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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to be here today, in one of the oldest civilizations of the world and at the center of a region confronted with historical challenges. This is a good setting to address some of the changes with which we are struggling today in humanitarian affairs.

The Middle East today is the setting of the world's largest humanitarian crisis – a man-made crisis. The conflict in Syria, the fighting in Iraq and the instability in parts of the region have led to over 10 million displaced persons, over 3 million of them refugees, and scores of people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.

This unprecedented flow of refugees is putting an equally unprecedented strain on the economies and infrastructures of host countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey with respective political consequences. Yet, the region has also demonstrated extraordinary generosity in welcoming and hosting refugees as their own, opening access to hospitals, local schools and some livelihood opportunities. The humanitarian response has been, first and foremost, driven by local communities. Yet it is normal that as time goes by, without a perspective for sustainable solutions, relations between host communities and displaced populations are getting more complicated.

Looking at the situation in this region, we can clearly see the challenges for the humanitarian response:

- We see conflicts and violence that show no signs of abating, which result in the collapse of public services and infrastructure at a scale unknown in recent history, many of them full system failures, amid crises that more than ever require political solutions.
- We see that the international community is not as present, active and involved as it should be, sharing the burden of this historical crisis. The largest part of this burden – financial and structural – continues to fall to national and neighboring communities.
- We see major difficulties in securing sustainable financing for humanitarian action. The lasting emergency does not always translate into lasting financial support, despite all the efforts undertaken.
- We see how humanitarian actors - local and international - are pressured to integrate their efforts into larger political and security agendas, often at the cost of their own principles and mission.
- We see international humanitarian law (IHL) being violated at large scale, and yet the same law remains an essential axiom to orient our efforts to face current challenges.
- Lastly, we see how essential dialogue with many non-state actors is prevented, discouraged or otherwise lacking due to political and ideological tensions.

At the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), we base our actions on the needs of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. We are convinced that neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian action has the best chance to reach those most in need. It is also a tried and tested formula to prevent

humanitarian action from becoming part of larger and more controversial political agendas.

These humanitarian principles have emerged at the heart of all major humanitarian operations for over a century. They were the main sources of inspiration of the Guiding Principles of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182, adopted in 1991.

Yet as the humanitarian sector grows and diversifies, we see also a growing number of differing interpretations of the goals and strategies of international relief operations. This can create confusion about the nature and intent of humanitarian action and generate doubts and challenges for those actors which strictly adhere to these principles.

Most notably, the ongoing crises in Syria and Ukraine exposed uncertainties and contradictions of state actors regarding these principles. In light of a very serious humanitarian situation in Syria, some states have advocated for a “pragmatic understanding of national sovereignty” and engaged international political institutions in favor of cross-border operations without the consent of the Syrian government.

Other states put national sovereignty upfront and insist to work through the national government first, arguing that such an approach would yield better results in terms of accessing populations in need.

While standing strong on these doctrinal approaches, both groups took distinctively opposite positions regarding the needs of affected populations in Ukraine and thereby illustrated the highly contextual interpretation of humanitarian principles when mixed with political and strategic interests.

It is obvious that there is a growing lack of consensus on the meaning and implementation of humanitarian principles, as the number of actors, the range of their visions and the extent of crises in which they are involved, continue to increase. This constitutes a particular challenge for an organization like the ICRC, which works in many conflict situations and on all sides of front lines.

Allowing humanitarian assistance and protection to people in need must prevail over political and strategic interests. The neutrality of the ICRC and other organizations must be respected - especially in politically tense environments - as we depend more than anybody else on a coherent approach at the international level to be able to respond to people’s needs.

Yet the humanitarian space necessary for our work is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate against the new type of conflict and actors that are dominating today:

- Protracted conflicts that are ever longer in duration and affect basic social delivery systems
- Regionalized conflicts that spill over into neighboring countries
- Volatile conflicts spiked with terror tactics and spread through the ideological battleground that is social media

- Politicized and increasingly polarized conflicts with few perspectives for political settlements

Fourteen years after the so-called global war on terror started, we find ourselves in a world where violent extremism is indeed globalized. This violent extremism is challenging the shared values of the international community, but it is also contributing to a new reality for humanitarian action, impacting our work, our access, our capacity to deliver aid to people in critical need. Vast areas and millions of people have thus fallen off the radar screen of humanitarian actors: we are just not there is the simple conclusion.

Violent extremism mixed with global connectedness means that any event, any development can have a lasting impact for civilians in faraway countries and continents. What happens in Syria, matters in Nigeria. What happens in France, has effects in Iraq. It is no coincidence that the orange jumpsuits used for detainees in Guantanamo Bay are also used by the Islamic State Group, to parade Peshmerga detainees. Some symbols have become universal.

This interconnectedness is proof that there is no such thing as an isolated conflict anymore. For us, concretely, this means that – as neutral, independent and impartial humanitarians – we cannot pretend to work in a vacuum immune to global developments.

What needs to be done?

We have to adapt humanitarian efforts to the evolving reality of conflict and find principled, but pragmatic and contextual solutions to assist and protect people in need.

We also need a new type of peace effort, based on a fundamental commitment to maintain basic rules in protecting and assisting affected populations beyond particular political interests; an effort which recognizes the critical importance to put limits to the use of force, ensures the humane treatment and the provision of essential relief for the wounded and sick, the detained, and the non-combatants and civilians in all circumstances. An approach, which takes into account the high level of interconnectedness across regions and continents; where inconsistencies and incoherence in one situation impact on commitments for strict respect of IHL rules and principles in other situations. A shared effort, which does not give in to ideologically charged narratives but aims to depoliticize and break up tensions.

To build a common effort, we must agree on common starting point: War has limits. War has to have limits. Wars without limits are wars without end. Limiting wars is an intrinsic test of our civilization, and probably of all civilized worlds.

But which limits?

For the past 150 years, the Geneva Conventions and other bodies of international law have codified the limits of war. These limits of war are not only to be found in international humanitarian law; they are universal human norms which have existed for thousands of years, based on the intrinsic value of humanity, dignity, protection of the vulnerable and service to those in need.

While the necessity to limit war remains, the reality is that the tools within the international legal and policy frameworks no longer suffice to respond to some of today's challenges.

In reality, some of these tools present significant deficiencies in long-term conflict situations with multiple layers of superimposed violence; with actors who cannot be clearly distinguished, neither as civilians, nor as combatants; for contexts where even in the absence of conflict, there is insufficient peace and infrastructure for populations to live in dignity.

Most of the legal and policy tools available are informed by past conflicts, predicated on punctual, delineated hostilities waged by rational actors. If current conflicts show many similarities with the ones of the 20th century, they also represent a significant departure in terms of the involvement of rapidly mutating non-state actors, the availability of small weapons, the fragility and fragmentation of many affected states, and the global ideological confrontation through the extended use of social media by the parties.

While the need to regulate the conduct of hostilities remains, the ways and means to regulate the behavior of belligerents in these situations have changed considerably, calling on religious, cultural and ideological codes, new means of communication, a capacity to engage and negotiate on the frontlines of ideological divide, often at the expense of traditional universalist processes and norms.

The ICRC for example, works with a number of religious scholars around the world and particularly in our long-standing cooperation with Islamic scholars, we find that the values that shaped international humanitarian law are equally enshrined in Islamic law. Let me just add here that we recognize the efforts made by national and regional actors in the run-up to today's meeting, in preparing and reflecting on these issues and bringing their voice to the table.

Limiting the effects of war is not only an obligation of all state and parties to armed conflict, it engages us humanitarians as well. The respect for basic rules and principles protecting civilians are an essential component of any stabilization efforts. The respect for truly neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action is, in the ICRC's view, an intrinsic part of imposing limits to war.

Operating relief programs outside this principled framework is not only hazardous for the organizations concerned and their staff, but may complicate stabilization efforts, if they do not contribute to further escalation of the conflict. In this context, humanitarian action is a craft that needs to be continuously examined critically, re-enforced and adapted if necessary, building on clear principles and hard-learned experiences. The necessity to assess and reassess the impact of our methods, to improve our response and to adapt our functioning, will always be a part of our work.

Instead, our work environment, our global society, is marked by permanent high insecurity, and by permanent transgressions of the limits of war. That is why we need a new global social contract; to overcome misconceptions and build consensus and engagement around the fundamentals that define civilization; the same fundamentals that lie at the heart of the Geneva Conventions.

This global social contract must elicit agreement on the implementation of basic norms to limit the effects of war on populations: the principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality in the conduct of hostilities; the general protection of civilians against abuses; the humane and fair treatment of detainees; the non-use of indiscriminate weapons, from barrel bombs and cluster munition to chemical and nuclear weapons.

A global social contract can help us reaffirm our shared values as humanitarians, create the necessary space for the implementation of the core norms of international humanitarian law, and overcome the creeping impunity which has become today's status quo.

It is a reality that the international community is tacitly accepting conflicts, their new characteristics, their ever longer duration, and their ever more harmful impact on people, as a given. This is morally unacceptable. We have to engage the rest of the world to not simply stand on the sidelines, but to seek creative and sustainable solutions.

Three days ago, I spoke at the United Nations' Human Rights Council about the value of humanity in our world. I urged the States to meet their responsibilities and to tackle impunity. As humanitarians, we cannot have all the solutions, but we can inform the policy debates and bring first-hand reality to the table.

As we see conflicts and the world evolve, the conclusions for humanitarian actors are two-fold: we have to start on the ground, and find pragmatic, holistic solutions to protect and assist the people in need. Simultaneously, we have to aim high, and build a coherent global social platform with everyone on board, state and non-state actors, on the imperative requirements of assisting and protecting people affected by armed conflicts, above and beyond particular political and strategic interests. This includes States, heads of governments, international and multilateral organizations, NGOs, local actors, business representatives and media – and first and foremost the people who are directly affected by conflicts and violence.

This two-fold approach is also how we build protection: through law, policy and operations on the ground.

And it works – across the Middle East, we have gained and consolidated access and through it, scaled up our activities. In Syria, we doubled field movements in the second half of last year and completed twice as many cross-front line operations. In Iraq, we extended our operational footprint into new areas. In the first two months of this year alone, we distributed food and relief items to over 130,000 displaced people across 12 provinces. Despite political chaos and uncertainty, we continue to be fully operational in Yemen, across the country.

But humanitarianism – whatever its definition – will not bring to an end the conflicts that create humanitarian crises. It is a simple truth that solutions must come from elsewhere. Yet what it can do is contribute to stabilizing politically tense environments, to prevent further violence and violations. It can also help identify new avenues for searching for durable solutions, adapted to today's conflict environments.

Ladies and gentlemen, this consultation is practically over. When you return home, I encourage you to engage with your respective environments in ministries and institutions, for new solutions.

The World Humanitarian Summit is a unique opportunity to explore how the humanitarian sector interlinks with foreign policy and security agendas, how to tackle burden-sharing and build sustainable financial schemes, to come to a pragmatic, constructive understanding. The humanitarian sector must bridge the gap between going back to the basics – the established principles – and on the other hand engaging and connecting with other areas of policy and operations.

In today's complex operating environment, smarter collaboration and coordination among humanitarian actors is crucial, inside or outside traditional mechanisms. In view of the protracted crises and long-term needs that we increasingly see, it is also an opportunity to link short-term relief to long-term structural development.

The ICRC's vision of coordination in that sense is simple: distinctive where necessary, coordinated where possible. Coordination must not be an aim in itself, but a tool to serve beneficiaries better, based on complementarity on the ground.

Our experience with the benefits of complementarity is time-honored: with our members and partners, the national Red Crescent and Red Cross societies, we see the added value of a coordinated and complementary movement response every single day.

In 14 months, we will meet again at the World Humanitarian Summit. Before then, I hope to engage with many of you in the run up to the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent this December. Separate from the World Humanitarian summit, we will use this unique forum to formulate assessments and goals for the development of humanitarian action. The results – based on the long-standing system of the International Conference – will then also inform and nourish the discussions in Istanbul.

Let me conclude by asking you to make pragmatic use of the opportunity that is the World Humanitarian Summit; not as an inward-looking technocratic exercise, but as a chance to broaden the global network of those engaged in making the world a better place. The challenges we face are not merely operational or technical, but profoundly political as they shape our common vision of the future of the international order. While past consultations have discussed the lack of effectiveness, the lack of innovation and the lack of one all-encompassing humanitarian system, I invite all participants to recognize the richness of diversity and the importance of a space for initiatives and creativity.

I am concerned with a growing trend towards categorically privileging domestic actors, towards more technocratic procedures, towards a focus on what can be measured in figures. I do not think that a 'one-size-fits-all' system based on some notions of effectiveness is adapted to the multifaceted, rapidly evolving challenges we currently face.

I don't think that the answer can be as simple: I think that instead of categorically privileging domestic actors over international responders, we should look at how to

foster truly collaborative environments between national and international agencies, building on shared values and principles, without prejudice.

I think that instead of new standard operating procedures and new guidelines we should remind ourselves of the values and principles we share.

I think that instead of a blind focus on assistance we need to focus on the dynamics between assistance and protection, and the role of prevention in engaging with the parties to armed conflicts and other situations of violence. Instead of an artificial “one humanitarian system” approach we should embrace our different strengths and experiment with them, within the space of the fundamental principles.

In a time of protracted conflicts, wide-spread impunity and confusion around humanitarian principles, we can and must improve the functioning of humanitarian actors on the ground – through a lot of pragmatism and a maximum of complementarity.

But we must first and foremost build consensus on a new global social contract on the core principles of humanitarian action that can be a game changer for humanitarian experts, professionals, and especially the people affected by conflict and violence.