

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
MENA Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
Examining the Syrian Refugee Crisis
Thursday, September 19, 2013**

While much attention and great amounts of deliberation have been focused on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict and what the proper U.S. response may be, we must also continue to highlight the increasingly dire humanitarian crisis. Since this conflict began in March 2011, the numbers of those impacted have grown exponentially and are truly shocking and devastating. Nearly a full one-third of Syria's population is in dire need of humanitarian assistance and has been displaced by the conflict. By most estimates, there are now nearly five million Syrians who are now internally displaced persons (IDP). Unable or unwilling to flee Syria to find sanctuary elsewhere for whatever reason, these IDPs are extremely vulnerable. The vast majority of them are women and children, and the elderly, who end up staying in unofficial shelters, unfinished buildings and makeshift accommodations, making it extremely difficult to get them the basic necessities that they require.

There have also been over two million Syrians who have risked their lives to flee the fighting in Syria and have sought refuge in other countries, with over one million of those refugees being children under the age of 18. Over 97% of these refugees flee to Syria's neighboring countries, like our ally Jordan, or to Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq. We have seen hundreds of thousands flee to each of these countries, and this mass influx of refugees weighs heavily on their economies and their security situations. Perhaps the two countries most greatly impacted by the refugee crisis are Lebanon and Jordan.

Lebanon is home to anywhere between 700,000 to one million Syrian refugees who are living with host communities or in settlements, and whose presence introduces a complex and potentially dangerous situation – as we have witnessed with multiple cross-border incidents and spillover violence. While the political situation in Lebanon already is tenuous at best, this massive influx of refugees further destabilizes the country and threatens to upend the fragile government and pull Lebanon into the conflict – a situation that would not only have serious ramifications for regional and U.S. national security, but would severely exacerbate the humanitarian crisis.

Meanwhile, Jordan has pledged to keep its borders open to those fleeing Syria, despite the heavy burden that this places on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan – whose Ambassador is with us today, and I would just briefly like to recognize her – welcome Madam Ambassador. Our Subcommittee had met privately with her before this Subcommittee about this refugee crisis. Jordan continues to be an important ally of the United States. Official numbers place the number of refugees in Jordan at well over half a million, but those numbers may be much higher as we heard from the Ambassador this morning, due to the large number of unregistered refugees. While some Syrians live in camps within Jordan, most live amongst host communities. In fact, one camp is home to over 120,000 refugees, which would be Jordan's fourth largest city.

The United States, through the work of the State Department and USAID, continues to provide humanitarian assistance to those impacted by the Syrian conflict. We are the single-largest contributor of humanitarian assistance for the Syrian people, providing aid to nearly four million people living in Syria with the assistance of the UN, and local and international organizations and NGOs. Our assistance, along with the assistance provided by our friends in the EU, the UK and the UAE will provide food, medical care, clean water, and shelter for those affected by the conflict. This is a massive undertaking, and with no end in sight to the Syrian conflict, it is important that we evaluate the situation and its implications for the region, as well as the programs we have in place to support ongoing and future developments.

Half of these Syrians in need are children who need something, or someone, to turn to. If the United States doesn't step up to assist them, these children may turn to the Islamic extremists who would seek to take advantage of their vulnerability and radicalize them – further threatening the stability of the region, and our security interests. For the well-being of the millions impacted, for the stability and security of the region, and for our own national security interests, we must continue to seek ways to aid these millions who desperately need our help.

With no end in sight to this conflict, these numbers will only continue to add up, causing increased pressure on the region and directly threatening the U.S. and our allies.