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United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Hearing on: The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East:
Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against ISIS

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations today about the spiraling humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq, and for the close attention you have paid to this complex and protracted crisis. I am here today in my capacity as Vice President of Humanitarian Leadership and Response with Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian and development non-governmental organization (NGO) that responds to emergencies and supports community-led development in more than 40 countries around the world. Mercy Corps has been working in the Middle East and North Africa for more than three decades; we currently run and manage programs in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and now Greece.

Senators, I just returned from Lesbos, Greece, this week. This island is a waystation for many refugees in their long journey to Europe. There I saw thousands of people who have risked everything they had left to flee for their lives. They are all survivors of a violent, protracted crisis that urgently requires a political solution. What we are seeing in Europe is an emergency within a much bigger and more complex crisis.

Tragically, Syrians and Iraqis are worse off today than they were a year ago, whether they are in Syria, Iraq or living in neighboring countries. Regional host countries that are receiving the vast majority of refugees face particular strain on their resources. The longer the war drags on, the more new challenges emerge. Humanitarian aid to assist those fleeing unimaginable violence in Syria and Iraq is critical, and the U.S. government has been incredibly generous. Still, ending this crisis and its impact on the region requires more than writing checks.

Humanitarian response efforts: reaching a breaking point

I can say without hesitation that for Mercy Corps and other humanitarian agencies, Syria and Iraq present some of the most hostile and complex environments in which we have ever worked.

In the face of extraordinarily difficult circumstances, through our local partnerships with Syrian and Iraqi civil society groups, we have been able to respond to humanitarian needs on a large

scale.

In Syria, Mercy Corps is among the largest providers of food assistance as well as essential supplies that people need to survive and maintain a modicum of dignity and small comfort, such as blankets, toothbrushes, soap and cooking utensils. We are also working hard to strengthen access to clean water and sanitation services, as well as a means to earn income and keep local markets going. Our programs meet the needs of an estimated 500,000 vulnerable Syrian civilians every month. Over the last year in Iraq, we met the critical needs of 365,000 displaced Iraqis and 385,000 Syrians through cross-border operations providing cash assistance, support to Iraqi civil society, access to education and programs that give communities the tools to address conflicts. Funding for these programs comes from contributions of the United States Agency for International Development; the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration; and other institutional donors.

These response efforts continue to be just a drop in the bucket compared to the exponentially growing needs. The humanitarian community is struggling to assist hundreds of thousands of innocent people who need our help. To be direct – we are nearing a breaking point. The sheer number of people in need is staggering, their needs grow ever greater and more desperate by the day, and there is still no end in sight.

Humanitarian situation in Syria

Let me tell you what we are seeing in Syria. At this juncture, more than 11.6 million Syrians are on the run and half of those people are children. According to the U.N., an estimated 7.6 million Syrians have fled their homes and are still trying to survive in Syria. Another 4 million have been forced to seek safety in neighboring countries. Syria's prewar population is estimated to have been 22 million. By this accounting, to date more than half of the country has been displaced by the conflict.

Protection continues to be the number one challenge facing Syrians who are still in the country. On a daily basis, civilians living outside the areas where the coalition is fighting ISIS face unrelenting aerial attacks, including the threat of barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian regime. In ISIS-held areas like Mare in Northern Syria, we heard reports from multiple sources, including medical personnel, of chemical agents being used against civilians; some of our own staff were impacted. Medical professionals throughout the country are overwhelmed and targeted. The Syrian regime continues to restrict access – in some areas, agencies wait up to eight months for permission to access people in need. On a daily basis, our partners, as a matter of common practice, painstakingly negotiate access across numerous conflict lines in order to deliver lifesaving aid.

An entire generation of Syrian children and youth are growing up in a war zone. Instead of worrying about their schoolwork, they worry whether they or their family might be killed. They are frustrated and isolated – young women in particular rarely leave their homes. Young men and women both experience a sense of powerlessness and humiliation.

For the first time since we started delivering aid into the Aleppo governorate three years ago, families we spoke to this week said that they depend on our food aid to survive; their personal

resources are now completely exhausted. Without this aid they would go hungry. A mother of 10 in Aleppo told us that she has no money left to buy groceries, but with the monthly food basket her children will not go hungry. During August alone, we responded to the needs of more than 400,000, delivering 2,600 tons of food. We are observing a new trend in our northern operating area: When fighting with ISIS threatens towns and villages, people are moving closer to the border with Turkey so they can cross if things get too bad. Everyone is on the phone with relatives, many already outside of the country, so they can make a decision in real time.

Humanitarian situation in Iraq

In Iraq, we are witnessing displacement of massive proportions with more than 3 million internally displaced Iraqis. People are moving around the country because they do not feel safe. Importantly, while needs cross ethnic and sectarian lines, most of those displaced are Sunni Arabs. People are fleeing violence and repression from ISIS, as well as the conflict generated by the Iraqi Security Forces' counter-offensives, and need protection. Underlying this, unresolved ethnic divisions continue to fester.

The humanitarian crisis *within* Iraq risks becoming something of a “forgotten” crisis – overshadowed by, and conflated with, the war in Syria. The Iraqi crisis has its own roots and its own nuances. The humanitarian response in Iraq should not be seen as another dimension of response to the wider Syrian regional crisis.

Although currently overshadowed by the dangers of ISIS, weak governance driven by sectarian divisions threatens to magnify the scale of the crisis in Iraq, and over the longer term poses a threat to stability. The displacement crisis compounds existing fragility, accentuates the risk of fragmentation and amplifies human suffering. Moreover, the conflict overlays Iraq's vulnerability to other man-made and natural disasters – like the continued structural vulnerability of the Mosul Dam. While it is unknown just how fragile the dam is, recent Iraqi Security Forces' activity urging people to relocate from villages nearby the dam in Nineweh governorate does prompt renewed concern. Imagine the humanitarian consequences of a serious dam breach: more than a million displaced; flooding that would overwhelm the city of Mosul and even put the U.S. embassy in Baghdad under several feet of water; and untold implications for an already tense and violent society and for a humanitarian response that is already stretched beyond capacity.

A proactive strategy is essential now to address the root causes of violence in Iraq and to prepare Iraq for the protracted challenges that will no doubt remain even after ISIS is defeated. Iraqis are concerned about the protection issues and human rights abuses taking place now, but are even more concerned about what will happen after the current fighting ends. If history is any guide, communities will face violent retribution and collective justice in the aftermath, and we need to act now to prevent atrocities. We also need to support the work of grassroots organizations that are leading response efforts – including in areas where needs are great but access is increasingly difficult for international actors – and avoid segmenting aid or favoring particular regions or demographics in Iraq, which in some cases inadvertently fuels sectarianism.

If the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress continue to take a narrow and predominantly short-term approach to addressing humanitarian needs in Iraq, the cycle of violence will surely continue and most likely escalate. Interventions that only address the symptoms of the conflict

have the real potential to do more harm than good by creating dependencies and sidelining the voices of Iraq's fledgling civil society and government stakeholders, both local and central. This includes government bodies like the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Directorate, Reconciliation Committee at the Prime Minister's office, provincial councils and the Iraqi Civil Society Committee, which are seeking to lead reconciliation efforts and address the underlying drivers of the conflict: poor governance and political grievances. Some notable progress has been made on this front with dedicated funding from the Department of State for peace building and reconciliation efforts, with Iraqi civil society in the lead, but this work needs greater attention.

Challenges of humanitarian assistance in ISIS-controlled areas

In both Syria and Iraq, aid agencies like Mercy Corps are increasingly walking a fine line between the humanitarian imperative to respond to the tremendous human suffering in areas under the control of sanctioned terrorist groups such as ISIS, and the need to protect U.S. taxpayer-funded aid from falling into the hands of such groups.

This is a tough challenge to navigate. Aid agencies are conducting operations where the need is greatest – inevitably high-risk areas – yet we lack adequate legal protections. The result is a chilling effect on our operations: Banks are terrified of doing business with Syrian humanitarian aid groups because they fear that the U.S. government will crack down on them. Humanitarian actors are reticent to work in areas of real need due to fears that any diversion of aid – no matter how small – will cost them their reputation or shut down their ability to provide aid elsewhere. This leaves innocent civilians trapped in besieged areas, left to fend for themselves.

Mercy Corps – like other professional humanitarian organizations – brings decades of global experience, rigorously tested standards and robust rules of engagement, which we clearly communicate to armed actors in our areas of operation. Where red lines are crossed, we will not hesitate to suspend operations. Where aid is captured, we do not hesitate to hold those responsible to account and seek to regain that aid. The humanitarian community has developed operating protocols that have proven effective in countering aid diversion and opening up access in non-ISIS areas. We want to roll these out further in ISIS areas, too. But, to do that with any measure of confidence, we urgently need clarity on U.S. government policy toward humanitarian negotiations with groups such as ISIS, as well as a crisper delineation of the space we have to operate.

Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism

While speaking to the destruction caused by ISIS, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the administration's strategic leadership in advancing a new global policy framework on countering violent extremism focused on mitigating and preventing violent extremism.

The February White House Summit on CVE – Countering Violent Extremism – has truly helped to usher in a new global dialogue on how to strengthen civilian efforts to mitigate the grievances and root causes that fuel cycles of violence and lure communities into joining or supporting violent groups.

On September 29, President Obama will lead a high level leader's summit in New York focused on advancing this framework. We urge congressional attention and support to advance this emerging, but potentially pivotal, policy framework.

Recommendations for Congress

While the situation is bleak, there are a number of concrete steps that Congress can take now to help the people of Syria and Iraq. I would like to leave the Committee with the following four key recommendations:

First, provide adequate funding for humanitarian assistance and longer-term needs.

As of this month, the joint U.N. and NGO funding appeals for Syria and Iraq are funded at barely 30 percent and 46 percent, respectively. This week, the World Food Program cut food assistance for one-third of Syrian refugees, including 229,000 people in Jordan.

It is more important than ever to shore up funding for the various humanitarian accounts in the FY16 budget – Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), Food for Peace (FFP), and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA). Specifically, we urge that these accounts be funded at no less than the following levels – \$3.059 billion for MRA, \$1.895 billion for IDA, \$1.466 billion for FFP, and \$50 million for ERMA.

We also need funding for programs that address root causes underlying the Syrian crisis among others. We urge you to support funding levels of \$6.1 billion for Economic Support Funds (ESF), including no less than \$72.5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), both base and Overseas Contingency Funds (OCO), in Iraq to help local governments and service ministries respond to citizens' needs and rebuild trust and legitimacy in communities in areas throughout the country. Continue to support allocation of \$25 million in Iraq for conflict response programming, as directed in the FY15 omnibus spending bill in FY16, and consider expanding to cover civil society support efforts.

Finally, support funding of no less than \$100 million for the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF), a crucial flexible account that enables civilian agencies around the world to undertake rapid stabilization, prevention and crisis response activities.

Second, support programs that address the underlying causes of conflict, build resilience and promote social cohesion. After four-plus years of war, families are tired of dependency. Despite the risks, they want to rebuild and repair schools, clinics and water systems. They want to address the underlying conflicts that fuel cycles of violence. And the people we work with want opportunities to earn a living. But because of the way assistance is compartmentalized, humanitarian aid does not fully allow for these types of programs.

An overreliance on emergency response – without simultaneous support to programs that seek to address the underlying causes of crises – is unsustainable. In Syria and Iraq, we need more multiyear, multi-sector programs that integrate “humanitarian” and “development” and that support local and national actors – including the private sector, local government and civil society – who usually have the greatest knowledge and capacity to operate effectively.

Third, re-balance risk and operations in high-risk environments by providing reasonable legal protections for humanitarian actors. The U.S. and other major donors do not have adequate legal frameworks to protect humanitarian actors from criminal prosecution against overly aggressive counter-terrorism legislation. We have worked with the administration toward a solution on this issue for years, to unsatisfactory outcomes. We urgently need the Senate to accelerate efforts to reform U.S. counterterrorism frameworks and laws that slow or impede effective humanitarian operations or access.

Finally, humanitarians are not the solution to these crises. I urge you work with the Obama administration to urgently seek a political solution to the war in Syria and support the growth of a more accountable government in Iraq. Our world leaders must take decisive action and push for a lasting peace. Humanitarians are being hung out to dry, left to address the Syria crisis by themselves. Where is the diplomatic push? The moment for this push is now. With the U.N. General Assembly and G-20 coming up in quick succession, Congress needs to urge the Obama Administration to work with other P-5 governments, among others, to invest the diplomatic energy necessary to end the war in Syria. In Iraq, the escalating violence of recent months reminds us that the international community needs to aggressively invest in conflict mitigation, reconciliation and good governance as part of a long-term vision for Iraq's stability. Following the establishment of a new government in Baghdad in September 2014, this is an especially critical time for the central government to respond positively to demands for political inclusivity.

In conclusion, I would like to say that through our work and partnerships in the region, we have been humbled and touched by the grace and dignity of Syrians and Iraqis, as well as by the generosity of their hosts, despite the many profound challenges they face.

I wish to sincerely thank the Committee for its focus on this tremendously important issue, and for extending me the privilege of testifying today.