being overcrowded. Hospitals, schools, markets and IDP locations have been targeted, hit and destroyed by air strikes. Many of those strikes occurred in de-confliction zones, which means that the parties that launched the attacks were well aware of their location.

Time after time, we have called upon the parties to uphold the September 2018 memorandum of understanding on Idlib. We have called for the protection of the 3 million civilians living in the region. We have deplored the loss of innocent civilian lives. We have condemned the violations of international humanitarian law and have called for accountability.

We have also condemned the attacks perpetrated by Security Council-designated terrorist groups while, at the same time, reiterating that counter-terrorism efforts can never absolve any of the parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction and proportionality. We have called for a surge in diplomacy among key players to urgently stabilize and de-escalate the situation — tragically, for all concerned on the ground in Syria, to no effect so far. OCHA has repeatedly called for a unified Security Council to take action, a call Mr. Lowcock repeated this morning.

Since the beginning of the de-escalation in Idlib at the end of April, the humanitarian co-penholders have strived to keep the attention of the international community on this important humanitarian situation. We have found support among many around this table. Today we call for the Council to urgently take a unified stance, with us, against this violence that has caused so much human suffering. The situation cannot continue. That is why the co-penholders regarding the humanitarian situation in Syria — Kuwait, Germany and Belgium — have presented a draft resolution to the members of the Council that aims to urgently alleviate the humanitarian situation in Idlib. We look forward to working constructively with all Council members on the text.

In the meantime, our attention also goes to other parts of Syria. In Al-Hol camp, over 70,000 persons still receive humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian agencies have been able to scale up their response, but the situation remains of deep concern nonetheless. In southern Syria, across Dara’a, Quneitra and rural Damascus, where high levels of population movements continue to be recorded, 2.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. In Rukban, the United Nations was able to conduct an assessment mission last week. This is welcome news, but what is crucial now is that the United Nations be permitted back in Rukban in the weeks to come in order to provide assistance to those who decide to stay in the camp and to help others leave in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner.

I would like to conclude this intervention by recalling the following: with the crisis in Idlib in mind, cross-border operations, as renewed under resolution 2449 (2018), are more than ever of life-saving importance. There is no other way to provide adequate support to the 3 million civilians in the area who rely on that mechanism.

(spoke in French)

Allow me to continue with some comments in my national capacity with regard to the political aspect.

First, I wish to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing and his commitment. I wish to assure him that he can count on our full support. We are all aware of what we are facing. There can be no military solution to the Syrian crisis. It can be resolved only through a negotiated political process, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), under the aegis of the United Nations. We support all Mr. Pedersen's efforts to implement the resolution, including the implementation of a national ceasefire, the initiation of a political transition through the holding of national elections, to include the Syrian diaspora, and the fostering of a safe, stable and calm environment.

For my country, the establishment of a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led constitutional committee, facilitated by the United Nations, will be an important step forward, provided that the committee is credible, in other words, balanced, inclusive and representative, and that it works under clear rules and is facilitated by the United Nations. We are in favour of the Special Envoy and the United Nations playing a central role in that process, as envisaged by the Astana guarantors who initiated the idea of the committee. We continue to support the efforts of the Special Envoy in that regard and eagerly await the rapid establishment of the committee. Its establishment, however, is not an end in itself. It must constitute the basis of a credible political process able to bring together all Syrians who seek peace.

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): Let me thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for their briefings. As Secretary of State Pompeo stated in this Chamber last week (see S/PV.8600), we appreciate the opportunity to use the Security Council to confront the complex challenges of the Middle East. There are few places with challenges today greater than those in Syria.

In the recently published report on the situation in Idlib, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reconfirmed that, despite the denials of Al-Assad and his supporters, the greater Idlib area has around 3 million Syrians, roughly 20 per cent of the country's remaining population. More than half the civilians there are children. The report notes that hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured due

to air strikes and shelling since May, and more than 400,000 people are estimated to have fled their homes to escape from violence. The overwhelming majority of those displaced are moving to densely populated areas close to the Turkish border in northern Idlib governorate, where humanitarian assistance is overstretched.

Attacks by the Al-Assad regime, Russia and their allies in north-west Syria continue and have increased in recent weeks. The number of civilians killed, injured or displaced from their homes continues to rise. The Al-Assad regime and its allies are causing devastating harm to civilian infrastructure, including to schools and medical and water facilities. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock emphatically stated moments ago, there can be no justification for that. We saw this tragic story unfold yet again when a targeted air strike in the Ma'arat Hurmah neighbourhood in southern Idlib took the lives of two humanitarian workers, a paramedic and an ambulance driver. Even more barbaric, a White Helmet volunteer who rushed to save their lives was himself killed in an infamous double-tap air strike.

Meanwhile, the past week has seen escalating violence and the regime's capture of Khan Shaykhun, the same town that was victim to a sarin attack by the regime in April 2017 that killed nearly 100 people. The United States supports calls for a resolution to address the situation in Idlib.

These attacks make it impossible to believe that the regime and Russia are being honest when they say that they are not pursuing a military solution to this conflict. We object to the offensive launched by the Al-Assad regime and its allies under the false pretence of counter-terrorism operations. We know what counter-terrorism operations look like and, although we agree that there is a terrorist problem in Idlib, what we are witnessing is not counter-terrorism but, rather, an excuse to continue a violent military campaign against those who refuse to accept the Al-Assad regime as it is. Therefore, we call upon the United Nations to move swiftly with the board of inquiry responsible for investigating attacks on medical facilities in north-west Syria.

The dire the situation in Syria is not limited to Idlib. Throughout the country, more than 6 million internally displaced persons have yet to return to their homes because of continued violence. Millions more live in constant fear for their safety and security, while also lacking basic necessities and a way to provide for themselves and their families. The United States calls

on all members of the Council, as well as our regional partners, to ensure that the United Nations has the ability to freely implement cross-border aid deliveries through all agreed border crossings in accordance with resolution 2449 (2018). There is no substitute for cross-border operations, and it is particularly important now that we are seeing a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib.

We continue to call for full humanitarian access to Rukban and the immediate delivery of critically needed aid, as well as the ability for displaced persons to depart in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner to the location of their choosing if they wish to do so. We do not support forced relocations. Further, it is important that the Syrian regime permit regular access for humanitarian agencies to reach all displaced people in need, including those in Rukban.

Repeated failures by the Astana guarantors to maintain a ceasefire between the Al-Assad regime and opposition groups, such as the one two weeks ago, demonstrated that the format is incapable of truly preventing violence or making substantive gains towards a political solution and other mandates of resolution 2254 (2015), including the release of detainees.

The United States strongly supports the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria to establish the constitutional committee, which should be led and launched by the United Nations as an integral part of resolution 2254 (2015). The inability of the Astana guarantors to deliver on the constitutional committee for the past two years shows that the regime and Russia are content to use this format to slow political progress. We call on the members of the Astana group to halt their futile attempt to seize ownership of the political process and instead put their full support behind the Office of the Special Envoy.

On 7 August, the United States and our Turkish counterparts committed to establishing a combined joint operations centre and implementing this security mechanism in north-eastern Syria. We believe that this mechanism will be a viable way to secure and stabilize the border and ensure continuity in the efforts of the Global Coalition. The United States stands with Turkey in calling for the preservation of the 2018 Sochi agreement, as agreed by Turkey and Russia last September.

We call upon all members of the Council to help ensure that efforts to establish a true de-escalation zone

take hold, accompanied by a ceasefire across all Syria, in particular in Idlib and northern Hamah. Progress on a political track is unrealistic unless those conditions are met. Of course, no path forward is possible without the cooperation of the Al-Assad regime and Russia. We call on both to end their violence in Syria and join the international community in a process that will result in the final stabilization of the country.

We also reiterate the call made by the United States and other Council members during our recent meeting on detainees for the Al-Assad regime to immediately release innocent civilians held in regime prisons and to grant impartial and independent international entities access to detention centres in order to begin building mutual trust and the basis for reconciliation that is needed for a lasting peace.

Until then, we will continue to apply pressure through all appropriate means to isolate this murderous and corrupt regime and its allies.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to welcome Special Envoy Mr. Geir Pedersen following his recovery from his illness, and to thank him for his valuable briefing on the developments on the Syrian political track. We also thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

We associate ourselves with the statement made by the Permanent Representative of Belgium, Ambassador Pecsteen de Buytsverve, a short while ago on behalf of the penholders on the Syrian humanitarian situation, namely, Germany, Belgium and Kuwait. I would like to make the following observations in my national capacity.

We are weeks away from the one-year anniversary of the signing of the memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey in September 2018, which at the end of last year and the beginning of this year significantly contributed to de-escalating the situation in the Idlib Governorate, where 3 million people live. However, over the past few months there has been a military escalation in north-western Syria, which has led to the displacement of approximately half a million people and the deaths of at least 500 civilians.

We reiterate our condemnation of the targeting of innocent civilians, health centres and civilian facilities by any party. We reiterate once again the need for all sides to abide by international humanitarian law and

international human rights law. We emphasize that counter-terrorism operations do not absolve any party to a conflict from its obligations under international law, including compliance with the principles of distinction, proportionality, caution and the protection of civilians and civilian targets.

We are concerned that the continued military escalation in north-western Syria will have negative repercussions on the efforts of the Special Envoy and his team to revive the Syrian political process. We stress the need for de-escalation and achieving a ceasefire in order to stop the bloodshed of the brotherly Syrian people, who have suffered greatly over the past few years.

As stated by our colleague, the representative of Belgium, the co-penholder on the Syrian humanitarian situation will work, along with all other Council members, to draw up a draft resolution that would put an end to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib.

We are closely following developments regarding the formation of the long-awaited constitutional committee. We heard what Mr. Pedersen said a while ago. Like him, we hope that an agreement can be reached on the formation of the committee before the opening of the upcoming General Assembly session. We reiterate the need for the constitutional committee to be balanced, inclusive and credible. Moreover, the political process must be supported by confidence-building measures, most notably making progress on the issues of releasing the detainees and prisoners and of the missing persons.

In conclusion, I once again stress that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. There must be a political solution that takes into consideration the aspirations of all Syrians and guarantees the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Mr. Hickey (United Kingdom): I thank the two briefers of the United Nations, which continues to have the United Kingdom's full support for the important work that it is doing.

Since this is my last meeting in the Chamber, I wanted to offer a few reflections on the Council's work on Syria. It weighs heavily on me that, despite the best efforts of many of us in the Chamber, the international community and the Council have failed the people

of Syria. However, we should be in no doubt that the Al-Assad regime bears the primary responsibility for the suffering of the Syrian people, as well as for Da'esh. And we cannot forget Russia's 12 vetoes to protect the Al-Assad regime. The Syrian people have endured unspeakable suffering and continue to do so. The regime has bombed them with chemical weapons. It has systematically tortured and murdered its opponents. It has targeted civilians through mass indiscriminate aerial bombardment. That is still happening this week, as we saw through the horrific images of the violence in Ma'arat Al-Numan yesterday.

Eight years on from the start of this conflict, we should not forget why it began. In the spring of 2011, ordinary Syrians, among them teachers, students and doctors, took to the streets of Damascus, Dara'a, Homs and other towns and cities across Syria to protest peacefully for greater freedom and better governance. I witnessed some of those protests myself. The regime responded with overwhelming force, shooting civilians in the streets and arresting, torturing and murdering them. That is what started the conflict and what sustains it today. At no point since then has the regime seriously engaged in a political process; it has pursued a ruthless military strategy against its own people to stay in power at any cost.

While I think it is important to say such things, these words alone will not help the Syrian people today. First, the least we can now do is to put a stop to the violence in Idlib by demanding and implementing an immediate ceasefire. Since the recent escalation, the regime and its allies have killed more than 500 civilians and displaced more than 400,000. Of the 3 million Syrians in Idlib, less than 1 per cent belonged to the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham.

In Idlib, there remain more babies than terrorists and, as my American colleague said, more than half the population, 1.5 million out of 3 million, are children. The Council must insist on an immediate ceasefire to protect civilians and prevent further war crimes. We therefore strongly support the draft resolution proposed today by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany.

In addition, the least we can do is to ensure justice and accountability for the crimes committed by the Al-Assad regime and by Da'esh. The United Kingdom will be relentless in its efforts to ensure accountability through its support for the international impartial, independent mechanism and the United Nations commission

of inquiry and through national prosecutions. We welcome the successful prosecutions already under way in Europe and the Secretary-General's decision to establish a board of inquiry. One day, Bashar Al-Assad will face justice for his crimes.

We must also keep laser focus on the actions of the military units currently engaged on the ground in Idlib, from the regime, Russia and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. They include, but are not limited to the 679th, 680th and 947th squadrons at the Hama airbase; the 7th, 675th, 677th and 685th squadrons at the Shayrat airbase; the 695th and 698th squadrons at the Al-Nasiriyah airbase; and the 1st and 819th squadrons, as well as the Russian 5th and 827th squadrons, at the Tiyas airbase. We will be watching the actions of those military units and their commanders, and we will hold them accountable.

The least we can do is address the root causes of this conflict. As resolution 2254 (2015) recognizes in its call for inclusive and non-sectarian governance, there will never be stability and peace in Syria as long as the regime terrorizes its people and tortures and murders those who oppose it. Such conditions will continue to act as a breeding ground for extremism and terrorism, such as perpetrated by Al-Qaida and Da'esh.

Finally, this conflict has undermined and weakened the United Nations and the wider, rules-based international system. Al-Assad has used chemical weapons against his own people. He has thumbed his nose at the Council and its resolutions, at the General Assembly and at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons — aided and protected by Russia and Iran. If we, as United Nations States Members, are to uphold the ideals of the Charter of the United Nations, which sought to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war and reaffirmed our faith in fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person, we must do more to prevent criminal, rogue regimes from violating international law and imposing death and suffering on their people. Respect for State sovereignty can never be a license to allow a leader to commit war crimes against his own people.

The Council must learn the lessons from the last eight years of this conflict and from the suffering of the Syrian people. We must now urgently come together to stop the violence in Idlib and to protect Syrians from further suffering.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): First, like others, I would like to thank Mark Lowcock

and Geir Pedersen for their very detailed and useful briefings, as always. I am particularly pleased to see Mr. Pedersen in the Council restored to full health.

The Syrian tragedy has, for some months, entered into a new phase of the Syrian regime's ruthless strategy, following the horrifying destruction of Aleppo at the end of 2016 and the dreadful battle in Ghouta in 2018. We are witnessing a similar situation in Idlib, even as elements could be put in place to advance the political process, the only way to definitively put an end to the vicious cycle of violence. In that regard, collective action is urgently needed on three fronts — strictly enforcing the rules of war, bringing about a cessation of hostilities and beginning, at long last, the search for a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

There is an urgent need to silence Idlib's weapons and prevent Syria from becoming the scene of a new escalation and conflagration. France is particularly concerned about the significant intensification of the offensive of pro-regime forces in Idlib in recent weeks. We call on the signatories to the ceasefire agreement — Russia, first and foremost — to return to full compliance with their commitments and to ensure an effective ceasefire in the north-west, with a view to freezing the fronts and reaching a nationwide ceasefire, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

In that regard, we welcome the dialogue between the United States and Turkey on north-east Syria, as well as the first steps towards establishing a security mechanism, which advance the necessary de-escalation of tensions in the east. It is essential that all efforts focus on the fight against Da'esh, which continues to pose a major threat to our security. For our part, we are pursuing action within the framework of the international coalition against Da'esh, with a view to the lasting stabilization of these liberated territories.

The second and equally important point is that respect for international humanitarian law is binding on all and is not negotiable. I would like to reiterate two absolute priorities — the protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, and immediate, secure, comprehensive, sustainable and unhindered humanitarian access to the entirety of Syrian territory. We condemn in the strongest terms the attacks of the regime and its allies, which continue to indiscriminately target civilian populations and

infrastructure in the north-west. It is particularly unacceptable that health infrastructure, including those that have been de-conflicted, and schools continue to be targeted. We reiterate our full support for the internal investigation launched by the Secretary-General in that regard. The fight against terrorism cannot justify the sacrifice of civilians, much less children. Such crimes must not go unpunished.

It is also critical that humanitarian aid reach the people who need it most through the fastest and most direct channels. We reiterate our call for parties that have the means to do so to exert the necessary pressure on the regime to ensure unhampered humanitarian access to all areas under its control, and thereby enable humanitarian workers to respect the cardinal principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity, especially in the south-west and eastern Ghouta. It is also essential that the United Nations be able to access displaced persons and refugees who have returned home. It is also critical that significant and concrete progress be made with regard to detained and missing persons. In that connection, I support the recommendations just made by Mr. Pedersen.

The third priority is to ensure that the urgency of the situation in Idlib does not cause us to lose sight of the political urgency. We all know, but it bears repeating, that only an inclusive political solution can stabilize Syria in the long-term and eventually allow refugees to return to their country. In that regard, we reiterate our full support for the Special Envoy's efforts to relaunch a political process, under the auspices of the United Nations, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) in its entirety.

More than ever, it is necessary to finalize a constitutional package that is credible and balanced, both in the composition of the committee and in its rules of procedure, and to convene the constitutional committee in Geneva, under the auspices of the United Nations, as soon as possible. The Special Envoy has indicated that we are close to achieving that goal. We therefore call on the parties to finalize its establishment without delay, with the supervision of the United Nations. However, if the regime's obstruction continues, it will be up to the Special Envoy to tell us whether the constitutional committee can really help initiate a political discussion.

Nevertheless, the constitutional committee cannot be the only driver for the political process. In order to ensure that the process does not stall, we must now

address the other aspects of resolution 2254 (2015), first by paying attention to the preparations for the Syrian elections, which must be free and transparent and, in keeping with resolution 2254 (2015), supervised by the United Nations. All Syrians, including refugees, must be allowed to participate. In order to emerge from the Syrian tragedy, it is critical to give the Syrian people the ability to once again freely express their views on their country's future.

To bring about the political future that we all so ardently seek, France places its full support in the efforts of the Special Envoy to bring together the small group and the guarantors of Astana within the same international forum. We hope to see progress on this issue over the weeks ahead.

Lastly, Council members are aware of our position — shared with the European Union and which remains unchanged — on reconstruction, the lifting of sanctions and normalization.

We call on all members of the Security Council to assume their responsibilities to bring an end to the tragedy unfolding before our very eyes in Idlib and urge them to support the draft resolution put forward by the humanitarian co-penholders, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait. Tragically, we have been too slow to act. There is no more time to lose.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): At the outset, my delegation would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for their comprehensive briefings and efforts to find a light at the end of the tunnel.

We are delighted once again to have Special Envoy Pedersen in our midst: I welcome him home. We have always supported his work seeking a solution, including on a credible, balanced and inclusive Syrian-led and -owned process, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). We hope that the constitutional committee will be established soon.

My delegation shares the concerns expressed in the Secretary-General's most recent report (S/2019/674) regarding the continued escalation in north-west Syria, which has resulted in over 500 civilians being killed, hundreds injured and more than half a million individuals displaced since April. We are not only concerned by the continued escalation of violence in north-west Syria but also deeply troubled by the possibility of an offensive deeper into Idlib, as

mentioned by the Secretary-General in his statement of 20 August (SG/SM/19705), which could signal further suffering for 3 million civilians, 76 per cent of whom, as we all know, estimated to be women and children. In that regard, Indonesia wishes to highlight three pertinent points.

First, the attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure must end. We strongly urge all parties to fully respect international humanitarian law, strictly uphold the September 2018 memorandum of understanding on Idlib and refrain from the destruction of facilities on the de-confliction list and of United Nations facilities.

Secondly, there is a need to ensure sustainable humanitarian assistance and access to civilians in need. The situation in Rukban camp remains dire. It is important for the United Nations to facilitate and assist those who have expressed their willingness to leave, as well as to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance. We underline what Mr. Lowcock said regarding the need for such to be voluntary, safe and dignified. We also appreciate the approval given by the Syrian Government in that regard and the cooperation between the United Nations and the Syrian Red Crescent. Continued dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders are urgently needed to ensure that humanitarian access is being provided, including in Al-Hol camp.

Thirdly, we are pleased to hear encouraging developments regarding the constitutional committee, as reported by Special Envoy Pedersen earlier. At this stage, we must appreciate any positive developments that keep the process in motion. We sincerely hope that the outstanding gaps and issues will immediately be resolved, through further communication and peaceful discussions. Again, strong and genuine commitment on the part of all parties to making progress in this process is critical.

Indonesia remains seriously concerned with the possible impact of the ongoing escalation in the north-west on efforts to advance the political process. We cannot secure a credible political process without a successful de-escalation in Idlib. It would be a tragedy, for the Syrians, the region and the international community, if peace were to be rejected and the ongoing escalation of violence were permitted to prevail in north-west Syria.

In conclusion, I should like to end by quoting what Geir recalled in his statement: "let us remember that

Syrian families face multipronged dangers". He also mentioned that there is a sense of hopelessness. It is up to us all in the Security Council to restore hope to the children and families of Syria.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation commends Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General, and Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for their informative briefings on the humanitarian situation and latest developments in the political process in Syria.

My delegation shares the Secretary-General's concern regarding the ongoing military escalation in north-west Syria, particularly in Idlib governorate, where approximately 3 million people are trapped in the fighting, as Mr. Lowcock reported. This new outbreak of violence is exacerbating an already alarming humanitarian situation and represents a major obstacle to the smooth running of the political process. According to humanitarian agencies, the resumption of hostilities in Idlib governorate has claimed the lives of more than 500 civilians, displaced more than 578,000 people and destroyed social and educational infrastructure.

Against the backdrop of the continuing deterioration in the security situation and ongoing humanitarian challenges, Côte d'Ivoire calls on the parties to adhere strictly to the agreement made in Sochi on 17 September 2018 between the Russian Federation and Turkey with a view to achieving the de-escalation required to relieve the civilian population in distress and resume the political process.

My delegation takes this opportunity to remind the parties to the conflict that any action targeting civilians, health and education facilities, means of transport and personnel bearing the distinctive signs defined under the Geneva Conventions constitutes a war crime subject to prosecution under the provisions of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

The Security Council's commitment to finding lasting solutions to the humanitarian challenges in Syria must be accompanied by the promotion of a political solution to the crisis. That is why Côte d'Ivoire welcomed the holding, on 2 August, of the thirteenth round of the Astana process, in Nur-Sultan, which allowed the guarantors of that process to reiterate the need for the implementation of all agreements relating to Idlib, including that of 17 September 2018.

Moreover, my country welcomes the fourth visit of the Special Envoy to Damascus, on 10 July, to reconsider with the Syrian authorities the issue of establishing a constitutional committee to review and amend the Constitution.

Likewise, my delegation welcomes the initiative of Pope Francis, who, in a letter sent to the Syrian authorities on 22 July, stressed the need for a viable political solution to the conflict and encouraged the parties resort to diplomacy, dialogue and negotiation with the assistance of the international community.

The search for solutions to the Syrian conflict will also need to incorporate confidence-building measures between the parties, such as the exchange of detainees, the return of remains and identification of missing persons, in accordance with the Astana process. My delegation encourages the parties to the conflict to continue such initiatives and urges them to prioritize dialogue as the viable solution for ensuring lasting peace in the Syrian Arab Republic.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire expresses its full support for the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General towards establishing a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Duclos (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome the convening of the present meeting and express our thanks to Mr. Lowcock and Mr. Pedersen for their highly informative briefings.

Peru is following the ongoing conflict and grave humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic with deep concern. It is clear that, since April, despite the fact that there has been an evolution on the ground, the level of violence has escalated, especially in north-western areas such as Idlib and Hama. Women and children, as in all such bloody conflicts, are the principal victims. We condemn in particular the extensive damage to the area's infrastructure, including schools and medical centres, as a result of air strikes that do not discriminate between combatants and civilians. In that regard, we welcome the decision of the Secretary-General to mount an investigation into these and other incidents in the north-west of the country. We hope that will lead to much-needed accountability in Syria.

Peru reaffirms its condemnation of terrorism in the strongest terms but once again emphasizes that combating this scourge cannot, and must not, be

interpreted as a justification for putting the lives of millions of people at risk.

The responsibility to protect the civilian population makes the cessation of hostilities in north-western Syria imperative, which we believe could be achieved by effectively implementing the September 2018 agreement reached between Turkey and Russia or through new ways of devising a solution that the Council should urgently explore and implement in a united manner, as embodied in the proposed draft resolution. That is necessary, *inter alia*, to provide assistance to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons living near the border with Turkey in extremely precarious conditions.

The focus on events in north-west Syria must not allow us to lose sight of the humanitarian crises in other parts of Syria. We commend the efforts of the United Nations and other humanitarian actors to provide continued assistance to the 68,000 internally displaced persons living in the Al-Hol camp and underscore the importance of continuing to encourage the international community to support them. Given that a major percentage of them are of Iraqi origin, we encourage the Iraqi authorities to conclude the necessary processes to make their return a reality within internationally accepted parameters with the support of the Organization.

While we welcome the recent assessment of humanitarian needs in Rukban by the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, we underscore the obligation to allow continued access for that assistance, as well as to guarantee that those who wish to return to their homes can do so in a voluntary, dignified and safe manner. We also hope that the bilateral arrangements announced in the northern part of the country will not pose a threat to the civilian population or affect humanitarian assistance operations.

With regard to the political arena, Peru is eagerly awaiting that the efforts of the Special Envoy in conjunction with the parties and the Astana format lead to the speedy establishment of a legitimate and balanced constitutional committee in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). We commend the progress that has been made to that end. We emphasize the urgent need to agree on a single measure encompassing aspects relating to its composition, decision-making functions and mandate

as soon as possible so that it leads to free elections monitored by the United Nations.

In conclusion, I underscore the urgency of the parties continuing to work on measures that foster a better environment of understanding, particularly with regard to the release of detainees, the identification of missing persons and the transfer of human remains. We welcome the work being done within the Astana framework but note the need to make further significant progress in that regard.

Mr. Yao Shaojun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): At the outset, I thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for their briefings. We appreciate the constructive efforts of the United Nations and all parties concerned in promoting a political settlement to the Syrian issue and improving the humanitarian situation on the ground.

The protracted conflict in Syria has brought about untold suffering to the country and its people and has become one of the major challenges hampering the return of security and stability to the Middle East. China supports the settlement of the Syrian issue through political means and calls on the international community to scale up its humanitarian assistance to Syria. In that regard, I would like to make the following points.

First, based on the principle of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process and resolution 2254 (2015), we should continue to promote a political settlement to the Syrian issue. The priority now is to establish a representative constitutional committee accepted by all parties. That is the most realistic way forward to launch a political process in Syria. For some time, Special Envoy Pedersen has been in close contact with all parties with regard to the establishment of the constitutional committee through his tireless efforts. At present, only a few outstanding issues remain. Hope is within sight.

The international community should stand firmly behind the Special Envoy and support the continued role of the Astana process. Security Council members should remain united and speak with one voice. All parties in Syria should continue to resolve their differences through dialogue and consultations and increase mutual trust through measures such as the exchange of detainees.

Secondly, rampant terrorism poses a major threat to the Syrian political process. Combating terrorism is an important aspect of resolving the Syrian issue. Idlib is part of Syria. A proper solution to the issue of Idlib is closely linked to the territorial integrity of Syria, as well as the country's future. The international community should work in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international law, uphold unified standards and combat terrorist organizations in order to prevent the resurgence of terrorist forces.

Recently, Russian President Putin met with Turkish President Erdoğan, and they agreed to take joint measures to promote the normalization of the situation in Idlib. In mid-September, Russia, Turkey and Iran will hold a summit. China applauds such diplomatic efforts and looks forward to seeing their positive outcomes.

Thirdly, based on the situation on the ground, we should take tailored measures to address the humanitarian issues in various regions as well as in camps for internally displaced persons throughout the country. China supports efforts to protect innocent civilians and provide them with decent living conditions. Based on a long-term perspective, we should support the Syrian Government's reconstruction efforts in areas where the security situation is relatively stable.

The international community bears a moral responsibility to help Syria restore economic development and social stability, instead of relying solely on exerting pressure. China has been providing humanitarian assistance to Syria in several areas, including food assistance, power supply, public transportation and personnel training. China is currently in contact and coordinating with the Syrian Government. The focus of our plan is to launch livelihood projects to support the post-war reconstruction of Syria.

In the process of promoting a political settlement of the Syrian issue and providing humanitarian assistance to Syria, we must respect its sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. We cannot allow Syria to be fragmented by separatist forces. All the relevant parties of the international community should work together to build up the momentum and create the necessary conditions for achieving a political settlement.

Recently, the Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian issue, Mr. Xie Xiaoyan, visited Iran and Syria. He met with Special Envoy Pedersen in Geneva and had an in-depth exchange of views with all sides concerned. As always, China

stands ready to play a constructive role in achieving a political settlement to the Syrian issue.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Lowcock and Mr. Pedersen for their informative briefings. We reiterate our support for their efforts to improve the living conditions of the Syrian population and achieve peace in that country — an aspiration that the Dominican Republic fully shares.

The Dominican Republic supports all diplomatic means for resolving this crisis regardless of whoever takes the initiative to that end. That goal is undoubtedly an ambitious task facing great challenges going forward, in the light of the fragile and volatile situation in the north-western part of the country. The 500 confirmed civilian deaths over a three-month period, with more than 400,000 displaced people and repeated attacks on health-care and educational infrastructure, paint a truly bleak picture.

We welcome the investigative process announced by the Secretary-General and hope to see its results as soon as possible. Furthermore, we support the draft resolution submitted by the co-penholders as a clear demonstration of the Council's commitment to peace in Syria.

We believe that, at the present juncture, it is essential to maintain our focus on the ultimate goal of our efforts. For the Dominican Republic that objective is clear — ensure a credible political process for and by Syrians, with the facilitation of the United Nations, that opens the door to a new national framework based on the rule of law, respect for human rights and sustainable development. We acknowledge the progress made on the composition and rules of procedure of the constitutional committee and await progress on its mandate. Those three elements should be considered holistically. We urge Ambassador Pedersen to continue advocating that approach and solidifying the role of the United Nations as guarantor and facilitator of the process.

In Ambassador Pedersen's most recent briefing to the Council (see S/PV.8567), he conveyed to us the feeling of distrust and lack of faith on the part of the various stakeholders, in particular the opposition and civil society, in the political process. For the Dominican Republic, such sentiments jeopardize a sustainable political solution. In order to reverse it, we believe it is essential that the parties move forward with concrete measures in the following direction.

First, they should move forward with the full implementation of the September 2018 ceasefire agreement. In areas under the control of the Government, people must be able to return to their normal lives without fear. That includes the millions of displaced persons and refugees, whose return depends on viable conditions for a dignified and safe life. The parties should also advance the process to release detainees, starting with the immediate suspension of arbitrary detention and the unilateral release of women, children, those who are ill and people with disabilities, as an act of good faith. And they should ensure that all segments of the society are included in the decision-making process, in particular Syrian women.

The catastrophic humanitarian situation that continues to unfold in the north-west of the country could end up burying any opportunity that lies ahead in the political process. Therefore, halting all hostilities that endanger the lives of civilians must be pursued at all costs. Retaking Idlib, however, cannot be pursued at any cost. International humanitarian law must be respected, civilian infrastructure must be protected and humanitarian access must be maintained.

We underscore that any consideration of establishing a possible safe zone must ensure the safety and well-being of, and humanitarian access to, the population. Furthermore, security and assistance must be provided for the hundreds of thousands on the border with Turkey. We encourage the donor community to intensify efforts to fund the humanitarian response plan as soon as possible. A sustainable solution to the conflict will emerge only from the political commitment of all parties, including external ones, to the peace and prosperity of the Syrian people — their main objective.

Mrs. Mele Colifa (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): The Republic of Equatorial Guinea thanks you, Madam President, for convening today's important meeting. We also thank Mr. Mark Lowcock and Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for their useful briefings.

With regard to the humanitarian situation, while the conflict in Syria might make fewer headlines eight years later, it certainly remains one of the most complex humanitarian crises in the world, as proved by the statistics just provided by Mr. Lowcock and some of the delegations that took the floor before me. The ongoing harsh offensive by the Syrian army is significantly increasing tensions in Idlib and parts of the neighbouring cities of Aleppo, Hamah and Latakia.

The situation is deteriorating rapidly, with extremely high levels of violence continuing to hamper the humanitarian response, and in particular the provision of food aid to more than 20,000 people in some areas of Idlib. In addition, those displaced in camps, such as Rukban and Al-Hol, remain in inhumane conditions.

While it is true that we must support local efforts to eradicate terrorist threats, we remain deeply concerned about the plight of civilians who are faced with continuous bombardment. There are many civilian victims and, in that context, Equatorial Guinea believes that it is important that all parties directly involved in the conflict comply with all agreements reached on Idlib, aimed both at continuing to fight terrorists and at ensuring the safety of civilians.

We believe that, even in the fight against terrorism, we must always ensure respect for international humanitarian law. With regard to protecting health centres and medical personnel in Idlib, we insist that the allies of the parties must be more involved in order to prevent the deterioration of the situation. Furthermore, the parties to the conflict must be reminded that any attack, including attacks on education centres and health facilities, considerably undermines efforts to resolve the crisis and poses a serious threat to the security of the region.

In that regard, Equatorial Guinea joins the support expressed for the Secretary-General's initiative to establish an internal board of inquiry at Headquarters to investigate a series of incidents in north-western Syria. We have high expectations for the work of the board of inquiry. We hope that the Council will be provided with a comprehensive report on the issue in the coming weeks.

With regard to the political process, the Government of Equatorial Guinea believes that all the necessary conditions now exist for the successful convening of the constitutional committee, which would make it possible to initiate direct consultations among Syrians on the parameters for the future of their country, as envisaged in resolution 2254 (2015).

As every delegation, including those of the Syrian Government and the armed opposition, agreed on and finalized the composition of the constitutional committee in the last round of consultations held in Nursultan earlier this month, there is no doubt that it is possible and feasible to move towards a political solution, above and beyond the military truce established

specifically in the areas most committed to the process, such as the north and north-west of the country.

We also recall the overriding obligation of the parties to continue to provide unwavering support to the Special Envoy for the successful conclusion of the process, without forgetting the need to resolve the problems on the battlefield first, before creating a strengthened institutional framework to restore political stability and peace in Syria.

I wish to conclude my statement by reiterating the obligation that falls to us members of the Security Council to continue our efforts and urging the negotiating parties to resolve all other matters relating to the committee's rules of procedure as soon as possible, as well as facilitating the beginning of its work.

Mr. Schulz (Germany): First of all, we would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock and Mr. Geir Pedersen for their comprehensive briefings. Allow me to make four remarks.

First of all, on the situation in northwest Syria, we associate ourselves with the statement delivered by the representative of Belgium on behalf of the co-penholders on the humanitarian situation in Syria, namely, Belgium, Kuwait and Germany.

We remain deeply concerned by the military offensive in north-west Syria through indiscriminate air strikes, shelling and the use of barrel bombs. The ongoing escalation has severe consequences for civilians, who were again indiscriminately targeted in blatant violation of international humanitarian law. We have repeatedly stated that there can be no excuse for attacks against innocent civilians, the destruction of hospitals and schools through targeted aerial attacks and the displacement of 500,000 civilians.

We, too, are concerned by the presence and attacks of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other United Nations-designated terrorist groups in Idlib. As the Special Envoy reminded us in his briefing, there is no easy solution or panacea, but their attacks must stop. They must cease. However, the fight against terrorism does not justify indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Therefore, we remind the Russian Federation and the Syrian regime once again that counter-terrorism operations do not override the responsibility to protect civilians, or any other obligations under international humanitarian law. The Syrian regime and the Russian Federation

must immediately end their military offensive in and around Idlib.

We urge all sides to recommit fully to the ceasefire arrangements of the Russian-Turkish memorandum of understanding and implement it in full, including by withdrawing their forces from the agreed demilitarized zone. We need to see a de-escalation zone without escalation. The Council needs to do everything in its power to urgently alleviate the humanitarian situation in Idlib. Kuwait, Belgium and Germany have presented a draft resolution to the members of the Council that aims to do exactly that. We look forward to working constructively with all Council members on the text.

Secondly, as there is no military solution to this conflict, Germany remains convinced that only a political solution on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) can achieve sustainable peace and stability in Syria. We recognize the role that the Astana group and the Russian Federation in particular can play with regard to a political solution under the guidance of the United Nations and Special Envoy Pedersen. But we need to finally see tangible progress and concrete results. Promises and optimistic statements are not sufficient.

The constitutional committee is a good case in point. It is overdue and urgently needed as an entry point into a political transition process. It could and should have been established a long time ago. Today we heard from Mr. Pedersen that the package is nearly finalized and that he is hopeful that it can be finalized before the beginning of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly. That is good news. Unfortunately — and we have to be honest about this — we have heard this too many times. We hope that he is right, but we have been told time and again about progress on the establishment of the constitutional committee, and time and again we have been left disappointed. We have to say that this is largely due to the Syrian regime and its policies of obstruction and procrastination.

Let me also say that we are particularly alarmed by reports that the regime's intelligence services threatened and intimidated prospective members of the constitutional committee, as well as their families in Syria, in order to sabotage the committee before its first session. Damascus must stop harassing its prospective members and allow their free movement in and out of the country. It must seriously engage on the formation

of the constitutional committee under the auspices of the United Nations.

Thirdly, there will be no solution to the tragic conflict in Syria without a serious change in the Syrian regime's behaviour. It remains essential to create a safe, calm and neutral environment in which a political transition can take place. First and foremost, this requires an immediate end to the brutal actions of the Syrian regime. However, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence and forced disappearances and killings of detainees continue, even in so-called reconciled areas. Those actions must finally stop. It is this Syrian regime's policy that keeps Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees from returning home. It is the responsibility of the Syrian regime to provide credible security guarantees that would enable the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrians to their country. As discussed during the Council's meeting at the beginning of August (see S/PV.8593), we also need to see meaningful progress on the issue of detainees and missing persons. Again, the Special Envoy has reported some progress in that area, but of course it is not yet sufficient.

As long as the Syrian regime does not change its brutal behaviour and end its continuous violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, there will be no lifting of sanctions. As long as there is no credible, inclusive and genuine political process firmly under way, there will be no participation in reconstruction efforts from our side. We therefore call on Syria to finally engage seriously in bringing about a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) in all its elements.

My final point refers to accountability, which is most crucial from our point of view. The crimes and atrocities committed on all sides during the Syrian conflict, including horrific accounts of murder, torture, sexual violence and crimes against children, must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. National reconciliation and lasting peace in Syria will not be possible without justice and accountability.

The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 has become a central repository of information and evidence of the crimes

committed in Syria, and therefore has a crucial role to play in the prosecution of crimes committed during the Syrian conflict. We will continue to support the work of the Mechanism and the Commission of Inquiry. We also welcome Secretary-General's establishment of a board of inquiry regarding the incidents in Idlib. We will continue to pursue accountability in order to achieve justice for the victims and eventually enable national reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Mr. Geir Pedersen, and the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for their briefings.

Unfortunately, today's meeting is a textbook example of how the Syrian issue is often discussed in the Security Council. The humanitarian problems — which certainly do exist — are being distorted and blown out of proportion. We are also very concerned by what is happening, however we are very conscious of the primary reason they exist. None of us must forget the fact that this situation is not due to the activities of the regime and its allies, as our Western colleagues repeat over and over again, but rather the activities of terrorists working in the area — who, by the way, cannot complain about insufficient material or military support.

We must not forget that, if it were not for the terrorists who went to Syria and tried, with the support of some of our Western colleagues, to overthrow the Syrian authorities, Syria would not be facing these terrible problems, which have caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and affect the lives of many millions of others who had to flee from their homes or live in poverty.

Neither the Syrian people nor the peoples of other countries will ever forget this. History, as my British colleague said, will judge those who claim to stand for Western values but, because of their geopolitical ambitions, have almost destroyed an entire country and condemned it to unprecedented suffering, as well as those who sang the same tune in the Security Council spreading mendacious and unverified information in order to impede the political process and national reconciliation. Even if members do not have test tubes in their hands today like their predecessors who lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, they are still doing the same thing.

Russia without doubt supports the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen and is taking active measures to promote the political process and to restore trust between the parties to the Syrian conflict. As has already been noted, intensive work is being done in the Astana process, together with Iran and Turkey and in cooperation with the Special Envoy, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition. I would like to emphasize that the Astana process is the only forum contributing to political reconciliation in Syria.

The most recent meeting under the Astana format took place on 1 and 2 August. A noteworthy feature was the participation of Beirut and Baghdad as new observers. The fifth summit of the guarantor countries is planned for mid-September in Turkey. The meeting in Nur-Sultan took place in a constructive atmosphere, with all the participants, first and foremost the guarantor countries, seeking compromise and more effective cooperation. We hope that, despite the increasingly blatant efforts of our Western colleagues to impede the process, we will soon be able to launch the constitutional committee. We, like Mr. Pedersen, are optimistic that the preparatory work on this aspect will soon be completed.

Nonetheless, we emphatically encourage — and I would like to emphasize this insistence — all parties genuinely interested in the success of the political process who want to work towards a stable settlement in Syria not to throw a spanner in the works of these efforts. A lot has already been done. Any confrontational or imbalanced actions or discussions, including within the United Nations, will not help efforts towards a political settlement in Syria. I will be quite honest: such discussions or actions would directly impede Mr. Pedersen's efforts, which is not what we want.

The joint statement issued by Russia, Turkey and Iran on 2 August emphasized the need to establish calm on the ground by fully implementing all of the agreements with regard to Idlib, especially the Sochi memorandum of 18 September 2018. It also expressed serious concern at the increasing prevalence of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in the de-escalation zone and confirmed the commitment of the parties to further cooperate on finally eliminating the terrorists. All of this, of course, while respecting the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. The situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, in particular in Idlib, was discussed during negotiations between the Presidents of Russia and Turkey on 27 August, where

they reaffirmed the Russian-Turkish understanding on this and other issues.

Idlib remains the main theatre of tensions. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham has effectively turned the region into a bridgehead for attacks on the positions of Syrian Government forces and against civilians in nearby towns and cities. During this month alone, fighters have been able to carry out more than 20 attacks on the positions of Syrian forces, resulting in more than 140 killed and approximately 230 Syrian personnel injured; dozens of civilians were also injured. Attacks are also continuing on Russian military facilities in Syria. For instance, the Khmeimim airbase was attacked by the terrorists using missiles four times in August alone. If one were to believe our British colleagues' assertions that there are more infants than terrorists in Idlib, then it would seem that many of those infants have grown beards and know how to use the latest weapons. Do you not think this is rather bizarre? We certainly do. In answer to the constant provocation from the terrorists and to reduce the threat against civilians, the Syrian army, with the support of Russian aviation, has been compelled to take action. However, we must emphasize that all the measures have been taken strictly inside the demilitarized zone, which should have been established a year ago pursuant to the Sochi memorandum.

The possibility of a reconciliation has been mentioned in this Chamber, but nobody has mentioned that the Syrian Government agreed to the ceasefire in Idlib brokered in Nur-Sultan on 2 August on the condition that all parties adhered to the Sochi memorandum, which would entail the withdrawal of heavy weapons. However, the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists refused to comply with the ceasefire and to withdraw fighters beyond the de-escalation line. Therefore, the ceasefire did not hold, and the fault for that does not lie with Damascus but with the terrorists who are continuing to bombard Idlib.

Russian and Syrian military forces are striving to ensure that the actual situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone is reported as widely as possible in the press. On 26 August, representatives of more than 20 Russian and European media outlets visited the area around Khan Shaykhun, in south-east Idlib province, which was liberated by Syrian Government forces. Yes, this is the very same Khan Shaykhun where, some time ago, White Helmets staged a blatant provocation, alleging that the Syrian forces had used chemical weapons. We debunked those claims loud and clear a long time ago.

Journalists have been able to see with their own eyes how the terrorists are using civilian infrastructure for military ends, as well as inspect their extended network of fortifications. We had hoped to hear about that from our Western colleagues — although, of course, we did not hear anything, even though journalists from these Western countries were courageous enough to go out there and find out for themselves the truth about the situation in terrorist-controlled areas.

As for other regions in Syria, we are concerned about the continued instability in the north-east of the country. Despite the alleged end of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, terrorists are continuing their underground activity and are activating their so-called sleeper cells. This also complicates matters in terms of the fighting between Kurdish formations and Sunni Arabs who have historically lived in the area. The Russian position on this remains unchanged: we advocate re-establishing territorial integrity and sovereignty in Syria as a guarantee of national security for neighbouring countries and to achieve regional stability.

The overall humanitarian situation in north-east Syria also remains dire. A clear example of this is the situation in the Al-Hol camp for internally displaced persons, which is in territory outside the control of the Syrian authorities. We have been asking for a long time that the forces controlling this territory share with all of us what is actually happening there. However, there is still a complete void with regard to information about what is actually happening beyond the Euphrates. Accordingly, we have a logical question for those who claim to care so much about humanitarian stability in Syria. Why is it that they focus their attention almost exclusively on Idlib province? Are they indifferent to the fate of Syrians living in the north-east? Is it not true that civilians are dying there as a result of the activity of fighters and that infrastructure has been destroyed? We have information suggesting that it is true, and we have shared it with members. Do members not have that information, or are they simply not interested in what is happening there?

We are also worried by the situation in the Al-Tanf area. We wish to recall once again that, under the Geneva Convention, an occupying Power is responsible for the population in the territory it is occupying. That holds true of all the areas I have listed. Russia, together with the Syrian Government and in coordination with specialized international humanitarian agencies,

continues its work to dismantel the Rukban camp, which is in the zone of illegal American occupation, and help people resettle. In the second half of August, an assessment mission of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent carried out a survey the civilian population in the camp who wished to leave. Within a month from now, we plan to organize the departure of a total of approximately 16,000 people. Overall, since March, some 18,000 refugees have already left Rukban. Following their departure, almost all of them were able to return to their places of permanent residence in areas controlled by Damascus.

We continue to believe that humanitarian assistance should be provided to all Syrians throughout the Syrian territory without preconditions. We believe that it is important to promote the reconstruction of Syria, which should be carried out in strict accordance with the norms of international humanitarian law and the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. We must work to create the conditions for and promote the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their places of residence in Syria and to ensure their right to return and to support.

In conclusion, let me share an observation about a trend that we see recurring. As soon as the Syrian forces gain some advantage on the ground and begin to force terrorists out, our Western colleagues increase their cries and calls for an end to military activity. It seems they have forgotten our common decision to uncompromisingly fight terrorists. As we have heard today, those terrorists become “innocent babies” and there appear schools and hospitals that have supposedly been bombed by Russia but in fact either did not exist or were not targeted.

We refute all that, but nobody listens to us. It seems that the objective is not to establish the truth but rather to reverse any move by Syria towards peace under its elected President and legitimate Government.

I wish to disappoint some members. That process is irreversible. There is already an agreed consensus in support of a new peaceful Syria that is owned by the Syrian people and not by Western puppets and mercenaries. Terrorists and those who support them no longer have the advantage. It is not possible to save them. The sooner that is understood, the quicker we will achieve peace in Syria and the more lives we will be able to save. The Council should not forget

this enormous responsibility to history and future generations that rests with it today.

Mr. Mabhongo (South Africa): I would like to start by thanking Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for their insightful briefings this morning.

South Africa continues to express its deep concern about the many civilians, in particular women and children, who have lost their lives, sustained severe injuries and been displaced due to the recent upsurge of violence in north-west Syria. We have grave concerns over the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and basic services, with schools, health facilities, markets, water stations and residential areas destroyed in the fighting.

We also express concern that a number of aid agencies have suspended their operations due to increase in violence. The large numbers of people fleeing the area add to the already overburdened humanitarian response. We continue to urge all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It is also important that the signatories of the September 2018 ceasefire memorandum adhere to its provisions.

South Africa reiterate that, while we acknowledge the threat and violence committed by terrorist organizations, it is also necessary that all actions taken to counter terrorism activities not be undertaken at the expense of innocent civilian lives and that any other such actions be taken only within the parameters of international law. We express support for the opening of a peace corridor in northern Syria in an effort to establish a safe zone in the region and to facilitate the repatriation of Syrian refugees through such corridors.

We continue to call for the immediate cessation of hostilities between the parties engaged in the conflict. We wish to re-emphasize that the situation in Syria can be resolved only through negotiation and dialogue in a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process supported by the United Nations. We therefore call on all parties to exert every effort towards the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) to further avoid the displacement of Syrians and loss of innocent lives. We recognize the role of the Astana process in trying to find a solution to the situation in Syria. Furthermore, we call for the early convening of the constitutional committee and

thank the Special Envoy for his hard work in that regard. To ensure its legitimacy, the committee should be inclusive and representative of all Syrian actors. Without a political process, the humanitarian situation will further deteriorate, leading to more destruction and deaths.

In conclusion, we further call for respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria by all States Members of the United Nations.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Poland.

At the outset, I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for their briefings. As always, I reiterate our full support for their work.

The current situation in Syria remains unacceptable. As we speak, a deadly escalation of the conflict in north-west Syria is ongoing. Since April, more than 500 civilians have been killed and hundreds more injured, including the most vulnerable groups, that is, women and children. Strikes have caused the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including internally displaced persons camps, markets, schools and, most importantly, health-care facilities.

Any military operation should be conducted fully in line with international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The protection of civilians and provision of unhindered access to humanitarian assistance are not a choice but a legal obligation for all sides to the conflict. Those who do not comply should be held accountable.

That is why we should focus on the need to enhance multilateral cooperation and uphold international law to address the multiple challenges not only in Syria but also in a wider regional perspective. That was the aim of our high-level debate, held almost two weeks ago, on challenges to peace and security in the Middle East (see S/PV. 8600).

As almost every day we hear about the suffering of the civilian population in Idlib province, we want to underline that civilians should be subject to protection, in line with the international law. In that context, I would like to thank the three penholders in charge of the humanitarian dossier on Syria for proposing a draft resolution, as recently announced. They can count on our support.

There is a need for enhanced efforts aimed at the promotion of and compliance with international humanitarian law, as indicated in the recently adopted presidential statement S/PRST/2019/8, on the initiative of Poland, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Geneva Conventions. Let me recall the words of the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Peter Maurer, on this important anniversary

“[C]ontinued violations of the law do not mean the law is inadequate, but rather that efforts to ensure respect are inadequate. We can and must do more. The Council can do more.” (S/PV. 8596, p.5)

Let me conclude by underlining that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Any lasting settlement can be achieved only through a political agreement, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). A political settlement is urgently needed, since it remains the only way towards sustainable peace under the extremely dire circumstances. We look forward to the establishment of the constitutional committee, the first step towards a genuine political process, under the supervision of the United Nations.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to thank you, Madam President, for managing the work of the Security Council for this month. I also express our satisfaction about the recovery of Mr. Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, to good health. We are pleased to see him back at work.

I have noted from the statements of some of my colleagues — particularly those from the delegations of the United States, Britain, France, Belgium and Germany — that they are now speaking as if they were the Special Envoy. They have drawn up a new road map for him, one that has nothing to do with the road map that he follows and was agreed upon by everybody. The new road map is full of landmines in the shape of preconditions and was presented in a rude way that does not respect the mandate of the Special Envoy. In fact, it violates his mandate and its provisions, thereby obstructing the Special Envoy's noble mission.

The only path, the most effective and the least costly, to end the suffering of the Syrian people is for the States that sponsor terrorism to recall their monsters from Idlib and Al-Hol camp, which is being run by the occupying United States forces in a dear part of my country. I ask them to take back their monsters and put them in their civilized caves in Europe, Britain — as Britain is no longer part of Europe — Australia, the United States, Turkey, the Caucasus, the Gulf, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Central Asia. Then the bloodshed of the Syrian people will stop and my country — all of it, not just Idlib — will enjoy peace and security.

Terrorism in the caves of Tora Bora led to the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001. Terrorism in the caves of Idlib led to the killing of tens of thousands of Syrians in Aleppo, Hama, Latakia and throughout the Syria. Therefore, no one can blame us when we exercise our sovereign right to combat terrorism.

As we are speaking about terrorism, I mention the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague, the Netherlands. According to the Centre, there are nearly 4,300 European terrorists fighting in Syria and Iraq. The “moderate armed Syrian opposition” has been genetically modified. First, they were Europeans, then became Syrians and now, members of the moderate armed Syrian opposition. Of those 4,300 European terrorists, 2,838 are from Belgium, Britain, France and Germany. Four European countries sent us almost 3,000 terrorists. These statistics are not accurate, as they are European statistics. The Syrian Government’s figures are much bigger. The number of Belgian terrorists in Syria today who are fighting the Syrian Government is 400. Fighting what? They are fighting the Syrian Government.

I would like the Belgian representative to ask my dear friend and Belgian colleague, Ambassador Jan De Ruyt, who was here in 2011, what I said to him back then, when the crisis first started in Syria. I told him that we had detected the first foreign terrorist in Syria. He was a sniper, attacking Syrian soldiers and policemen in Homs. He was Belgian. The very first foreign terrorist detected in Syria was from Belgium. I encourage the Belgian representative to ask his colleague Ambassador De Ruyt. We could speak at length about this matter.

It has become the regular approach of certain speakers in the Council, and has occurred in 62 meetings prior to this one, that with every victory of the Syrian Arab Army in confronting the hordes of

global terrorism, they launch campaigns of lies in order to defame and mar the image of the Syrian State. The Council will recall that, when Homs was liberated, some claimed the use of what was then called exploding barrels. Regarding Al-Qusayr and Qalamoun, on the Syrian-Lebanese border, lies were spread about forced evictions and demographic changes. When the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo were liberated there were claims of siege, starvation and obstructing access to medical supplies. When the eastern Ghouta villages were liberated lies were fabricated about the use of chemical weapons. Now we hear other claims about targeting medical and educational facilities and services in Idlib and its outskirts.

All those claims are baseless and simply part of the unjust and aggressive political architecture of terrorism that has been targeting my country for the past eight years. I assert before the Council that the Syrian Air Force and the friendly Russian Air Force do not attack civilian targets. Instead, they attack only terrorist bases and centres, unless one considers the bases and centres of terrorists as sanctuaries of worship, kindergartens and centres that promote international humanitarian law.

Moreover, there are not 3 million Syrians in Idlib. That number is misleading and incorrect. Idlib does not hold 20 per cent of Syria’s population. It is, instead, a small province in Syria, compared to Syria’s other provinces. The number of residents living in Idlib is no more than 1 million.

Earlier this month, I took part in the thirteenth round of the Astana meetings, which were held in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan. That round of talks concluded in the adoption of an important declaration that reiterated a strong commitment to the Syrian Arab Republic’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as continued cooperation with the Syrian Government until the terrorist organizations in Syria are totally eliminated. The declaration also rejected the separatist agendas that aim to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. Moreover, the declaration reiterated adhering to international resolutions pertaining to putting an end to the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan — first and foremost resolution 497 (1981).

In that context, my delegation would like to thank the delegations of Russia and Iran, as well as the host State, Kazakhstan, for their contributions to ensure the success of that round of talks. We emphasize the need to not prejudice this track because, as enjoys broad

support and consensus, especially from the Syrian people, who are primarily concerned with determining their own future. We also stress the need to not obstruct this track for any reason.

What is astonishing here is the provocative measure by the United States and Turkey, which coincided with the final meeting of the Astana round of talks, taken directly after the final declaration was issued, as thankfully mentioned by our Russian colleague. They have taken that provocative measure aimed at creating a new reality on the ground in the areas illegally occupied by the forces of those two States.

That provocative measure took the form of a statement issued by those two parties on an agreement to establish a so-called safe zone on Syrian territory — I repeat: on Syrian territory, not in Florida, Texas or Istanbul. My country categorically rejects that agreement, as it constitutes a blatant violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, which has been affirmed by all Security Council resolutions on Syria. It is also a blatant violation of the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. This United States-Turkish agreement has further exposed those two countries' partnership in the aggression against Syria and the manoeuvring and deceit governing their policies.

We are facing a dangerous reality in which two antagonist countries are supporting terrorism in my country and overtly negotiating encroachment over the territories of a third State — my country, Syria — while, at the same time, the Security Council, through 20 resolutions, has confirmed its firm commitment to preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. The United States delegation supported those 20 resolutions, which were adopted unanimously. Can the Council therefore let us know what position it takes vis-à-vis the hostile behaviour of the United States and Turkey in entrenching the occupation of part of my country? Is there any justification for the Council's silence on the blatant and public violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations?

Certain all-too-familiar Member States strive to exhaust Council members by sometimes calling for almost daily meetings, providing false witnesses, proposing draft letters, statements and draft resolutions and establishing committees, such as the one recently set up to investigate claims that hospitals and medical

centres are being targeted, based on so-called open-source accounts that are both misleading and unfounded. All such efforts are meant to level accusations against the Syrian Government and tarnish its reputation, rather than to rely on the documented information that my Government provides to the United Nations. In that regard, I thank Mr. Lowcock for putting himself today and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the service of the agendas of the antagonist countries vis-à-vis my country.

Israel's participation in this terrorist architecture was demonstrated in the recent Israeli attacks on the territories of three Arab States, namely, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which were supported by the United States Secretary of State in a manifestation of the United States-Israel partnership aimed at continued instability and insecurity in the region to serve Israeli interests.

The Polish presidency thankfully held a meeting on 20 August regarding the challenges to international peace and stability in the Middle East (see S/PV.8600), during which most speakers confirmed that Israel's occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and its aggressive policies are the root cause of those challenges. In the light of the firm statements delivered by dozens of speakers, we would assume that there is no place for further political illiteracy in this international Organization.

Certain speakers mentioned today the current situation in Idlib. In that regard, I would like to confirm that my Government has demonstrated the patience of Job, opted for political solutions and has provided sufficient time, as it has always dealt seriously with all attempts to restore calm. It has abided by such initiatives to safeguard the lives of Syrian citizens and end the actions of those who trade in the pain and blood of Syrians throughout Syria.

As I said, we recently witnessed that seriousness at the thirteenth round of the Astana talks, in which the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic participated and where we adopted a final communiqué, which was very constructive. But that communiqué was completely rejected, while I was in the middle of a press conference at Astana. I was reading out an official statement on behalf of my Government after the meeting's conclusion, and the agreement was broken and rejected within half an hour of its adoption. Who broke that agreement? Turkey, the terrorists and the sponsors of the terrorists in Idlib.

Terrorist organizations and their sponsors have chosen the military solution through their continued targeting of civilian areas in Aleppo, Hamah, southern Idlib and Latakia where hundreds of innocent victims were killed and thousands were injured. This has met with silence by the co-penholders on the humanitarian issue, who failed to say a single word to condemn it in or outside the Council. Rather, the co-penholders talk only about confidence-building measures with the terrorists, thereby disregarding the fact that the Western-backed terrorist groups have killed a large number of those whom they kidnapped and were holding hostage.

Furthermore, out of concern for the safety of its citizens, my Government recently announced the opening of a humanitarian corridor in the city of Souran to enable civilians who wish to leave the areas in which terrorist groups are present in the northern rural Hamah area and southern Idlib for areas in which the State is present. We are working on meeting the various needs of those civilians in terms of food, shelter and medical care. Moreover, my country has agreed to send an entire hospital of the International Committee of the Red Cross to the Al-Hol camp. It seems the news of sending an entire Red Cross hospital to the Al-Hol camp has not reached Mr. Lowcock. My country's Government strongly rejects the claims in the report of the Secretariat (S/2019/674) aimed at besmirching its reputation and spreading false and unfounded accusations involving the targeting of civilian infrastructure in Idlib.

The twenty-fourth report (S/2019/570) of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team asserts that

“[Idlib] contains the greatest concentration of terrorist elements anywhere in the Levant and Iraq and is described as ‘the world’s biggest dumping ground for foreign terrorist fighters.’”(S/2019/570, para. 2)

I repeat, Idlib is “the world’s biggest dumping ground for foreign terrorist fighters”. Those are the words used by the Security Council’s Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.

The report continues, stating that the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham is the sole and effective party controlling armed and unarmed activities in those areas. It is no secret to anyone that the Astana agreement on the de-escalation zones does not cover the armed groups that had been designated by the Security Council as terrorist entities. Furthermore, the Astana agreement stipulated

a series of obligations, including those requiring the armed groups that signed the agreement to dissociate themselves from terrorist organizations, especially Da’esh, Jabhat Al-Nusra and all their affiliates.

The Astana and Sochi agreements also reaffirmed the right of the Syrian Government and its allies to confront the terrorist organizations regardless of what they called themselves. In that regard, we reaffirm that the armed entities present in Idlib, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, Da’esh, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Huras Al-Din and Jaysh Al-Muhajireen Wal-Ansar, among others, are all armed terrorist groups. The efforts of the States sponsoring, recycling and presenting them will not succeed in projecting them as the moderate armed Syrian opposition. Moreover, with the support of our allies, we will not stop defending the lives of our citizens and combating terrorism. Standing alongside Syria today represents the true measure of credibility with regard to the war on terrorism. By the way, the Huras Al-Din organization, which is sponsored by United States intelligence, is also funded by the Kuwaiti Salafist movement. I would like to draw the attention of our colleague the Ambassador of Kuwait to that piece of information. Huras Al-Din — Guardians of Religion — is a terrorist organization run by United States intelligence and funded by the Kuwaiti Salafist movement. I would ask him to investigate that.

In conclusion, the Government of my country values the efforts of the Special Envoy and reiterates its readiness to continue working with him in order to ensure the success of his mission, which is to facilitate an intra-Syrian dialogue that is Syrian-owned and Syrian-led, without any foreign intervention. However, ensuring the success of the Special Envoy’s work requires putting an immediate and unconditional end to illegal foreign presence on all Syrian territories. It also requires a full and effective commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It also entails support for the efforts of the Syrian Government and its allies in combating terrorism and meeting the basic needs of the Syrian people, promoting reconstruction and facilitating the return of refugees, instead of laying down conditions as we heard today. That has to be done by offering genuine, not promotional, humanitarian assistance and funding the humanitarian response plan, which only received 27 per cent of the funds to date despite the fact that we are in the last third of the year.

Moreover, we stress the need to lift the unilateral, coercive economic measures that have been imposed on the Syrian people. They constitute economic terrorism that complements the terrorism carried out by terrorist organizations. They represent a cheap and useless attempt at extortion. Its most recent manifestation came through an announcement by the United States Administration to impose sanctions on firms and people participating in the Damascus International Fair.

The President: The representative of Kuwait has requested the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): The representative of Syria mentioned Kuwait while levelling many accusations against Kuwaiti parties and institutions. He usually makes such accusations during his statements, and he has the right to do so. However, it is also our right to reply.

Those accusations are baseless. He mentioned that the Salafist movement in Kuwait supports a faction known as the Huras Al-Din. It is the first time that we are hearing about such a movement. There is no Salafist movement in Kuwait that supports any faction. We have charities with specific religious affiliations. But the Kuwaiti Government can confirm that they are not involved with any terrorist group, whether in Syria or elsewhere. Those charities provide funding only for humanitarian purposes, similar to what the Government of Kuwait does with regard to the situation in Syria. The humanitarian dimension gets our priority. That is why Kuwait hosted three international conferences. We are still one of the first countries to support the humanitarian operations of the United Nations in Syria in support of Syrian refugees and displaced persons.

The President: The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has requested the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): When we speak of countering terrorism, we refer to terrorism that has led us to suffer for eight years, claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and destroyed our infrastructure. When we talk about terrorism and say that an individual is a Kuwaiti, Egyptian, Tunisian, Australian, American or Belgian, it does not mean that we are accusing the Governments of those countries. We are drawing the attention of those Governments to the presence of people sponsoring terrorism in their countries. Salafist movements are known throughout the Gulf, not just in

Kuwait. There are Salafist and Wahhabi movements that are influenced by the Saudi Wahhabi ideology. The Kuwaiti Government is well aware of that.

For years, we have unequivocally proven that there are members of the Kuwaiti Parliament, for instance, who are part of the Salafist movement, such as Al-Tabatabai and Shafi Al-Ajmi. Are not they Kuwaiti nationals? They are two members of Parliament. I believe one of them is still a member of Parliament and the other is a former member. There are video clips on several social media platforms in which those two terrorists encourage the slaughter of Syrians, based on their sectarian and religious affiliation.

The New York Times featured a full-page article in 2013 about a staff sergeant called Al-Mutairi, whom we mentioned previously. He alone had sent \$400 million to Syria in cash and weapons. He was a staff sergeant in the Kuwaiti army. The representative of Kuwait compels us to mention names. There is another Kuwaiti terrorist called Al-Jalahma — one of the many terrorists active in Syria, alongside Saudis, Egyptians, Tunisians and others. That does not mean that the Kuwaiti Government sponsors terrorism. We are simply drawing the attention of Governments to the fact that terrorists from their countries come to Syria. They are not Syrians. They are foreign terrorists. It is our right, as a Syrian State, to fight and expel them. If those countries are concerned about them, they should take them back, as we said in our statement. They should return those monsters back to their caves in their countries.

The President: The representative of Kuwait has requested the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I apologize for requesting the floor again. As I mentioned before, I have genuinely tried not to respond to the representative of Syria, so that we do not start an argument for one reason: we need to focus our discussion on the agenda item. We should not divert our attention to other issues that are not supposed to be discussed today. However, given the fact that the representative of Syria has mentioned this matter again and again, we are compelled to respond.

As the Council knows, the representative of Syria mentioned an individual called Al-Mutairi several times. *The New York Times* featured an article on him four or five years ago, to which he referred. I would like to inform the Council that that individual, known as

Al-Mutairi, does not exist. The Al-Mutairi is a big tribe in Kuwait. We are speaking of 2 million individuals or more. To be honest, the information of *The New York Times* article is false. I hope that the representative of Syria will provide us with a United Nations document or any other credible report from the Secretariat. Then we would respond to any proved accusations against any individual. We have laws in Kuwait and can prosecute and hold accountable any individual with ties to any terrorist group, whether Al-Mutairi or any other individual. I believe that there is one person whom the representative of Syria mentioned that is designated on the list of terrorists, and we took every possible measure against him through the Security Council. If the Syrian representative has names of persons who committed crimes against the Syrian people or participated in any operations on Syrian territories against the Syrian people, then let the Syrian representative provide us with their names, or he could directly provide the Sanctions Committee established pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999) with all the information he has regarding those persons. Should the Council decide to include any of those names on the list, we will then take the necessary measures against those individuals.

I do not believe that it is right to level accusations haphazardly against persons who do not exist and accuse them of terrorism based on reports issued by *The New York Times* or any other newspaper. I wish that the Syrian representative would accept the content of United Nations reports on the situation in Syria and the detainees there. United Nations reports are independent, objective and unbiased.

The President: The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

I now give him the floor, hopefully for the final time today.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): As a matter of fact, I am keen on Kuwait

more than my colleague the representative of Kuwait. As I said, we are not levelling these accusations against the Government of Kuwait. However, given that the representative of Kuwait insists on denying the credibility of what I said, this confirms that our suspicions are true.

We must not protect terrorism, in accordance with Council resolutions. We are not talking only for the sake of talking. We have provided these names to the relevant counter-terrorism subcommittees. We do what we say. We are not simply basing these accusations on articles from *The New York Times*, despite their importance. If the Mutairi tribe of 2 million people was all terrorists, then that would be a Kuwaiti disaster. No. We are referring to one Al-Mutairi individual — a staff sergeant in the Kuwaiti army — who is involved in terrorist acts in my country. This is confirmed and not just the talk of *The New York Times*. We have provided the counter-terrorism subcommittees of the Council with all the necessary evidence, but when we asked to include Shafi Al-Ajmi on the list of terrorist individuals, the delegation of Kuwait opposed it.

The President: The representative of Kuwait has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I hope that this is the last time that I ask for the floor. Honestly, it is unacceptable for the Syrian representative — or others — to say implicitly or explicitly that Kuwait is accused of being involved in terrorism.

I would like to correct the information that the Syrian representative mentioned in his latest statement on Shafi Al-Ajmi. This individual is listed on the lists of the Sanctions Committee established pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999). He was designated pursuant to a decision by the Security Council. Back then, we were not a member of the Security Council to be able to oppose that decision.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.