NGO Statement on the MENA region
Agenda item 3(a)ii

Madam/Mr Chair,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs.

Once more, the Syria crisis remains at the heart of this statement. With the conflict soon entering its eighth year, millions still living inside Syria continue to experience unabated suffering, with no relief in sight.

The international community’s efforts to reduce the conflict through the implementation of de-escalation zones resulted in a brief respite in 2017. Soon after, fighting resumed, often with increased intensity. In eastern Ghouta, for instance, an estimated 400,000 people have been trapped in a siege that is choking off essential assistance. Since the resumption of fighting in the area, the list of people in need of life-saving medical evacuation is growing by the day. No medical point inside the enclave currently provides assistance to people with disabilities resulting from the violence, like six-year old Omar, who has been waiting for three years for leg braces available just kilometres away in Damascus. Community centres providing necessary relief and support for this vulnerable population are crumbling.

As the conflict continues to evolve, the number of people on the move increases exponentially, many being re-displaced multiple times. With the increase in military operations, relatively stable areas now witness new waves of displacement, placing an additional load on already overstretched host communities. Many go through repeated traumatic experiences. Children are often the most affected, particularly because of severe malnutrition and lack of mental health specialists.

In areas retaken from the ‘Islamic State’, destruction and explosive remnants of war are major obstacles. A long process of reconstruction, de-mining and rebuilding of infrastructure and social services needs to take place before displaced families can safely return home. This is an enormous task, which should be implemented in parallel with – not at the expense of – emergency responses.

It is important to emphasize that the conflict in Syria is still ongoing. In Idleb Governorate: more than 272,800 people have recently fled their homes. This exceeds the entire population of the city of Geneva!
About 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees were still hosted in neighbouring countries, (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt). Around 8% live in camps, while the vast majority settled in urban areas, putting a strain on local services already supporting non-Syrian refugees.

While in exile, many face heightened risks of becoming stateless, including children whose birth in the host State is not registered, children born within female-headed households, children born within child marriages, undocumented refugees, and those not registered with UNHCR. There is no comprehensive data on stateless Syrian refugees in the region.

While situations may vary according to host countries, living conditions for Syrian refugees in exile remain precarious. For instance, access to safety and protection, including child protection, protection against SGBV and abuse remains problematic.

Although governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have taken steps to ease processes and waive administrative fees, access to civil status documentation, including birth and marriage certificates, residency and work permits, continues to be a challenge. The lack of legal residency results in restrictions on freedom of movement that affects refugees’ livelihood opportunities and access to healthcare and education.

Despite efforts to increase access to education, and the opening of second shift schools, 40% of Syrian children are out of school in Jordan, 58% in Lebanon, and 31% in Turkey. Lack of space, low quality of teaching, poor transportation and large distances, as well as child labour due to underlying poverty, continue to act as obstacles to attendance and enrolment.

While acknowledging efforts made by host countries and strains on their economies and communities, conditions are currently not met for safe, voluntary and dignified returns to Syria. Any returns must be conducted in accordance with international law and respect the non-refoulement principle. Host governments, donors, UN agencies and non-government actors must refrain from practices which could result in premature, coerced or forced returns of refugees.

Madam/Mr Chair, the international community must increase resettlement to third countries for the most vulnerable refugees and step up multi-year humanitarian and development funding to support Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in supporting affected populations.

In Iraq, IS’ control of extensive territories, the subsequent battles to retake these territories, and the continued contamination of the region with explosive devices, have resulted in casualties, injuries, and widespread displacements. 2.1 million have returned to often devastated retaken areas, where services are yet to resume to sufficient capacity, and 1.5 million continue to live in protracted displacement. Conflict-affected people in retaken areas face debilitated infrastructures, disrupted services, and the continued risk of explosive incidents. 8.7 million people continue to be in need of humanitarian assistance and recovery support.

Civilians from these areas bear deep scars. Occupation, conflict, displacement, family separations, and disruption of social networks have exposed people to unimaginable horror,
grief, and injury. Many chronically ill and war injured continue to suffer from inadequate healthcare services, as delivery mechanisms are only beginning to recover.

Similarly, people are yet to recover from the psychological trauma of war. Symptoms of acute distress associated with war-related violence are prevalent among displaced people. Over a million children are reported to have been out of school or learning a curriculum meant to normalize and justify violence under IS-occupation.

Adding to the social fragmentation due to the war, ethnic tensions have recently flared in many areas, with burning and looting of homes. These tensions have further contributed to new and protracted displacement, people being afraid to return home due to threats of violence. Social cohesion building remains critical to supporting the recovery of Iraq's conflict-affected civilians.

Meanwhile, the recent political realignments in Iraq have resulted in a challenging regulatory environment that makes it hard for humanitarian actors to work across local borders. Consequent jurisdictional changes and the tightening of regulations have impaired the clearance operations of Humanitarian Mine Action agencies.

Madam/Mr Chair, we need to ensure not only that adequate resources are available to continue the critical work of recovery and reconstruction in Iraq.

A longer version of the statement is available on icvanetwork.org.

Thank you.