



**Statement of Michael Bowers
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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

For a hearing, entitled:

“Examining the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis from the Ground (Part 1)”

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa today about the spiraling humanitarian crisis in Syria 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.

Last month I spent time on the island of Lesbos, Greece, which serves as a waystation for many Syrian 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; the vast majority of them fleeing the civil war in Syria, but many also fleeing Syria’s unstable neighbors.

“Crossing is very dangerous, but we are looking for a small dream,” one Syrian youth from Hama told our team in Lesbos. He added, “We had to escape. In Syria there is only killing.”

Another fourteen-year-old Syrian youth named Hammed crossed a parking lot, packed with refugees waiting to secure tickets on to Athens, to tell us that he was frightened. He had lost his leg when a barrel bomb fell onto his school. Though he had already made it to Lesbos, he wondered aloud how he could continue to walk on crutches hundreds of miles to Austria, his planned destination.

Though most of the people we met in Greece were men and older boys, sent ahead by their families to establish a base in Europe, women also make the trip on fragile crafts. Some are

pregnant, and give birth on the beaches. Babies just a week or two old were among those we saw crowding the island.

It is important to highlight that the Syrians we met in Lesbos are in the minority - those able to pull together the substantial resources required reach the beaches of Lesbos, often through sales of property in Syria. Many Syrians in the region cannot pull together the resources to leave, an endeavor costing many families their entire savings.

Tragically, Syrians are worse off today than they were a year ago, whether they are in Syria 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.

I have also just spent time with the Mayors of Athens and other global city leaders on how ill-prepared they feel in supporting and accommodating thousands of migrants and refugees flowing into Europe. Countries neighboring Syria know this situation all too well.

Humanitarian aid to assist those fleeing unimaginable violence in Syria 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. Absent a political solution in Syria, the current situation will not abate.

Humanitarian response efforts: under extreme stress

I can say without hesitation that for Mercy Corps and other humanitarian agencies, Syria is one of the most hostile and complex environments in which we have ever worked. It is an active war zone, where few areas could be described as safe and operations are carried out at great risk.

Yet, in the face of extraordinarily difficult circumstances, through the work of our Syrian staff on the ground and our local partnerships with Syrian 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.

Many of our programs focus on youth. In 2013, we partnered with UNICEF under its “No Lost Generation” campaign, carrying out needs assessments of at-risk adolescents in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Our adolescent programs have been ongoing in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria since early 2014, and expanded to Turkey and Iraq in 2015. To date, our programs have reached over 10,000 youth affected by the Syria crisis.

In addition, Mercy Corps has deep expertise in conflict mitigation and social cohesion, which are particularly relevant in communities experiencing a large influx of refugees. We have implemented more than 95 conflict management programs in more than 30 countries. In the

Middle East, we have worked to develop the capacity of communities, government officials and young people to peacefully engage one another. Since the Syria Crisis began in 2011, we have worked with host communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq to address social tension, find space to cooperate and empower peaceful resolutions.

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 private and 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 millions of innocent people who need our help. To be direct: 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 on the ground. 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 four 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 challenges

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.

A lost generation

We are also witnessing the tragic outcomes of an entire generation of Syrian children and youth 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. Mercy Corps recently conducted a survey of 120 adolescents from eight communities, including in opposition-controlled and besieged areas. We found that three quarters of this group faced serious difficulties in accessing and continuing their education. Family financial burdens coupled with the security situation have forced many children on the cusp of adulthood to drop out of school. This is a heart wrenching decision for parents, many of whom told us that they believe a strong educational grounding is critical for their children's future and the future of the country at large.

Not surprisingly, when faced with this bleak option for their children, many families hazard the long, dangerous trip to Europe, trusting their fates to luck and smugglers in the absence of a legal, well-regulated path. And, while many have left for Europe, many more have remained in

Syria and neighboring host countries, seeking support to carve out a life of meaning and dignity. As in Syria, refugee adolescents in regional countries are overwhelmingly out of school: 81 percent in Lebanon, and 43 percent in Jordan. Perhaps worse, the link between aspirations and outcomes has begun to break: many youth feel that gaining an education, as a refugee, is not meaningful because it will not lead to a job or improved life circumstances.

Economic hardship

For the first time since Mercy Corps 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. In refugee hosting countries, the inability of Syrians to work legally is driving an underground economy and negative coping mechanisms, including child labor, and forced and early marriages.

Emerging displacement

Layered on top of these challenges, humanitarians are grappling with a new development: the entry of Russia into the battlefield and the resulting internationalization of the armed conflict. With this comes higher standards for civilian protection as outlined in the Geneva Protocols, yet we are already seeing concerning reports of increased numbers of civilian casualties in the areas impacted by the Russian strikes from civil society groups like the White Helmets, the Syrian Civil Defense. If this intensity of strikes continues, we will prepare for the possibilities of significant redistribution of internally displaced persons.

At the same time, the possible redeployment of armed opposition groups to parts of the country targeted by Russian strikes could have a major impact on the fragile balance of power in places like Aleppo city and North Aleppo governorates. In these locations, our access is already being challenged daily by the shifting conflict and alliances between armed opposition groups, ISIS, regime forces and the Syrian Kurdish Forces, commonly known as the YPG. In particular, ISIS is exploiting this shift in the fight to gain footholds in towns and villages in this area. As a result, people are increasingly 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. Preparing for reduced access, we are stocking up aid into areas where civilians may be cut off and are strategically repositioning our staff where necessary.

Response coordination – key course correctors

Until last year, operations between different locations in Syria were inconsistently coordinated and a collective effort for delivery throughout the country was not in place. In July 2014, the UN Security Council Resolution 2165 changed this course by providing the legal basis for cross border assistance from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq – which had previously been implemented under the radar – launching the opportunity for all humanitarian actors to be more joined up and coordinated. The new leadership and coordination efforts in place now through the ‘Whole of Syria’ approach, took some time to gain traction and confidence among humanitarian actors, but there is a sense that the trajectory is now in place for a joined up approach that reaches more people. At the same time, the leadership structures for the Whole of Syria, while consultative,

could benefit from a more agile structure that also brings in greater representation of local stakeholders and civil society.

The largest obstacle to delivery of assistance in Syria continues to be access. A July 2015 Operational Peer Review by the Inter Agency Standing Committee on the Syria crisis response cites that less than one percent of the 422,000 people in besieged areas receive any kind of assistance from UN agencies, and on average, only five percent of the 4.5 million in hard to reach areas receive assistance on a monthly basis. 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.

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. 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.

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. Recognizing the growing global needs, we also recommend considering additional support in addition to this base.

We also urge you to support funding levels of \$6.1 billion for Economic Support Funds (ESF), to help local governments and service ministries respond to citizens' needs and rebuild trust and legitimacy in communities hosting refugee populations.

Finally, US assistance streams focused on preventing and managing violent conflicts – such as USAID's Offices of Conflict Management and Mitigation and Complex Crises Fund, and the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF) – are minuscule in comparison to funding streams focused on responding to the symptoms of crises. We need a better balance of funds that address the spectrum of need and address root causes. To support these efforts, we urge you to provide 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; \$28 million for the office Conflict Management and Mitigation; and \$80 million for the Human Rights and Democracy Fund.

Second, change the US government approach to assisting fragile states. The widespread nature of the worst refugee crisis since World War II should be a wake-up call. It calls for

nothing less than a dramatic reappraisal of how we do development in fragile states like Syria that suffer from chronic insecurity, poverty and weak governance.

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, we need more multiyear, multi-sector programs that integrate “humanitarian” and “development” and that support local and national actors – including the private sector, local administrative bodies, and civil society – who usually have the greatest knowledge and capacity to operate effectively. Further efforts are required to support Syrian NGOs and staff working inside Syria with international NGOs.

As part of our long-term resilience-enhancing strategies for fragile states, we also need to strengthen civilian efforts to mitigate the grievances that fuel cycles of violence and lure communities into joining or supporting violent groups. The February White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism helped spark a new global dialogue on how to empower community-level actors to prevent violence and promote stability in order to move beyond recurrent militarized responses to sources of instability. However, we have yet to see meaningful progress to support this agenda beyond political rhetoric. We urge Congress to support this emerging, but potentially pivotal, policy framework.

In Syria, we also need greater leadership from the UN System to collectively lend its weight to advocacy efforts on humanitarian access and protection of civilian populations. Senior officials, including in the US government, need to speak out on human rights issues in Syria to prevent serious violations and to strengthen protection for civilians. Discussions need to deliver more actionable commitments to reduce violence, including through elevated, regional leadership within UNHCR for its protection mandate.

Third, improve conditions and dignity of refugees in the Middle East, particularly by enabling them to work and access education and by shoring up the resources of host communities. Many of the Syrian refugees making the dangerous trek to Europe are doing so because life in refugee camps and host communities in the Middle East are unsustainable. For the millions who have stayed behind, conditions must improve and humanitarian needs must be fully funded. Host communities in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon are under extreme stress with their capacities to provide services greatly overstretched. Specific priorities include:

- **Refugee livelihoods**, particularly the right to work in neighboring countries. The right to work is not simply about survival; it is also about dignity. The social status of refugees in host communities is greatly diminished by their inability to participate in the formal labor market.
- **Adolescents.** Young people are often overlooked in programming, and yet they are often the most vulnerable to negative influences. Donors should specifically develop strategies to provide education for adolescents and youth that builds the technical and soft skills

required for meaningful, future employment within the local labor market. Private sector partners can and should play a significant role in shaping these efforts.

- **Implementation of a comprehensive regional development and reconstruction plan.** Syria's neighbors continue to shoulder a disproportionate number of refugees and need our support. The United States took a leadership role both diplomatically and financially for European recovery following the Second World War through the Marshall Plan. A similarly proportional response is needed for a comprehensive recovery and support plan for Syria and its neighbors. The U.S. should work with allies and the United Nations to lead in a funding and development plan for Syria and its neighbors, mirroring the scale and commitment of the Marshall Plan instituted to repair war-torn Europe, to meet the urgent needs of refugees in the region and foster their resilience. Such a plan should move beyond humanitarian emergency relief to include sustainable development projects, education, livelihood programs, and reconstruction.

Finally, humanitarians are not the solution to these crises. I urge you to work with the Obama administration to urgently seek a political solution to the war in Syria. Our world leaders must take decisive action and push for a lasting peace. The push factors behind the refugee exodus are at the root of the current challenge, and until a political solution is reached, refugee populations will continue to surge toward Europe, if they can, or else suffer in sub-standard conditions in neighboring states.

Where is the diplomatic attention? With the G-20 coming up next month in Turkey, Congress needs to urge the Obama Administration to work with other P-5 governments, among others, to seize this window of opportunity and invest the diplomatic energy necessary to end the war in Syria. As an initial step, the United States should proactively support the passage of the French-proposed Resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This Resolution includes the establishment of a mechanism to track and publicly disclose indiscriminate attacks against civilians, including barrel bombs, car bombs, and mortars, and lays down clear consequences for such indiscriminate attacks.

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, as well as by the generosity of their hosts, despite the many profound challenges they face.

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