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“Fulfilling the Humanitarian Imperative: Assisting Victims of ISIS Violence”

Written Testimony by

**Noah Gottschalk
Senior Humanitarian Policy Advisor, Oxfam America**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the humanitarian situation in Syria and Iraq and on what we can do to better assist victims of the ongoing violence in both countries. My testimony is drawn from several months spent over the last few years speaking to the civilians caught up in these conflicts, as well as from the ongoing work of my Oxfam colleagues in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Oxfam America is a global organization working to right the wrongs of poverty, hunger, and injustice. We save lives, develop long-term solutions to poverty, and campaign for social change. As one of 17 members of the international Oxfam confederation, we work with people in more than 90 countries to create lasting solutions. Our sister organizations, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Netherlands (Novib), and Oxfam Italy are working on the ground in the region, providing aid to more than 1.5 million people in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan with programmes for the provision of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene, as well as livelihoods, gender justice, and protection programming. In Iraq, Oxfam is providing access to clean water, safe hygiene, and livelihood opportunities to more than 120,000 people. In my testimony today, I will highlight some of the humanitarian challenges facing the people of Syria and Iraq, and what the US can do to better assist them.

The arrival of tens of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis to Europe’s borders and the shocking deaths of women, children, and men on their perilous journey is a daily reminder to the international community of the tragedy engulfing the people of the region. Syrians, Iraqis, and other refugees put themselves and their families at so much risk only out of sheer desperation. Unfortunately, the international community is failing to address the spiraling catastrophe in

Syria, Iraq's own crisis, and their impact on the entire region.

Accordingly, Oxfam is calling for urgent and immediate action by the international community to deal with this deepening crisis, by 1) fully funding the aid response in Syria, Iraq, and refugee-hosting countries, 2) ensuring humanitarian access to those in need of aid and offering refuge to those who have fled the country, and 3) reviving concerted efforts towards a resolution of the crises.

The Syrian Humanitarian Crisis and Funding Gaps

In Syria, the statistics paint a grim picture. Since 2011, more than 250,000 people have been killed and more than one million injured. Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks are being committed by all parties to the conflict, including through the use of barrel bombs, mortar attacks and other explosive weapons in populated areas. These types of attacks remain by far the primary cause of civilian deaths and injuries.ⁱ Ten million people in the country do not have enough to eat. More than half of Syria's hospitals have been destroyed or badly damaged, and Syria's human development indices have been rolled back 38 years.ⁱⁱ The water supply has decreased to less than 50 percent of its pre-crisis levels and is increasingly being used as a weapon of war by all parties to the conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ

Well over half the entire pre-crisis population of Syria has been forced to flee their homes, making Syria the largest displacement crisis in the world today. 7.6 million people are internally displaced and more than 4.2 million people have fled the country. As the number of people in need grows, however, aid from humanitarian agencies is being drastically reduced due to funding shortages, and the violence in Syria remains endemic and all-encompassing. Neighboring countries have shown extraordinary hospitality in hosting refugees from Syria, but they have seen their resources and infrastructure overstretched, leading to increasingly restrictive government policies aiming to stem the flow of asylum seekers. For example, maintaining valid residency papers and registration, or being allowed to work and have an income, has become ever more challenging for refugees, increasing the risk of being fined, arrested or even deported. Most refugee crises last more than a decade,^{iv} and sadly the Syria crisis is proving to be no exception. As the conflict continues, more and more refugees are being pushed to make desperate choices. Children are forced to leave school and work illegally, girls are forced into marriage before their time, and many have little option but to risk their lives on dangerous boat journeys in the hope of reaching Europe.

Major gaps in the humanitarian response are a significant source of misery for Syrians throughout the region. The Syria Humanitarian Appeal is only 40% funded for aid inside of the country. The regional response for refugees and host communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt is just about half funded. The US is the largest single donor to the Syria humanitarian crisis – providing more than 4.5 billion dollars since the start of the crisis. Yet according to Oxfam's analysis, the US is still not meeting its fair share based on our Gross National Income. This year, we've reached approximately 72% of our fair share. By comparison, Canada has provided 80% of its fair share, the UK has provided 229% of its fair share, and Kuwait 538%. Other Gulf Countries are lagging far behind, however, providing far less than in previous years. Saudi Arabia has only contributed 6 percent of its fair share, Qatar 17 percent and the United Arab Emirates 38 percent (compared with 98 percent, 186 percent and 121 percent

respectively a year ago). Our allies elsewhere in the world have not managed much better: France ranks at 22 percent compared with 33 percent last year and Japan has contributed only 24 percent. For its part, Russia remains at 1 percent. We must continue to lead by example, and encourage our allies to follow suit.

The Iraqi Humanitarian Crisis

In Iraq, the US is also the leading donor, having provided over half a million dollars to the humanitarian response over the last two fiscal years. However, as in Syria, the scale of need is outpacing aid contributions, with Iraq's 700 million dollar humanitarian appeal only about two-thirds funded. The UN now estimates that 11 million people will require some form of humanitarian assistance in 2016, including 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Displaced families are currently living in more than 3,000 locations throughout the country; more than 90 percent are living outside of camps, hosted by communities who have done their best to protect and provide for them. The Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government are providing support, yet about half of all displaced people need urgent assistance to secure shelter, as many are surviving in unfinished and abandoned buildings, makeshift collective centers, and spontaneous settlements.

Meanwhile, over 500,000 people have begun to return to their communities to rebuild their homes, restart livelihoods, and recover from the trauma of conflict. They are returning to businesses that have been looted and homes that have been severely damaged, and this trend of return is expected to increase throughout 2016.

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is a protection crisis above all else. Even for those civilians who manage to reach proximity to safety, there are consistent reports that they face access restrictions at governorate and district borders. This poses serious restrictions to the freedom of movement of IDPs across the country as they are impeded by security screening, sponsorship requirements, and inconsistent and non-transparent procedures at checkpoints. Additionally, access is often only granted on a conditional basis, such as moving into camps where working to provide for themselves and their families is difficult if not impossible. Conditions for entry into neighboring governorates continue to be severely affected by sectarian and partisan politics, as well as by tensions between IDPs and host communities. Restrictions on entry are evident in the fact that since April 2015, half a million people have been displaced from or within Anbar Governorate, yet nearly half of these people remain within the governorate in proximity to areas of active conflict.

Humanitarian Access in Iraq and Syria

Quantity of aid is important, but so is access. Inside both Syria and Iraq, aid shortages are compounded by the difficulties that far too many civilians have in reaching the assistance that is present. In Syria, shifting conflict lines, the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS, and restrictions imposed by the government on aid agencies have impeded humanitarian access. Indeed, the United Nations estimates that more than 4.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in hard to reach and besieged locations.

This week the UN confirmed that there are more than 12,000 displaced Syrians stranded at the Jordanian border without access to sufficient assistance and living in poor sanitary conditions. With temperatures dropping in the region, a lack of resolution to the situation could mean possible deaths, particularly amongst children and elderly. Syrian asylum seekers have faced restrictions accessing safety in neighboring countries for more than a year, particularly Palestine refugees from Syria who faced additional restrictions by neighboring countries for the past several years.

On my last visit to Iraq earlier this year, I stood on the side of the road with a group of several hundred Iraqi children, women, and men who had been forced to flee their homes in Ramadi. Horrified by the brutality they'd witnessed, frightened for their friends and neighbors from Christian and other minority communities, and terrified that they themselves would be swept up in the violence, they were now trying to find safety first in Baghdad, then in the north of their country. One man spoke of his brother being killed and his barber shop being burned to the ground. Now, with his children and wife in tow, he was trying to find refuge with friends in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where he'd grown up and studied. But, because he is a Sunni Muslim, the authorities were not allowing him and many others to enter the region for fear that he might be associated with the very extremists who attacked his family and destroyed his livelihood. Without clear guarantees of safety and enhanced humanitarian space, families will have little option but turn to back to areas held by the same extremists they seek to escape.

With regional countries hosting more than 4.2 million Syrian refugees and nearly 400,000 Iraqi refugees, the strains are mounting. With the right help from international donors, however, these countries can and should develop policies that allow refugees to better support themselves financially without the risk of arrest by authorities. This would also allow refugees to contribute to the economy of the communities hosting them and to live in dignity until they are eventually able to return home. Rather than viewing refugees as a burden, we should be focusing on the benefits they can bring to host economies through their skills and experience. But all of this takes careful investment and support from countries like the US.

Political Solutions

None of these humanitarian efforts, however well intentioned, can take the place of an end to the conflicts. In Syria, far too many foreign powers are fueling conflict rather than undertaking earnest efforts to bring it to an end. In Iraq, any efforts to restore stability and return populations must be accompanied by the provision of genuine physical protection to all at-risk communities; this includes Sunni Arab populations in areas currently occupied by ISIS or communities who have fled violence and face risk of reprisal killings, threats to safety and further displacement. While the persecution of minorities has perhaps been the most visible and systemic, on all sides of the conflict, civilians have been targeted based on group identity – Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, and even Sunni Arabs. Iraq's social fabric has been torn apart; in singling out particular groups along identity lines, we risk stigmatizing communities which still consider themselves first and foremost Iraqi. A lasting political solution in both countries will enable the return and reintegration of the displaced, but this will require a meaningful process of reconciliation and genuine safety for all of Syria and Iraq's citizens.

The Role of Refugee Resettlement

Finally, no discussion of the ways to assist Syrian and Iraqis would be complete without reference to refugee resettlement. Although it will ultimately benefit just a tiny fraction of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, America's well-established, secure, and successful resettlement program is literally a life-and-death matter for persecuted women, men, and children who have no other means of survival. It is also a fundamental expression of our values as Americans to offer safe haven to the persecuted, and allows us to show the suffering and oppressed around the best of who we are as a people.

ⁱ UN Security Council (2015), "Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165(2014) and 2191 (2014), August 2015",

http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/698

ⁱⁱ "Syria's war economy", European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2014, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR97_SYRIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ "Severe Water Shortages Compound the Misery of Millions in War-Torn Syria",

http://www.unicef.org/media/media_82980.html

^{iv} Crawford, Cosgrave, Haysome and Walicki, 'Protracted Displacement: Uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile', Overseas Development Institute, September 2015, p.5, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9851.pdf>, last accessed 8 December 2015