

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

**Testimony of Dr. Michel Gabaudan, President
Refugees International
Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

“The U.S. Role and Strategy in the Middle East: The Humanitarian Crisis”

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and the members of this committee for holding this important hearing today. Refugees International (RI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in some of the most difficult parts of the world. RI does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which allows our advocacy to be impartial and independent.

Based here in Washington, we conduct 12 to 15 field missions per year to research displaced populations. Our ongoing reporting on the Syrian crisis includes my recent trip to Turkey to look at both cross-border assistance as well as birth registration.

Since spring 2011 RI has conducted a dozen missions in the region, and has been able to witness the evolution of the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and northern Iraq. I shall never forget the blank stares of children who fled the horrors inflicted upon civilians in Hama and Homs at the beginning of the conflict. Since then the causes of displacement have multiplied, with heavy military operations, the advent of various extremist groups, and the seriously deteriorating socioeconomic conditions all contributing to the largest movement of refugees and internally displaced people in the last three decades. But today, as many Syrians will tell you, it is the barrel bombs of the regime, dropped on civilian centers such as markets, schools and health facilities, that represent the most compelling cause for the continued displacement of women, children and men from their homes. The conflict has to date has killed over a quarter million people, displaced more than half of the pre-conflict population, and sent over 4 million refugees across the borders.

As we’ve watched the causes of displacement evolve, we have also watched with frustration as assistance to the displaced has shrunk alarmingly over the years and is not keeping pace with the ever-growing needs, to the point where Syrians are now risking their lives to get out of the region—and even returning to Syria—in order to find better opportunities for a future. Funding shortages and aid agencies’ inability to keep up with the desperate emergency needs even four and a half years on have led to secondary migration flows and the need to work on emergency aid and long-term stability at the same time, but with few resources at our disposal.

Countries hosting the largest numbers of displaced Syrians (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) have made enormous efforts in receiving and assisting the 4 million Syrians who have collectively crossed their borders over the past four years. Support for Syrian refugees is estimated to amount to 7.5 billion dollars from Turkey alone. But in spite of the scale of the needs, many other countries have not been able to maintain their support for the survivors of the crisis. The recent influx of refugees to the European Union has brought some much-needed attention back to the displacement caused by the conflict in Syria. But we need to recognize that the European crisis is merely a symptom of the world's collective failure to respond to the problem both politically (a peace process is non-existent) and socially (aid to refugees and IDPs is well below basic requirements).

Over the course of four and a half years, assistance by the United States to the Syrian crisis, which focused on the humanitarian needs of Syrians both inside and outside the country, has been absolutely critical. Most recently, the US government contributed more than \$400 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis. I want to take this opportunity to thank Congress for supporting core humanitarian funding accounts, such as Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA). Continued US aid is essential, because although the world now considers Syria a long-term conflict and the Syrian refugee crisis a protracted one, Refugees International's recent work in the region indicates that emergency humanitarian aid is still a desperate need.

Life in host countries for Syrians

Until about 18 months ago, most Syrians RI spoke with in the region were intent on returning home as soon as possible. Even knowing that their houses and property were destroyed and that it would be hard to build a new life, they wanted to stay as close to home as they could in order to make returning faster and easier. But as their time in exile grew longer, people began to say that they saw no future for themselves in their host countries. This change of attitude happened at roughly the same time that large numbers of Syrians began leaving from the north coast of Egypt to make the journey across the Mediterranean to Europe; some even went over land to Libya in order to get on boats there. They knew these trips were dangerous, they knew that hundreds of people who had gone before them had drowned, and they knew that they could be detained in attempting to leave Egypt. But all of this appeared to be a better option than remaining in a place where they saw no future for themselves. During RI's mission to Egypt in spring 2014, Syrian refugees were saying that taking their chances in dangerous waters seemed more promising than remaining in Egypt. Some were even trying for the second or third time to make the crossing by boat.

Another 18 months on, the migration routes and the people on them have changed. Today, the Syrians leaving for Europe by sea are embarking mainly from Turkey, but they are coming from across the region, where it has become more and more difficult to survive.

The neighboring countries hosting so many of the Syrians have long been feeling the pressure of the influx of huge numbers of people, of the strain on infrastructure, and of the ever-decreasing support the world has been able to provide. It is important to note that the huge majority of Syrian refugees—85 percent—are not living in the camps that we hear so much about, but rather

are in urban and rural areas trying to get by in the local communities that are often not better off than the Syrians. Almost two years ago in Jordan, RI visited a rural area where poor Jordanians and Syrian refugees were living in the same difficult conditions. Already at that time, the Jordanians we spoke with had the same needs as the refugees—food, medical care, employment, children’s education, but the majority of the assistance provided was going to their Syrian neighbors. How could such host communities reasonably be expected to absorb yet even more refugees? From the perspective of the Jordanians, at least the Syrians had the fallback of a refugee camp.

Camps are in fact the option of last resort for handling refugee assistance, and it is commendable that there are so few formal camps for a population of this size. However, the fact that people are living side-by-side with the host communities makes it harder for humanitarian groups to find those in need, and practically impossible to separate the needs of the refugees from the needs of the hosts. The US government, the UNHCR, and their partners have all shifted focus to include greater attention to support for those outside of camps, but the scale of the task is enormous, and the numbers of people in need increase every day. Refugees and host communities are all sharing the same resources while facing the same struggles with health, education, and employment. The sheer numbers of Syrians make this even more of a challenge.

Over a year ago in Lebanon, a Syrian mother told us about how she had pulled her teenage daughter from school to put her to work at a nearby local business. She had not been able to find work herself because the Lebanese host community where she lived was reluctant to hire Syrians in general, but children could often be put to work successfully because they were paid less and had fewer expectations than adults, either Syrian or Lebanese. Situations like this were leaving the Lebanese with the feeling that refugees were taking opportunities they wanted for themselves, even when those opportunities were far less than desirable.

Inside Syria, despite three Security Council Resolutions supporting better access for humanitarian aid and the sustained efforts of Syrian civil society, INGOs, and donors, and as a result of the fluctuating nature of the conflict, with armed actors constraining free movement and the safety of aid workers, the efficient delivery of assistance remains a constant challenge

Support from the international community

The financial reality of assisting so many displaced Syrians is beyond grim. Each year, the United Nations and its partners require more and bigger contributions in order to help more refugees. But each year, additional crises around the world demand attention and money from the same donors who now must somehow provide more aid without a simultaneous increase in how much money they have available.

The results of this are readily apparent in the aid available to Syrians. Food rations have been cut, health services have dwindled, and education programs have been closed down. RI has seen more and more Syrians each year living on the streets in their host communities or in inadequate and even dangerous housing. In Lebanon, additional protection concerns arose with the shortage of aid. In addition to not having enough food or being evicted for not paying the rent, Syrian refugees can be arrested or detained for begging in the streets or working illegally.

Other agencies have reported on increases in child labor as families run out of savings, in early or coerced marriage intended to protect young girls whose families can no longer support them, and in people returning to Syria when the help they need is not available. As many Syrians have told RI and other groups over the years, “We can die here, or we can die at home.” For the poorer families, as a result of depleted financial resources and increasing poverty, lack of hope to settle in first asylum countries, and absence of other durable solution, more people now appear to be choosing to brave the dangers of returning home.

Beyond international financial support, the host countries themselves are worried about their long-term futures as they are being affected by hosting so many Syrian refugees. While it’s not at all clear that refugees are the economic burden that many have suggested, it’s also not clear how to make the most of the economic benefits they can bring. This is a main challenge in host countries, where citizens and refugees are seen to be competing for jobs in tight markets. Work permission for refugees is a politically and socially fraught issue in the region, and without an effective plan for livelihoods, those tensions simply increase. And while an informal labor market does exist, Syrian refugees in all the host countries in the region have regularly told RI about the exploitative nature of this option. Most recently, a Syrian mother of three in Jordan described how she had taken on several catering projects from home, and her futile efforts to get the business owner to pay her after the work was done. She had tried to get regular work, but people didn’t want to hire Syrians, so she resorted to unofficial labor and was taken advantage of. It’s a story we’ve heard countless times.

The creation of livelihoods is one of several points—but arguably the most crucial one—where humanitarian aid and development assistance intersect. While there has been wide recognition over the past few years of the desperate need of development support for livelihoods in the main host countries and for the general involvement of development actors in the refugee response, **how to create and implement such programs** remains largely untested. And while these projects are being developed, refugees are facing more and more difficult circumstances and taking their next steps, literally.

Next steps

The inability to find a living situation that has a sustainable future appears to be driving Syrian refugees from the regional countries to more distant destinations like the EU. Tragically, many of them do not survive that journey across the sea, and those who do are not always welcome in Europe. This has been of tremendous concern over the past two months, and much has been made of the chaotic situation in Europe as it involves Syrians.

However, as stated above, we need to recognize that the European crisis is merely a symptom of the world’s collective failure to respond to the problem.

The most serious situation, and the one that needs the most attention, is the poorest refugees in the neighboring countries: those who cannot afford to move and are trapped in growing poverty and misery, with little hope for the future. Most of these Syrians will never have the means to move on to Europe or North America. And in spite of current discussions in the media, most will never be resettled, or even be eligible for resettlement.

Thus, we need to recast the approach to the Syrian crisis by:

- 1) Fully funding humanitarian appeals. The \$4.5 billion request for Syrian refugees is only 40 percent funded, and the appeal for inside Syria has received even less money—only 33 percent. As I mentioned previously, the humanitarian support the US gives is essential, and the support it can prompt from other donors is equally important;
- 2) Developing a "Marshall Plan" type of development assistance to first asylum countries in order to ensure refugees' impact on host communities is mitigated, a comprehensive plan for educating refugee children is implemented, and that livelihood programs are developed on a large scale. The US can play an important role here by using its considerable governance weight with the development banks, in particular, to encourage their involvement in the regional response and reinforce the idea that host country development is now an essential element of addressing the Syrian displacement crisis;
- 3) Facilitating orderly departure from first asylum countries through resettlement that must include the Gulf states as receiving countries, in addition to the traditional resettlement countries; and
- 4) Urgently renewing attempts at a peace process led by the United Nations, including a dedicated attention to the protection of civilians by the parties wishing to participate in the process.

New strategies to this ongoing emergency displacement crisis must begin now. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.