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Dear members of the house committee on Foreign affairs,

Thank you for inviting me for this testimony. For the last decade, I have researched and advocated for women's rights as part of my academic research and activism. The region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) presents a mixed landscape when it comes to women's rights and gender equality. The last two decades witnessed a notable developmental in legislations, policies and initiatives to empower women and protect them from violence in many countries. It has also witnessed a threatening trend towards conflicts and violence that affected women and girls in particular. Gender inequality and violence against women are two multifaceted and wicked problems which can't be resolved without women's civic engagement in their communities and their unfiltered access to information; both remain a huge challenge under the increasingly authoritarian climate of the region.

Though most gender gap indicators rely on government-issued statistics and do not reflect necessarily the complexity of the lived realities of all women, it can provide a landscape of women's challenges in the Middle East in global comparison. The World Bank gender gap report of 2020 concluded that it would take 140 years to close the gender gaps in MENA region if going with the same pace; one of the lowest regions globally in performance. Of all the subindex of performance in the countries of the region, women's economic participation and opportunities and political empowerment are the two persisting challenges to achieve gender parity. Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are, for reasons of ongoing wars and instability, among the lowest in gender inequality. Syrians represent the highest refugee's population recorded at 6.6 million. Women of these countries were among the most vulnerable as refugees or internally displaced because of economic insecurity, sexual harassment and exploitation.

At 37% prevalence rate, violence against women in the MENA region are among the highest globally. The lockdown because of COVID-19 pandemic has added more risk for women in abusive homes. Governments are failing to respond as resources and political attention are diverted to fighting and managing the pandemic, thus offering women no escape. While some legislations have recently passed to address violence against women, sexual harassment and ending leniency punishments for rapists in several MENA countries such as Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, many women remain vulnerable to such abuses.

Factors such as restrictive family laws in divorce and custody, unresponsive law enforcements, fear of losing income, diminishing freedoms, honor-related and patriarchal norms, or lack of information, impede women's access to legal or social resources. In my own research and others in the region, only a minority of women disclosed the cause of their injuries to healthcare providers. In a highly patriarchal and conservative societies such as that of Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries, women often resort to their extended family for support against violence, but it rarely led to ending their suffering or abuse.

In such situations, Arab women, particularly young women, have taken to social media networks for help that is difficult to claim by their own governments or families. Recent cases of women reported in the media reflect the diversity and complexity of factors affecting women beyond wars and displacement. The case of Rahaf Al Qunon, an eighteen years old female who fled Saudi Arabia to avoid a death penalty for renouncing Islam in 2019, adds to more than 1762 asylum seekers from Saudi Arabia alone since the oppressive rein of King Salman and his son Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. A 21-years old Israa Ghareeb from Gaza was beaten to death by male relatives for posting pictures with her fiancé and his sister. Her case went unrecognized by law enforcement or health authorities who dealt with her extensive injuries and death. It was not until a group of her friends triggered a social media storm by publishing videos of Israa claiming her family's criticism for the dishonorable behavior of going out with her fiancé before marriage, that an investigation into her unusual death and detention of her abusers were ordered. However, many other requests for help are posted online by women of all ages and backgrounds go unnoticed or ignored without redress.

The effect of social media, however popular in Arabi countries, may not be sustainable to protect women or offer them solidarity. The continuous weakening of women movement across Arab countries is an important factor in the perpetration of abuse and the painstakingly slow pace of reforms for women. In their attempts to silence critics and dominate the narrative on reforms, many Arab governments have closed any civic space for women to amplify their demands and organize to advocate for needed reforms. State-led violence against women is prevalent in most Arab countries, either by failure to legislate or implement protective measures or by targeting women activists. In Saudi Arabia, the arrests and brutal torture of Saudi women activists who campaigned to end the women-driving ban and the male-guardianship system, have sent a shockwave across the women movement and deterred them from further advocacy for real reforms. In Egypt, the targeting of women activists and feminists' organizations, like Nazra for feminist studies, and the confiscation of their assets, have diminished their impact on assessing women's needs and advocating for rights reforms.

The United States is uniquely positioned to make a difference and lead by example. Ending the support for the devastating Yemen war and supporting the civil-society initiatives instead to enhance women's rights and protection from violence are achievable goals. Arab women, and people of the MENA region, has shown an impeccable resilience in dealing with their own challenges and should be always at the center point when strategizing for alliances or support. The United States has the leverage and the means to offer a moral leadership. One that does not compromise on rights and freedom for selling arms or intelligence sharing to further the survival of autocrats of the region.