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It is a privilege and honour for me to be here today representing UNHCR and having the opportunity to share with you some of my organisation's experience and reflections on partnerships for protection. I certainly hope that my comments will serve to complement and reinforce some of the perspectives we have heard so far today.

Many compelling arguments for why we need partnerships have already been presented in this conference. Indeed, UNHCR's commitment to working in partnership and the values that underpin such partnerships (mutual respect, transparency, complementarity and impact orientation) have been highlighted by our High Commissioner, Mr Antonio Guterres, in his opening statement of yesterday.

What is protection and what are protection partnerships in MENA?

I hope I can address this through examples and through some of the images you see on the screen. Protection in MENA presents a whole range of diverse interventions, with diverse partners.

It is engaging with Governments as the primary actors of protection through technical support, training and joint projects such as refugee registration and documentation programmes in Yemen

It is working with local NGO partners to provide initial reception assistance to the most vulnerable (including victims of smuggling) who arrive on Yemen's shores, in their thousands, on board derelict boats

It is working with national legal partners to provide legal aid to Iraqi and Mauritanian refugees returning home to help them obtain their legal rights (documentation, property restitution) and reintegrate fully after years in exile

Protection is working with Red Crescent Societies - notably here in the UAE - and throughout the region to provide health care, educational and financial support to needy asylum seekers and refugees

It is setting up a referral system with the competent authorities at airports to ensure persons wishing to seek asylum and therefore unable to return to their countries, are referred to UNHCR to determine their claims and identify appropriate and lasting solutions for them

Protection is partnering with regional bodies such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the League of Arab States to raise awareness of, and promote, international protection principles

It is working with Middle Eastern and North African judges through a partnership with the International Association of Refugee Law Judges to sensitize the judiciary on refugee law

It is also collaborating with Arab think tanks and academic institutions in Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia to map displacement situations and to introduce refugee law into university curricula

And there are many other examples. You will have noted what is common in most of these partnerships is that they are forged with national or local protection actors.

Allow me to comment a little on why this is the case, by reflecting on the protection landscape in our region - the MENA region. The two foremost characteristics which shape our protection response in MENA are: firstly, an absence of formalised protection/asylum frameworks. Viewing this legalistically, which we don't, one can argue that we often operate in a legal vacuum. This requires pragmatic, yet principled, approaches. Basic protection (an open border policy, access to safety, enjoying access to basic services and protecting the most vulnerable from exploitation and victimisation) is often derived from notions of hospitality rather than formal laws, which often have their foundations in deeply rooted local values and cultural, or often religious, norms.

It is tempting for protection actors, in particular, agencies with a protection mandate, operational capacity and technical expertise in protection to work alone and focus on direct

implementation. Instead, our approach is to capitalise on and strengthen national capacities, and on making positive practice predictable, impactful and sustainable.

A second reality which I would like to highlight is the fact that the greater majority of the displaced in our region are in fact in urban centers – Cities. Very few are actually in camp settings, and that many of those cities were or are in a state of turmoil since the events of 2011, with insecurity, unrest, and in some cases, fully fledged conflict. This of course has had a major impact on both the populations' needs and on the identification of the right protection interventions to address those needs.

Many of you are experienced at operating in such settings and will be aware that what happens in such situations is that the vulnerable become even more vulnerable. Access to basic services is suspended for the local population and refugees alike, and scarcity of resources and its impact on livelihoods often breeds protection risks, including the victimisation and exploitation of the most vulnerable; women and children are often the most affected.

Protection in urban settings in turmoil poses important challenges and requires a re-thinking of how we deliver protection through a solid investment in established local partners, and by capitalising on new opportunities for partnerships, again, with local service providers and communities.

What we have learnt is that local partners play a critical role in ensuring access and outreach to persons in need of protection. They help us to overcome security barriers when working in hostile environments. Here, I would like to give the commendable example of the work of our local NGO partners in Libya during the crisis who effectively maintained contact with the refugee population by setting up a neighbourhood warden system to identify the populations' needs and extend financial, material psycho social support to the most vulnerable through home visits and deliveries.

Local actors working closely with affected communities also help us overcome societal or cultural barriers to the delivery of protection, and here I refer to the another example in our region, namely, Iraqi refugee women outreach workers in Syria who through their networks, ensured the protection needs of the most vulnerable (women/children) were addressed, and thereby became key protection agents themselves. And there are many other such examples in other parts of the region which I would be happy to elaborate on further in our discussions.

Recognising the importance of working in partnerships, we have initiated a series of consultations during the course of last year, reflecting on who our protection partners are and how we work with them.

I would like to share with you some region specific observations and conclusions, which we hope to pursue jointly with protection actors in the region:

We see remarkable engagement by partners in operational protection delivery, but would encourage more active engagement in policy making processes, and here we welcome and invite participation in governing bodies such as Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, and consultative processes such as the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection, the Annual NGO consultations and other fora. This would not only inform policy formulation but also showcase the good practice examples of partnership we have in this region to feed into global thinking and global approaches to partnerships.

We have noted that while there is extensive engagement within traditional partnerships in regular country programmes/protection operations, there is an urgent need to expand partnerships to address the protection component of emergency preparedness and response. Recognising that early community outreach, mapping of protection risks, and setting up of prevention mechanisms are vital in emergencies.

We need to strengthen community mobilisation initiatives and apply participatory approaches more widely to enable persons of concern to act as agents for their own protection.

And foremost, we see this as an exciting time for the region. Never have there been so many protection actors – and here there is a need to define our common goals in delivering and promoting protection; to capitalise on diversity, identify our comparative advantages and to coordinate our interventions.

In conclusion, allow me to repeat an important message: Protection can neither be done by one actor alone, nor by acting in isolation. It involves good governance and requires government ownership, community ownership and civil society ownership. Ultimately protection is an expression of our common humanity. It is meant to bring us together, to overcome divisions and to act in partnership. I look forward to a rich exchange and very much welcome your views and ideas. Thank you very much.