



Securing a safer future for Syrians

IRC's recommendations for the Brussels Conference on Syria

The IRC launched its Syria emergency response in 2012. Through our 1,000 staff and national partners we reached more than 1.1 million Syrians in 2017. In the South of Syria, the IRC remains the largest NGO provider of healthcare, while in the North East we have the largest INGO presence on the ground providing both emergency response and longer term programming for Syrians. The IRC also has programming in Jordan and Lebanon, where we work to meet the needs of those displaced by the war.

On the 24th and 25th April 2018, the international community will take part in the second Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) believes the following concerns should guide international efforts in the lead up to and following the Conference:

1) Violence shows no sign of abating: Syria remains unsafe for refugees to return

With no end in sight, the war in Syria continues to be fought with outright disregard for international humanitarian law and for the efforts of the UN to protect civilians and end the violence. The suspected chemical attack carried out earlier this month in the rural Damascus town of Douma only serves to further demonstrate that civilians are utterly exposed. UNHCR estimates that 133,000 people fled Eastern Ghouta between March 9th and April 10th, as the Government of Syria and its allies seized vast swathes of territory from opposition forces. In Idlib, over 65,000 Syrian civilians have arrived fleeing the destruction in Eastern Ghouta in recent weeks. IRC teams report escalating need, responding in Idlib with life-saving health assistance. The IRC teams have found that children in particular are struggling, appearing traumatized as a result of the conflict, their experience of fleeing their home and their current poor living conditions. The humanitarian impact of a new military campaign in Idlib would escalate and compound existing needs, with nearly 2.6 million Syrians at risk, including 1.1 million displaced and 1.7 million in need of aid.

Since the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2401 on 24 February, the airstrikes and attacks against civilians have continued unabated. Besiegement, the prevention of aid reaching those in need and the targeting of hospitals continues, in breach of international humanitarian law. The ongoing violence and human suffering in Syria highlights the urgent need for aid to be allowed to reach people in dire-need, and civilians to be protected from harm. The airstrikes launched by the US, UK and France on the 14th of April risk leading to a further escalation of violence if not backed by a longer-term, coherent and more robust political and diplomatic strategy that puts the interest of Syrians at its heart.

Whilst violence shows no sign of abating, the discourse of the international community and host countries' is increasingly marked by a false narrative that Syria is becoming less violent, which is in turn increasing pressure on Syrian refugees and IDPs to return home. Yet in reality, the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return do not currently exist and prospects of peace are far from sight. The war has shattered and continues to ravage Syria's physical and social infrastructure, including houses, schools, hospitals and water systems. Across the ten Syrian cities surveyed by the World Bank, about one-third of housing stock and one half of health and education facilities have been damaged or destroyed¹. Explosive hazards – such as mines or unexploded bombs – litter much of the country, particularly areas retaken from ISIS such as Raqqa.

The reality of the situation inside Syria is starkly illustrated by displacement trends. For every Syrian (internally displaced or refugee) who returned home in 2017, there were three newly displaced, likely because of changes in safety and security. The numbers for refugees alone are equally stark: while 66,000 refugees returned to Syria in 2017, Turkish and Jordanian authorities prevented nearly 300,000 people who were trying to flee Syria from entering their countries.

¹ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview>

In light of the continuing fighting, lack of livelihood opportunities in the communities of origin and limited humanitarian access to people in need, any premature talk about returns risks creating push and pull factors that are likely to expose Syrian displaced people to further danger and harm.

Recommendations

- The EU and Member States must use the Brussels Conference as a forum to seriously assess the best course of action at a diplomatic level. The EU must use all its diplomatic leverage with Russia, Iran and Turkey to create the conditions for the implementation on UNSCR 2401, ending Russian opposition to the renewal of the Joint Investigative Mechanisms and securing the Government of Syria's respect for the norms of international humanitarian law. This must include the immediate lifting of remaining Government sieges and facilitating unhindered, safe and sustained humanitarian access to all those in need.
- In light of increasing levels of violence and barbaric use of force, the Brussels Conference provides a high-level platform for the EU and the wider international community to send a strong and unequivocal message that Syria is not safe for returns. While it is important to consider and identify interventions to support those who return to Syria in ways that do not create pull factors, the EU must be categorical in its position that commits to the principle of non refoulement and does not support efforts to return refugees to Syria. This must be accompanied by a strong message that it stands ready to support host communities to continue to provide a safe haven for Syrian refugees for as long as needed and until the war is over.

2) Humanitarian access remains insufficient

Humanitarian access remains grossly inadequate and often deeply politicised. Continuous arbitrary administrative and bureaucratic restrictions have resulted in a severe reduction in cross-line access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas. 2017 saw a 40% reduction in the delivery of assistance to these areas as compared to 2016 (OCHA)². Only 27% of requested cross-line convoys were approved in 2017 and that figure has dropped to only 5% in the first quarter of 2018 (OCHA).³ Furthermore, armed groups - and particularly those allied with the Government of Syria - have consistently interfered with aid deliveries and removed life-saving medicines and medical supplies, with nearly 100,000 medical supplies refused or removed from convoys in the first half of 2017. It remains to be seen whether the large population of Eastern Ghouta will at last be able to access the aid they urgently need, now that they are no longer living in areas controlled by Syria's armed opposition.

Despite talks of de-escalation, close to 2.3 million people in need live in hard-to-reach areas that humanitarian actors are unable to reach in a sustained manner. The renewal of UNSC resolution 2165 that allows cross-border assistance into Syria was vital for the 15 million people who benefitted from it since its adoption in 2014. In 2017, more than 40% of aid was delivered through cross-border assistance reaching an average of 2.76 million people per month, with a peak of 3.8 million in December 2017.

Whilst cross-border assistance remains the only possible modality for delivery in most of the remaining opposition-held areas, Russia and the Government of Syria have expressed reservations about renewing the resolution. Furthermore, since cross-line assistance remains inadequate, it is critical to ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to ensure those in opposition-held areas continue to receive assistance.

Recommendations

- As convener of the 'Brussels process', the EU must exert all its leverage on the Syrian government, its supporters and neighbours - and particularly on permanent and elected members of the UN Security Council - to push for increased humanitarian access in opposition-controlled areas and to protect cross border humanitarian access into Syria.
- As the Government takes control of more territory and the delivery of cross-line assistance is increasingly restricted, sustained diplomatic engagement with the permanent and elected members of the Security Council is needed to ensure that people in opposition-held areas continue to receive assistance by all available means, including cross-border access.

3) Investment in the region remains critical

IRC research conducted with refugee returnees in Homs, Idlib and Aleppo shows that 61% of those surveyed returned to Syria in part because they had no income or livelihoods opportunities in their place of displacement⁴. At the London Syria conference and in Brussels 2017, leaders made bold commitments to support Syria's neighbours who continue to shoulder responsibility for the majority of the refugee caseload. Compact agreements signed with Jordan and Lebanon provided a potentially game-changing combination of funding and national policy reform designed to improve the lives of both refugees and host populations. Yet, despite positive progress implementation of the Compacts remains partial.

For example, in Jordan, despite some positive progress made with the easing of restrictions on work permits and of other bureaucratic requirements, the current legal framework for access to employment continues to create barriers to access for Syrians to formal work. In addition to the legal requirements, a number of other challenges are preventing the translation of employment-related commitments into real changes for Syrian refugees. For example, many sectors remain closed to non-Jordanians, and Syrian refugees are only able to access jobs linked to unskilled labour (i.e. construction, agriculture, manufacturing). This leaves high-skilled Syrian refugees struggling to find formal employment. The situation is even more challenging for women, who hold only 4% of work permits and whose access to jobs is further complicated by lack of transportation to the workplace, safety concerns and a lack of culturally appropriate employment opportunities⁵.

Significant delays have also marked the implementation of the compact in Lebanon, where Syrian refugees still experience profound barriers accessing the protection they need. Despite the easing of the process to secure legal stay in 2017, 74% of Syrian refugees aged 15 and above still lack valid legal residency, which limits their access to humanitarian assistance and services and exposes them to abuses and exploitation in the workplace⁶. These figures show that whilst host governments have made enormous efforts to improve the living conditions of refugees and open up access to critical services, there is a long way to go to ensure sustainable long-term responses. These challenges should also remind donors of their responsibility in ensuring continued investment to support Syria's neighbours until it is safe for Syrians to return. Failure to effectively implement commitments risks creating additional push factors for refugees to return to Syria in 2018, undermining the voluntary nature of returns.

Recommendations

In light of the continuing challenges faced by Syrian refugees to provide for their livelihoods in host countries, as well as increasing blockages to health care, the regional outcome documents of the Brussels conference should include:

- A firm commitment to revitalize funding commitments to the EU-Lebanon and Jordan compacts and to continue supporting Syrian neighbouring governments in overcoming lasting obstacles to decent living conditions.
- Guidance on the establishment of an effective monitoring system of compact implementation based on an accountability framework mechanism a clear set of indicators that provide insights into the improvements in refugee and host community lives and livelihoods. This should be measured in terms of outcomes such as improvements in household socio-economic status, jobs secured, rather than on outputs such as the number of work permits issued. Regular reviews of compact implementation must be underpinned by a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the synergies between health, education, protection and livelihoods, and leverage the necessary support to national services and systems.
- Renewed efforts to fill gaps in humanitarian assistance funding to meet the immediate health needs of excluded Syrian refugees as well as support to national public facilities and systems for both Syrian refugees and vulnerable host populations.

⁴ Samuel Hall (2018): [Syria's Spontaneous Returns](#).

⁵ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Promise%20to%20Practice_Online.pdf.

⁶ UNHCR's 2017 annual vulnerability assessment

4) Inside Syria, supporting resilience must be at the core of international efforts

The 7-year long conflict that has ravaged the country has left millions of people inside Syria deprived of livelihood, cash and savings. The aid Syrians have been receiving is quickly depleted, and with ongoing conflict dynamics causing further displacements and insecurity, people continue to struggle to support themselves and their families. It is estimated that the conflict has brought Syria's development back four decades⁷.

In 2017, four out of five Syrians were living in poverty and the Syrian economy has shrunk by 40% from 2011. The shrinking economy has resulted in a massive loss of livelihoods for the majority of Syrians. Over 50% of working age Syrians do not have a job – a figure that increases to 75% among youth of working age. Without access to reliable work, many Syrians resort to harmful coping strategies to meet their basic household needs, such as sending children to work, joining armed groups, survival sex, early and forced marriage, and working in dangerous conditions. Being unable to access work and become self-sufficient also has serious effects on mental health and wellbeing, leading to elevated levels of stress and a sense of hopelessness which can result in increased domestic violence, affecting women's and children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

Access to livelihoods can reverse these trends by giving people dignity, the ability to feed their families, to feel productive, pay for healthcare and education, contribute to host economies and recover from conflict-related shocks. Livelihoods programming, when designed in a way that addresses multiple humanitarian outcomes, including economic wellbeing, education, health and safety, allows beneficiaries to be the drivers of their own future. Economic wellbeing has the potential to build self-sufficiency in other areas— from preventing negative coping mechanisms to ensuring families have the means to purchase food, medicines and pay school fees. Further, the skills gained from livelihoods interventions such as trainings, small enterprise development and apprenticeships are lifelong assets for beneficiaries, transferable to any other context. In addition to benefits in terms of socio-economic status, the household and the community's ability to access sustainable income can help to support improved outcomes in terms of protection, freedom of movement, access to better healthcare, food security and children's access to education.

Whilst no large-scale reconstruction efforts should be supported unless a meaningful and inclusive political transition is in place, the international community must continue to invest in humanitarian assistance inside Syria that supports livelihoods, early recovery, and the longer-term resilience of households and communities, thereby contributing to the long-term recovery of Syria without pre-empting a political resolution.

Such a resilience-focused approach must be conflict-sensitive and address humanitarian needs while strengthening the ability of individuals and communities to recover from the losses they have endured and be prepared for future shocks. Evidence from IRC's programs show how supporting resilience is key in order to effectively address the broad range of challenges Syrians face and foster inclusive, community-based, economic resilience for Syrians. However, in 2017, the early recovery and livelihoods sector of the Humanitarian Response Plan was only funded at around 17% of the target, thus preventing the scaling-up of such activities to meet the needs.

Recommendations

As part of the forward-thinking exercise associated with the “Brussels process”, donors should:

- Commit to stepping up their contributions to the early recovery and livelihoods sector of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, with a view to rebuilding markets and supporting agriculture, small businesses and livelihoods opportunities for particularly vulnerable groups.
- Ensure support for UN agencies is complemented by direct support to INGO platforms working to build Syrian communities' resilience by combining emergency life-sustaining basic support with emergency livelihoods to prevent livelihood asset depletion.
- Support longer term funding that would allow for jobs development programs inside Syria and funding for research on how to better design these and other long-term solutions.

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⁷ <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/syria>