Remarks by António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the 142nd ministerial meeting of the Council of the League of Arab States, Cairo

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today.

I last had the honor to address this distinguished Council seven years ago. I wish the world had become a more peaceful place since then, but we all know it has not. The number of people displaced by conflict and persecution worldwide *every single day* has risen from 14,000 in 2011 to 23,000 in 2012 and 32,000 last year. This exponential increase in needs is severely testing the humanitarian response capacity, and available funding has become clearly insufficient.

Syria and Iraq are the most challenging displacement crises confronting today’s world, and I will focus my remarks on these two emergencies.

UNHCR has registered 3 million Syrian refugees in a little over three years. Another 6.5 million are internally displaced. The same Syrians who, just a few years ago, generously hosted the second-highest number of refugees worldwide, have now themselves become the world’s largest refugee population after the Palestinians.

In close cooperation with the neighbouring countries, UNHCR coordinates the international humanitarian community’s response to the refugee crisis. In 2014, 155 UN and non-UN partners have requested 3.7 billion dollars to assist Syrian refugees and host communities. But less than half of that — some 1.7 billion dollars — has been received so far.

My Office is also closely involved in the inter-agency assistance to internally displaced people inside Syria. Through a combination of cross-line and cross-border operations, we have reached over 3.1 million people so far in 2014, both in government and opposition- controlled areas.

Syria’s neighbours — Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt — have been extremely generous hosts to the refugees, notwithstanding the dramatic consequences for their economies and societies, let alone the impact of the conflict on their security. As fighting drags on, host communities are heavily affected across the region, and refugees are becoming increasingly vulnerable.

In Lebanon, where over 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees account for more than a quarter of the population, the pressure on overstretched host communities has become unbearable. The situation is similar in Jordan, where Syrian refugees also represent a huge portion of the total population. In both countries, public infrastructure, schools and hospitals are overwhelmed, and governments have to spend additional millions in public subsidies for food, fuel, water and electricity.

But the refugee influx not only affects the governments, it also has an enormous impact on the lives of host communities and families. High unemployment, shrinking salaries and rising prices leave many ordinary Lebanese and Jordanians struggling to make ends meet.

Turkey of course has more resources, but as the number of registered Syrians there now stands at 830,000, the impact of their presence is far from negligible. The Turkish government has spent over 3.5 billion dollars of its own budget on assisting the refugees. And here in Egypt, there are already 140,000 registered Syrian refugees.

Recently, the most dramatic impact of the Syria crisis has been on Iraq, to the extent that it is now difficult to distinguish the two crises. Iraq’s main challenge is no longer just the fact that the Kurdistan region hosts 215,000 Syrian refugees with similar consequences as in Lebanon and Jordan. The major concern now is that the conflict itself has spilled over into Iraq. 1.8 million Iraqis have become internally displaced as a result of this year’s events, and neighbouring countries have already registered more than 91,000 new Iraqi refugees.

But the spillover effects are not limited to Iraq. They also pose dramatic security threats to Lebanon, and even Jordan and Turkey are not immune. There is a growing awareness that with the large number of foreign fighters now active in Syria and Iraq, this is not only the worst humanitarian crisis of our times, but it has become the most serious threat to global peace and security.

Excellencies,

The generosity and support host countries provide to neighbours in need is a clear illustration of the deep roots that anchor the basic principles of refugee protection both in the values prevailing in the Arabian peninsula before Islam, and in Islamic tradition and law. In fact, there is hardly anything in the 1951 Refugee Convention that did not already exist in Islamic law from the very beginning -- from the principle of *non-refoulement* to the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum. Everything is in the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH).

Asylum in Islam goes beyond an act of mercy, creating a contractual relationship between the asylum-seeker and the provider of asylum. This is a remarkably “modern” view and a humanistic and human rights-minded approach. It proves wrong the often expressed opinion that asylum is a “western” invention and fully contradicts the islamophobic campaigns we see around the world today.

But to help host countries cope, their generosity needs to be matched by much stronger international support, in a true spirit of effective burden-sharing.

This also means that borders beyond the region must be open for fleeing Syrians. It breaks my heart to see asylum-seekers drowning in the Mediterranean because they had no other way to try and reach safety. UNHCR has been insisting on the need to create more legal avenues for Syrians to enter Europe — through resettlement and humanitarian admission, family reunification or more flexible visa policies.

I am deeply grateful for the important contributions of other Arab states to these refugee crises. I welcome the fact that a growing portion of Arab solidarity is being channelled through multilateral organizations, in addition to remarkable efforts in bilateral assistance and national charities. This gives Arab donors a stronger voice in the international humanitarian community.

Kuwait has been the key pillar, hosting major donor conferences and generously supporting international and national humanitarian actors working in the Syria response. Saudi Arabia recently provided a significant donation to the international humanitarian operation in Iraq. All GCC countries have supported Syrian refugees, and there have been contributions from as far away as Morocco and Algeria.

It is my belief that the Arab League can play an even more important role in promoting these growing partnerships.

Excellencies,

The refugee situations under UNHCR’s mandate pale in comparison to the desperate situation of the Palestinians, the largest protracted refugee situation in the world. While assistance to Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the occupied territories is the responsibility of our sister agency UNRWA, we support them in other countries.

I want to pay tribute here to the difficult and lifesaving work of UNRWA, both in relation to Palestinians displaced from Syria and recently during the tragedy in Gaza. It was devastating to me to see Palestinian refugees in Syria being forced to flee for the second time. But even worse, in addition to the terrible loss of life and the tens of thousands of people displaced, it was shocking that Gaza’s inhabitants could not even flee to seek safety from the recent conflict. No one wants to be a refugee. But for the people of Gaza, not even that was an option.

Mr. Chairman,

UNHCR deeply values its partnership with the League of Arab States, which has long shown its strong commitment to a protection agenda. Your role in advocacy for borders to be kept open for people seeking protection is precious. We also fully support the League’s draft convention on refugees, another step in the right direction.

As conflicts continue to multiply, it must be clear that there are no humanitarian answers. The solutions must be political. Achieving them requires not only the strong involvement of the Arab League, but indeed that of the whole international community, under the condition that it acts without double standards or conflicting strategies.

Thank you very much.