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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
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Mr President,

1. Let me start with the very worrying situation in and around the Idlib de-escalation area. Regrettably the fighting continues, with reports of: airstrikes, shelling, rockets and mortar attacks, all too often involving the indiscriminate use of force. Civilians continue to be killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. Front-lines have not shifted – at least not significantly.
2. Security Council-designated terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is a significant presence within the de-escalation area. Its attacks must cease. But all due protection must be afforded to the up to 3 million civilians in Idlib, many of whom fled there from earlier fighting – and to civilians in the surrounding areas too. As the Secretary-General said last week: “Even in the fight against terrorism, there needs to be full compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.” Strikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure – including de-conflicted health facilities and humanitarian workers - are absolutely unacceptable. They must cease without delay.
3. Reports of close military exchanges, between the Syrian Government and Turkish observation posts are also of grave concern. They remind us that Idlib is not just a humanitarian issue, nor just about Syria - but a potential powder-keg of regional escalation.
4. Undoubtedly, there is no easy solution for Idlib. But the only way to find one is for hostilities to stop, and for key stakeholders to engage in a cooperative approach towards countering terrorism – an approach that safeguards the protection of civilians. Both Turkey – which I visited earlier in the month - and the Russian Federation – which I will visit next week - have reassured me that they remain committed to the September 2018 Memorandum of Understanding and have set up a working group. But we must see this assurance reflected on the ground. I strongly reiterate the Secretary-General’s appeal to Russia and Turkey to stabilize the situation without delay.

Mr President,

5. We must in fact pursue a nationwide ceasefire, as envisaged in resolution 2254. We see the importance of this when we see unrest across Syria. There are exchanges of fire and fatalities in northern rural Aleppo and continued signs of instability in the south-west. The fate of the north-east remains unresolved, demanding a solution.

6. There are immense humanitarian and protection needs across the country and outside too. There is a grinding poverty, exacerbated by commodity shortages and rising prices in many parts of Syria. We have seen a terrible spate of fires ravaging wheat fields and jeopardizing Syria's food security.
7. The internally displaced are acutely vulnerable. In addition to Idlib, two grave humanitarian situations – in Rukban and Al-Hol – remain at the top of our agenda. Emergency Relief Coordinator Lowcock briefed you on this two days ago. Today, my Senior Humanitarian Adviser, Najat Rochdi, urged the Humanitarian Task Force here in Geneva to support the UN's efforts for humanitarian access, to support protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure and to find durable solutions.
8. The current escalation and unrest also sends exactly the wrong signal to Syrian refugees. It only reinforces their doubts over security conditions, conscription, and livelihoods in Syria.
9. We must stabilize the situation in Idlib. If that is achieved, we must then avoid the risk of a “no-war-no-peace” scenario: front-lines mostly frozen but *still* periodic conflict and unrest; *still* five international armies in perpetual risk of confrontation; Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence *still* violated; IDPs and refugees *still* not returning – at least not in any critical mass; the tragedy of the detained, abducted and missing *still* unresolved; a strengthened ISIL insurgency with terrorist groups and foreign fighters, *still* regrouping and *still* posing a challenge; and *still* no political solution.

Mr President,

10. We all agree, there is no military solution to this conflict. I have sought to revive a Syrian-led and -owned political process, based on resolution 2254. An immediate priority has been to launch -- if it is possible -- a credible, balanced and inclusive, Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated constitutional committee, fully respecting Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. This has been a key item in my sustained dialogue with the two parties - the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission. I have also ensured the continued support for a common way forward among the Sochi co-convenors and others, including the so-called Small Group, who I saw in Paris earlier this week - and the Secretary-General himself discussed the issue with the Russian leadership during his recent trip to St Petersburg.

Mr President,

11. I believe the path to concluding the constitutional committee's composition and the rules of procedure now may be open. I look forward to testing directly, in my upcoming engagements, whether a formula that I have been careful to ensure has the buy-in of all, can move forward the establishment of a committee. I appreciate recent engagement by senior Russian officials to support the UN's efforts. I look forward to consulting the Government in Damascus in the near future -- and to consulting the leadership of the Syrian Negotiations Commission. It is time to finalize outstanding details, to enable the UN to facilitate the work of the constitutional committee in Geneva.

12. The constitutional committee can be a door-opener. But it will not alone solve the conflict or the challenges facing Syria. This can only unfold if we begin to see real trust and confidence developing, via tangible and reciprocal steps, including on the ground.
13. I strongly believe that progress on detainees, abductees and missing persons– if done in a meaningful way and at meaningful scale – could make such an impact. I have prioritized action on a unilateral release of women, children, the sick and elderly. Improving access to information and communication is another step. The Government and the opposition should compile and consolidate lists of individuals they hold or have information on – and also who they seek.
14. We will continue to engage in earnest on this very difficult but critical file - both myself and Deputy Special Envoy, Khawla Mattar. We will continue in parallel also to press Russia, Turkey, Iran – with whom we are working in a working group on this issue - to exert the efforts needed to try to achieve more concrete results on this file. My invitation for the Working Group, to have its next meeting in Geneva stands.

Mr President,

15. In truth, a series of steps will be needed if a cycle of trust and confidence is to develop. This has been impressed upon me by Syrians from many walks of life.
16. I have met with many civil society actors and networks recently – including through the Civil Society Support Room. All of these Syrians, from both inside and outside, and irrespective of their political orientations or backgrounds, are eager, even desperate, for a political solution. But it strikes me that they do not really believe that a real process that could lead to a solution is likely.
17. This week I also engaged with the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board, who met in Geneva to deepen their understanding of how constitutional processes can protect and advance women’s rights. They and many others stress the critical importance of at least 30% women participating in a constitutional committee. But they too emphasized the deficit of faith that Syrians, men and women, have in the political process.
18. This is why a political process must be about more than just meetings in Geneva – it must include concrete actions on the ground, to inspire trust and confidence. I will therefore continue to intensively consult the widest spectrum of Syrians on what they see as practical and constructive entry points for trust-building actions.
19. But ultimately of course, it falls upon the parties to take those actions. Unblocking the impasse will be difficult. There is much mistrust. Positions are entrenched. But I believe that international discussions and cooperation can help Syrians overcome these obstacles. This is not to undermine the Syrian-led and owned nature of the process. It is simply a recognition of the extent of international involvement in Syria and the centrality of international support for any viable future for Syria. So real steps on the ground could and should see international

actions too. This would build trust and confidence among Syrians -- and also between Syria and the international community.

Mr President,

20. At present, no currently active international grouping brings together all key international players whose support can guarantee concrete and reciprocal steps, across all dimensions. I believe my effort should be helped by bringing together the will embodied in the Astana format, the Small Group format and the permanent membership of this Council. This is why I continue to work on inviting a group of key players to a common forum, to support a Syrian-led and owned process *in Geneva* in a very practical way.

Mr President,

21. Tomorrow, at the G20 Summit, world leaders will have many items on their agenda. The Secretary-General and I have urged that Syria should be high among them. We hope that Russia and Turkey can work at the highest level to stabilize the situation in Idlib. We hope that Russia and the United States can build on recent talks and deepen their dialogue at the highest level too, because cooperation between them will be a key element for international cooperation on Syria. And we also hope that cooperation can be built in a way that *all* other key players are involved – supporting a Syrian-led and owned process facilitated by the United Nations in the discharge of its mandate from this Council.

Mr. President,

22. Since the beginning of my tenure, this Council has offered its full support for my mission, and I have greatly appreciated that. Six months into the job, I appreciate just how complex and difficult it is – but also I see the possibilities to chart the path out of this conflict. It is now time for the Idlib situation to be stabilized and a nationwide ceasefire pursued. It is in fact past time to launch a constitutional committee. It is also time to try to develop a climate of confidence-building measures. And we clearly need a renewed international support format.

23. These are the kinds of actions that would signal that we are at least moving down a political path in line with resolution 2254 -- through a constitutional committee unfolding in a safe, calm and neutral environment, paving the way for free and fair UN-supervised elections as envisaged in the resolution, and a lasting political settlement.

ENDS.