**Mr Special Rapporteur, moderator, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour to join you today. I’d like to thank Dr Fernand de Varennes for his kind invitation and for giving me the chance to engage, once again, with minority experts and activists from the MENA region and around the world.**

**The MENA region enjoys a uniquely diverse mix of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural minorities, each of whom has a distinctive history, beliefs, language, and culture, offering a great opportunity for rich, vibrant, and diverse societies. However, authoritarianism, political and economic instability, and protracted conflicts and wars have detrimental effects on minority communities across the region.**

**The Yazidi community in Iraq faced genocide in 2014; their women and children were forced into slavery just for holding a different belief. The region witnessed unprecedented mass displacement of Christians in Iraq (Mosul 2014) and in Egypt (Arish 2017) due to the government's failure to provide necessary protection against terrorism threats. The results were devastating. The impact of protracted conflict and wars has not only taken a mammoth toll on minority communities but also had a colossal effect on their tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage.**

**Despite the universal protection guaranteed by the IHL to all civilians not taking direct part in hostilities, recent events have – once again – beyond any doubt, provided evidence of the dire need to ensure special protection for minority communities during the war and armed conflict.**

**Today I am calling for special protection for minorities in war and conflict zones, special protection for minorities’ cultural heritage and a commitment to priorities for their recovery in post-conflict situations.**

**The conflict in Syria and Iraq, the occupation in Palestine, and the longstanding sectarian division in Lebanon had severely limited spaces for dialogue and opportunities for understanding. They also resulted in a colossal loss in tangible and intangible cultural heritage, especially the cultural heritage of minority communities in these countries. In addition, they deepened the societal divide and resulted in a lack of trust between different communities within societies. The need for a safe space for dialogue, a space in which we can build understanding, a space in which we can accept each other and feel safe to share our different beliefs, our rich cultures, our diverse traditions, and our unique languages, is growing. I believe that media can play a part in providing such spaces, celebrating diversity and pluralism, and giving a platform to those who have long suffered discrimination and negligence.**

**I also believe that international funding and development agencies can play an enormous role in normalising and mainstreaming minority-focused projects and activities, bringing minority issues to the fore.**

**Today, we are celebrating 30 years of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Although the declaration represented a landmark toward the recognition and promotion of minority rights three decades ago, the need for effective protection and fulfilment of minority rights is still mounting. The current framework stands far short of providing effective and adequate protection for minorities' rights.**

**I call for the introduction of a legally binding covenant on minorities' rights and the formation of an independent monitoring body to which individuals belonging to minorities can file complaints.**

**I believe that these small steps would contribute to better protection and fulfilment of minorities' rights in the future.**

**Building on this, I am honoured to introduce the following recommendations:**

**Recommendations:**

**1 – In the IHL framework, calling for special protection for minority communities/persons belonging to minorities in war and conflict zones, special protection for minorities’ cultural heritage and a commitment to priorities for their recovery in post-conflict situations.**

**2 – Encouraging media outlets/platforms (mainstream & alternative/digital) to provide spaces for dialogue and opportunities to develop understanding between different communities, celebrating diversity and pluralism, and giving a platform to individuals belonging to minorities.**

**3 – Encouraging international funding and development agencies to mainstream minority-focused projects and activities in their funding programmes and grants.**

**4 - Introducing a legally binding covenant on minorities' rights**

**5- Establishing an independent monitoring body that accepts individual complaints regardless of the state ratification status.**

**It has been my pleasure to be here today, and thank you very much for this opportunity.**