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Ladies and Gentlemen participating in the conference

It is of great pleasure to me to participate in the 35<sup>th</sup> Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East, which represents an important forum for the discussions for facing the regional challenges and priority issues related to food and agriculture.

The terrorist war against Syria and the systematic destruction of all the economic and social sectors, which are known by everybody, has put the Syrian community under increasing pressure and extended suffering. The unilateral sanctions that are becoming more severe a day after the other coupled with the climate change and drought challenges and the increasing desertification are threatening the agricultural production elements and the water sources depletion because of the increasing demand on the already limited water resources, are leading to declining food security level.

In the context of this complex crisis, enhancing the farmers' resilience, planting all the arable areas, development of the agricultural sector, including forests, plant and livestock production, are on the top of the priorities list of the Ministry of Agriculture. Furthermore, the Ministry faces other challenges related to the investment of land and water resources. The area of cultivated land dropped dramatically because of the war and the economic sanctions that increased agricultural inputs prices and constrained timely access to high quality inputs. All these elements reduced the yields, plant and livestock products, strategic stock of the strategic products and staples and led to declined food security. The economic sanctions and the terrorist acts destroyed the irrigation systems and the public irrigation schemes and damaged the wells that supply irrigation water. Consequently, most of the agricultural production is done in rain fed lands that yield 50% of the irrigated land production. The declined agricultural production has created a circle of food insecurity and water insecurity. Furthermore, some places are now deprived from drinking water, while other areas are suffering from irrigation water scarcity. The reduced planted area resulted in reduced agricultural production and, consequently, lower strategic stocks that will influence food security over the coming years. This means that big support is needed.

In order to encourage farmers to re-invest in their lands we need to:

- Rehabilitate the public irrigation networks;
- Train farmers on technical measures they need to take in order to resume the agricultural production;

- Provide farmers with agricultural inputs in a sustainable manner and help them with the marketing of their products. Farmers are facing marketing challenges, not because of market access, but because of the high transportation costs, volatile fuel prices and lack of wholesale markets organization. Relevant services can be provided to market organization, value chain of the agricultural products that ensure complementarity between the inputs provision, production and marketing stages. Furthermore, complementarity among irrigation, farming and industry enhances the value added of agricultural products. The Ministry of Agriculture is designing new programmes to achieve agricultural production integration and raise the value added. We are also endeavoring to support complementarity between agricultural and industry so as to enhance agro-processing and issue quality certificates that can help access to local and international markets. Achieving this will help increasing the storage period of processed products that can be supplied in proper timing and ensure food availability and prevent any possible future shortage.

The agricultural sector is facing environmental challenges resulting from fires which take place every year in forests and crop and fruit trees lands. Usually, farmers burn the agricultural crops residues in August and September in order to prepare their fields for cultivation in September. But it happens that the fire extends to fruit trees orchards or to forests, which causes huge environmental problems and bio diversity losses in the forest areas, which are already small compared to the total area of the country. It is our duty to protect these forests from violations and fires by establishing an early warning system, designing training programmes on how to control forest fires and rehabilitate burned areas according to the international environmental standards. It is simply possible to replant a burned area, but this should be done based on the environmental measures that help recover the vegetal cover by protecting the burned areas so as to help the recovery of the plants. Huge efforts should be exerted to rehabilitate the burned area and this requires the support of the international organization that can transfer the international experience in forest fire control and burned areas rehabilitation and provide the required inputs, equipment and advanced machinery. Training and capacity building are other pre-requisites to implement advanced forest fire control programmes.

Rural development is one of the main objectives in Syria. Over the last twenty years, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform implemented several rural development projects that had positive impact on rural development. These projects were implemented in cooperation with international organizations and funds in the areas of land reclamation, local community development, infrastructure, production improvement support services and livestock development. FAO played a significant role in this area, especially during the war, through the implementation of family farming, livelihood support, food processing of family farming products, product improvement to meet the standard specification, access the market and gain market niche. Furthermore, FAO is providing support for livestock vaccination and treatment to protect the Syrian herd from contagious diseases.

COVID 19 further worsened the already bad situation and affected all the Syrian community strata, including farmers, peasants, traders and urbans. The government has taken all possible measures to control this virus. Movement restriction was imposed for some periods among and within the Syrian governorates, which negatively influenced the farmers because the agricultural products cannot stay for a long period without daily services like irrigation, weeding, fertilization and other services. The inaccessibility of agricultural lands for services and irrigation resulted in a fall of agricultural production. Furthermore, the movement of agricultural products among the governorates was constrained, despite the fact that the agricultural products movement was not suspended in order to ensure food supply and because of the far distance between the production areas and the population concentration areas. Along with the continued food supply, and in order to reduce the prices of agricultural products during the COVID 19 period, the government allowed the establishment of local markets in the main cities so that the producers can sell their products directly to consumers without passing through the various parts of the marketing chain. This measure had a positive impact on small farmers who were allowed to deliver their products directly to the markets and make descent profits to cover their life expenses and settle in their areas.

Generally speaking, our priorities are clear. We need scientific, technical, technological and financial support for the rebuilding process of Syria. We need the support of all organizations and friend countries. We underline that the Syrian government priorities are related to the development of the current strategies in order to control and mitigate the impact of climate change which influenced social and economic situation in the country. There is a strong need to timely supply agricultural inputs at reasonable prices so as to reduce the cost of production and make available the agricultural products at affordable prices. We need to enhance modern agricultural practices and disseminate advanced technologies which doesn't only mean the use of machines, but also transfer the knowledge along with the technology in order to increase the agricultural productivity. The cultivable area became limited and cannot be increased. So we need to enhance the efficiency of our investments so as to get the best yield out of the area unit. This can only be achieved by adopting the results of the agricultural scientific research and applied research to address the agricultural sector problems. Productivity improvement cannot be achieved without the provision of agricultural inputs, enhancement of cooperative work and support of agricultural cooperatives. We need to provide technical support for forests development and to implement integrated rural development projects. Focus should not only be made on family farming, but we should disseminate the agricultural technologies that build the farmers' technical and financial capacity to plant small holdings wherever they are and not only in family gardens.

We are very much interested in supporting the livestock sector. The Syrian Awasi sheep is only available in this part of the world and has to be improved locally as it cannot be mixed with any other race. So we need to improve this important subsector in addition to the poultry and red meat subsectors. We have also original camels herd that can be developed and provide important products to Albadia population.

I wish all the success to this conference and I hope this meeting would lead to useful conclusions, especially because the coming days are full of big challenges and it is not possible to address these challenges without more cooperation and coordination. We are relying on the support of FAO, which has always been a main partner in the development of the agricultural sector and has a long cooperation history and joint programmes that were implemented with the Ministry of Agriculture all over the Syrian territories and had good development effect. We look forward to see this organization taking the lead in supporting the countries of the region to achieve their goals. We would like to mention here the importance of activating the “Hand in Hand” initiative launched by H.E the Director General as it contributes to coordinating the efforts to face the region’s economy challenges in general and the agricultural and food production in particular.

Assalam Alaikum