

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

22 November 2019
Ms. Sabah Alhallak briefing
to the UN Security Council

Madam President, Ambassadors, Civil Society colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon. My name is Sabah Alhallak and I am a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and a member of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. For more than half my life, I have worked for the advancement of women's rights in Syria, and so today, I am briefing you in my independent capacity as a member of civil society and as a lifelong feminist.

Madam President and members of the Security Council, I am addressing you today because the fate of millions of Syrians across the country, in Damascus, in the north-east, and in Idlib, are in your hands.

My statement will focus on three key issues:

- 1) The gendered impact of the conflict and ensuring accountability
- 2) Women's participation in the political process as well as in all aspects of peace and security
- 3) Release of detainees and forced disappearances

The gendered impact of the conflict and ensuring accountability

Madam President,

The Syrian conflict, which has been ongoing for more than eight years, has had a devastating impact on all civilians, including women and girls. Just this week, missiles hit a building next to a maternity hospital in a displaced persons camp in Idlib, killing at least 16 people and injuring many more, including women, children and medical staff, according to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). This is now the sixty-fifth attack on health facilities in north-west Syria since April of this year. Further, tens of thousands of people, the majority of whom are women and children, have been displaced in north-east and north-west Syria as a result of recent military operations, triggering humanitarian emergencies.

The current political and humanitarian crisis in Syria continues to exacerbate discrimination against women, leading to an increase in gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, and trafficking. Syrian women have faced threats to their rights from all sides, not only from existing discrimination embedded in law, but also from groups such as ISIS and Al-Nusra, who have threatened violence against women and girls. Women also make up the majority of those who are displaced, and ensuring their safe, voluntary and dignified return to their places of origin, in accordance with international standards, is critical.

In Syria today, all parties to the conflict continue to operate with impunity. The Security Council must pressure all parties to operate in accordance with international law and ensure accountability of all those

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who have committed violations. Any efforts to ensure accountability and transitional justice must include women's rights and gender at their core. This cannot wait until after a political process has concluded.

Women's participation in the political process as well as in all aspects of peace and security

Despite the fact that space for Syrian civil society to influence the political process remains limited, women's rights activists from grassroots and political movements continue to organise and demand a say over the future of Syria, including on issues related to justice, citizenship and the constitutional process.

Madam President, let me be clear: there can be no democracy in Syria without women's full, equal and meaningful participation or without codifying women's rights and gender equality in any political process. Yet, these fundamental issues continue to be overlooked in formal, high-level processes to this day. Since 2014, despite the efforts of the Special Envoy and the demands of Syrian women's rights activists, there have been only two women in each of the Government and the opposition's delegations for the Geneva negotiation process.

Many civil society activists support the constitutional process now underway and consider it a path to the political process. The Constitutional Committee, which met for the first time this month, is a good step forward in increasing women's participation in the formal political process. With the support of the Special Envoy and the strong advocacy of women's rights activists, representation of women in the Committee has reached 28%. Gender equality must be firmly enshrined in the new Constitution in order to ensure that women's rights are guaranteed in Syria's future.

Detainees and enforced disappearances

Since the Security Council briefing on the situation of detainees and missing persons in August, there has been no progress on this issue, despite Council members expressing the desire for immediate action. As you heard from Families for Freedom in August, over 100,000 Syrians remain detained or missing, and subject to torture and other ill-treatment. Many women and children are detained in order to exert pressure on their fathers and husbands who are politically active or in the military—in effect being held as hostages by the warring parties. Many human rights defenders have been forcibly detained or disappeared over the past decade, often under the pretext of counter-terrorism efforts. Women's rights activists, including humanitarian workers, face all manner of violence, including arrest and torture. Women and girls who are detained face gender-specific violations during and after detention, where acute stigmatization upon release can result in honor killings, divorce, or even suicide.

All civilians who have been arbitrarily detained should be released immediately in accordance with international human rights law and the provisions of Resolution 2254 (2015). Addressing detention and forced disappearances of Syrians is a critical confidence-building measure between the parties to the conflict and the Syrian people. Prioritization of this issue by the UN will also increase the legitimacy of

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its role in this process in the eyes of ordinary Syrians, who have often felt betrayed by the international community over the past decade.

In conclusion, Madam President, I call on the Security Council to ensure the full implementation of Resolution 2254 (2015), which was adopted by consensus, as the framework for future action by this body.

I call on the Council to prioritize the following:

- **Call for an immediate cease-fire to end the current conflict and ensure that all civilians are protected from attacks.**
- **Ensure women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all ongoing and future political processes.** A minimum of 30% representation of women in all decision-making processes, at all levels, must be guaranteed, with the goal of full equality.
- **Include provisions within a new Constitution that codify international human rights law, including gender equality and non-discrimination.** The Constitution must include guarantees of non-discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ability, religion, economic and other status and explicit provisions enshrining gender equality and criminalizing all forms of gender-based violence. In addition, it must include provisions on the primacy of international conventions to which Syria is a party, over national law.
- **Release all arbitrarily detained persons, addressing it as a humanitarian priority. Allow unconditional access to all places of detention by international humanitarian and medical organizations.** The Security Council should support the ongoing efforts of the UN Special Envoy to address the situation of detainees as part of his mandate and ensure that the gender-specific consequences for detained women and children are addressed.

To date, the abject failure of the UN Security Council to stop the bloodshed in my country and end impunity in Syria undermines the credibility of this body to carry out its core mandate of maintaining peace and security. In this chamber, just this year, you have heard about the impact this war has had on civilians, on women, on children, on people with disabilities, on families of the disappeared, on medical workers. All of us wish desperately for the day when all Syrians are free from violence and war. We dream of a future that is inclusive and rooted in human rights, including women's human rights. But our future, indeed, our present, depends on decisive action by this body.

Thank you.