



**Statement Submitted by the Center for Victims of Torture to the
U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee
“The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement”
November 19, 2015**

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) welcomes the opportunity to submit a statement for this timely and important hearing on the impact of ISIS and refugee resettlement. CVT provides healing services to survivors of torture and severe war atrocities at its clinics in the United States, the Middle East and Africa and engages in training and capacity building initiatives in support of torture survivor rehabilitation programs worldwide. CVT’s largest program serves urban refugees in Jordan. In 2015, CVT provided inter-disciplinary counseling, physical therapy and social work services to over 1,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees who come to us with severe psychological and physical wounds resulting from torture and other traumatic experiences.

As the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee considers the impact of ISIS as it relates to refugees being resettled to the United States, CVT urges the honorable members of the Committee to not conflate the victims of terrorist activities and/or mass government-sponsored atrocities with the perpetrators of such horrific acts. At all of CVT’s programs that are helping survivors heal from severely traumatic experiences associated with war, violence, terrorism and government repression, we see the impacts of such horrors every day.

CVT abhors the brutal and inhumane tactics that have been employed in the course of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts and by terrorist organizations with roots or bases in Syria and/or Iraq, including but not limited to ISIS. We stand in solidarity with efforts to bring perpetrators of torture, war crimes and other human rights violations on all sides of the conflict to justice. We also support measures to ensure that the United States is not a safe haven for human rights violators and that the U.S. refugee resettlement program is not exploited as a way for terrorists to enter the United States. At the same time, we believe that national security protections and a robust refugee resettlement program are not mutually exclusive.

The Syrian and Iraqi Refugee Crises

As the conflict in Syria shows few signs of subsiding and its spill-over effects are increasingly evident—including through the rise and expansion of ISIS and the escalation of violence in Iraq—the levels of suffering, damage and despair throughout the region are immense. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that over 4 million Syrians are registered as refugees, with the majority in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.¹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 6.5 million people are displaced internally in Syria, with 13.5 million people in need of

¹ U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees: Syrian Regional Refugee Response, July 15, 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

humanitarian assistance.² Throughout the region, people are scrambling to survive. Iraqi refugees who fled to Syria in the mid-2000's have seen their new communities in Syria destroyed and are facing displacement again. Syrians who fled to Iraq in 2012 and 2013 are being forced to flee from violence there. Iraqis who may have returned when the country began to appear more stable are being forced back into exile in neighboring countries or displaced internally. OCHA reports estimates of more than 3.2 million people internally displaced within Iraq and 8.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.³

Without the prospect of returning home in the near future and conditions for refugees in highly strained host communities ranging from challenging to hostile to impossible, refugees are becoming more frustrated and more desperate.⁴ At CVT's program in Jordan, clients report that life is extraordinarily challenging for refugees. One CVT client commented, "We are like the living dead here." Work authorization is highly restricted and most refugees in Jordan do not have permission to work legally and earn a living. Simultaneously humanitarian assistance is being reduced or cut, leaving refugees in an impossible situation of having neither the means nor the opportunity to meet their basic needs of shelter, food, medical assistance and education. A CVT staff member in Jordan explained, "Syrians are feeling anger and frustration. Before they had the belief about returning, now they are stuck and they don't know what to do."

U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program: A Lifeline for Refugees in Need

The needs of Syrian and Iraqi refugees cannot be ignored. As part of this, the United States must substantially increase the number of Syrians it resettles in the coming years. Refugee resettlement not only helps address the immediate protection needs of some of the most vulnerable of refugees, it is also a vital component of international-responsibility sharing.

For example, "Amal's"⁵ family has been severely affected by the war in Syria:

Amal's oldest son was killed in an attack on his car while attempting to flee Syria. Two of her younger children have also suffered war-related injuries—her 19 year old suffers from a severe back injury that prevents him from being able to carry heavy objects. Her 7 year old was shot in the head and now has a facial disfigurement that will require specialized medical attention to repair. Her husband and two oldest sons—ages 19 and 21—were arrested in a neighborhood sweep, even though they were never involved in any opposition activities. They were imprisoned for four months. During that time, officers tried to force them to "confess" but they had nothing to confess. When her husband returned home, he was severely malnourished and looked hollow. They hit him with rods and pipes on his hands. He'd been beaten so much that his teeth were all broken and his thumbs were fractured.

The family was once quite rich and prosperous in Syria. Amal's husband was a business owner in Damascus. They lost everything— their home was destroyed by a rocket attack on their neighborhood. After their home was destroyed, they spent 6 months internally displaced in Syria prior to arriving in

² U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Syrian Arab Republic Crisis Overview, November 2015, <http://www.unocha.org/syria>.

³ U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Iraq Crisis Overview, November 2015, <http://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

⁴ CARE International in Jordan, Five Years into Exile: The challenges faced by Syrian refugees outside camps in Jordan and how they and their host communities are coping, June 30, 2015, <http://www.care-international.org/uploaddocument/news/publications/english/care%20five%20years%20into%20exile%20exec%20summary%202015%20print%20final%20recut.pdf>.

⁵ Written informed consents for use of client stories are on file with CVT. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Jordan. The family's journey to Jordan was very difficult – there were rockets and bombs everywhere, forcing them to travel late and in the dark. The family is suffering in Jordan—they feel dehumanized, dependent and hopeless about the future. Amal wants to be resettled so that her children can have opportunities and get an education.

Similarly, “Sayeed” believes his family’s only hope will come through resettlement to a third country:

Sayeed is the father of four from Homs, Syria. Prior to the war, he owned a thriving business and lived a comfortable life with his family. He participated in early peaceful demonstrations in 2011—holding signs and leading the crowd in pro-democracy, pro-freedom chants. Intelligence officers taking photos during the demonstration turned him in and, in the middle of the night, he was attacked his home. He was arrested a few months later at a regime checkpoint and held in prison for seven months. For the first two months in prison, he was tortured daily—beaten with cables, forced to raise his hands for up for 90 minutes, forced to strip naked and subjected to sexual torture, chained to his core and hung from the ceiling, and burned with cigarettes. After being released, his family obtained Jordanian visas and fled Syria. Life in Jordan is very difficult. They are not allowed work and the limited UNHCR support they receive is not enough – his family can't afford basic necessities. They lost everything they had in Syria. His only hope is that in the future his family can be resettled to a third country.

The United States can—and must—help families like Amal’s and Sayeed’s, who are full of hope and potential yet lost everything in Syria and now lack options and opportunities. The United States can do this while simultaneously protecting national security. In fact, USRAP’s eligibility criteria and scrutiny are so rigorous at each stage that refugees are the most thoroughly screened people to travel into the United States. Prior to being admitted, all refugees undergo a series of meticulous security screenings conducted by the U.S. government. These checks include multiple biographic and identity investigations; FBI biometric checks of fingerprints and photographs; in-depth, in-person interviews by specialized and well-trained Department of Homeland Security officers; medical screenings; and other checks by U.S. domestic and international intelligence agencies including the National Counterterrorism Center and National Security Council.⁶

The commitment by the Obama Administration to resettle 85,000 refugees in FY 2016, including at least 10,000 Syrian refugees, is a step forward. Thus far, the United States has only resettled 1,854 Syrian refugees.⁷ Nevertheless, given the scale and severity of refugee needs globally, current U.S. resettlement goals are still far more modest than the number of people the United States can and should welcome. CVT continues to call on the United States to resettle 200,000 refugees in FY 2016 with 100,000 of them being Syrian.

⁶ Center for American Progress, “Infographic: The Screening Process for Entry to the United States for Syrian Refugees,” <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2015/11/18/125812/infographic-the-screening-process-for-entry-to-the-united-states-for-syrian-refugees/>.

⁷ New York Times, “Paris Attack Intensifies Debate Over How Many Syrian Refugees to Allow into the U.S.,” <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/21/us/where-syrian-refugees-are-in-the-united-states.html>, November 16, 2015.