

Examining the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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Thank you, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Deutch and Members of this Subcommittee for holding this hearing on the Syrian Refugee Crisis and for calling attention to the enormous humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Middle East. Thank you for the opportunity to update you on how the crisis has evolved and how the U.S. government is responding. I also want to express our appreciation for the resources authorized and appropriated by Congress that are allowing us to make significant contributions to humanitarian operations. As you will hear, these funds are helping to keep people alive and lessen their suffering. But there are limits to what even the best delivered aid can accomplish in such a terrible crisis, and I also want to alert you to some of the more difficult challenges humanitarians face today.

This Year vs. Last

Let me start by discussing some of the ways in which the crisis is different this year than it was a year ago.

First, the crisis has grown quickly, with people forced to flee at an accelerating pace so that the number of refugees increased from 230,000 at the beginning of September last year to more than two million refugees today. They have poured across Syria's borders into neighboring countries and even further afield (*see chart, below*) and another four-to-five million are displaced inside Syria. More people have fled their homes in Syria than fled the genocide and its aftermath in Rwanda or the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, earlier this month said that "Syria has become the great tragedy of this century – a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history."

Lebanon	740,000
Jordan	520,000
Turkey	464,000
Iraq	183,000
Egypt	117,000
Total	2,038,000

Neighboring countries that have allowed the refugees to cross into their territory and escape the violence deserve our thanks.

Turkey has built 20 camps for just over 200,000 refugees, and even more Syrians live in Turkish cities. Informally, some referred to the camps as “five-star” because they offered a high level of comfort in contrast to most refugee camps around the world, but the passage of time has worn down the infrastructure of the camps and frayed the nerves of camp refugees. We are grateful that Turkey has plans to build three additional camps for contingencies and is also starting to register Syrians in urban areas and providing them access to free medical care. Turkey also continues to provide humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance, food, and shelter, to internally displaced persons waiting in Syria to cross the border into Turkey.

In Jordan, refugees were initially held in short-term transit centers before being allowed to be “bailed-out” or sponsored by relatives, friends or even strangers. Over time, however, the Government of Jordan concluded that a camp should be constructed to hold the growing influx of refugees. A year ago, that camp was desert and rocks. Today, Za’atri camp is Jordan’s fourth largest city. The United Arab Emirates has constructed a much smaller second camp that opened in April and construction of a larger third camp at Azraq is well advanced.

Some weeks ago I spoke to Killian Kleinschmidt, the manager of the Za’atri camp in Jordan, and we discussed the way that the needs of the refugees were changing. He maintains that some of the vandalism of communal spaces seen in that camp – such as theft of kitchen equipment and damage to latrines -- is related to refugees preferring to fix up their own areas. They want to have reliable electricity. They want to shop for and cook their own meals instead of lining up at communal kitchens. They are essentially turning tents and caravans intended to serve as temporary dwellings into more permanent homes. I agree with Mr. Kleinschmidt’s recommendation: we should recognize that their displacement will not end soon and help them improve their living conditions in what really has become a Syrian city in Jordan.

In both Turkey and Jordan more refugees actually live in cities and villages than in camps. And there are no refugee camps for Syrians in Lebanon, where desperate refugees have crowded into any unoccupied building, shed or building site for shelter, placing great strain on already-stressed Lebanese infrastructure. In order to help these refugees, programs are designed differently in order to reach into the villages where they live. Aid is provided using food vouchers or debit cards so that refugees can shop in local markets. Instead of tents or containers, refugees are given cash assistance in order to pay rent for accommodations.

While neighboring countries initially welcomed the refugees, there is a growing sense among their citizens that they are inundated and could be overwhelmed. Refugees are driving wages down but rent prices up as they compete against local people for jobs and housing. They strain water and electrical systems, force local schools to run double-shifts and occupy beds in hospitals. All of this is leading to tensions in these societies. (Large-scale international aid operations can also pump money into local economies, and neighboring countries are also hosting wealthy Syrian exiles, but it is unclear the extent to which these positive economic impacts are offsetting the costs of hosting refugees.)

In recent weeks, the number of refugees crossing has decreased at some border points because refugee-hosting countries have taken steps to restrict the flow. Measures include

limiting the number that can cross per day or imposing stricter requirements for identity documents. Some crossing points have been closed completely. In response, we have asked neighboring countries to keep borders open, urged them to respect the rights of people seeking to flee the violence, and discussed different ways to help these governments cope.

On August 15, authorities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region opened a key crossing point that had long been closed. Some 63,000 refugees have used that point to cross from Syria into Iraq.

Frankly, we no longer believe people could return easily to their homes inside Syria. For many, their homes are destroyed or their workplaces are gone. Familiar landmarks are now recalled as the scenes of tragedies and atrocities. Doctors have fled or been killed, medical centers bombed, and the services one needs for daily life have vanished. Reports based on interviews with newly arriving refugees indicate that when tens of thousands crossed into Iraq in late August, they were not fleeing fighting so much as they were leaving because they could not get sufficient food and water.

What We Are Doing

In the midst of all this tragedy there is little good news, but we should acknowledge some of the things that have gone right. First, thanks in large part to the aid that is getting delivered throughout the region, millions of people are being helped and kept alive. Babies are delivered, children fed, the wounded and sick get medical care and families find shelter. Of the \$1 billion in U.S. aid provided since the crisis began, nearly half -- \$488 million -- has come from funds appropriated to the Population, Refugees and Migration bureau. The final aid package for this fiscal year is scheduled to be announced next week when the UN General Assembly meets in New York, and we are encouraging other donor countries to also make generous contributions.

We play a leading role in directing U.S. humanitarian aid to the organizations that help refugees. Our partners include the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the UN Children's fund (UNICEF), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and a number of non-governmental organizations. They, in turn, use contributions from the United States and other major donors to provide food, clean water, emergency shelter, and health care as well as schools for refugee children. We also support programs to help keep refugees safe and to protect their rights. This includes programs to keep children protected and to prevent and respond to instances of sexual or gender-based violence.

We are horrified by reports of sexual violence inside Syria and want victims of these attacks to get the help and protection they need. The United States is a major funder of women's health centers and mobile health clinics in places where refugees live. We also fund counseling services for survivors of sexual violence and information campaigns to raise awareness about available services. Over the past year, my colleagues and I have delved deeper into issues related to gender-based violence and are actively reviewing ways to do more to protect Syrian

women and girls by working with UNHCR, ICRC and international non-governmental organizations.

Assistant Administrator Nancy Lindborg, from the U.S. Agency for International Development will testify at greater length about the U.S. government's relief efforts inside Syria and the remarkable courage that aid workers from international and local aid agencies demonstrate every day in order to get aid to people in the middle of a war zone. The Population, Refugees and Migration bureau has allocated \$135 million of our funding to support the activities of several international organizations (UNHCR, ICRC, UNRWA) working inside Syria. Our contributions complement the efforts of USAID and our staffs stay in close touch to ensure our funding is allocated and used wisely and it helps as many people as possible.

Issues of Concern

We also know that humanitarian aid alone will not be sufficient to address the problems bred by this regional crisis. We realize that development funding in countries like Jordan and Lebanon is essential to help keep their economies stable and to make improvements in their overtaxed infrastructure and public services. This is a topic we are discussing within the U.S. government, but international financial institutions also have a role to play, and in the coming days and weeks we will seek their greater involvement. The World Bank, for example, recently approved a \$150 million emergency loan to the Government of Jordan to help address needs in host communities. The World Bank recently completed a joint assessment mission to Lebanon with UN experts to identify development projects deserving of donor support, which they plan to announce in October during their annual meetings. These and other efforts to finance development projects will assist local communities that are hosting refugees and will help foster stability in this region. The Administration recognizes the need to support neighbors shouldering this responsibility, and, in addition to humanitarian assistance, we are providing significant economic, development, and security assistance to support Jordan and Lebanon as the crisis continues.

In terms of delivering aid to the refugees, if we can convince more countries to donate to UNHCR and the efforts of other UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, this will help those agencies to reach more people, especially refugees living outside of camps. It will also help these agencies to plan with more assurance and have the confidence that resources will materialize to support programs. Unfortunately, many on the roster of major donors to the humanitarian operations in and around Syria – the United States, Europeans, Japan, Canada, and Australia – are the usual donors to humanitarian causes. The one bright spot is the addition of Kuwait to the list of those supporting major relief agencies.

I remain concerned about safety in refugee camps, particularly in Za'atri. That camp grew so quickly that chaos resulted. For a time, there was no police inside the camp. Several measures have been taken to improve this situation. The Jordanian police who used to stay outside the perimeter of the camp have begun patrols on the inside. Our colleagues in the Bureau of International Narcotics & Law Enforcement are also working with the Jordanian police and UNHCR to design a training program for 600 camp residents to serve as a community patrol

under the direction of the Jordanian police. They are coordinating those efforts closely with UNHCR and the Government of Jordan.

UNICEF experts have told us that too many Syrian children are not going to school. Throughout the region, we are examining ways to increase the relatively low numbers of Syrian refugee children enrolled in schools because the risk of a “lost generation” of Syrian children is very real.

I am also worried about the spread of disease throughout camps or poor, overcrowded neighborhoods. Medical staff working in camps has been particularly vigilant to prevent outbreaks. In Jordan, more than 625,000 Syrian and Jordanian children received vaccinations against polio and measles this summer as part of a U.S.-funded program.

Palestinians who live or lived in Syria deserve special attention during this crisis. Before the conflict, 525,000 Palestinians were living in Syria. Subsequently, Palestinian neighborhoods have been severely damaged by fighting and shelling. 235,000 Palestinians have had to flee violence within Syria and 45,000 have fled to Lebanon.

Our greatest concern, of course, is for those still inside Syria, who remain vulnerable to attack. What good is getting aid inside Syria if the aid recipient is caught in the crossfire and killed by armed groups? Or bombed? Or gassed by his or her own government? We support efforts to get more aid into Syria, but that is not enough.

Conclusion

In the humanitarian community, it is well known that war is not ended by more and better aid deliveries. Peace must be negotiated, and we salute our colleagues -- the U.S. and international diplomats -- who are striving to bring this conflict to a peaceful end. Until peace returns, the role of my bureau at the State Department is to support international efforts to deliver aid and alleviate suffering. To do this, we will continue to need your help and your voices speaking up in support of what we are doing and explaining to the public the importance of the aid we direct to humanitarian organizations. I might also mention that private contributions Americans choose to make to reputable charities working in the region would also be extremely helpful.

Thank you again for holding this hearing and for your interest and concern. I look forward to your questions.