



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **The Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis in Syria**

**Thursday, September 12, 2019**

**9:30 – 11:00 a.m.**

**2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good morning. I join Co-Chair Chris Smith in welcoming you to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria.

I especially welcome the witnesses who are joining us today. All of them represent agencies that operate on the ground in Syria and surrounding countries and all bring a wealth of experience and knowledge. I deeply appreciate the important work they do to save people's lives and safeguard their well-being, often in very difficult and dangerous circumstances.

I'm not sure that the contributions of humanitarian actors are as widely recognized as they should be, so let me take this opportunity to thank you on my own behalf. However bad things are in many parts of the world, there is no doubt they would be even worse without your persistence and commitment.

I wish that we did not have to be here today.

A couple of years back this Commission held a series of briefings and a hearing in an effort to draw attention to the terrible toll of the Syrian armed conflict on the civilian population.

Ours was far from the only voice - many organizations were raising alarms about indiscriminate bombing, the destruction of civilian infrastructure including schools, purposeful attacks on health care institutions and providers, mass executions, systematic sexual violence, and more.

From its earliest days, the Syrian conflict has been marked by a blatant disregard for international humanitarian law - the rules of war meant to protect those caught in the crossfire. And from the beginning, that blatant disregard has been condemned in the strongest terms. The call for civilian protection has been a constant refrain.

Yet here we are, eight years into the conflict, with no end in sight. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), hundreds of civilians including women and children have been killed or injured due to airstrikes and shelling since May 1 of this year, while more than 400,000 are estimated to have fled their homes to escape violence. Nearly 12 million people in Syria, 60% of the population, are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance.

The numbers are simply staggering.

But the Syrian conflict and its regional consequences are no longer front-page news like they were a couple of years back. As the war has ground on, the reality is that attention has shifted to other crises, of which there are too many.

So the objectives of the hearing today are to draw new attention to the complex and immensely consequential humanitarian crisis in Syria, and ask what more Congress could or should be doing in response.

The U.S. is already the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis. From FY 2012 through August 9, 2019, the U.S. has allocated more than \$9.6 billion to meet humanitarian needs. It sounds like a lot – it is a lot – but this year’s UN appeals for Syria and the affected region are less than 25% funded. Should we be giving more?

And for what? As the crisis becomes protracted, how has or should the humanitarian response change? Are we doing enough to respond to long-term needs? Are U.S. sanctions as currently designed an obstacle to responding to long-term needs?

There is the question of refugees – more than 5.6 million refugees have registered. Turkey, with a population of 80 million, has absorbed 3.6 million Syrian refugees. According to news reports, the Administration is considering cutting refugee admissions to the U.S. to zero next year. It’s fair to ask whether we’re doing our part on the refugee front.

And most fundamentally, what more could we be doing to protect civilians as well as humanitarian workers, and to ensure humanitarian access as the war continues? How can we help you confront the obstacles you face? Is it important to reauthorize UN Security Council Resolution 2449 of 2018?

What are we not doing on the diplomatic front that we should be doing?

These are some of the questions I hope we will discuss today. I look forward to hearing and learning from all of you.

Thank you.