

Testimony of the Rt. Hon. David Miliband
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Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on “The US Role and Strategy in the Middle East: The Humanitarian Crisis”
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin and distinguished Senators, I would like to thank you for your decision to hold this full committee hearing on the epic displacement crisis unfolding in Syria and the broader Middle East. For the purposes of my written and oral testimony, I will focus on Syria—the epicenter of the region’s humanitarian crisis—but am happy to take questions on other pressing emergencies in the region including Iraq and Yemen.

There is urgent need for renewed international leadership in both resolving and responding to the Syrian crisis, and by necessity that means deep involvement by the United States (US). The Syrian crisis has spilled onto the shores of Europe for two reasons: because of the magnitude of violence and threats to civilians in Syria, and because of the pressure in neighboring states. The mismatch between need and help for civilians, both in Syria and in the countries that surround it, is vast and growing. What was a civil conflict within one state has evolved into not just a regional human catastrophe of major proportions; it is also a defining geopolitical disaster for the Middle East.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has a unique vantage point from which to offer perspective on the crisis. IRC is working inside Syria; in the four major refugee receiving countries that surround it—Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey; on the island of Lesbos, which is the arrival point of over half of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians and people of other nationalities seeking asylum in Europe through Greece; and finally, IRC resettles refugees in 26 cities across the United States, including Syrians who have been given the opportunity to start their lives anew in this country. We witness the full arch of this crisis, from Aleppo to Beirut to Lesbos and Los Angeles. I hope to use the occasion of this testimony to pay tribute to the extraordinary efforts of IRC staff and our partner organizations, and highlight the vital contribution of aid workers from all the many organizations responding to the crisis in Syria, some of whom have paid with their lives.

Attention to Syrian refugees has peaked in the last month, with stunning images in the news headlines of people floating at great risk to safety across the Mediterranean and literally walking across Europe in search of asylum. While not all of the asylum seekers are Syrian, they comprise the majority. Their sheer numbers and the perilous journey they take to escape suggest the Syria crisis is at a tipping point. IRC, amongst others, has long warned that the barbarism inside Syria, in which civilians are trapped in a war without law between government forces, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other parties to the conflict, would spill over. It has now done so in many ways, evident in the extreme pressure that hosting four million refugees has placed on neighboring states, in the connections between the conflict and

displacement scenarios in Syria and Iraq, and finally in the onward journey out of the region to Europe.

Inside Syria

The figures of death, destruction and displacement in Syria are shocking. The brutal, seemingly endless violence that has consumed the country since 2011, spread across its borders, and sucked in weapons and fighters from across and beyond the region, has claimed at a minimum 240,000 lives (the number is widely believed to be twice this many) and left every second Syrian displaced. Satellite imagery reveals that just a fifth of Syria's pre-war lights remain on—such is the devastation wrought by shells, rockets and barrel bombs. In places like Aleppo, that figure is over 95 percent. Half the country's population have abandoned their homes.

There is a chasm between the needs of Syria's civilian population and the help they are receiving. It continues to grow. Global contributions are not keeping pace with needs, which have grown twelve-fold since the beginning of the crisis and more than 30 percent in the last year alone. While food, water, shelter, healthcare and sanitation services are desperately required, last year's UN appeal to meet basic needs inside Syria was only 50 percent supported—down from 68 percent in 2013. Only 34 percent of need inside Syria in 2015 has been committed so far.

The unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2139 (UNSCR 2139) in February 2014—no small feat given the intractable nature of the Syria issue on the Security Council—brought with it much needed hope for people in Syria and across the Middle East. In the resolution, the Security Council called for an urgent increase in access to humanitarian aid in Syria and demanded that all parties immediately cease attacks against civilians—including through the use of barrel bombs—and lift sieges of populated areas. In July and December 2014, the Security Council adopted two additional resolutions—2165 and 2191—which, among other things, authorized UN aid operations into Syria from neighboring countries without the consent of the Syrian government. And yet, whereas one million people inside Syria required humanitarian assistance in 2011, that number now stands at 12.2 million; among them some 7.6 million people forced to flee, but still trapped inside Syria's borders.

By blocking civilian movement, attacking aid convoys, kidnapping humanitarian personnel, and rejecting or miring in red tape official requests for access, the parties to the conflict are disrupting the delivery of lifesaving aid to 40 percent of those in need. All told, some 4.6 million people are currently languishing in areas defined by the UN as “hard-to-reach”—an increase of more than one million from this time last year. Over 422,000 people are completely besieged, cut off from food, water, and medicine, their lifelines choked, and escape routes blocked. A key component of UNSCR 2139— protecting civilians against indiscriminate attacks—is still sorely lacking, with government forces' increased use of barrel bombs, and opposition groups' use of explosive weapons.

IRC's eight decades of work in the world's war zones and disaster settings have not lessened the shock of what has befallen the Syrian people and their neighbors. However, what is even more shocking is the lack of a plan—or effort to create a plan—to bring the suffering to an end. It is humanitarians' job to staunch the dying, but it is only political action that will stop the killing. The political will and diplomatic energy aimed at securing an end to the war—and minimizing the impact of the fighting on civilians—have ebbed to low levels. Yet the longer the conflict goes on, the worse the options become. It is not the place of a humanitarian organization like IRC to advocate on military tactics. However, we have an intense stake in not only seeing humanitarian assistance make it to everyone who needs it, but also in the causes of humanitarian distress being addressed. A policy that truly puts civilian protection at its heart would leverage all diplomatic and political channels to curb the violence and bring hope of an end to the war.

'Friends of Syria' meetings once drew more than 100 nations. Today, the forum has been hollowed out to a core of less than a dozen countries. Early Arab League proposals, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's six-point plan, and the Geneva II conference of January 2014, yielded minimal results, but there was at least a sense of commitment and grim determination. There are a few developing efforts toward national reconciliation through the establishment of an "international contact group" and the efforts of UN Syria Envoy Staffan de Mistura. However, if political and diplomatic vigor is not placed into these processes over a sustained period of time (and against all odds), the crisis will further metastasize.

IRC would put forward the following recommendations to the Committee and US policy makers regarding the crisis in Syria:

- Protect civilians. There is an urgent need for the UN Security Council to establish a mechanism to track and publically expose indiscriminate attacks by any means against civilians, including barrel bombs, car bombs and mines, as well as the use of besiegement, and to lay down clear consequences for violators. Ending aerial bombardments of civilian areas was highlighted by the UN Security Council in its resolutions: civilian protection means turning words into action.
- Access the hard-to-reach and besieged. Increasing humanitarian access to those in need—particularly the hard-to-reach and besieged—requires constant and unabated attention at the highest levels. The US and other countries with leverage on parties to the conflict need strongly and consistently to press the belligerents to allow unimpeded cross-border aid, and to allow aid to pass into or through conflict zones. Humanitarian Envoys—senior diplomats with the backing of their head of state—should be appointed by permanent members of the Security Council and regional players to focus relentless attention to humanitarian access and protection obstacles in Syria, and actively seek ways to address them through bilateral and multilateral channels. They would advocate for the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, and would work in tandem with all relevant parts of the UN.

- Provide enough aid to meet need. The United States has been a leader in the humanitarian response to the situation in Syria. However, the funding provided simply is not keeping up with the ever growing need for life-saving assistance. As long as the crisis goes on and the international community collectively fails to find a solution to it, ensuring humanitarian assistance is available to those whose lives have been shattered by this conflict is the minimum that we must do.

Syria's Neighbors

It is not only Syrians themselves who have borne the brunt of the country's conflict, but the neighboring countries which now host over four million refugees. In exile for years now, with their economic and personal assets long depleted, Syrian refugees live on the margins and are in desperate need of food, water, shelter and education. There is often reference to "refugee camps"; but the vast majority of Syrians are not in camps. In Lebanon most live in decrepit dwellings or tented settlements that expose them to the elements and insecurity. In Jordan, tens of thousands of families live below the absolute poverty line. Rent accounts for more than half of refugees' monthly expenses, forcing parents to send their children to work long hours for meager pay. A 2015 assessment found that 86 percent of Syrian refugees outside of camps in Jordan were living below the Jordanian absolute poverty line of \$95 per person per month.

The impact upon Syria's neighbors of receiving such a massive influx of refugees cannot be overstated and they deserve great credit for their hospitality and sacrifice. Turkey has become the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, and last autumn put the cost of hosting Syrian refugees since April of 2011 at \$4.5 billion—a figure that will have only grown in the last year. In Lebanon—a country with a host of pre-existing tensions and no official government of its own—Syrians now constitute somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population, making it the highest per capita refugee hosting country in the world. The World Bank estimates that its basic infrastructure will need investment of up to \$2.5 billion just to be restored to pre-crisis levels. Jordan, one of the most water-starved nations on the planet, hosts nearly 630,000 registered refugees; proportionally equivalent to the United States absorbing the entire population of the United Kingdom. The Jordanian Economic and Social Council has stated that the cost to Jordan per Syrian refugee is over \$3,500 per year and the direct cost from the beginning of the conflict is expected to rise to \$4.2 billion by 2016.

The education of Syrian refugee children is probably one of the best illustrations of the strain that the influx has placed on surrounding countries and the failure of the humanitarian aid system to keep up. There are an estimated 400,000 children among the more than 1.1 million Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon. The ability of Lebanese schools to absorb these children has been limited by the scale of the task. Most have instituted second shifts to accommodate Syrian children. But in the 2014-2015 school year, only 37 percent of Syrian refugee children ages 6-14 were enrolled in school. The Lebanese Education Minister recently announced a "Back to School" initiative—funded at \$94 million by UN agencies and international donors—that will double the number of places for Syrian children to 200,000. This is welcome news, but

leaves another 200,000 Syrian children out of school this year and on their way to becoming what is frequently referred to as a “lost generation.” International and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can continue to play an important role in providing educational opportunities to many of the Syrian refugee children who will not be reached by the “Back to School” program; they should not only be allowed, but vigorously encouraged and funded to do so.

Refugee hosting countries’ public services, economies and resources are creaking under this strain and their social fabrics are fraying. As a result, neighboring governments are now taking steps to restrict the flow of refugees into their territory with many of the formal and informal border crossings out of Syria often closed to civilians seeking safety. Hundreds of thousands of people are estimated to be living in camps on or near the borders of neighboring countries, unable to flee Syria. Increased and costly administrative regulations to renew residency permits have forced many families to live illegally and precariously. There are reports of refugees being forcibly repatriated to Syria, sometimes over missing papers and the space for refugees within the region—their ability to access essential services, or earn a living—is shrinking. Lebanon is cracking down on illegal work; Jordan has halted free healthcare.

With the asylum space for millions on the line, it is stunning how poorly funded the UN’s humanitarian Regional Response Plan has been. It was just 64 percent funded in 2014, down from 73 percent in 2013. The current year seems to be shaping up for yet another decline, with only 45 percent funding as we head into the final quarter of 2015. As a result, some services are being scaled back, despite the growing need. For example, since the beginning of the year, the UN’s World Food Program (WFP) has been forced to reduce the number of food voucher recipients in refugee-hosting countries from 2.1 million to around 1.4 million. Last month, 229,000 of 440,000 Syrian refugees living outside camps in Jordan stopped receiving food vouchers from WFP. The value of food vouchers distributed to Syrian refugees in Lebanon has been slashed in half. The maximum voucher amount is now \$13.50 per person per month, down from \$27 in 2014.

With much less to feed their families, desperation among Syrian refugees is rising, forcing them into desperate measures – including begging, child labor, low-wage and unregulated labor, survival sex, early marriage and increased indebtedness. IRC would advocate that currently available resources be provided as much as possible through cash transfers, allowing refugee families to pay for rent, food, medical care and other urgent needs as access to public services is restricted and humanitarian aid programs continue to shrink. Another critical area of focus is vocational training for youth and creating livelihoods for Syrian families so they can support themselves.

Finally, it is important to come to terms with the sobering fact that these refugees will not be returning home any time soon. Given international assistance has not been enough to meet the needs to date and is likely only to further diminish as this conflict drags on, it is of paramount importance that opportunities are made available for Syrian refugees to work in the countries to which they’ve been displaced. Employment laws in the region either leave Syrians to work

illegally in the shadows—subject to exploitation and abuse—or best case in low levels of employment that are open to them. Not only is it a waste to let the human capital of these refugees go untapped, but allowing them to work is a key part of a strategy to make sure they thrive and contribute to the societies to which they have been displaced.

IRC recommends the following in response to the influx of Syrian refugees into neighboring countries:

- Aid: Increase international humanitarian assistance. There are challenges to getting aid to those who need it in certain parts of Syria, but there is no excuse for it not to reach those who manage to make it out. Providing this assistance ensures Syrian refugees who flee danger do not wind up in situations of abject poverty and exploitation. The US has contributed \$4.5 billion to the Syrian response over the course of the conflict—this assistance is vital and welcome, but it pales in comparison to the sheer scope of need generated by the crisis. The UN has called for \$7.4 billion for 2015 alone.
- Economics: Create a “Marshall Plan” for the region. After World War II, the Marshall Plan pulled Europe out of post-war devastation and laid the foundations for peace as well as prosperity. Public and private sector came together in an unprecedented drive. At that time the US committed approximately \$13 billion, or three percent of GDP. The magnitude of the Syria Crisis necessitates a proportionate response. Whether by this name or another, the international community must coalesce around a large scale, multi-country economic plan to buttress the governments and communities hosting the lion’s share of Syrian refugees. Institutional and infrastructural support to ensure that these countries can provide basic services like healthcare and education without buckling under the additional strain is a critical part of the mid-long term strategy to respond to the Syria crisis. This could be financed through public/private partnerships and serve as a framework to bring a wide array of actors along—including the Gulf state governments. The World Bank, UN Development Program, bilateral development donors and other international financial institutions should reorient their work to support the economies of conflict-affected states like Jordan and Lebanon to help them weather the shock. This type of large-scale support to governments is critical to maintaining the asylum space for refugees and ensuring that the events in Syria do not further destabilize the region.
- Helping the Most Vulnerable: Take a “needs-based” regional approach to displacement. Iraqis internally displaced by chaos wrought by ISIS are living side by side with some 250,000 Syrian refugees. Effort must be made to provide support in these areas based on need—not displacement status—to ensure we do not end up in a situation with refugees receiving assistance while Iraqis in a similar or worse situation receive much less. This includes assisting the communities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region—one of the only safe places to flee—which are currently hosting a massive influx of people from their own country and their neighbor to the West.

Refugee Influx into Europe

Given the dire scenario outlined above, it should not be surprising that refugees from Syria are risking life and limb to find asylum in Europe. The waves of people arriving on the shores of European member states have made a highly informed calculus on where their chances of survival are best and determined the perilous journey is their safest option. An estimated 477,000 people have arrived by sea in 2015, the vast majority of them in Greece. An estimated eight people a day die just among those traveling between Turkey and Greece, including children, which the world was so painfully reminded a few weeks ago when the photos of Aylan Kurdi surfaced in the world's newspapers and social media.

I just returned from visiting Lesbos, an island of 90,000 people where over half of all arrivals into Greece come ashore. In June, 200 refugees were arriving every day. When I visited the figure was 2-3,000 people a day. Last week the figure reached 6,000 on one day. IRC has established programs there to provide assistance in the form of clean water, sanitation, information services and transportation. Previously, families that had often arrived soaking wet and with few worldly possessions were walking the 40 kilometers north from their arrival points to register in the capital of Molyvos. Their ongoing journey, as we witness through dramatic images at train stations in Hungary and in the face of razor wire fences and tear gas on the borders of European Union (EU) member states, only becomes more fraught with obstacles.

An estimated 84 percent of the people arriving in Europe are from the top ten refugee producing countries in the world, including Afghanistan where the IRC also has programs to address the ongoing humanitarian fallout from the conflict. However, Syrians represent 54 percent of the arrivals in Europe. Therefore, as the Syria crisis continues to uproot millions of people and asylum space in the broader Middle East closes, the arrivals to Europe will continue. It behooves European leaders to respond with both compassion and competence. This situation will continue to be a test of the strength of character of the EU as an institution and its ability to manage a complex crisis in the light vocal opposition on the part of a few member states. EU member states should:

- Establish safe and legal options for refugees to come to Europe. Refugees will continue to fall prey to smugglers and face life-endangering options if more legitimate ones are not available to them. The tools are wide-ranging and should be maximized to increase opportunities for safe entry. These include: more pro-actively resettling refugees from the countries surrounding Syria; the flexible use of family reunification admission; increasing work and education visas; and private sponsorship schemes.
- Improve reception conditions, particularly in Greece. Arriving refugees must be managed with dignity, especially in light of the circumstances they have already endured. The humanitarian response effort in arrival countries like Italy and Greece and countries of transit like Hungary and Croatia must be financially and technically supported by EU member states. The response, including rescuing people at sea, should

be well-coordinated and information should be provided to arriving refugees on their options.

- Implement a robust and well-monitored relocation plan. The EU's decision last week to relocate 120,000 refugees—on top of the 40,000 already agreed to—between member states should be done in an equitable fashion and every effort should be made to accommodate the wishes of refugees to be with family members. A proportional distribution plan should be followed to have an equitable split between member states. States should ensure refugees are integrated into their societies and that they live up to the commitments in the plan including those to housing and social services. When considering relocation of refugees to states that are reluctant to receive refugees or only receive a small population, liaison officers must be present to monitor adherence to asylum standards. Where refugee families are not housed together in the same country, they should be allowed to travel within the Schengen zone to visit their family members, relying on the fact that social support will only be available in the assigned country for the refugee (ensuring their return). The same standards of data protection that apply for all EU citizens should be carried out when biometric tracking is used with refugees to ensure human dignity and privacy.

US Resettlement of Syrians

This brings us to the US role in providing sanctuary to Syrian refugees. While the US can and should encourage its European counterparts to respond to the refugee influx with fortitude and compassion, the best encouragement this country can offer is leading by example. To date, despite its relative leadership in providing humanitarian assistance to refugees from Syria, the US has admitted just over 1,800 refugees through its refugee resettlement program. This is a disappointingly low number for a country which has been the global leader in refugee protection since World War II and served as a beacon of hope to people around the world facing persecution and violence.

Resettlement is a life-saving option to highly vulnerable families living on the margins of survival in places like Jordan or Lebanon. However, beyond its immediate value to individuals who have suffered so much, it is a signal of solidarity and shared responsibility to other countries that have absorbed the vast majority of Syrian refugees. While a number like 100,000—which is what the IRC recommends the US take at a minimum in FY 2016 (see below)—is still only a small fraction of the total refugee population, its value is not lost on countries like Lebanon, a country of just four million which has absorbed over a million people in the last four years. The signal the resettlement number sends to these countries is a critical part of maintaining asylum space and provides the US and European countries the credibility they need to encourage Syria's neighbors to keep their borders open and improve conditions for those refugees who remain in the frontline states.

During the last international Syrian resettlement pledging conference in December 2014, the UN Refugee Agency sounded the alarm bell when it said that roughly 10 percent of the Syrian

refugee population (400,000 people) were particularly vulnerable and needed to be resettled. This was set as a medium-term, multi-year benchmark. The US has traditionally be the largest resettlement country in the world, possessing the geographic and population size as well as the know-how to absorb larger numbers than much smaller wealthy countries. As a result, it has traditionally taken at least 50 percent of all resettlement cases referred by the UN Refugee Agency. Given this tradition, the IRC is calling on the US to provide resettlement for 100,000 Syrian refugees in the first year of a multi-year program, to ensure that the global community meets a goal believed necessary to save lives and stabilize the situation in the region.

The IRC has long experience of resettling refugees across the US. Our annual figure is around 10,000. This is a country proudly built on the labor of refugees and immigrants. It's the same country that pulled together not too long ago in a massive effort to rescue over 1.2 million southeast Asian refugees through sheer force of political will when the circumstances demanded it. There is ample precedent for admitting and successfully integrating refugees on a much larger scale, when the political will and compassion is present. Large numbers of inquiries have flowed into IRC's 26 field offices around the US over the last several weeks from the American public ranging from "where do I send the collection we've taken at church?" to "how can I open my own home to a Syrian refugee family?" This is just one small reading that demonstrates the compassion and willingness to welcome that is present in American communities, and that people are hungry to live up to the principles that make this country great.

The IRC strongly supports effective and efficient security screening for refugees entering the United States. Refugees are, in fact, the single most vetted population entering the country, and the US government has spared no efforts to continuously improve security checks to safeguard the integrity of the program. There are ways that the Administration can admit refugees in efficient and expeditious ways without compromising the integrity of security screenings.

Finally, the US has one untapped option to rapidly and safely increase Syrian resettlement: creating family reunification options for Syrian-Americans and other lawfully present Syrian immigrants. Many Syrians have a relative here in the US who is desperate to take them in, just as Aylan Kurdi's aunt in Canada was attempting to do. Currently, only Syrians who arrived to this country as refugees themselves are eligible to file for family reunification—a very small number considering just over 1,800 have been admitted to date. Syrian-Americans, many of whom immigrated to this country decades ago or were born here, are not eligible to apply for their families through the refugee program. We are not fully tapping into this option and are neglecting the opportunity to aid Syrian-Americans in bringing their family members to join them in safety in the US. These families would play a large role in helping Syrians integrate successfully here and moving them to self-sufficiency.

The IRC recommends in regard to the resettlement of Syrian refugees in this country, the US should:

- Raise the US refugee admissions ceiling to allow for at least 100,000 Syrian refugees to enter in FY 2016. The President should raise the overall US resettlement ceiling to 200,000, allowing the space in the global program for 100,000 Syrians without compromising the urgent protection needs of refugees from other troubled regions of the world.
- Increase resources to make this happen. The agencies and offices that manage different components of the refugee resettlement process should be provided adequate resources to bring in additional Syrian refugees. This includes the Departments of State and Homeland Security, the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Health and Human Services Department, and other federal agencies that perform security checks.
- Expand access to family reunification for Syrians with ties in the US. In order to make the 100,000 target feasible, the US should expand opportunities for Syrian Americans and other Syrian immigrants lawfully residing in the US to bring their family members to safety. It's time to think outside the box and use the tools that exist to expand the resettlement program to include family reunification. There is ample precedent for this approach, most recently for Iraqis, Haitians and Central American minors. This is the single easiest, efficient and most cost-effective way to bring large numbers to safety.

I thank you and the members of the US Senate for the opportunity to provide IRC's perspective on the complex humanitarian challenges facing people in the Middle East and indeed the rest of the world at this time. I look forward to answering your questions.