Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin, (MEI President),
Mr. Daniel Serwer, (Moderator, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies)  
Ladies and gentlemen,

You will all know that two years on from the situation in Syria, it has become a significant threat to the stability of the Middle East region and an ongoing challenge to global peace and security. When Syrians first started to demonstrate, to secure greater freedom and democracy, many saw it as a further evolution of what we were calling the Arab Spring, following the events in, for example, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Syria’s role in the region has always been political given its proximity to Israel and its alliances with Iran and some groups in Lebanon, and the diversity within the country. So, an absolutely political pivotal role Syria has played.

Two years on, the world I think is now facing a humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and a real risk that the conflict will spill across the region, escalating into a political and security disaster that will overwhelm all of us. Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, have between them received more than 1.4 million refugees. And the domestic impact that it is having on those countries, not just in terms of the amount of money that is being spent on looking after those refugees, but the impact on the people of those countries, on education, on the health system, on employment is significant.

My very good friend, António Guterres, who runs the UN organization that is responsible for refugees, UNHCR, has talked about the Syrian crisis being an existential treat for Lebanon. Syrian refugees, registered refugees, now make up 10 per cent of the Lebanese population and if you look at the number of refugees not registered in the country, it’s much higher. They are six per cent of the population in Jordan. And, of course, we also have a significant Palestinian refugee population inside of Syria, 500,000 of them, and nearly half of them have been displaced as a result of the crisis.

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.
Inside Syria itself ordinary people are paying the price of the failure of the international community to end the conflict. Both sides have become increasingly entrenched in the rhetoric and reality of war, with a total disregard for its impact on people’s lives.

And most Syrians are now affected by the conflict, which is becoming more deadly by the month. Essential infrastructure including schools and hospitals has been destroyed; the currency is devalued and the economy is collapsing; food prices have risen sharply and many of you would have seen those queues for bread. There are shortages of fuel, electricity and even water. My colleagues in UNICEF say that on average Syrians are now receiving a third of the water on a daily basis that they did before the crisis.

The stories of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law are truly horrific. We have heard testimonies of homes burnt with families inside; of people being bombed and killed while queuing for a piece of bread. Millions have been traumatised by the horrors they have witnessed. The brutal conflict is not only shattering Syria’s present; it is also destroying its future. 6.8 million people, a third of the population of Syria, are now seriously affected by this crisis, and nearly half of them are children. Over 4 million people are internally displaced.

So why is it so difficult for us as the international community to find ways to reduce the violence and stop the bloodshed? In my view, the parties to the conflict must be reminded of their obligation to protect civilians; to provide access to humanitarian aid workers; to protect hospitals and other medical facilities; to ensure the safe access of aid organizations to those in need and to abide by international humanitarian law. The consequences of violating these rules must be made clear to all; there can be no impunity.

But for us on the humanitarian side we are also concerned that this is a crisis which is stretching our capacity to the limit inside Syria itself - growing insecurity, the proliferation of groups on the ground and there are some estimates that there are over a thousand different militia organizations which makes it extremely difficult to negotiate with an opposition, that makes it difficult. There are bureaucratic constraints. On a recent visit to Syria, my Operations Director went from Damascus to Aleppo, and there were over 50 checkpoints that they had to go through, about half of them manned by the Government forces but half of them manned by different opposition forces on the ground.

Our main operational partner, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, has very brave volunteers; many of them have died through this conflict. They, of course, represent the breadth of those in Syria who are either supporting the Government or opposition. They are a volunteer organization so they reflect those differences but they are important partners because they have been able to negotiate access for us into opposition-controlled areas. And there is an ongoing debate about how do we best help the people of Syria – should we as the United Nations continue to work with the Government when many of the organizations of the United Nations have recognized the opposition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people?

The important thing for us is that humanitarian aid has got to remain true to its principles. It has got to be about trying to get to the people who most need help. Some of those people will be in Government-controlled areas of the country, some of them will be in
opposition-held areas of the country, some of them will be in areas which remain contested where there is ongoing fighting.

Our job is not to take sides; our job is to put the people first and in doing that, our job is to work with all the groups that we need to work with and to work with the Government to get the access to get to those people in need.

But it has become overwhelming because as you yourself have seen from your television screens, the security situation has become extremely volatile and changes from day to day: the bureaucratic process that I talked about; but also the cost of funding this operation.

Just in the first six months of this year, we have asked our donors for $1.5 billion to aid our operation. It is a huge amount of money and at that time we were talking about meeting the needs of four million people in the country and just over 1 million refugees.

We are now looking at a situation where by the end of the year, if we do not find a political solution to this crisis, we may have up to 3.5 million refugees. And as I said the number of people inside the country needing our help has already sky-rocketed to 6.8 million people.

It is completely unsustainable. And I think it is up to all of us no matter whatever capacity we are in to try to work towards a settlement of this crisis. The impact on human lives is significant.

The violence has got to stop and I think it is important that we recognize that if we do not do that, I think history will judge us very harshly, because we will be seen as having stood by while Syria burns.

Thank you.