“Distinguished guests, Euromed Feminist Initiative (IFE-EFI) members, dear students, colleagues, I speak today as the Director of the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Padova that is co-hosting this event together with IFE-EFI.

I feel it is an extremely meaningful event that we are hosting today: in addressing the complex and tragic reality of the Syrian conflict, this conference aims at investigating one specific aspect which is all too often left aside in policy debates and remains invisible in media accounts of conflict areas and struggles for peace and democracy, that is: the key role of women in conflict and transitional processes – and in the Syrian context in particular – in order to promote gender justice and social change within and across communities in the Middle Eastern region.

This occasion stems out of a recent collaboration our center had with IFE-EFI. In the context of a project they are conducting with the support of the European Union in early 2016 for a period of five months, we hosted two young Syrian lawyers in Padova. They came to meet with us at the Center for Gender Studies and got involved in our activities at the Department of Law, Politics, and International Studies. They took courses and participated in our scientific initiatives and they met our students and engaged with local civic organizations. Roula Baghdadi and Yousef Razouk, through sharing their experiences and visions, certainly enriched our perspective on the complexities that characterize the Syrian context today, and the Middle East more generally.

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At some point, we felt it would have been crucial to create an opportunity to bring some of this understanding to a broader audience in the premises of a university that – as a place of knowledge production and sharing – has a mandate to promote a culture based on universal values of human rights, peace, environmental protection, and international solidarity. So we started, together with IFE-EFI, to plan for this international event.

We decided the focus of the discussion would be on how to better understand the role and the contribution of women in peace processes, and what are the challenges they face in their efforts to promote and protect human and women’s rights in ongoing conflicts and in constitution building, as well as in transition and post-conflict situations.

Indeed, it is crucial to make clear that gender gaps – in both peace talks and transitional phases, as well as before and beyond emergency situations – are a persistent and universal challenge to national as well as international solidarity: as issues of gender exclusion, women’s marginalization, and stereotypes persist at all levels and across social and cultural backgrounds, feminist analyses can help understand the connection between daily experiences of gender-based discrimination and crisis situations, between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extra-ordinary’ forms of violence against women, such as those we have witnessed during the long years of the Syrian conflict.

By adopting this perspective, and looking at national conflicts and international developments through a gender lens, we also want to highlight the responsibility of the many actors and institutions that have a role to play when the challenges of gender equality and women’s empowerment are immense and when a politics of recognition and political will would be core to take the formal principles of respect, dignity, and equality for women and men that are enshrined in international standards and constitutional laws to the more concrete level of actual implementation.

Historical, juridical, and geo-political perspectives will be presented today, and practical experiences from within the Syrian territory will be shared and discussed. Indeed, we need these diverse perspectives and disciplinary
approaches to be brought to us so that we can all understand how norms evolve internationally, impact on national contexts, and learn from a dialog amongst different knowledges – those emerging from academia and those elaborated through political activities on the ground and transnationally – to try and make sense of the complexities of the current situation.

We have the privilege today of listening to some of the voices that have been struggling for gender equality and peace in the Syrian context over the past years: advocates and activists whom we normally do not hear about; actions and struggles that are seldom reported in the news, even when the news is about the violation of human and women’s rights.

We shall have three sessions in our conference: one devoted to a better understanding of international juridical standards as critical tools for moving the gender equality agenda forward, in conflict and post-conflict situations; a second one focusing on how women’s rights organizations in Syria support women’s claims to play a key role in the transition towards democracy and regime change; and a third session where an *ABC for a Gender Sensitive Constitution*, produced by IFE-EFI, will be introduced and commented upon.

There is also a ‘civil society dialog’ organized in the evening. That session gathers civil society organizations from Syria and Italy to address the Syrian conflict and its tragic consequences with a gender lens. The aim is to discuss the impact of the conflict on women, girls, and children; as well as to address the implications on the refugee issues that are at the core of Italian and European democratic crises nowadays.

As I said, we have worked in close collaboration with IFE-EFI to make this happen, and this has been a pleasure. But I would also like to thank all those who have contributed in different ways: our Syrian speakers, who have come a long way to tell their stories and expectations; our Italian colleagues, who have agreed to share their expertise; members of the Center for Gender Studies and staff at our Department, for continued organizational support; our hosts in this amazing space; our video-makers; and our translators.
Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to remind everyone that the Center for Gender Studies is part of an evolving network of similar centers across Italy, and is strengthening its connections with European and International realities engaged with the promotion of a culture of gender equality, from the local to the global level, within and beyond academia.

This broad network – as well as an internationally interested audience – will have access to the content of our conference thanks to a video recording that will be made available on our respective websites. The presentations will also be collected in a publication. In this manner, we aim to give continuity to the effort that is initiated today.

As we are daily confronted with the tragedy of conflicts and human and women’s rights violations, we are also faced with the questions: how can we contribute to making women’s struggles for peace known? How can their voices enter our communication channels, our research communities, and our educational activities?

We, at the Center for Gender Studies, wish today’s event will contribute to making these spaces for dialog – and the collaborations through which they are made possible – part of our ongoing academic commitment and practice.

I wish you all a fruitful conference.”