



## **Brussels III Syria Crisis Conference**

### **March 2019<sup>1</sup>**

#### **About the context**

Inconceivably, on March 15<sup>th</sup> Syria will enter its ninth year of war. A war that has seen hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced<sup>2</sup>. The conflict has been characterised by a blatant disregard for human life and International Humanitarian Law. On this, the eight anniversary of the war, the scale of suffering and humanitarian need both in Syria and across the region remains enormous. Despite ongoing international initiatives there is little sign of real peace. As the Syrian Government now regains control over most of the country, four contested areas remain in active conflict, most notably Idlib province in the north-west. In September of last year referencing Idlib, Pope Francis noted; *“the winds of war are still blowing and troubling news reaches us about the risks of a possible humanitarian catastrophe”*. The pontiff appealed to the international community and *“all the actors involved”* to use diplomacy, dialogue and negotiations *“in respect for international humanitarian law and to safeguard the lives of civilians”*.

While the huge number of the displaced remains inside Syria, the vast majority of Syria’s refugees are hosted by neighbouring countries; Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in particular. Caritas commends the tremendous generosity that these countries have demonstrated. Year on year we have witnessed the ever-increasing strain placed on host communities in receiving so many refugees, 2018 has been no different. The combined breakdown of the social fabric and economy in Syria, with growing economic and socio-political challenges in neighbouring host countries has left an increasing number of people without necessary and vital support. Caritas member organisations are present in every country affected by the Syrian crisis, working to support internally displaced people within Syria, refugees in the neighbouring countries, and the communities who are so generously hosting them. We are working with people affected by the crisis to provide support across a range of sectors, including health, education, water & sanitation, protection, shelter, livelihoods, social cohesion as well as job creation.

The Brussels III Syria Crisis Conference presents an opportunity for the international community to pursue, with renewed conviction, an equitable political solution to the crisis and a platform on which to redouble efforts to alleviate the suffering of Syrians. The conference also provides an opportunity for the international community to reaffirm their support for the rights of Syrians to continue to seek and maintain refugee status in other countries, to support host communities and to take action to ensure Syrians can continue to exercise their right to access humanitarian assistance and protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Caritas Lebanon, Caritas Jordan, Caritas Turkey, Trocaire, CAFOD and Caritas Luxembourg contributed to the drafting of this paper. They have been supported by the Caritas Policy Task Force and other Caritas organisations active in the response to the Syria crisis.

<sup>2</sup> An estimated 500,000 lives have been lost, 11 million people have been displaced by the war, and 5.5 million people have fled the country as refugees, with most hosted by Syria’s neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

## **Prioritize protection and humanitarian access**

The United Nations is still unable to gain access to some areas within Syria. Protection of civilians and of minorities in particular remains a key concern, including in relation to freedom of movement for those wishing to return to their homes and, linked to this, ensuring housing, land and property rights are fully respected. Many areas in Syria are still affected by the impact of the conflict and security issues for a safe and voluntary return of displaced and refugees remain a key priority. Specific concerns related to protection, especially protection of women and girls continue to be of serious concern. In Turkey, for example, despite not being allowed by national laws, early marriage keeps being a serious problem among the refugee populations.

## **Invest in education**

Many children in Syria and in neighbouring countries have missed months, even years of schooling. Families are forced to rely on informal labour methods to survive and an estimated 180,000 Syrian children in Lebanon are in the labour market rather than in school. Fewer than half of the 631,000 school-age refugee children in Lebanon are in formal education<sup>3</sup> in large part because of lack of funding for classrooms and teachers and inaccessibility to schools due to lack of transportation. The differences between the Syrian curricula and those of hosting countries add to the challenges for refugee children. Many Syrian refugee families in neighbouring countries have cited the lack of access to education as a primary push factor for return to Syria. Caritas agencies are providing holistic schooling for refugee children wherever possible across Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey as well as Egypt, with an approach that tackles not just the educational needs of students, but also their psychosocial needs.

## **Invest in health**

In Jordan, Syrians increasingly find it more and more difficult to access health care assistance. Previous subsidies have been removed resulting in:

- 90% of Syrian refugees reported needing access to cheaper health services and medication;
- reduced access to maternal neo natal care for Syrian refugee women of childbearing age;

One of the most important and dire consequences of the financial crisis in hosting countries for refugees is the change in health insurance coverage provided for refugees. In Turkey, for example, not all medications and therapies are provided to all Syrians in need either due to the limits of the resources or due to the difficulty to enter in the temporary protection system in the last years. Also, it is possible that in the future the coverage of health insurance may continue to shrink with the worsening of the economy. At the same time, the incredible increase of poverty rate in Syria makes it really hard to access basic services, the health sector in particular.

## **Consider social cohesion and social stability**

The Brussels Conference must deliver increased investment to neighbouring countries hosting refugees that will benefit both refugees and host communities alike. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees are living in informal settlements established on agricultural land in Lebanon, in cramped flats in Jordan, and in housing with very basic necessities in Turkey. They need jobs, education and healthcare. The Brussels Conference needs to result in opportunities for employment and to stimulate economic growth -

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/13/lebanon-stalled-effort-get-syrian-children-school>

particularly to the smallest enterprises - so that experienced trades people, farmers and teachers, among others, can put their skills to good use. This is critical to offering, hope, safety and dignity to millions of refugees as well as to host communities, who suffer high rates of poverty and face increasing lack of quality health care services, education and social services.

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees with over 3.5 million Syrians registered to receive assistance. In response to the large number of Syrians, the Turkish government has adopted legislation to enable Syrian refugees' greater access to basic services such as education and health. Arguably, Lebanon has more refugees per capita than any other country in the world. Syrian Refugees currently represent over a quarter of the population<sup>4</sup>, this influx has exacerbated pre-existing tensions in a country already struggling with a challenging economic and a complex domestic and regional political situation. 28 percent of the local Lebanese population lives below the poverty line, meaning that nearly 1.5 million native-born residents were vulnerable even before the arrival of Syrian refugees. Notably the poorest areas of the country have also accommodated the majority of Syrian resettlement. Over the course of the crisis, Lebanon has witnessed a significant drop in its GDP while conversely public debt has increased rapidly. The 2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon report (VASyR2018)<sup>5</sup>, undertaken by three UN agencies, found that competition for jobs was cited as the top factor for tensions with the host community. Agencies that have been providing humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees are now expecting to see a surge of Lebanese natives also seeking help. Caritas Lebanon now sets aside 30% of each project budget for local Lebanese host communities. **There is a need for overall capacity building and social services for *all* underserved communities, Lebanese and refugee alike.** Until the systemic barriers facing refugees, whether long-established or recently arrived, are dismantled, the inequality, lack of opportunity, and informal employment will have effects not just on their communities, but for the native Lebanese population as well.

Since the Jordan-Syrian border re-opened in October of last year, some 13,000 Syrian refugees have returned. Caritas Jordan cites the rate of return at 100 Syrian refugees per day. Given that there are between 600,000 and 1.5 million refugees in Jordan these numbers suggest that a large portion of refugees currently in Jordan will remain in the long term. As such Jordan along with other neighbouring countries will require ongoing support to cope and to deal with its precarious economic situation characterised by high levels of unemployment, significant poverty rates, strained infrastructure and public services. In order to ensure an adequate assistance to Syrian refugees by the Jordanian Government and the NGOs, global humanitarian assistance needs to be sustained.

### **Improve decent short-term solutions and resettlements**

It is generally recognized that return of Syrian refugees to Syria is the best option in the long term, however, bearing in mind that for the time being, until conditions are safe to do so, further efforts on resettlement internationally must be undertaken in order to ease pressure on host communities in neighbouring countries, as recognised by the Global Compact on Refugees.

The number of refugees meeting resettlement criteria and severity of their vulnerabilities continue to escalate while the opportunities for resettlement have declined drastically.<sup>6</sup> Governments and communities across the world must share the responsibility with neighbouring countries in hosting Syria's

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately 1.5 million Syrians have sought protection in Lebanon since the start of the war.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/12/VASyR-2018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Out of a total of 81,310 UNHCR refugee resettlement referrals globally in 2018, the largest number of referred refugees were from Syria (28,200). However, this represents only one in 20 of Syrian refugees who meet the UNHCR resettlement criteria<sup>6</sup>. Of note, 9,000 fewer refugees from Syria were re-settled in 2018 than in 2017. Furthermore, according to UNHCR in 2017, resettlement submissions from 3RP countries reduced by 52% compared to 2016 due to limited resettlement places. In contrast, the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from 4.8 million (end-2016) to 5.6 million today.

refugee population and in particular the most vulnerable. In 2019, major resettlement needs include those for Syrian refugees currently hosted in countries across the Middle East and Turkey (43 percent) and for refugees in countries of asylum and transit along the Central Mediterranean Route. Caritas supports The Global Compact on Refugees that calls for States to offer more resettlement places, through expanding existing programmes or establishing new ones. Along with the work of UNHCR we encourage more countries to participate in global resettlement efforts, and increase access to complementary pathways for Syrian refugees.

### **Keep supporting the peace process**

The international community should continue to support the UN-led efforts to bring about a political resolution to the conflict, in accordance with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution 2254. These parameters make it clear that this needs to be a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process. All actors should continue to provide direct assistance to the Geneva peace talks and continue to support, in coordination with the UN, initiatives to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region to identify common ground.

### **Do not give up with funding**

Assessments carried out by Caritas agencies over the course of 2018 highlight a lack of access to adequate or reliable services for many both within Syria and refugees across the region. More than half of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are “unable to meet the survival needs of food, health, and shelter.” Sixty-nine percent live below the poverty line. Alarming, services previously provided by the UN and INGOs have in many instances been scaled back over the course of 2018. The situation of Palestinian refugees may become even bleaker. In 2018, UNRWA’s operations across the region have been severely curtailed due to major funding cuts. While donors have been generous in supporting those caught up in this protracted conflict, faced with an unprecedented number of crisis around the world and levels of displacement not seen since World War II, the United Nations 2018 Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan was only 52% funded which represented a drop in funding when compared with 2017 funding levels<sup>7</sup>. At the time of writing, despite the focus on return of Syrian refugees Caritas agencies are witnessing continued new arrivals into camps coupled with a reduction in visible support from other agencies and donors. Humanitarian donors must fully fund the 2019 Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan and ensure that money is not diverted towards reconstruction inside Syria whilst there are still acute needs amongst refugees who remain in neighbouring countries who cannot or are afraid to return home, and the communities that host them. Furthermore, in line with commitments under the Grand Bargain arising from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit donors must increase their support to locally led humanitarian response through dedicated multi-year funding. We welcome this third Brussels Crisis Conference and call on participants to address the funding gap which means that urgent basic needs of all people affected by the conflict are currently not being met.

### **Invest in durable solutions**

UNHCR maintains that significant risks remain for civilians in Syria and that “*present conditions ... are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity*”. Despite the ongoing hardship endured in neighbouring countries, many Syrian refugees still consider this is better than the current uncertainty and extreme circumstances at home. The pace of return of Syrian refugees is expected to accelerate exponentially in 2019. UNHCR chief Grandi has stated that for larger numbers to decide to go back, more confidence

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<sup>7</sup> Being only 52 percent funded

must be created by addressing issues of concern to refugees. At the Brussels Conference the international community should seek to ensure the following:

- return of Syrian Refugees is addressed in line with commitments to voluntary, dignified and safe return;
- coordination with host country governments, UN agencies, INGOs, and local civil society organisations to mitigate push factors, including barriers to legal residency and access to livelihoods and essential services in host countries;
- the Syrian government and host country governments allow UNHCR to play a more transparent and accountable role in preventing unsafe and involuntary return, and informing, protecting, and monitoring refugees during Phase 1 returns to Syria before key security and protection thresholds have been reached
- UNHCR is given unfettered access to monitor returns without any hindrance or delay;
- access by international bodies to all parts of Syria where refugees have returned;
- that refugees are not being coerced into returning to Syria before protection and other guarantees are in place and a monitoring mechanism is in place to enable returnees to report their concerns and seek redress.

### **Final recommendations**

After the Brussels II Conference, we acknowledge the steps taken so far in most of the areas considered. However, we still consider it crucial that:

- the international community redouble efforts to find immediate peaceful political solutions to end the conflict and to avoid further suffering and destruction;
- donors respond with adequate levels of funding to overcome the funding gap and fully fund the Regional Response Plan for Syria. Despite the generous pledges of 2018 (11.32 mo. USD)<sup>8</sup>, there is still a shortfall of almost the 50% of the total funding allocation;
- due to the protracted nature of the Syrian crisis, we strongly encourage donors to facilitate multiyear predictable funding and ensure that funds used for reconstruction inside Syria are not diverted from the acute needs among refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries;
- protection of civilians and minorities is mainstreamed, with special attention to protection of women and girls; that humanitarian actors continue to prioritize access to education for Syrian children, either internally displaced or resident refugees in neighbouring countries. The foundation of future Syrian society is in their hands; that host governments allow access to free basic and quality health services to Syrian displaced and refugees. It is imperative that safe and secure humanitarian access is a consistent for all who need it;
- the international community keep supporting and acknowledging the extraordinary efforts of neighbouring host governments and civil society, so that they can provide assistance and protection to refugees, and to work towards durable solutions, including voluntary, dignified and safe return when the refugees feel it is appropriate to do so.
- the international community reflect consistently on the feasibility of durable solutions which would allow safe, dignified and voluntary returns to Syrian people, families and communities.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA-ROMENA-FundingUpdate\\_Whole\\_2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA-ROMENA-FundingUpdate_Whole_2018.pdf)