



**United States Institute of Peace**

**War in Syria: Next Steps to Mitigate the Crisis**

**Testimony before the  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

**Nancy Lindborg**

**President**

**United States Institute of Peace**

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current situation in Syria and steps that can be taken to help mitigate the crisis.

I testify before you today as the president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute dedicated to the proposition that peace is possible, practical and essential to our national and global security. It engages directly in conflict zones and provides tools, analysis, training, education and resources to those working for peace.

## **Unabated Humanitarian Crisis in Syria**

The numbers associated with the Syrian crisis have become a grim litany of steadily increasing statistics throughout the past five years. Currently, the UN estimates 11.3 million Syrians are displaced, which is roughly equivalent to all the residents of Ohio being forced from their homes. Of those, 6.5 million are displaced within Syria and another 4.8 million have fled the country as refugees. Overall, 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance and of those, 4.6 million live in areas that are hard to reach. Grimmiest of all is the climbing death figure, now believed by some to be between 400,000 and 470,000 deaths.<sup>1</sup>

For more than five years the Syrian conflict has crossed the threshold of mass atrocities, featuring widespread crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the state security forces, affiliated groups, and opposition movements, including the use of chemical weapons and the intentional targeting of religious groups. The Syrian-American Medical Society has documented 161 chemical weapon attacks leading to the deaths of 1,491 people and more than 14,000 injuries. Additionally, an estimated 488,000 people live in besieged areas where they are unable to receive food or basic medical care, leading the UN Secretary-General to accuse all parties of using starvation as a weapon of war.

## **The Global Response**

Since the beginning of this crisis, the global community has mobilized to provide critical humanitarian assistance. With your important support, Senators, the U.S. government has led the way by providing \$5.1 billion over the course of this crisis. However, inside Syria, provision of critical assistance has been persistently hampered by the complexities and extreme danger of responding to needs in this crisis. The regime has conducted a ruthless bombing campaign,

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian Center for Policy Research published a report that estimated deaths at 470,000 through 2015. UN Special Envoy de Mistura made a personal estimate of 400,000 killed on April 28, 2016

including the deliberate targeting of civilians and specifically medical personnel and facilities. The rise of ISIS has led to its capture of large swaths of territory where humanitarian access is extremely limited, and the many different armed actors have made the crossing of multiple lines of control an arduous, dangerous and uncertain undertaking by heroic aid workers.

The Syrian crisis has helped drive a steep increase in global humanitarian need that has overwhelmed the international system and led to significant funding shortfalls globally, despite historic levels of funds raised. For 2016, the UN reports only 23% coverage of the \$4.55 billion requested for humanitarian and regional response needs.<sup>2</sup>

In February, 2014, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2139, which demanded that “all parties allow delivery of humanitarian assistance, cease depriving civilians of food and medicine indispensable to their survival, and enable the rapid, safe and unhindered evacuation of all civilians who wish to leave.” It demanded that “all parties respect the principle of medical neutrality and facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment and transport.” However, despite repeatedly reaffirming these convictions in subsequent unanimously passed UN resolutions, access to hard-to-reach and besieged populations remained difficult or impossible, with terrible reports of malnourishment and outright starvation.

Finally, in February of this year, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by the U.S. and Russia, managed to negotiate a Cessation of Hostilities (COS) that miraculously managed to hold for nearly seven weeks. From late February through early March, the humanitarian community was able to make important progress in reaching ten of the 18 communities under siege, both through 63 convoys bringing life-saving food, medical supplies and treatment and 22 airdrops by the World Food Program. Humanitarian assistance reached just 3% (10,500 of 393,700) besieged between October and December 2015, but with the Cessation of Hostilities in place, humanitarian aid reached 52% (255,250 of 486,700) of those in besieged communities between January and April 2016.<sup>3</sup> Some estimates indicate that violence decreased by 90 percent during the cessation, bringing a much needed respite to war-torn communities.

However, by mid-April, the tenuous Cessation of Hostilities began to fall apart. Humanitarian access has once again been severely reduced, with negotiations for access again difficult and uncertain. The regime bombing campaign never fully ceased, and in April, Syrian regime forces rapidly escalated attacks in and around Aleppo and Homs, including the destruction of two of the

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<sup>2</sup> UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service: <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emergencyDetails&appealID=1133>

<sup>3</sup>ISSG Humanitarian Task Force briefing April 28, 2016

few remaining hospitals in Aleppo. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that in March and April, Syrian government forces killed 1100 civilians, ISIS killed 165 and opposition forces killed 170.

*As the ISSG ministerial reconvenes today in Vienna, most urgent is the recommitment of all parties to pressure each of the warring parties to respect the Cessation of Hostilities in an effort to stop the killing and enable critical assistance to reach those most in need.*

### **Regional Spillover**

Syrians fleeing the war have helped push global displacement to the historic high of 60 million people worldwide who have been forced from their homes by violence. An estimated 4.8 million Syrian refugees have fled their country, overwhelmed neighboring countries and now spilling onto European shores, triggering a secondary crisis within Europe.

The impact of this outflow on the region is enormous. Basic infrastructure -- water, electricity, schools, hospitals -- have been stressed to the breaking point. Economic and social pressures are mounting as countries cope with the influx of Syrians.

In Lebanon, which is hosting an estimated 1.07 million Syrian refugees, nearly one in four people is now Syrian. *(If one in four Americans were a refugee, the United States would face the unimaginable equivalent of hosting the populations of California, Texas and Illinois combined.)* This influx has increased tensions among Lebanon's own communal groups. Since 2011, it has reduced the country's economic growth to the 1-2% range. Syrian refugees have increased the labor supply but also have pushed more Lebanese into the ranks of the unemployed. This crisis, along with Lebanon's chronic debt crisis, political paralysis, and declining revenue, has drastically limited the government's ability to invest in infrastructure improvements, such as water, electricity, and transportation—the very resources needed by an increasing population of both Lebanese and Syrian refugees.

Similarly, Jordan struggles to cope with more than 628,000 Syrian refugees. Jordan already suffers from an insufficient supply of natural resources, especially water and energy. Coupled with chronic high rates of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, this influx of refugees places immense stress on one of the region's poorest countries. The World Bank estimates that Jordan has lost more than \$2.5 billion a year since the beginning of the Syria conflict. This amounts to 6% of its GDP, and one-fourth of the government's annual revenues.

Even amid its own war, Iraq also is receiving Syrian refugees. The United Nations estimates that more than 246,000 Syrian refugees have entered Iraq to escape the Syrian civil war. These

refugees join nearly four million internally displaced Iraqis, adding to the enormous stress on the social infrastructure of a state already suffering from its own war.

Five years ago, there were hopes that changes in the region would lead to more equitable, inclusive growth, with an emphasis on creating more jobs for MENA's legions of young unemployed. Instead, the reverse has happened, with the first four years of the Syrian war costing the region as much as \$35 billion (measured in 2007 prices) in lost output or foregone growth.

The conflict in Syria has had a profound impact on the lives of average citizens throughout the region. In many cases, towns have doubled or tripled in size; housing prices have increased, schools are operating at double shift, and communities--already poor themselves--are stretched to accommodate a refugee population that continues to expand. Estimates are that per capita incomes for many Turks, Egyptians, and Jordanians are 1.5% lower now than they would have been without the Syrian conflict, and by 1.1% for many Lebanese.

### **Rethinking Refugee Assistance**

Importantly, the refugee crisis has accelerated a rethinking of how assistance is provided, with increased focus and action on responding to the protracted reality of this crisis instead of treating it as a short term conflict. Given the utter enormity of the social, physical and economic destruction inside Syria, it will be decades before people are fully able to return home even once a peace agreement is reached. While there is still much to do better and differently, there are useful if still nascent changes in how the international community provides assistance. For example, the UN has worked with Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt to develop a regional refugee and resilience plan as well as individual country strategies with the goal of forging a much closer link between relief and development efforts. Additionally, efforts have included an increased focus on:

- Building resilience, with greater attention to education, jobs, psychosocial and social cohesion within both refugee and host communities;
- Addressing potential conflict between refugee and host communities through dialogue, mediation and targeted initiatives, including a recognition of the importance of including host communities, often poor themselves, in any assistance programs;
- Enabling local initiatives and local government and civil society actors to have a greater role and voice in assistance programs;

- Financing to support host countries, including a new World Bank-led MENA financing initiative that provide new concessional loans to Lebanon and Jordan at rates not previously available to them as Middle Income Countries. New funding just announced provides \$100 million for Jordan to create 100,000 jobs for Jordanians and Syrians, while another \$100 million for Lebanon focuses on education for both Lebanese and Syrians.
- Providing education and livelihoods: Jordan has announced temporary work permits for Syrians; many schools in Jordan have gone to double shifts, and there is progress in enabling Syrians to attend school in Jordan.

### **Focus on Youth**

Addressing the youth of Syria may be the most important challenge as an entire generation is now growing up torn from families, homes and dreams. UNICEF reports that the conflict is affecting 8.4 million children—more than 80 percent of all Syrian children—either within the country or as refugees. Approximately 3.7 million Syrian children have been born since the conflict began in 2011, including over 300,000 children who have been born as refugees. Without a birth certificate, one of the main means of determining citizenship, these children risk becoming stateless in the future, adding to their risk. Children are left without protection, especially the more than 15,000 unaccompanied or separated children who have left Syria. Most of all, there is tremendous urgency to ensure education is available, with reports noting more than 2.8 million Syrian children are not attending school. Young people who languish in refugee camps or live on the margins in the slums of host countries risk growing up untrained, unskilled, and uneducated. These children and youth, many of them unmoored from family, culture and community, are vulnerable to predatory employers, the allure of violent extremists groups, transnational criminal organizations, or potential victims of human trafficking.

Despite significant efforts to mobilize action to ensure “No Lost Generation” of Syrians, persistent funding shortfalls and tremendous challenges remain. In the absence of concerted action, we risk a new generation of youth without hope and potentially poised to continue cycles of conflict. Instead it is imperative to focus on programs that enable youth to have opportunities, be heard and have a chance to contribute to a more hopeful future. This includes:

- Engaging youth from refugee communities in efforts that enable them to resist the lure of radical ideology, including consistent but discreet support to moderate religious leaders in the region who may engage youth as part of interfaith dialogues and counter radicalization efforts.
- Establish mechanisms to issue children born while displaced or as refugees some form of birth certification and documentation.

- Despite some progress on enabling refugee children to attend school, a full scale concerted effort is needed to ensure that Syrian children can attend school, and importantly, that high-school and college students can complete studies that have been interrupted by war.
- Increase the focus on enabling youth to find livelihoods and jobs, with complementary help for youth of host countries.

### **World Humanitarian Summit**

Next week, the first World Humanitarian Summit will convene in Istanbul, with governments and civil society working to map out a new approach for humanitarian action at a time of unprecedented need. Global humanitarian assistance has shifted over the last decade from primarily serving those affected by natural disaster. Now 80% of assistance is going to those affected by violent conflict. Conflict has been identified by the UN as the “greatest global threat to development.” The Syrian humanitarian crisis has dramatically sharpened the urgency to reconsider some of the fundamental approaches to humanitarian assistance.

The World Humanitarian Summit will aim to expand the number of donors helping to meet the global burden of humanitarian need. It will seek to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian delivery; will focus on building resilience and closing the gap with development; and most importantly, will deliver an urgent call to action on shrinking the need.

As the Syrian crisis illustrates, all too often, humanitarian action becomes the focus in the absence of real solutions moving forward. At the Summit, there will be a call to rally the missing political will to end these protracted conflicts that wreak generational havoc.

### **Conclusion**

Today the ISSG reconvenes in Vienna, with the hopes of reinvigorating the cessation of hostilities. In the absence of a longer term solution, an agreement to staunch the violence is paramount. In the meantime, critical policies for the U.S. government include:

**Continued life-saving support:** The U.S. government leadership and support has been critical; it is imperative that humanitarian support continues to ensure life-saving assistance is available for those most in need.

**Focus on Resilience:** The U.S. government leadership and support is vital for a wide range of changes that could enable smarter, more effective and more efficient assistance. This effort includes more flexible funding that enables greater support for local actors, greater ability to tailor response to needs on the ground and an increased ability to address relief and development needs as part of one response. It also includes support for the new World Bank initiatives that support middle income countries struggling to support an overwhelming refugee burden.

**Focus on building peace and reconciliation at the community level:** Finally, we know that even if peace is negotiated in Vienna tomorrow, the wounds of Syrians will take generations to heal. We need to focus now on investing in ways to rebuild social cohesion both within refugee communities and where access is possible, inside Syria. My own institution, USIP, has piloted some of this work inside Syria by gathering religious and tribal leaders, ethnic Arabs and Kurds from a rural northeastern district last year for talks that halted a rise in local communal tensions, let displaced families return home and re-opened a local road critical to normal commerce. This work helps lay the foundation for moderate local leadership and cooperation that are essential for building Syria's future stability. It need not, indeed should not, wait for an end to hostilities.

Thank you, Senators, for your continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*