

Panel: Humanitarian Diplomacy - Access and Human Security
Najat Rochdi, UN Deputy Special Envoy for Syria.

Thank you for having me here today. Let me start by quoting the words of a Syrian woman living in displacement, from a recently published report by the Syrian feminist lobby: "It's like placing thorn upon silk, our can't fix it. You can remove the thorn but the imprint is lasting. Displacement is the thorn that has ruined our lives."

She is one of the 16.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid today in Syria - one of three out of four Syrians in need. The "thorn" encapsulates an entire spectrum of suffering and hardship that will no doubt continue until such time as there is a sustainable political resolution to the conflict allowing her to pick up the pieces of her life. And until such time, humanitarian diplomacy - geared towards ensuring people's access to aid and their protection from violations of human rights and humanitarian law - remains as critical as ever in Syria and elsewhere.

Humanitarian workers and humanitarian diplomats are more and more operating in complex political environments where political interests, competing priorities, power dynamics and polarization, and geopolitical considerations hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilians. Governments and armed groups are more and more imposing restrictions, bureaucratic hurdles, and denying access, making it difficult to reach and protect affected populations. They face significant security risks, particularly in conflict-affected areas. They are exposed on regular basis to violence, attacks, arrests or kidnappings and in extreme cases to killing.

Moreover, information gaps, misinformation, fake news and communication breakdowns hinder coordination efforts and impact the overall effectiveness of humanitarian response and the safety of humanitarian works. Addressing these challenges requires sustained diplomatic efforts, political will, and collaboration among governments, UN, humanitarian organizations, local and international communities, and other stakeholders. It also requires advocating for the principles of humanitarian action, including neutrality, impartiality, and independence, to ensure the protection of affected populations and the effective delivery of assistance.

It's the *raison d'être* of the HTF for Syria. The HTF was set as part of UNSC Res 2254 for the use of diplomatic channels and negotiations to address humanitarian issues and promote humanitarian action. It plays a crucial role in negotiating and facilitating access to affected populations, advocating for the protection of human rights, and mobilizing resources for humanitarian response. The HTF involves engaging with MS, Donors and other relevant actors to ensure the safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Our Motto is that if the people are willing to negotiate, the people should be able to compromise, to give and take, which is not always happening unfortunately. Its also to remind all the stakeholders that IHL and humanitarian principles are a constant and not subject to interpretation or double standards. It is in this vein that I chair regular Humanitarian Task Force meetings, bringing together Member States of the International Syria Support Group and the UN humanitarian field leadership, to focus on the

most pressing humanitarian issues of the moment relating to aid access and protection of civilians, in view of negotiating ways to overcome or address some of these issues. Additionally - and this is where our humanitarian diplomacy efforts have yielded most results - we hold ad hoc meetings in smaller formats, aimed to seek solutions on very specific issues and only with those Member States having leverage on these issues.

In some cases, we have been able to reach some positive outcomes - for example, in the post-earthquake period, the HTF contributed to a speedy mobilization of resources for the UN's earthquake flash appeal, whilst at the same time enabling States to gather updates and insights from the field leadership on their response activities and challenges. We facilitated an ad hoc meeting with the relevant Member States dedicated to the issue of water and electricity, and with the active engagement of those present, we managed to unlock a deadlock on this file - which had an immediate outcome of resuming water access to some 1 million people in northern Syria. Even though they are few and far apart, these instances do attest that humanitarian diplomacy can work, trigger the political will and harness areas of leverage to resolve issues impacting the humanitarian aid response.

However - whatever positive results we are able to achieve, these remain hostage to the conflict itself. With every new wave of hostilities or escalation more people are driven into displacement and need. Security agendas and priorities more often than not overtake the imperatives of humanitarian aid. And one of the most important challenges today is the competition for resources - despite the valiant efforts of donors and huge credit to their efforts and generosity - the international community's attention and resources are being diverted by multiple crises all whilst, the humanitarian needs have reached their highest level ever.

We all know that humanitarian needs will only start alleviating when the conflict is resolved in a sustainable manner. When displaced families, individuals, are able to return to their homes, when children are able to go back to school, when lives are no longer disrupted and destroyed.

Until such time, and while our efforts continue in this regard, we bear the responsibility to continue to engage with all parties, exploring avenues for resolution of pending access and protection issues, and keep engaging the national and local authorities, the international community - traditional donors and new donors - and local communities to meet the needs of the millions of vulnerable people today. As such, humanitarian diplomacy has never been as critical as it is today. We need desperately that political will that creates the space for humanitarian diplomacy to protect civilians and to facilitate access. We need to act so we don't fail the people in need. We must allow the people to go back to their lives and to have hope for their future. We need to acknowledge that local communities are the first humanitarian and instrumental in humanitarian diplomacy.

We must listen to them and more importantly hear them and involve them in the design of solutions. We must always remember that this is all about their lives, their future, and their hopes. We need that as a testimony that our shared humanity is still alive, that our shared values are still guiding decisions and that saving a life is a collective duty and subject to accountability, no matter whose life it is. This is the very significance of Humanity and our collective duty of hope.

Thank you.