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

Thank you, Chair.

This statement has been drafted in consultation with, and is delivered on behalf of, a wide range of NGOs and aims to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Once more, the Syria crisis remains at the heart of this statement. With the conflict about to enter its eighth year, 13.1 million people still living inside Syria continue to experience unabated suffering, with no relief in sight.

In early 2017, the international community’s efforts to reduce the conflict through the implementation of de-escalation zones resulted in a brief respite to the ongoing violence. Soon after, fighting resumed, often with increased intensity. In eastern Ghouta, for instance, an estimated 400,000 people have been trapped in a tight siege that is choking off essential food, medicines, and other life-saving assistance from an already debilitated population for more than 4 years. Since the resumption of fighting in the area in late 2017, the list of people in need of life-saving medical evacuation is growing by the day, with 765 cases reported as of 30 January 2018. No medical point inside the enclave can currently provide assistance to people with disabilities resulting from the ongoing violence, like six-year old Omar, affected by lower limbs paralysis because of a spinal cord injury, who has been crawling for the past three years, waiting for leg braces available just a few kilometres away in Damascus. Community centres providing necessary relief and support for this vulnerable population, in particular its women, youth, and children, are crumbling. Spaces that should be safe are no longer accessible.

As conflict centres continue to shift, the number of people on the move increases exponentially, with a majority of families displaced and re-displaced multiple times. With the increase in military operations, areas that were previously relatively stable are now witnessing new waves of displacement, placing an additional load on already overstretched host communities. Some 5.6 million men, women, children and elderly across Syria face particularly acute needs, many going through repeated traumatic experiences. Children are often the most affected, like little Malik who went through two distressing experiences before he reached the age of two. The shock affected his brain, hindering his ability to talk, walk and eat. Malik eventually passed away because of severe malnutrition, and lack of mental health specialists in his area.

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1 https://hno-syria.org/
3 https://www.sams-usa.net/
In areas retaken from the ‘Islamic State’ (IS), destruction and explosive remnants of war are major obstacles facing people in North East Syria. A long process of reconstruction, de-mining and rebuilding of infrastructure and social services needs to take place before displaced families are able to safely return home. This is an enormous task, which should be implemented in parallel with – and not at the expense of – emergency responses in the rest of the country.

It is important to emphasize that the conflict in Syria is still ongoing. With the increase of violence in Idleb Governorate: more than 272,800 people have had to flee their homes in just over a month. Madam/Mr Chair, this exceeds the entire population of the city of Geneva.

As of January 2018, around 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees are still hosted in neighbouring countries, roughly 3.4 million in Turkey, 1 million in Lebanon, 650,000 in Jordan, 250,000 in Iraq and 150,000 in Egypt. Around 8% live in camps, while the vast majority has settled in urban environments, putting a strain on local government services already supporting non-Syrian refugees and migrants, often facing similar issues.

While in exile, many, 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, face a heightened risk of becoming stateless. There is no comprehensive data on the number of stateless Syrian refugees, either in the region as a whole or in individual neighbouring countries.

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 sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), and gender-based violence (GBV) remains problematic.

Although governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have taken steps to ease processes for refugees and waive administrative fees, access to civil status documentation, including birth certificates, marriage certificates, residency and work permits, continues to be a real 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.

6 http://www.ge.ch/statistique/tel/domaines/01_01_02_1/5_01_02_3_4_3_01.xls
7 http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php
9 In many of the neighboring countries, a marriage certificate is required in order for a child born to Syrian refugees to be registered at birth. Not being registered at birth is not synonymous to statelessness but it is a crucial step in acquiring a nationality.
10 Surveys with refugees in different parts of Lebanon have pointed to further ‘push factors’ influencing their decisions as to whether to return to Syria including sufficient access to humanitarian assistance, basic services and safe and dignified working condition. For example see https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/were-not-there-yet-voices-of-refugees-from-syria-in-lebanon-620273
While acknowledging efforts made by the host countries, and strains on their economies and host communities, **conditions are currently not met** for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and stateless refugees to Syria. Any returns must be conducted **in accordance with international law** and respect the **principle of non-refoulement**. Host governments, donors, UN agencies and non-government actors must refrain from issuing and implementing policies, statements and 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 providing for populations affected by the crisis.

In **Iraq**, the “Islamic State” (IS) group’s control of extensive territories, the subsequent battles to retake these territories, and the continued contamination of the region with **landmines and other explosive devices**, have resulted in casualties, injuries, and a widespread displacement of populations. 2.1 million\(^{11}\) 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 a **debilitated infrastructure, disrupted services, and the continued risk of explosive hazard-related incidents**. A total of 8.7 million people continues 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 and grief, injury, and bereavement. Many chronically ill and/or war injured people continue to suffer from **inadequate healthcare services**, as the healthcare delivery mechanisms are only beginning to recover from extensive destruction and stolen equipment.

Similarly, people are yet to recover from the **psychological trauma** of the war. Symptoms of acute distress associated with war-related violence are prevalent among displaced people, especially children.\(^{12}\) **Over a million children** are reported to have been out of school or learning a curriculum meant to normalize and justify violence for up to 2.5 years of IS-occupation.\(^{13}\) Without adequate support, and the **resumption of normal, safe education** for children, affected civilians remain vulnerable to psychological, physical, and social debilitation.

In recent months, to add to the social fragmentation due to the war, **ethnic tensions** have flared in many areas. In Salah Addin, for instance, ethnic violence led to the burning and looting of homes, and caused people to flee into neighboring governorates for safety. These tensions have further contributed to protracted displacement, whereby people are afraid to return to their homes due to the threat of violence. In this context, **social cohesion building** remains critical to supporting the recovery of Iraq’s conflict-affected civilians.

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\(^{11}\) Iraq Humanitarian response Plan – Advance Executive Summary, February 2018

\(^{12}\) International Medical Corps, Rapid Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Assessment: Needs, Services, and Recommendations for Support to Individuals Affected by the Mosul Emergency, (December, 2016)

\(^{13}\) Save the Children Report
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 for Mine Action Authorities and the tightening of regulations have impaired the clearance operations of Humanitarian Mine Action agencies, even as the prevalence of explosive hazards continue to pose the threat of death and injury to affected civilians.

Madam/Mr Chair, we need to ensure not only that adequate resources are available to continue the critical work of recovery and reconstruction, as well as of supporting social cohesion, in Iraq, but also that the regulatory environment is eased to facilitate programming.