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**UN Security Council session on the situation in the Middle East (Syria)
January 26, 2022
Briefing by Thuraya Hijazi, Release Me Director, to the UNSC**

Madam President, excellencies.

Good afternoon and warm greetings to you.

I am Thuraya Hijazi, a political and feminist activist, and the director of Release Me, an organization working to empower women survivors of violence and introduce civil peace programs in northwestern Syria. I am also a former detainee in the prisons of the Syrian regime.

I am speaking to you today in an effort to amplify the voices of women in my country. As you know, we are approaching the eleventh year since the start of the Syrian revolution, which has turned into a protracted crisis amid the desperation of all those who dreamed of bringing about political change.

The Syrian regime continues to rule with the unlimited support of Russia and Iran, amid near silence and inaction from the international community. The Syrian Opposition has failed to set up structures to replace the regime, mostly due to international interference.

Meanwhile, the Syrian people are paying the price in all regions in Syria. Syria today has turned into four countries, four large prisons holding captive those who live in them, where 90% of the Syrian people live below the poverty line, and 60% suffer from food insecurity. Nine million Syrians live in areas outside of regime control, and 5.6 million people need cross-border aid, a life-saving mechanism which has been consistently politicized in the UNSC¹. Additionally, more than 2.4 million children are out of school, 40% of whom are girls². Girls are among the most vulnerable groups in Syria, and you can imagine what future lies ahead for them.

Madam President, excellencies,

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the Special Envoy, the Security Council has failed to find a political solution for Syria. Syria has become a human tragedy, a country that is kept hostage to regional and international conflicts that have made us Syrians lose hope for a political solution that achieves justice for the people, and not for the ruling parties.

This is reflected in the multiple spheres of influence under de-facto authorities, who are gaining impunity for violations of international humanitarian law due to their support by international and regional actors. After investing in organizational, administrative, and military structures, they have positioned themselves for a future political solution that attempts to guarantee their control and increases their power.

We are also concerned about a growing trend of normalization with the Syrian regime, supported by Russia and some Arab governments, despite the violence that it has committed against Syria and the Syrian people. Russia is taking advantage of both the US indecision about public engagement and European countries' lack of influence on developments pertaining to Arab normalization, to attempt to legitimize and empower the regime. These include the Arab gas pipeline, and the UAE's attempt to bring Syria back into the Arab League. We are also concerned by some recent statements of the Special Envoy in support of some normalization under the banner of engagement. These developments in regard to normalization have been in part enabled through sanctions relief. They send conflicting messages about

¹ Reuters, 2019, [Russia, backed by China, casts 14th U.N. veto on Syria to block cross-border aid](#)

² UNICEF, 2021, [After almost ten years of war in Syria, more than half of children continue to be deprived of education](#)

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the implementation of the Caesar Act, without any alternative economic and diplomatic mechanisms at the international level to achieve justice and peace in Syria.

Madam President, Excellencies,

As a witness and a political activist since the start of the revolution, and as a former detainee who has experienced first-hand the regime's detention centers, I can tell you that Syrian women's problems go beyond the widespread violence, and impunity for perpetrators at the highest levels. There has been extensive reporting on violence against women in Syria, but unfortunately, there has been little to no action to address the regime's continued violations, as if victims were mere numbers.

As political feminists, we know the roots of atrocities facing women lie deep in the political economy of war and violence, underpinned by patriarchy. Sexual violence impacts women's positions in the public sphere, our productive roles, and our political roles as essential actors in the peace process. It is essential to ensure full, equal and meaningful participation of women in the political processes, including at negotiation tables and all committees and bodies of the transitional phase.

The politicization of humanitarian issues by the Syrian regime and its international allies is perpetuating women's legal and economic vulnerabilities and inhibiting access to education and health services. If the conflict continues, Syria will be a source of militancy and terrorism, and a regional hub for organized crime, especially with the prevalence of illicit drug trafficking, a main source of regime revenue. Camps and shelters - which lack privacy, and basic services - will continue to be sites of violence for women and girls.

Madam President, Excellencies,

Syrian women, with our strength and determination, seek to transcend the role of the victim despite all of the hardships we have faced, including the killing of loved ones, arrest, displacement, and the asylum process. Syrian women seek to confront all forms of exclusion perpetuated through patriarchal and militarist systems. We will invest our expertise to take active part in the political process and contribute to the rebuilding of Syria.

We urge the Council to:

1. Increase pressure on the Syrian regime to release all detainees, reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared, and ensure that the detainee file is above negotiation.
2. Emphasize alternative mechanisms to counter the normalization of the regime.
3. Place pressure on the regime and the de-facto authorities by enabling international organizations to investigate the crimes that were committed by force of arms, and by lifting the immunity of perpetrators.
4. Ensure that any leadership of Syria is representative of the will of the Syrian people, independent from external influence, and inclusive of women and youth.
5. Advance efforts to reach a comprehensive and sustainable political solution with the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women, by implementing measures including the Geneva 1 communique, UNSCR 2254, and the relevant resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.
6. Link the political settlement to accountability that guarantees women's rights.
7. Bind the reconstruction process in Syria with the achievement of a political solution, and the safe repatriation of refugees.
8. Support the criminalization of all violence against women. Additionally support the development of a gender-responsive constitution and other policies based on all international treaties and conventions related to human rights, and ensure that negotiations are shaped by gender-analysis and feminist policies.

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We urge this Council to push for a new round of negotiations that include all countries involved in the Syrian war, under the auspices of your Council, so that our dream for a civic and democratic state is achieved without the Syrian regime or any other authoritarian forms of governance. When we see your commitment, countless women are ready to play our part, fully participate, and assume the decision-making positions that we rightfully deserve.

Thank you for your attention.