

Brussels V Syria Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region

29-30 March 2021

Background

March 15th marked the 10th year of the Syria crisis.. A decade lost, which has seen hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced¹. For most Syrians, the past 10 years have been the hardest of their lives, characterised by countless violations of international humanitarian law and human rights by all parties, which have caused enormous suffering and humanitarian needs both inside Syria and across the region.

Despite ongoing peace initiatives and agreement to cease hostilities, there is little hope of peace and the humanitarian situation in Syria and in the region remains extremely critical, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the deterioration of the economic situation across the region.

In his recent Encyclical letter “*Fratelli Tutti*”, Pope Francis noted that “*the first victim of every war is the human family’s innate vocation to fraternity*”² and stressed that “*in today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an out-dated utopia (...). Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal.*”³

War brings out the worst of humanity, as shown by the enormous suffering of the Syrian population over the past decades. Pope Francis’ new Encyclical, calling each and every one of us to love through the “culture of fraternity” is a glimmer of hope and a source of inspiration for the international community, especially for “*all the actors involved*”, to rediscover the “*innate vocation of fraternity*” and to choose the way of diplomacy and dialogue to pave the way for long-lasting peace and reconstruction.

The occasion of the forthcoming Brussels V Syria Conference - convened to renew the international community’s support and solidarity to Syria and the region - **should be seized to send a strong message of hope and brotherhood to the Syrian people**. Syrians, and especially Syria’s youngest generation, cannot afford more years of war and they deserve a better future.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the Caritas confederation⁴ has served more than 1 million Syrians annually, inside Syria and in the region. It has supported communities through programmes on

¹ Cf. <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

² Encyclical letter « *Fratelli Tutti* », p. 7.

³ Op.cit. p. 8.

⁴ The Caritas confederation is formally linked to the Catholic Church and groups 162 member organisations; most of which are national FBOs, and a sub-set of which work both domestically and operate also internationally. As such, the Caritas confederation represents the second largest network of national civil society organisations working in the world after the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

shelter, food, education, health, protection, livelihoods, water and sanitation, among other critical sectors⁵. Caritas organisations also continue to promote social cohesion and solidarity to alleviate the impact of the protracted crisis on both refugees and host communities.

The Brussels V Conference presents an opportunity to renew our collective commitment to serving the Syrian population and alleviate their suffering. The international community must maintain and expand the scope of humanitarian assistance and lay the foundations for a just recovery and sustainable reconstruction through enhanced early recovery programmes.

We acknowledge the steps taken so far in most of the areas of concern, yet, the following issues need further urgent attention:

1. Prioritize protection of refugees and IDPs and durable solutions

Since the beginning of the crisis, more than 12 million people have been displaced. More than 6 million remained inside Syria, while more than another 5 million are generously hosted by neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and more than 1 million more have found refuge in other countries⁶. Caritas member organisations are present in every country affected by the Syrian crisis, working to support both internally displaced people within Syria and refugees in the neighbouring countries, as well as the host communities. The support of Caritas Jordan and Caritas Lebanon to refugees remains a vital lifeline, despite the growing economic and socio-political challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic.

It is generally recognised that return of Syrian refugees to Syria is the best option in the long term, however, until conditions are safe to do so, further steps must be undertaken to expand complementary pathways for Syrian refugees in order to ease pressure on host communities in neighbouring countries, as outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees.

According to UNHCR, significant risks remain for civilians in Syria and present conditions are not conducive for voluntary return in safety and dignity.

At the Brussels V Conference, the international community should clearly reaffirm the *principle of non-refoulement* and ensure that:

- Return of Syrian refugees is addressed in line with commitments to voluntary, informed dignified and safe return, according to international standards⁷;
- Refugees are not being coerced into returning to Syria before protection, adequate accompaniment services to support the process and other guarantees are in place, and a monitoring mechanism is established to enable returnees to report their concerns.

2. Promote and strengthen local leadership

Local NGOs, including faith-based organisations, are on the frontline of the ongoing humanitarian response both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, reaching many vulnerable communities, often in areas inaccessible to INGOs. Despite their role to support sustainable operations inside Syria is expected to grow in the coming months and years, analysis carried out in 2019 show that

⁵ Twenty-two Caritas member organisations (MOs) are currently supporting projects in Syria and in the region along with the national Caritas member organisations present in the concerned countries. In 2020 the Caritas Confederation supported around 830 000 Syrian people in the Middle East.

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

⁷ UN Refugee Convention, Global Compact on Refugees and IASC Framework for Durable Solutions.

just 0.8% of total UN system response funds in Syria were directly allocated to local and national NGOs and fewer than 20% of appeals for assistance from Syrian NGOs were funded.⁸

To support national Caritas organisations and other local civil society groups, Caritas partners have committed to providing sustained support to capacity strengthening with a fair and adequate level of support to the overhead costs of national members. Unfortunately not all donor governments provide this or fail to ask their INGO or UN agency partners to cascade support for overheads costs to their local NGO partners.

This clearly shows that more needs to be done to invest in and strengthen effective local leadership, in line with the Grand Bargain localisation commitments, including through increased direct funding.

Caritas Jordan⁹ for example has established a solid partnership with the Government of Jordan and the local private sector (both pharmacies and delivery companies) to ensure the supply of medicines to patients during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Caritas Jordan's innovative programming has been possible only through long-term, flexible funding provided by the Government of Denmark which has enabled piloting new approaches and is fostering effective partnerships at a more strategic level with the Ministry of Health and the private sector. Increased donors' support to locally led humanitarian responses through dedicated multi-year, flexible funding would allow similar creative partnership approaches to be replicated in other contexts to the benefit of people in need.

We therefore encourage donors provide increased support for both multi-year flexible funding and capacity-strengthening to local NGOs/FBOs, in line with the Grand Bargain commitments on localisation.

3. Address the humanitarian impact of sanctions, counterterrorism measures and bank de-risking

Syria is facing a severe economic crisis and 85 percent of the population is living below the poverty line, with more than 11 million people in need of humanitarian aid.

The complexity of sanctions regimes imposed on Syria has further exacerbated the situation by seriously hampering the ability of NGOs to deliver essential aid and contribute to a just recovery. Increased levels of bank de-risking often prevent NGOs from receiving funds allocated for their programmes. This often results in delays in programming and suspension of life-saving activities, with direct consequences on vulnerable people.

It is a legal and a moral imperative to allow aid to reach those in need without delay or impediment, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic, and to alleviate the social and economic impact on the population. We therefore call on the international community to:

- Remove all those sanctions that prevent the Syrian population from accessing basic needs and services and essential health supplies, including COVID-19 vaccines and treatments
- Address the unintended impact of sanctions and other restrictive measures hindering effective access to the population and delivery of aid by putting in place effective and transparent humanitarian exemptions

⁸ Local2Global Protection, Localisation in numbers –funding flows and local leadership, <https://www.local2global.info/research/the-humanitarian-economy/localisation-in-numbers>

⁹ Caritas Jordan, Fact Sheet, The 10th Syrian Crisis Anniversary

- Address bank over-compliance challenges by supporting NGOs to build trustful relationships with the banking system

4. Human rights and human dignity must be central

For any hope of future peace, reconciliation and reconstruction in Syria, it is essential that respect for human rights, protection of civilians and a just and dignified recovery are given the necessary attention and action by the international community, parties to the conflict and by host government authorities.

As governments and UN agencies plan towards the Brussels V Conference, as well as in their bilateral diplomacy, we call on them to:

- Put human rights and protection of civilians at the heart of their efforts
- Progressively move from a mere emergency lifesaving logic to an early recovery phase to restore access to basic services, establish a sustainable process of recovery from the crisis and restore the dignity of communities
- Redouble efforts to a negotiated peace solution which is the only way possible to end the conflict and avoid further suffering and destruction

Back in 2015, the former Joint Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi said: *“Everybody had their agenda and the interests of the Syrian people came second, third or not at all.”*¹⁰

It is time to change and put the interests and safety of the Syrian people first in a true spirit of fraternity and solidarity.

Recommendations

1. The international community must redouble efforts to find an immediate peaceful negotiated solution to the conflict
2. To put human rights and protection of civilians at the heart of their efforts and ensure voluntary, dignified, informed and safe return of Syrian refugees, according to international standards;
3. Donors should provide increased support for both multi-year flexible funding and capacity-strengthening for local NGOs/FBOs, in line with the Grand Bargain commitments on localisation;
4. Remove all sanctions that prevent the Syrian population from accessing basic needs and services and essential health supplies, including COVID-19 vaccines and treatments and support NGOs to build trustful relationships with the banking system to address over-compliance challenges.

¹⁰ Interview with the former Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi (31 August 2015). Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016, p.232.