



Written Testimony of:

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here today in my capacity as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to discuss the ongoing needs of Syrian refugees and their host communities. As you're well aware, last month saw the eighth anniversary of the Syrian conflict. Like many others, I've seen news of the conflict on a regular basis. I watched the pictures of the refugee crisis in different parts of the world over the years. Then in 2016, inspired by seeing a fellow actor on the shores of a Greek island helping women, men and children who had made a treacherous journey across the Mediterranean, fleeing for their lives, I decided I didn't want to just keep watching. I wanted to do something.

I called the UN refugee agency, which is mandated to care for refugees fleeing Syria and elsewhere across the globe, and I got involved. Since then, I've had the opportunity to travel to meet Syrian refugees in Jordan, in Berlin, and last month in Lebanon. I also travelled to Guatemala to meet individuals fleeing horrific violence in our own hemisphere.

Both international and U.S. law define refugees as persons who are unable to return to their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While refugees are UNHCR's core constituency, the agency also works to protect and assist persons who have fled their homes but not their country; such persons are known as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Frankly, it is easy to read these definitions, gain an intellectual understanding, and move forward talking about refugees and displaced persons, and the statistics describing their situation, without any real understanding of *who* we are actually talking about. The term "refugee" in particular has become politicized in many places around the world, in spite of the fact that refugees are real people with real stories, stories that are some of the most frightening and traumatic I've heard, especially as a father. I have tried to imagine how I would feel if caught in the middle of conflict and unable to protect my children, if my son was at risk of forced recruitment, or my daughter at risk of unimaginable violence. Honestly, for me it is not something I want to think about. If any of us

were to take a moment to really consider this, we would have a tiny sense of what everyday life is like for millions of people across the world. Getting a chance to meet some of these people and hear their stories first hand has been a privilege. Immediately, it becomes so clear what we all have in common. Though we come from different cultures, and totally different worlds, we all want the same things: to provide a good environment for our kids to grow up in. To have the chance to live freely and do what we want in life. To laugh and share experiences with family and friends. To see our children grow up and achieve their dreams. These are things we all want, no matter who or where we are. And every time I leave and say goodbye to these people whom I'm lucky enough to spend some time with, I am aware that but for being born in a different country, it could well be me, and not them sitting in a small, cold make-shift shelter, not being able to do any of those things. These people have lost everything.

In my time with UNHCR, I've been incredibly impressed by their work. With a staff of nearly 17,000, of whom 90% are located in deep field and often in hardship locations, UNHCR works tirelessly to assist the world's most vulnerable people. I've had the privilege of meeting many UNHCR staff members in the field and, time and again, I've been moved and inspired not only by their expertise but also by their unwavering commitment to the people they serve. Day in and day out, they are on the ground talking to refugees, gaining an understanding of who they are, and working to ensure that their most basic needs are met. There is nothing easy about this job, about aiming to support people who are on the brink of despair or who have suffered unimaginable trauma and loss. Given severe underfunding, there is nothing easy about making daily difficult choices, like which programs to downsize or which families won't receive thermal blankets during a cold, harsh winter. Even so, UNHCR staff leave me inspired. They stay the course and they manage to deliver positivity and hope in unparalleled fashion. Most of all they offer compassion.

In the eight years since the Syrian crisis began, international attention has often shifted to newer crises around the globe. Yet, this Committee has remained steadfast in its commitment to the protection and assistance of Syrian refugees and IDPs, as well as to the neighboring countries that are hosting the refugees. On behalf of all of my colleagues at UNHCR, we thank you for that

leadership and support. As an American, I'm also proud that the United States continues to be UNHCR's largest donor and that our State Department remains a steadfast partner.

Recent developments in Syria and across the region have begun to focus attention on the prospect for the return of Syrian refugees to their home country. I know that this Committee will work to help ensure the conditions that will allow for such returns, while at the same time continuing to meet the needs of uprooted Syrians and their generous hosts. I hope that my testimony today will contribute to this vital discussion.

### **Global Forced Displacement**

I'd like to take a moment to put the Syrian crisis in the global context. Around the world today, global forced displacement is at the highest level in modern history. Nearly 70 million people are uprooted from their homes because of persecution or conflict. That's the population of California and Texas combined. Of those, more than 25 million are refugees while more than 40 million are internally displaced. Another 3 million are seeking asylum.

Syria continues to be the origin of the largest refugee population in the world, with 6.5 million Syrian refugees in over 125 countries. A large majority—over 5.6 million—live in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. In addition, Syria is second only to Colombia in the number of IDPs, with 6.2 million Syrians uprooted from their homes but still inside their country. Other major refugee populations include Afghans, South Sudanese, Somalis, and the Rohingya and other minorities from Myanmar, while other large IDP groups include Congolese, Somalis, and Yemenis. Here in this region, people continue to leave Venezuela due to violence, insecurity, and lack of essential services. Over 3.4 million Venezuelans now live abroad, mainly in countries within South America, representing the largest exodus in the recent history of Latin America. In addition, about 325,000 refugees and asylum seekers have fled the northern Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. UNHCR is working in Mexico and other neighboring host countries to enhance protection and assistance for these individuals, many of whom are women and children fleeing unspeakable violence at the hands of powerful transnational gangs. During my trip to Guatemala

last year, I met women, children, and men who were literally running for their lives. The danger was so great that in our interviews we could not show their faces or identify them by name.

The sheer numbers of the displaced and the growing complexity of humanitarian crises—which includes the protracted nature of conflict and the role of non-state actors—make our work and the work of our partners both more challenging and more needed than ever before. Thanks to the continued leadership and humanitarian diplomacy of the State Department, the strong bipartisan support from the U.S. Congress, and the American public’s unwavering commitment to protect and assist the most vulnerable, UNHCR has been able to save lives, protect and assist those fleeing persecution, and help stabilize war-torn areas of the world.

### **The Syrian Crisis**

Last month, the Syrian crisis entered its ninth year. In that time, the conflict has reportedly killed about half a million people and has uprooted nearly half of Syria’s population. Turkey, with 3.6 million Syrian refugees, is the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, while Lebanon—at one-third the size of Maryland—hosts between a million and 1.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the largest per-capita refugee hosting country in the world. Another 660,000 Syrian refugees are in Jordan, 253,000 in Iraq—primarily the Kurdish region of northern Iraq—and 132,000 in Egypt.

Although the world’s attention was focused in 2015 on Syrians and other refugees who crossed the Mediterranean to reach Europe, and while a vigorous debate in this country has concerned the number of Syrians to admit as refugees, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees have always been, and still remain, in the countries bordering their homeland. This is the situation for most of the world’s refugees, who rarely cross more than one international border. For this reason, developing regions host more than 85% of the world’s refugees, while the least developed countries host about one-third of the global total. Although the countries hosting the majority of Syrian refugees are middle-income countries, the sheer size of the refugee population and the fragile nature of the region’s economic and political situation puts an enormous strain on these governments and their local communities. Let’s remember that

many of the countries hosting Syrians also host Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghans, and other refugee populations.

In Jordan, I had the honor of meeting with King Abdullah and Queen Rania. They discussed the significant impact that the Syrian refugee population has had on their country, particularly their infrastructure. In Lebanon, the Syrians have strained not only the public services of that small country but also its delicate political and demographic balance. These and the other neighboring countries have all been and will continue to be generous hosts to the Syrians refugees, but clearly they need help if they are to keep the welcome mat out.

In the past several months, in light of changing dynamics in Syria and across the region, the prospect of refugee returns has emerged prominently in discussions around the future of the country. However, discussions around returns must not be driven by politics. It's critical to consider the rights and interests of refugees first and foremost, and also whether the situation on the ground in Syria is conducive to return. As is the case in any displacement situation around the globe, UNHCR's position is that return of Syrian refugees or IDPs must be voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable.

The majority of Syrian refugees tell us that they want to go home one day. And those who made a free choice to return should be supported. However, at this point the majority of Syrian refugees don't foresee a return to Syria in the immediate future. They fear for the security of their families, as well as the prospect of military conscription, lack of necessary documents, and a lack of basic services or livelihoods. On my recent trip to Lebanon, I heard these exact concerns first-hand. Refugees say they want to return when the violence subsides, when guarantees are in place for their rights and safety, and when there is a political solution. And UNHCR is working to address the obstacles to return with the government of Syria and other stakeholders.

Although UNHCR is not yet facilitating the large-scale return of Syrian refugees, we are aware that some self-organized returns are already happening. In 2018, at least 56,000 refugees returned to Syria from neighboring host countries. These Syrian families have made a highly personal decision to return to Syria, and UNHCR fully respects and supports that decision. While not yet promoting or facilitating such returns, UNHCR is present at points of departure in the host countries to ensure that such returns are voluntary and to provide advice on documentation and other key issues. UNHCR also provides returning Syrian refugees with humanitarian assistance, as it does for internally displaced persons, IDP returnees, and host communities. But in order to fully support those who return, as well as to monitor conditions in place for returnees, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies need unhindered access to areas of return inside Syria. While access is slowly improving, it is far from being sufficiently widespread or systemic.

When the time is right, when conditions allow for safe and sustainable return, UNHCR will indeed be there to support an organized, large-scale repatriation effort, as it has done in so many refugee situations around the world. In the meantime, the 5.6 million Syrian refugees in the region, and the countries that host them, need the continued support of the international community.

During my recent trip to Lebanon, and my earlier trip to Jordan, I heard over and over from refugees about their desire to go home. Despite the aid that they receive from UNHCR – including access to legal services and civil status documentation, cash assistance, and emergency supplies – coupled with the generosity of host countries, many Syrian refugees are living on a knife edge. Making ends meet has become more difficult with every passing year of displacement. Until they can return home, life is a daily battle to prevent slipping deeper and deeper in to poverty and destitution.

In Lebanon, there are no formal camps for Syrian refugees. While some Syrians live in informal settlements, the vast majority live outside these settlements in urban areas. Five out of ten Syrian households in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty – on less than \$2.90 per person per day.

Any savings these refugees may have arrived with have been depleted, and limitations on their right to work and the ongoing discrimination they can face can make earning a living close to impossible. Until Syrians can return home, life is literally a daily battle to prevent slipping deeper and deeper in to poverty.

This reality was all too clear last month when I was in Lebanon and had the opportunity to meet a young family who has faced the most immense struggles over the past eight years. Binana and her husband Raed have four children and currently live in a small, unfinished building that is damp and cold with no real door or windows. Their children include beautiful and amazing eight-year-old twins, sister Razan who dreams of being a princess and a doctor, and brother Yazan who dreams of being a pilot but is already working as a vegetable seller on the street to support his family. Razan and Yazan were four months old when their parents fled Syria, due to the surrounding sounds of war, the shelling, and the imminent danger. It is worth noting that like most refugees, their life in Syria had been good. Raed worked as a taxi driver, and Binana took care of her family. They had what they needed for a nice, stable life. They have now been in Lebanon, living as refugees, for eight long years. Raed has had difficulty finding work, so they struggle to make ends meet and are in a great deal of debt. They have moved multiple times. They have lived in an old bakery, in something they describe as a birdcage, and also in a stable. Binana even gave birth to one of their younger children in the stable, where she described everything as being dirty and smelling of garbage. She also described a time when their space was flooded and covered with moths. It is hard to appreciate just how difficult these past eight years have been, but the exhaustion and desperation of the parents are palpable. They have nothing, and they have lost almost all sense of hope. Raed resorted to trying to sell his kidney on Facebook, but Binana was against the idea. When Binana was pregnant with Rajaa, who is now six months old, a friend suggested she sell her baby to help make ends meet. She of course did not do this, but the suggestion sheds light on the desperation of the family. There have been times when they've gone without even bread for five days straight. Binana told me, "You have no idea how difficult it is when children ask for things we cannot give them. We have lost hope." Sometimes, in the evenings when the kids are hungry, she gathers them together and tells them to imagine and visualize what they would most like to eat. She tells them that when they go

to bed they'll all dream this same dream. But when they wake up, they're still hungry. The strength and courage of Yazan, the twin boy, really affected me. He overheard his parents talking about their struggles, and at eight years of age he intervened and offered to start selling vegetables. It was difficult for the father to even share this story, to acknowledge that his eight-year-old is helping to support the family. Raed and Binana did not want Yazan to work and initially said no. But Yazan insisted and told them it was better than begging. Raed proudly explained that Yazan is an excellent salesmen. I asked Yazan, who, by the way, cannot even reach the top of the vegetable cart, what makes him such a good salesman. With his wonderful smile, Yazan told me that he's good at selling because he's so cute. While his response was funny and made me smile, the fact that he is working as a young child and going to bed hungry is a reality all too common for refugee children. The family recently moved into their current home, so the children have not yet started their new school. Another reality for refugee children is that constant moving severely impacts the continuity of their education, if in fact they are able to attend school at all. Binana and Raed receive monthly cash assistance from UNHCR and food assistance from the World Food Program (WFP). They're surviving, but their day-to-day existence remains a struggle.

In Lebanon, I also met a young Syrian refugee mother named Hanadi. She is just 21 years old and lives alone with her three children: four-year-old Hassan, three-year-old Mayed, and two-year-old Abed. Each of her children is more responsible than any child deserves to be, yet still inquisitive and curious. I remember little Hassan who was fascinated with the recording device our team took there. In that moment, he was just a kid with a toy. It was a small moment of levity during a difficult conversation. They have been living in an informal settlement in northern Lebanon for the past three years.

Informal settlements are some of the poorest living conditions I've seen on my trips with UNHCR. Hanadi's particular space was clean with plastic sheeting for walls, mats on the floor and a separate, small but well organized kitchen. Just like you or I, she takes pride in her space, and the fact that she was tragically driven from her home hasn't changed that. I am always struck by the level of attention and care refugees give their make-shift and temporary spaces. Even her "kitchen" area where she went through and showed me all of her cooking equipment and spices,

right down to the tomato paste, was impressive. Hanadi fled Homs with her husband and family and sought safety in Lebanon in 2016. Her parents and in-laws remain in Syria, but she lost contact with them, and actually does not know whether they are even still alive. Her husband, realizing the challenges of life in Lebanon, went back to Syria in 2017. Hanadi has now lost contact with him as well. She last heard that he was detained by authorities but hasn't heard anything further. As the conflict carries on, this story of young mothers piecing together an existence in makeshift shelters that leak when it rains and are cold in the winter are all too common. To make ends meet and to afford food for her children, Hanadi works two days a week in a greenhouse where she plants tomato and zucchini, leaving her children with neighbors. She earns \$3 a day. She can barely keep up with her debts and her \$50 monthly rent. She also has to pay for the generator subscription and water, as well as for doctors and medicine if her children fall ill. And make no mistake, her children do fall ill. This isn't a theoretical problem. Hanadi told us about a time when her three-year-old was sick. She had to make the difficult decision between medicine and lights. The smile on the face of the little girl I saw beside Hanadi in their tent lets you know the choice she made. And these difficult financial choices are happening even with vital assistance from UN agencies. Hanadi receives cash assistance from UNHCR, which she uses to buy essentials for her children like diapers and clothes. She also receives the WFP food assistance. But given her other expenses and her debt, she can't always afford to have electricity or to heat her house. Hanadi says that she would love to return to Syria as soon as it goes back to normal, but security and stability are needed. Hanadi doesn't go out much – she doesn't feel free to move about alone as a woman and asks neighbors to get things for her family. Her main hope is to provide for her children. She wants them to be educated, and to live a different life than they're living now.

In Jordan, which I visited in December 2016, approximately four out of five Syrian refugees live outside of camps in urban areas. As in Lebanon, their resources have diminished over time, and many refugees have become more vulnerable, risking exploitation to make ends meet. The majority of Syrians in Jordan live in rented accommodation that can cost two-thirds of their income, and the dwellings often suffer from poor ventilation and dampness. A UNHCR study revealed that 78% of Syrians in Jordan are living under the Jordanian poverty line. About 36% of the school-aged Syrian refugee children in Jordan are out of school, despite the significant efforts

to make sure that education is available to all children. While a number of innovative programs have reduced the out-of-school rate, it still remains too high. Obstacles to accessing education include overcrowding in some areas, the inability to pay for transportation or related fees, and often the need to send kids out to work to provide needed income.

In fact, Syrian refugee families throughout the region often have no choice but to resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as child labor and early marriage in an effort to reduce financial pressure. They are also at risk of trafficking and exploitation. It's clear that children have been, and continue to be, among the most heavily affected by this crisis—losing out on education and other childhood opportunities. UNHCR regularly conducts needs assessments for urban refugee households to identify the most vulnerable and to support them where possible, within UNHCR's budget limitations.

During my trip to Jordan, I met a young family who had recently begun resorting to the coping mechanisms mentioned above. Like so many others, Haitham and his wife Um Khalil fled Syria in 2013 thinking they would be away for only a short time. They had a fruitful life in Syria and left with savings from his work as a farmer. Three years later, when I was visiting, their savings were depleted and Haitham was unable to work due to a health condition. They had eight children and were expecting a ninth. Only one of their children was able to attend school, because, in spite of registering the others, overcrowding in the schools prevented them from attending. Money was a constant worry, so the eldest son, Khalil, only 13-years-old, went to work as a mechanic. He had worked the previous day from 7:00am – 11:00pm, an astonishing 16 hours, and his work left his hands stained with engine grease. In spite of receiving UNHCR cash assistance, Khalil had no choice but to work as his family needed his income to help make ends meet. Taking that in, I turned to Khalil and said that was quite a responsibility for a boy. He listened to the translator then quickly and proudly replied, "I'm a man, not a boy." The family was asked about applying for resettlement but rejected it, as they prefer to stay in Jordan with the hope that they can one day return to Syria.

While UNHCR and its partners work within their means to ensure that all Syrian refugees have access to basic essentials of life, including services such as health and education, life remains a struggle. Even in the camps, where basic services are provided, life is difficult. In Jordan's Azraq camp for Syrian refugees, I met a young and vivacious couple, Mohamed and his wife Alaa. They have two children, four-year-old Hussein and two-year-old Sema, and had been in Jordan for less than a year at the time of my visit. In Syria, Mohamed studied to be a veterinarian and worked on a reserve. Alaa is an agricultural engineer; she studied plants and trees and worked as an environmentalist. Notably, she was one of the top 10 students in her class, and her ambition to achieve, to do great things and contribute to her community was as strong when I met her as it was when she was top of her class. However, having no opportunity to work was discouraging and a constant struggle for them both. It was difficult for them to maintain a sense of hope, when they had no idea what their prospects for the future might be. Alaa told me, "We both have energy inside of us that we want to give to the world but don't have the chance." In addition to their own struggles, their children suffered from psychological issues due to the constant sound of bombings they heard in Syria. In spite of all of these challenges and obstacles, Mohamed and Alaa wanted to stay in Jordan, close to the home they fled. Above all, they wanted to return to Syria as soon as possible. .

### **A New Approach to Supporting Refugees and Host Communities**

In the past couple of years, driven in large part by the Syrian crisis, the international community has begun pursuing a new approach – a new way of working – with respect to protracted refugee situations. As refugees often spend decades in exile, with no solution in sight, it is critical to ensure that these years are not wasted and that opportunities for greater self-reliance are provided.

Let me briefly highlight the key components of this approach. First, we must increase support to refugee-hosting countries—such as Jordan and Lebanon—in ways that will allow them to not only help refugees but also improve the well-being of their own citizens who have taken these refugees into their communities. Second, refugees in these host countries need more

opportunities to go to school and earn a living, in order that they can become self-sufficient and contribute to their host communities; we cannot let entire generations be uneducated or waste their potential. Third, the international community needs to provide more opportunities for resettlement and other pathways of admission, such as work visas or scholarships for higher education. Refugees should not be forced to risk their lives trying to find opportunity elsewhere. Finally, we need to redouble our efforts to achieve the conditions that enable refugees to return voluntarily to their home countries. Refugees clearly need access to safety and refuge. But they also need to be included in the societies hosting them and have the chance to create a better future. Given the opportunity, refugees have the potential to contribute to the economies and the cultural and social lives of their new communities—whether those communities are in neighboring host countries, in western countries where they are resettled or where they work or study temporarily, or ultimately back in their home countries where they can help to rebuild after years of conflict.

UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community, while providing support to refugees around the globe, cannot by itself address the longer-term needs of refugees and host countries. That is why this new approach involves key partnerships with development actors, international financial institutions, governments, and the private sector. Such assistance—both bilateral and multilateral—is critical not only in the Middle East but in many other corners of the world, including forgotten crises throughout Africa and in parts of this hemisphere such as Central America and the Venezuela region. Aid, done smartly, can transform countries of origin, transit, and destination. Through a coordinated and holistic response to the needs of the displaced and their hosting communities, we can achieve significant humanitarian and development objectives while also helping to stabilize fragile regions of the world.

In the Syria region, this new approach is already bearing fruit. With access to World Bank funding and other development and bilateral aid, countries hosting refugees are able to address the long-term needs of their own populations while continuing to host refugees. And more humanitarian funding is now being channeled through national systems—for health care, education, and other services—rather than creating parallel services. At the same time, host

countries have been more willing to expand livelihoods opportunities for refugees. Turkey and Jordan, for example, have already provided more than 150,000 work permits for Syrian refugees according to their figures—which has benefitted refugees, their hosting communities, and the local economy.

### **Key Messages**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, I would like to leave you with three key points to keep in mind as the situation in Syria continues to evolve.

First, we must enhance support for the Syrian refugees throughout the region. Syrian refugees have told us clearly what they want, which is what all of us want: hope for the future. They want education for their children and the ability to work and provide for their families. They don't want to be dependent on aid and to sit idly for years, wasting their time and their talents. They want to be agents of change in their own lives, and they are more than capable of doing so if we just give them the chance.

Second, the neighboring countries that have so generously hosted Syrian refugees for eight years continue to need our help. They urgently require more long-term structural support so that they can keep their doors open and keep hosting Syrians as well as other refugee populations. Much has been already achieved through the engagement of bilateral and multilateral actors in both the humanitarian and development arena, but more needs to be done. We need to help host countries ensure that health services, education, and livelihood opportunities are available to refugees and that the needs of their own citizens are also addressed, so that both groups—refugees and nationals—are able to thrive.

Finally, we know that the majority of Syrian refugees want to go home one day. All refugees have a fundamental right to return. These returns need to be voluntary, safe, and sustainable in order to prevent another refugee outflow. The international community should do whatever it

takes to depoliticize the issue of return and instead place refugee perspectives, rights, and interests at the center of discussions and decision-making. While self-organized returns are beginning to happen, and while more and more refugees will likely return as the situation evolves, it is clear that large-scale return will take time. This means that we should expect a significant Syrian refugee population outside Syria for the foreseeable future.

The United States has been the most generous donor to many refugee crises and to the Syrian humanitarian situation, and I urge you to maintain this generosity and this leadership. Eight years into this crisis, we must not look away. We cannot let Syrian families go deeper into destitution and cannot let children be part of a lost generation. We need to ensure that these families can make ends meet, live in dignity, and look to the future with hope. We need to ensure that these kids—like my kids and your kids—can have a childhood and achieve their dreams. Ultimately, we need help create the conditions that will allow the majority of Syrian refugees to return home—when the time is right—as they so desperately want to do.

Thank you.