



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

**Statement Submitted by the Center for Victims of Torture to the
U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
“Syria After Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy”
March 26, 2014**

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) commends Chairman Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Ranking Member Bob Corker (R-TN) for holding this important hearing, “Syria After Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy.” CVT’s mission is to heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities, and to stop torture worldwide. Since 1985, CVT has provided direct rehabilitation services to more than 25,000 survivors of torture and severe war atrocities in the United States, Africa and the Middle East.

In 2012, as the conflict in Syria intensified and millions of refugees began pouring into neighboring countries, CVT’s clinic in Jordan began facing an unprecedented demand for its mental health counseling and physical therapy services that continues today. Daily, up to 50 Syrian refugees arrive at CVT’s clinics requesting services for themselves and/or their children. In 2014, with support from the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, and the Open Society Foundations Arab Regional Office, CVT’s clinics in Jordan will extended rehabilitative care to 1,000 survivors of torture and severe war atrocities, approximately 70% of who are Syrians and 30% are Iraqi. Nevertheless, CVT and other mental health service providers in Jordan are only able to meet a fraction of the need, leaving thousands of Syrian refugees, including young children and adolescents, without access to life-saving services that support positive coping and resilience, improve daily functioning, mend family relationships, and promote stability.

CVT’s Syrian clients report horrific stories of torture, imprisonment, rape or other forms of sexual and gender based violence. Many bear physical evidence of their experiences, such as scars from being shot, stabbed or burned with cigarettes; head injuries and broken bones they incurred from beatings; musculoskeletal disorders they obtained from being hung by their arms or subjected to other stress positions; paralysis or lost limbs. Clients describe witnessing massacres, taking cover from bombings, running from tanks, and being shot at by snipers. Many have had family members killed, arrested, tortured or disappeared.

Psychologically, as a result of these experiences, CVT’s clients suffer from deep despair, anxiety and depression. Many struggle with nightmares, flashbacks, excessive rumination, chronic sleep disorders, and suicidal ideation. All are experiencing the agony of displacement and live with profound uncertainty of what the future may hold. As refugees, they are grieving the loss of their former lives and attempting

to cope with the past horrors they have experienced and witnessed, while struggling to secure basic needs of food, shelter, medical attention, physical safety, or education. For some, this psychological pain can be debilitating, hindering their ability to function or provide for themselves or their children. As the conflict in Syria continues, refugees' sense of despair, hopelessness and frustration deepens, and the need to address their psychological distress becomes ever more urgent.

Children are especially vulnerable in this conflict, as they have been witnesses as well as targets of various, severe human rights violations, including torture. Millions of children, both within Syria and those displaced in neighboring countries, are in desperate need of basic necessities, such as food, shelter, medical care, education, and counseling and psychosocial support. The impact of torture and war on children can lead to unique psychological and emotional pain that can have long-term impacts on their development and well-being.

CVT urges the U.S. government to continue to provide robust support for the humanitarian needs of all individuals in Syria impacted by the conflict, to lead the international community in helping to fund global appeals from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and to offer generous humanitarian and development-related assistance to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa who are hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. As part of the broader humanitarian response, CVT also urges the U.S. government to expand its support for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming, including by increasing access to specialized rehabilitation services for survivors of torture. While basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and medical care, cannot be ignored, MHPSS services must be a higher priority.

Recommendations:

- **Pass the Syrian Humanitarian Resolution of 2014 (S. Res. 384).**

The Syrian Humanitarian Resolution of 2014 is an important step in recognizing the scale of the humanitarian crisis, the depth of the suffering, and the extent of the human rights violations being committed. Among its core provisions is its call for all parties to the conflict to immediately halt indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure and allow for and provide unfettered access to humanitarian aid for the millions of desperate people in need within Syria. Further, the resolution calls on the international community to increase investments in programs to assist children, including through counseling and psychosocial support.

- **Increase U.S. contributions to the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture.**

The United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture is a highly effective grant making entity that supports over 230 projects in more than 70 countries, including to NGOs in Middle East and North African countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. These programs help tens of thousands of survivors heal from their deep wounds and rebuild their lives through providing psychological, medical and social assistance, legal aid and financial support.

- **Provide funding to mental health and psychosocial support programs (MHPSS) for Syrian refugees in accordance with guidelines established by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs.**

The Victims of Torture Fund through USAID and programming funded by the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and other U.S. State Department Bureaus support international NGOs in assisting in the rehabilitation of individuals, families, and community members who suffer from the physical and psychological effects of torture and war atrocities. CVT urges Congress to elevate the prioritization, quality and availability of MHPSS services and activities for Syrian refugees by allocating appropriate resources specifically targeted for mental health and by integrating mental health within other initiatives. Mental health programming provided as part of emergency responses should be implemented according to guidelines established by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs.¹ These guidelines call for MHPSS services to be evidence-based, coordinated, and implemented in the most ethical and appropriate way possible. Included in the guidelines is the recommendation for creating a continuum of care, starting at broad integration of MHPSS into basic humanitarian response, and building towards specialized support services provided by professionals.

¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2007). IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Geneva: IASC.