Thank you Chair.

This statement has been drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Syria

1. As the Syrian conflict enters its sixth year, the impact of the protracted conflict is acutely felt within Syria and beyond its borders. This conflict, which has forced over 4.5 million refugees from the country and internally displaced a further 6.6 million, is the world’s single largest driver of displacement. As the protection environment inside Syria further deteriorates, the numbers of displaced persons continue to grow. In October last year, OCHA reported over 13.5 million Syrians to be in need of some form of protection and humanitarian assistance – an increase of 1.2 million people in just ten months.

2. Inside Syria, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is routinely violated by a multitude of actors, as civilians and civilian infrastructure remain the targets of both direct and indiscriminate attack. Meanwhile humanitarian access to the most vulnerable in Syria is regularly subject to obstruction and delay. Recently, the international community has witnessed the preventable suffering of at least 480,000 Syrians living in areas under siege, where humanitarian access has been impeded and civilians have starved to death.

3. Most Syrians and Palestine Refugees from Syria continue to be denied access to enter neighbouring countries. Over 40,000 asylum-seekers are stranded at the border with Jordan with very few permitted entry on a daily basis. NGOs also have grave concerns for the 58,000 Syrians reportedly at the border with Turkey. This undermines the principle that all persons fleeing conflict should be provided access territory where they can enjoy their fundamental right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.

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1 http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php
2 http://www.unocha.org/syria
3 According to Jordanian Border Guard Force and UNHCR, 29 February 2016
4. More than 60 per cent of the approximately 560,000 registered Palestine Refugees from Syria were forcibly displaced as a result of the conflict that erupted in 2011. Over 280,000 have become internally displaced within Syria and more than 80,000 have fled to neighboring countries. Although discrimination against and refoulement of refugees are forbidden by international law, they are two of the main realities Palestinian refugees suffer from when fleeing Syria. These breaches are practiced by neighboring countries and other states including European states signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. No action has been taken by the international community yet. Palestinian refugees are subjected to discrimination and are denied equal treatment with other refugees including access to territory where they can enjoy their fundamental right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution.

Regional response to Syrian refugees

5. The recent “Supporting Syria and the Region” conference brought much-needed funding pledges to the ongoing humanitarian response in the region and commitments by neighbouring countries to better accommodate refugees from Syria, including by easing conditions for access to education, livelihoods, legal stay and documentation. Valid legal stay and access to documentation is a key precondition for many refugees to be able to access services, livelihoods and humanitarian aid, but it is one that comes with an array of challenges. As long as host countries impose restrictions on refugees’ ability to legally remain on their territory, any attempts to strengthen the resilience of refugees and ensure access to humanitarian aid will be ineffective. Refugees will then be forced to consider embarking on unsafe boat journeys to reach Europe or continue to resort to negative coping strategies.

6. Turkey has registered 2.5 million Syrian refugees to date; they are therefore hosting more refugees than any other nation in the world. The EU must reinforce Turkey’s efforts to accommodate the continuing influx of refugees. However, we caution against efforts to externalize migration management that can worsen refugees’ access to protection and asylum, or contravene their rights. NGOs note that Turkey continues to maintain geographic and temporal restrictions to the 1951 Convention. The UNHCR, among other actors, must be ready to support the EU and Turkey in realizing their Joint Action Plan, specifically in the areas of resettlement; the implementation of legislation granting refugees and asylum-seekers access to education and health services; and assistance to refugees and host communities. In recent weeks, Turkey has published new regulations allowing Syrian refugees to apply for work permits. NGOs commend Turkey for this shift in policy and strongly encourage similar policy changes in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.
7. In Lebanon an estimated 70% of Syrian refugees and almost all Palestine Refugees from Syria have no valid residency permits due to regulations requiring them to have a Lebanese sponsor or sign a pledge not to work, provide difficult-to-obtain documentation, and pay a USD$200 fee for each person over the age of 15. In addition, they face administrative hurdles for processing and arbitrary application of the regulations. Under such conditions refugees are forced to limit their movement out of fears of being arrested and detained, which subsequently impedes access to humanitarian assistance, basic services and livelihoods opportunities. With more refugees in situations of extreme poverty than ever before, many are becoming severely indebted or are forced to accept undercut wages and exploitative work, including – increasingly – child labor. In 2015, estimates of up to 150,000 Syrians have transited through or left Lebanon for Turkey in the hope of an uncertain crossing to Europe. NGOs stand ready to assist the Government of Lebanon and UNHCR to promote improved protection responses for refugees including the right to access territory, the ability to access and maintain valid residence, the ability to obtain civil and identity documents, and the right to legal and dignified livelihood opportunities.

8. In Jordan, refugees in the community are forcefully relocated to formal refugee camps, or even deported back to Syria, because of their inability to prove that they have complied with ‘bailout’ procedures because they were caught working without a work permit, which often leads to family separation. Others are not able to leave the camps - refugees who left a camp after July 2014 are unable to update their UNHCR registration or Ministry of Interior (MoI) registration to be recognized as refugees. Since August 2012, Palestine Refugees from Syria, including women and children, have been prohibited from entering the country. Without updated MoI registration, refugees from Syria face problems receiving aid outside of the camps, registering their children in schools, accessing public health services at subsidized rates, and registering births, deaths and marriages. Without the legal right to work, refugees in Jordan are forced into the informal sector or remain dependent on ever-diminishing aid. Noting that enjoyment of the right to freedom of movement is fundamental to the enjoyment of nearly all other refugee rights, we applaud UNHCR’s commitment to its Alternatives to Camps policy, and encourage UNHCR and governments to pursue strategies in line with the policy, in this and all other contexts.

9. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) hosts almost all the refugees from Syria who have crossed the Iraqi border. Although the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) issues residency permits to registered refugees that allow them to rent houses, obtain work permits, and access healthcare, education and other services; many others notably those living outside camps, are facing obstacles to obtaining residency permits. As the situation becomes protracted, providing more assistance to refugees
and support to host communities will offer a vital stabilization measure to refugees and affected host communities in KRI.

Other issues of concern

10. NGOs express grave concern regarding States, including in the MENA region, which have denied asylum seekers access to territory, or failed to uphold the rights of refugees as people in need of international protection.

11. NGOs commend the increased pledges to support Syrians in displacement by countries such as Canada, the United States of America and Australia. There is more to be done by European governments in particular who can provide safe and legal pathways through resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admission as an alternative to irregular migration and dangerous sea crossings, which is increasingly the only option for many Syrians and people in need of protection. NGOs urge that UNHCR and resettlement countries make every effort to ensure that 10 per cent of the current registered refugee population in the region is resettled by the end of this year, based upon their vulnerability.

12. The number of Syrian children who have been displaced or who have fled due to the conflict is at its highest. According to UNICEF, 4.29 million children are displaced within Syria, and 1.25 million Syrian refugees in the region are children. In the region, 10% of refugee children are working on farms, begging, or engaging in other forms of informal labor. The NGO community encourages UNHCR and governments to enhance registration and identification for unaccompanied and separated children, and to increase efforts to determine the best interests for at-risk children.

13. We remind UNHCR that other populations of concern, including Palestinians, Iraqis, Somalis, Sudanese, Eritreans and Afghans, are also present throughout the region. The assistance and protection that they receive must be commensurate with that of Syrian populations. Deportations of specific groups such as Sudanese asylum seekers from Jordan have been met with condemnation by human rights groups and are a marker of the precarious situation faced by asylum seekers.

14. With up to 13 million people predicted to be in need of humanitarian assistance by the end of 2016, protection concerns continue to grow in Iraq. In the last year, more than one million Iraqis were displaced by violence bringing the total number of IDPs to over three million. Support for safe and voluntary return has become an important component of the 2016 humanitarian response. However, despite the recent return of over 440,000 people to their homes in areas reclaimed by the government, freedom of movement remains restricted on ethnic and religious grounds.
15. Humanitarian support for vulnerable populations in Iraq has been largely concentrated in areas where the security situation is stable and assistance delivery is facilitated by cooperative local authorities. However, minimal efforts have been made for the negotiation of humanitarian access into the hardest-to-reach and most critical areas. We look forward to seeing a positive impact from the newly created Humanitarian Access Unit. Until then, amidst the violence, decreases in funding and assistance coupled with a lack of access to documents and registration threaten the delivery of even the most basic services, which further endangers social safety nets.

16. We commend UNHCR for the work it has done to ensure that Palestinian refugees not receiving protection and assistance from UNRWA are benefitting from the protection of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and we urge the Agency to develop its interpretation to Article 1D of the Convention and to continue its important work to hold relevant States accountable to these commitments.

Yemen

17. The conflict in Yemen continues to intensify, with 80% of the population currently in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. There are approximately 250,000 primarily Somali refugees in Yemen. NGOs recognize the important work that UNHCR and Yemeni authorities are carrying out to assist these individuals mainly along the southern and western coastal regions and in Sana’a’s urban areas, and would encourage increased responses for refugees in the other areas of the country.

18. Estimates suggest that there are 2.8 million IDPs in Yemen, many of whom are in need of shelter and protection. For example, IDPs are currently living in makeshift open informal settlements, taking refuge in social institutions (such as schools) or living with host communities. These arrangements are stretching already limited supplies of basic commodities like food and water, exposing vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, to further protection risks. NGOs encourage stronger leadership from UNHCR in ensuring that the necessary steps be undertaken to more adequately and systematically respond to IDP protection, food, water and shelter needs. Furthermore, we would encourage UNHCR to more proactively engage with the full range of potential partners in Yemen in order to meet these needs.

North Africa

19. Many of the 120,000 registered Syrian refugees in Egypt face challenges including arbitrary arrest, deportation, as well as lack of access to livelihoods and social services. The security and political environment in Egypt has resulted in a deteriorating protection environment for refugees and asylum seekers, including
Syrians, Palestinians and other populations, which has led to instances of people attempting unsafe journeys to the EU and beyond. NGOs ask that UNHCR continue to work with the Egyptian government to ensure registration and effective protection from arbitrary arrests, detention and deportation as well as find durable solutions for Syrian refugees.

20. Facing conflict, a climate favourable for the emergence of terrorism and a strong lack of security, Libya is still characterized by instability. Libyans continue to face worsening conditions of internal displacement with 2.44 million people estimated to be in need of protection in the country. The situation for migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in Libya has seen little improvement with 153,842 people taking the dangerous sea crossing from Libya to Europe and 2,892 dying along this route making it the most deadly sea passage across the Mediterranean. More must be done to strengthen response systems, especially for rescue at sea and improved procedures for identifying those who die at sea. There must also be efforts to pursue alternative arrangements for migrants and refugees who are subject to detention in Libya.

Thank you Chair.