

Statement for the Record
Ms. Nirvana Shawky
Regional Director, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – CARE
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa
and Global Counterterrorism
“11 Years of War: The Humanitarian Impact of the Ongoing Conflict in Syria”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank you for this opportunity to examine the humanitarian impact of 11 years of conflict in Syria.

CARE implements humanitarian and development programs in over 100 countries with a focus on women and girls who are the most vulnerable in crisis but also the most powerful changemakers. CARE responds to the Syria crisis directly and through partners in Syria and neighboring countries. Since 2013, we've reached more than 9 million people inside Syria.

Simply put, humanitarian needs are increasing while diplomacy and support are decreasing. Alongside lifesaving aid, Syrians need longer-term, sustainable assistance that builds their self-reliance and resilience. This includes durable solutions to displacement, mitigating the impacts of climate change like recurrent drought and harsher winters, addressing the ways gender inequalities compound humanitarian needs, and investing in locally-led solutions. Above all, support for Syria must not be politicized. Syrians cannot afford for humanitarian access or early recovery support- a longstanding pillar of the humanitarian response in Syria- to be used as political bargaining chips.

The severity of needs after 11 years of war are compounded by multiple crises: economic collapse, food insecurity, water scarcity, and the global pandemic. CARE's recent Rapid Gender Analysis reveals households under immense duress across northern Syria. In the Northwest, where 97% of the population lives on less than two dollars a day, women reported domestic violence as a major concern. In the Northeast, Syria's breadbasket which has now been devastated by drought, 25% of households eat one meal a day, and one in five children is malnourished. Families are resorting to negative coping mechanisms like eliminating meat, fruit and vegetables; selling farmland and animals; begging and borrowing; sending children to work; and marrying off young daughters.

The reality is grim and we are preparing for further deterioration. Cross-border humanitarian access- a fundamental lifeline - has been eroded and the last authorized crossing into northwest Syria is at risk again if UN Security Council Resolution 2585 expires in July. Additionally, the devastating conflict in Ukraine may well have dire impacts on global supply chains, exacerbating food insecurity in places like Syria and Lebanon while further straining diplomacy.

The U.S. commitment to prioritize humanitarian needs within its Syria strategy is welcome but this must be backed up with meaningful resources. Syrians cannot eat promises or shelter their families with words alone. Last year, humanitarian actors were forced to cut vital health services and food rations due to the lack of funding. CARE urges Congress and the Administration to support additional funding for lifesaving aid, early recovery, and resilience activities in Syria. We hope your offices will support a substantial increase of the topline humanitarian accounts next fiscal year to respond at scale to growing global needs.

But aid alone is not enough. This must be complemented by concerted diplomacy towards an inclusive political solution. CARE urges U.S. leaders to put renewed focus on international humanitarian cooperation – including the continuity of UNSCR 2585 for another 12 months at a minimum. The Syrian people need policymakers to be united in support of their wellbeing.

Finally, CARE recommends increased direct funding to Syrian-led NGOs, particularly women-focused organizations. Local solutions are the most enduring. CARE is honored to be invited to testify, and I am very pleased to see my colleague Jomana here today as a witness, but we must do more to engage and empower Syrians to define their own path forward.

Syria, singularly dire in many ways, is sadly not unique. This crisis is symbolic of a chronic lack of humanitarian resourcing and diplomacy globally. But with these steps, we have an opportunity to reverse these trends in Syria while setting a new humanitarian course globally.

To mark the end of the 11th year of the crisis, CARE spoke to 11-year-old Syrian girls, all born the year the conflict started. I will let Atiya, a refugee in Lebanon, have the final word: “Even though we’ve been here for a long time... we’re different. Our accent is different. I feel different from everyone else. I’m not in my country and when you’re somewhere else, you never feel really safe. My parents say Syria was beautiful, that it was a good place to live. Sometimes people ask me why I am still here, why I don’t go home. I want to shout: ‘Why don’t you understand? My country was destroyed. Where do you want me to go? I have nowhere to go.’”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for your time and attention today. I look forward to your questions.