

Recommendations to Delegations Attending the 5th Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region

The EU and UN will co-host the 5th Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region on 30th March 2021. The conference is an opportunity for state delegations to continue to work to achieve a political solution in Syria, and to pledge financial support for Syria and regional states hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees. Support is more critical than ever as we mark the tenth year since the start of the conflict in Syria.

Jesuit Refugee Service MENA and Entreculturas support people displaced by the conflict in Syria, as well as vulnerable host communities in the region. Through this work, which includes the provision of education, mental health care, livelihoods and protection programmes, we see first-hand the current reality in Syria and neighbouring countries.

Based on this knowledge, we address the following recommendations to the delegations attending the 5th Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region:

1. Respond to critical needs through increased funding and review the impact of sanctions on civilians.

The needs of displaced Syrians and vulnerable host communities have not lessened with the duration of the crisis: now more than ever, people are unable to meet their basic needs, and humanitarian assistance must be increased. A special focus should be made on the needs of the most vulnerable, including children, women and older persons. An estimated 11 million people inside Syria require humanitarian assistance, 4.8 million of whom are children.ⁱ The Syrian economy has reached a point of extreme crisis and nearly 60% of the population lack access to sufficient food. Sanctions imposed by the international community have worsened the economic situation and hurt the most vulnerable. In Lebanon, fifty percent of Lebanese are now living below the poverty line whilst 89% of Syrians in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty.ⁱⁱ A staggering 65% of Syrian refugees in Jordan report being unable to buy sufficient foodⁱⁱⁱ.

Through our experience in the region, we see that there are also critical needs in health and mental healthcare, protection and education. Children in Syria have been forced to drop out of school due to a myriad of issues including forced displacement, attacks on schools, child labour, COVID-19, overcrowding in schools and poverty. 2.4 million children in Syria are out of education and children are working in an estimated 75% of households. More than half of Syrian school aged children in Lebanon and 40% in Jordan are out of education. Education is a human right, an essential part of the humanitarian response, and intricately linked to the protection of children. Achieving inclusive and quality education for all is one of the most powerful and proven drivers for sustainable development and is vital to achieve the other UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Conference participants should commit to adequate multi-year funding for these sectors that is flexible to the ongoing challenges presented by operating in the midst of COVID-19. The international community should also use the Brussels Conference as an opportunity to review the impact of sanctions on the civilian population of Syria.

2. Invest in income generating opportunities and innovative partnerships to improve social cohesion and resilience.

Humanitarian response to critical needs must be accompanied by a longer-term approach that considers resilience. Syria and neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees are currently facing multiple unprecedented crises. For example Lebanon, the state with the highest per capita proportion of refugees in the world now also ranks as the second most hyperinflated country. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the past year Lebanon has experienced economic collapse, political instability and a seismic explosion in Beirut in August 2020 which killed 200 people, injured 7,000 and made thousands homeless. More

funding should be provided to assist host communities through development projects that seek to build strong and innovative partnerships amongst both Syrians and nationals of host countries.

Investment in livelihoods opportunities is also a key part of resilience-building. Employment is scarce in many countries hosting refugees, for example in Jordan, national unemployment has risen from 19% in 2019 to 23% in 2020^{iv} while this figure is 65% for Syrian refugees, many of whom have lost livelihoods in the last year because of COVID-19.^v Job creation for host communities will help maintain social cohesion and reduce tensions, and for refugees can create a life-saving source of income. It must be accompanied with an increase in access to legal documentation and permission to work, which is currently very restricted for Syrians in some states such as Jordan and Lebanon.

3. Reaffirm that regional and international states must not forcibly return Syrians to Syria. Any returns should be safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable in line with humanitarian principles.

Despite the numerous political, social, economic and health challenges they are now facing in host countries, many Syrians with whom we work in Lebanon and Jordan do not feel able to return to Syria. Amongst regional governments, there have been attempts to return Syrian refugees, such as the issuance of a statement by the General Security (GSO) in Lebanon in May 2019 that any Syrians entering the country irregularly from that date onwards would be deported, and the international conference on refugee returns hosted in Damascus in November 2020 by the Syrian government with support of Russia. European states have maintained a general consensus^{vi} that the situation in Syria is not yet safe for returns, however Denmark has recently declared that parts of the country are safe and is the first EU nation to rule that refugees can return.^{vii} This may develop into a concerning trend if other countries of asylum follow the Danish example and declare parts or all of Syria safe to return. We encourage conference delegations to reiterate support for the international principles of return and to acknowledge that conditions for return to Syria are not yet met.

4. Share responsibility through the provision of opportunities for asylum, resettlement and complementary pathways.

The majority of displaced Syrians live in countries neighbouring Syria. These countries are now experiencing some of the most significant changes and challenges in their recent history. With people struggling to survive, safe resettlement in another country can be a vital lifeline. The international community can and must share responsibility by committing to increase refugee resettlement and complementary pathways to settlement and keep asylum processes open to Syrians.

JRS MENA and Entreculturas will continue to work alongside those who have been affected by the Syrian conflict both inside Syria and throughout the region. We stand by them as they chart a path forward for themselves and their communities and urge the global community to prioritise their needs.

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ⁱ UNICEF, Syrian Arab Republic Appeal, <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syria>

ⁱⁱ WFP, 2020, Nine out of ten Syrian refugee families in Lebanon are now living in extreme poverty, UN study says, <https://www.wfp.org/news/nine-out-ten-syrian-refugee-families-lebanon-are-now-living-extreme-poverty-un-study-says#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20most%20concerning,cent%20only%20a%20year%20before.>

iii Jordan INGO Forum, 2021, Walk the Talk

iv Badarin, 2020, Jordan's economic, security and political challenges under Covid-19,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2020.1850624>

v Jordan INGO Forum, 2021, Walk the Talk

vi European Parliament press release, 2021, MEPs 'remind all EU member states that Syria is not a safe country to return to and believe any return should be safe, voluntary, dignified and informed',
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210304IPR99218/syria-needs-a-greater-financial-and-political-response-from-the-eu>

vii InfoMigrants, 2021, Denmark declares parts of Syria safe, pressuring refugees to return,
<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/30650/denmark-declares-parts-of-syria-safe-pressuring-refugees-to-return#:~:text=Denmark%20declares%20parts%20of%20Syria%20safe%2C%20pressuring%20refugees%20to%20return.-,Published%20on%20%3A%202021&text=Denmark%20has%20stripped%2094%20Syrian.be%20sent%20back%20to%20Syria.>