



Syria INGO Regional Forum recommendations for the “Brussels III” conference on Syria and the region

The third Brussels conference comes at a critical moment in the Syria response, both inside Syria and in neighboring countries. Eight years of war have left 11.7 million people inside Syria in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.2 million internally displaced, and 5.6 million forced to flee to neighboring countries. Those neighboring countries continue to feel the burden that hosting millions of refugees has had on their communities, systems, and infrastructure. As conflict dynamics shift, states must follow through on commitments made in previous conferences and continue to prioritize the aid response in its entirety, while lending their support to address critical issues of access, protection and refugee rights.

This briefing note articulates the recommendations of the Syria INGO Regional Forum and 10 undersigned agencies pertaining to issues of funding, access, protection, durable solutions, and the Whole-of-Syria architecture.

FUNDING

Fully fund a comprehensive response through the HRP

The HRP outlines a comprehensive approach to humanitarian response in a protracted crisis such as Syria, including early recovery. There is still a critical need to fully fund a comprehensive humanitarian response across all parts of Syria, regardless of who is in control. This includes recognizing that funding based on severity alone can be shortsighted, perhaps tipping areas in moderate need to more acute need the following year if their immediate needs are not addressed. To date, there has been uneven funding across geographic regions to support the full range of programs outlined in the HRP. Brussels attendees should:

- Fund the full package of humanitarian activities outlined within the HRP across all of Syria, including early recovery activities to support the shift from emergency aid to a more dignified approach at the individual, household, and community level;
- Increase the use of multi-year and multi-sectorial funding; and
- Work with humanitarian partners to address any existing concerns about the ability to deliver these services in an impartial and independent manner across all of Syria.

ACCESS

Humanitarian access has been and continues to be hampered by all parties to the conflict. As always, states must continue to call on parties to the conflict to allow safe, unfettered access to civilians through the most direct and efficient means, including cross border.

Quality of access

The quality of access is as important as the quantity of goods or services reaching a particular population. Brussels attendees should:

- Advocate to relevant authorities for the removal of bureaucratic restrictions and delays related to: free movement for national and international staff; staff recruitment and issuance of visas; cash-based programming; creation of partnerships/collaborations with local and international organizations; procurement; and opening new field offices and warehouses;
- Support ongoing efforts by OCHA and NGOs to improve their access measurement through the creation of a more comprehensive access matrix and use this as an accountability measure for pooled funds and implementing partners; and
- Advocate for the continuation of cross border operations where appropriate.

Donor restrictions

Humanitarian organizations work across Syria in an impartial manner to ensure civilians receive necessary services regardless of who is in control of the territory. Some NGOs have experienced intensive scrutiny and suspension of programs, despite their well established, extensive due diligence procedures to ensure donor funding is safeguarded from diversion by sanctioned entities. Brussels attendees should:

- Recognize NGOs' common commitment to mitigate the risk of aid diversion, and ensure that unproven concerns over aid diversion do not lead to sudden termination of existing funding; and
- Work with NGOs to ensure that sanctions and counterterrorism legislation do not inhibit humanitarian activities undertaken on the basis of needs within a robust due diligence framework.

Evaluation and accountability mechanisms

Evaluation and accountability mechanisms are critical aspects to any humanitarian response to ensure programming is addressing needs and reaching intended beneficiaries. In Syria, while some NGOs are able to carry out independent needs assessments, the environment for implementing robust monitoring and evaluation can be limited due to security and access concerns. Brussels attendees should:

- Communicate to the government of Syria and non-state armed groups the critical importance of evaluation and accountability mechanisms conducted by independent experts;
- Have an open and constructive dialogue with implementing partners to explore options for carrying out independent needs assessments, monitoring, and evaluation in the current, less than ideal circumstances across Syria; and
- Provide funding for training to local organizations and partners on best practice evaluation and accountability mechanisms.

PROTECTION

The Syria crisis, at its core, is a protection crisis. In the face of possible further escalations in violence in Idlib and other parts of Syria, states must continue to call on parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian principles and human rights law. While the direct threat to civilian lives through indiscriminate war tactics appears to have lessened, a myriad of other threats still exists. These include but are not limited to:

Mine action

All across Syria, land is highly contaminated by explosive remnants of war, which pose deadly risks to civilians, particularly children, and will take years to effectively clear. 10.2 million people are still at risk of exposure to explosive hazards in Syria, with approximately 187 incidents per day. Brussels attendees should:

- Provide financial support to humanitarian mine action (including risk education, clearance, follow up monitoring and victim assistance) in all affected regions of Syria;
- Require that recipients of mine action funding (including any sub-grantees/sub-contractors) conduct their activities in line with the International Mine Action Standards and humanitarian principles;
- Emphasize to regional governments and local authorities that appropriate mine action is a necessary precondition for any return of internally displaced Syrians and refugees; and
- Encourage local authorities to rapidly register and create an enabling environment for organizations engaged in humanitarian mine action.

Protection of humanitarian workers

Syrian humanitarian workers have been the backbone of the humanitarian response over the past eight years. As the government reclaims more territory, humanitarian workers are fearful for their safety due to the possibility that they could be punished for their previous association with humanitarian activities undertaken by organizations not registered with the government of Syria. Brussels attendees should:

- Continue to advocate for guarantees from the government of Syria to ensure that individuals are not arrested or detained for their affiliation with humanitarian work, in both the short and long-term; and
- Require and fully fund staff and partner duty of care policies in all humanitarian grants to ensure adequate and consistent policies exist across all humanitarian actors.

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Syria remains both rampant and underreported. However, there is little to no availability of clinical care for sexual assault survivors, and very few humanitarian agencies provide survivor-centered GBV case management. Brussels attendees should:

- Recognize the unique needs of women and girls in the Syria context and allocate specific funding for both the provision of direct support and capacity building of local actors to provide GBV prevention and response services; and
- Support the specialization of clinical care for sexual assault survivors for children, as currently no practitioners are able to provide treatment catered to children and adolescent survivors.

Child recruitment and child labor

Reports of child recruitment into armed groups and forces with children as young as fourteen continue, which particularly poses a risk in areas with higher insecurity and during the movement and separation of families. Brussels attendees should:

- Advocate to the relevant parties to the conflict for the safe demobilization and re-integration of recruited children into society, including access to community support and education;
- Fund programming to support families and children who were previously recruited, without requiring sensitive information that could put the child or family at risk;
- Invest in livelihoods opportunities for vulnerable families to discourage child labor and ensure higher enrollment and retention of children in schools, with a focus on ensuring girls and children with disabilities have equal access to education; and
- Ensure all humanitarian agencies abide by child safeguarding policies, including through local partners, as a minimum standard.

Freedom of movement

Civilian movement continues to be constrained across Syria. Brussels attendees should:

- Advocate to relevant authorities to ensure that civilians are able to move freely across all parts of Syria, regardless of control, and without fear of being arbitrarily detained. This includes developing and disseminating clear written policies pertaining to screening procedures, particularly at checkpoints.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS AND REFUGEE RIGHTS

Over the past year, the rhetoric around refugee returns has increased, particularly with the proposed Russian initiative in 2018. The reality is that eight years of conflict, and ongoing insecurity, mean that the conditions in Syria are still not conducive to the organized return of refugees. The Brussels conference should clearly reaffirm that any returns to Syria or within the country itself must be undertaken in a safe, dignified, and voluntary manner in accordance with international law and that the principle of *non-refoulement* is respected. The achievement of durable solutions requires conditions to be in place or created that enable displaced people to make voluntary, informed and sustainable choices about their future. As such, the following issues must also be addressed.

Neighboring countries

The people and governments of neighboring countries have generously hosted millions of Syrian refugees during the conflict. Even if Syrians do begin to return to Syria, many refugees will remain in neighboring countries for years to come. The services and infrastructure of host governments have been under continuous strain over the past eight years. Brussels attendees should:

- Commit to supporting countries neighboring Syria for the long term, including through multilateral and bilateral government support as well as through policy commitments on market access, taking note of the scale and protracted nature of the refugee crisis;
- Recognize that many refugees cannot or will not be able to return to Syria, due to well-founded fears of persecution or other reasons; and
- Continue to fully fund the response plans in these countries especially focusing on multi-year funding and further improving operational actors' funding visibility through ensuring greater transparency on allocation of un-earmarked funds and timely distribution of available funds.

Protection monitoring to ensure safe returns

UNHCR has articulated protection thresholds to measure when conditions inside Syria are appropriate for refugees and IDPs to return. In order to gauge progress towards these thresholds, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors must be able to freely access all parts of Syria and conduct robust protection monitoring. Currently, the parties to the conflict are obstructing this. Brussels attendees should:

- Urge parties to the conflict to allow UNHCR to fulfill its mandate to conduct protection monitoring, together with other relevant humanitarian agencies; and
- Refrain from endorsing or funding activities which facilitate organized refugee returns until UNHCR is able to fulfill this function and can demonstrate that protection thresholds have been met.

IDPs

More Syrians are displaced inside the country than are living as refugees outside Syria. The international community has focused much more intently on the issues regarding refugee returns, neglecting the concerns of millions of IDPs. Brussels attendees should:

- Support the rights of IDPs to access a durable solution to their displacement, in line with the IASC Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and fund specific programming based on these needs.

Resettlement and other forms of admissions

Resettlement is arguably the most tangible and direct form of responsibility-sharing by the international community. While resettlement alone will not address the issues facing refugees and host communities in neighboring countries, it does provide an effective solution for refugees who face particular vulnerabilities in their country of asylum or in their country of origin. Brussels attendees should:

- Commit to a specific, measurable target for an increase in resettlement or other forms of humanitarian admission of refugees; and
- Support refugees through the provision of funds and assistance before and after departure from countries of first asylum including fees, transportation, subsistence, and other social/community engagement.

WHOLE-OF-SYRIA APPROACH

Underpinned by UN Security Council Resolution 2165 / 2449, the Whole-of-Syria (WoS) approach has enabled a more principled, coherent and efficient response. As different humanitarian modalities continue to coexist in Syria, the WoS must remain the architecture for the collective aid effort. Despite the L3 designation of the WoS response, key gaps have emerged in the sectoral leadership at WoS level and an overall sense of uncertainty is palpable. NGOs nevertheless recognize the need for the WoS approach to remain adaptable and fit for purpose. Brussels attendees should:

- Collectively engage to review the WoS functions and agree on the selection of criteria and triggers that would warrant a change in the architecture, planning processes and potential deactivation;
- Urge the humanitarian leadership and cluster lead agencies to renew a meaningful commitment to the WoS approach and to ensure NGOs and their representative bodies are consulted and included in any discussion related to the alteration of the coordination; and
- Adequately support and resource the WoS architecture.

Signatory agencies



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