

Global Refugee Forum
Opening plenary, 17 December 2019
Statement by Ms. Aya Abdullah, Alumni, Globaly Youth Advisory Council

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honor and pleasure to be here with you this morning.

Today I have the unique opportunity to be a voice for 70 million forcibly displaced persons in this world.

As you listen to this voice, I ask you to look past the shocking number of us who inhabit this planet to the **actual word, “person”**. Because every one of these people has an individual life. Each of those lives has been affected from **the second** that that person has been forced to flee his or her home. I am no different. Like each of these other refugees, I have a **name** and a **home**.

My name is Aya Abdullah and I am from Baghdad, Iraq.

I became a displaced person at the age of 14, when the situation in my beloved home country degraded to the point my family and I could no longer remain safely. Upon my family’s arrival in Syria, I officially became a refugee, registered with the UNHCR, and my story of life away from home began.

At 14, no one wants to feel that all the doors have closed. When I hurriedly packed my bags to leave my home, I included my textbooks, because I knew how important an education is for success in life, and I intended to succeed in my life.

As strange as it may sound, I was fortunate to start my life as a refugee in Syria since Arabic is their official language. As a result, the day after I arrived, I was immediately able to enroll in school and resume my studies. I was **incredibly** lucky, because I was one of the very few refugees in the world who could continue to study in the school system upon arrival in the country of refuge. I really believe that one of the keys to integrating refugees into their host communities and countries is enabling them to be educated in local schools. As a refugee in a new country I could have felt lost, but my new school gave me my confidence back and made me feel at home. **For this, I will always be grateful to Syria.**

Sadly, only 2 years after my arrival, the Syrian conflict broke out and my family and I found our lives disrupted again. This time our fortunes took us to Turkey, which shook my family and I out of the comfortable culture of Arabic traditions and language and placed us in new situations with new challenges. No longer able to communicate directly, Turkey still made sure that we were welcomed into a community surrounded by local people. Placing refugees in normal living situations, not camps, **is essential both for their wellbeing, and their potential to contribute to their host country.**

Living as neighbours, my family and I became friends with those in our community. This inclusion is imperative for refugees, especially the youngest, to avoid becoming a “lost generation” who is excluded. For offering this possibility to myself, my family and countless others, I am grateful to Turkey.

Six years later, I have now found myself and my family relocated to Switzerland. Today, I am one of only 3% of refugees in the world enrolled in higher education. I am pursuing a Bachelors degree in International Relations and Media Communications at Webster University in Geneva. As part of my

studies, I am taking a course on Refugees and Migration Movements – learning the history of how countries and citizens across the ages have both rejected and welcomed refugees at various points in the past. I am grateful to Switzerland for having welcomed me and offered me and my family the chance to integrate here, in this new country of refuge, where I stand a chance of creating a better life for myself, my family and the world.

As you can see from my story, I am one of those 70 million forcibly displaced people – living, breathing, human beings, with a family, friends, dreams, goals and a desire to make the world a better place. Speaking as such a person, I encourage you all to look at what will happen today as an opportunity to help each of those displaced people, individuals like myself and my family, to live a normal life through the UNHCR “#Every One Counts” campaign. During the course of our meetings, let us focus on the idea that displaced people are people too. Today, let us recognize that we are making history because this is the first time we have a chance to not only learn from history but ensure that we do not recreate the same mistakes.

I would like to be remembered as that young woman who was once just a statistic, but today is known to you all as Aya. Was once a refugee who most people would assume had reached a dead end, but today is speaking on a world stage, brimming with optimism because of the opportunities I am grasping. And as I stand on this stage, I speak on behalf of the forcibly displaced population to remind you that having fled war and persecution, we are the world’s greatest ambassadors for peace.

Today I call on you, leaders in your countries, to speak this truth – refugees are people who are by their nature peaceful. Believe in us. Invest in us and you will see – we will all be stronger for it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to ask you, How would you like to be remembered? I hope that you will be remembered as the changemakers who supported and believed in refugees, as the leaders who recognized the potential of how refugees can contribute to your home countries.

And now, I am honoured to welcome some of the leaders in this room who have chosen to step up and make commitments towards realizing this dream.