

Final Recommendations of the Preparatory Consultative Meeting of the Brussels Fourth Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region

Addressed to:

The Joint Commission of the European Union, and United Nations; the Organizers of Brussels Fourth Conference.

Disclaimer

While we are drafting this paper, we cautiously watch the intensification of the military build-up on the outskirts of Idlib. As a result of the danger that any military action may pose to the humanitarian situation in this region, we urgently call on the European Union to put pressure on Russia and the regime in order not to take any military operations in Idlib, and to press for the withdrawal from the areas they occupied, for the return of the locals to their homes, and adherence to UN Resolution 2254.

Introduction

The Syrian civil society (SCS) is the first concerned party with the crisis of his country, which has left during the past 9 years more than 6 million displaced people, 6 million refugees, more than 1 million casualties, hundreds of thousands of detainees, and millions of injuries and disabilities. 85% of the population were left below the poverty average, and at the bottom of the global indicators for development. While the SCS finds in these circumstances an exceptional opportunity to bring back the Syrian issue to the centre of attention, it hopes to build on this global spirit of solidarity and steadfastness that emerged during Covid-19 crisis in order to push the Syrian conflict to its end through political and legal tracks, and to assist Syrians inside and outside Syria in their humanitarian and social ordeal.

Main Recommendations: Cross-cutting Issues

1. Given the centrality of the Brussels meeting, the Syrian civil society encourages the formation of a follow-up and periodic review mechanism that

works all over the year through which it can ensure that recommendations of the conference are achieved, and that all stakeholders are included in the updates on progress in achieving the recommendations.

2. Maintaining levels of the humanitarian aid and access by renewing the Security Council Resolutions: 2165& 2504 to pass aid across borders through all crossings in northern Syria (including Bab al-Salama, Bab al-Hawa) and adding crossings (Tal Abyad and Al-Arabia) for an additional 12 months, as an important means to maintain our humanitarian response capacity in supporting the resilience of civilians.

3- Supporting marginalized and vulnerable groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities, by further inclusion in humanitarian programs, facilitating their access to services by creating a friendly environment, and increasing support for physical, psychological and social rehabilitation projects, which aim at protecting children and women from psychological, sexual and physical abuses. We also affirm the importance of supporting all types of educational activities as a central priority for the future of Syria and peace-building. We also affirm the importance of supporting special programs for protecting and taking care of orphans and unaccompanied children, paying attention to this group, its needs and its different status, by developing mental health care programs and providing referral systems. Moreover, we accentuate the importance of continuing support of programs in all regions which call for the protection of women in war situations, and cases of domestic violence, harassment and sexual violence, especially in light of the impact of quarantine and the crisis of the spread of Corona and the closure of centres and safe spaces.

4. Emphasis on the protection of civilians and humanitarian facilities:

The continued violations of health facilities in 2019 prompted the Secretary-General of the United Nations to share the summary of the report submitted by the Commission of Inquiry into seven incidents that occurred northwest of Syria. The attacks have led to a serious decrease in the ability to deal with the current and future victims infected with Corona Virus. Therefore, we recommend providing programs for accountability measures against perpetrators of attacks on medical facilities, educational facilities and other civilian and humanitarian objects. We also call for supporting programs to protect humanitarian workers and civil society activists in various areas of control, as they are the ones most at risk, and providing protection programs against the risks of displacement, loss of their jobs and the lack of laws that

protect them inside Syria, or the neighbouring countries as a result of the spread of Covid-19.

Livelihood

Livelihood constitutes a lifeline for the needy and the displaced people, which help them, move to production, and to end dependence on humanitarian aid. 86% of Syrians are currently below the poverty line, and IDPs are suffering from exceptional conditions due to the poor financial situation.

- We recommend adopting the nexus approach to gradually move societies from an emergency response to development, with the need for the EU and donor countries to adopt clear policies for early recovery programs that take into account the areas that are most affected and in need.
- We recommend increasing investment in productive projects with a focus on the agricultural, livestock and small-business sectors, and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives for young men and women, and providing small-loans.
- Providing professional training to develop workers' skills and facilitate getting employment opportunities as the largest section of women refugees suffer from entering the organized labour market because of the difficulty in obtaining work permits, or their skills do not match the required expertise. The economic decline associated with Covid-19 crisis has led to the loss of a large number of workers of their jobs, at the same time, they have not received adequate humanitarian help from social network support. This highlights the importance of:
 - Providing emergency humanitarian support to Syrian with a focus on monetary/cash support because of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 crisis.
 - Facilitating the procedures of getting work permits for the Syrian refugees.

Health

Covid-19 has shown the weaknesses of the health system in Syria, whether in terms of infrastructure such as the availability of medicines and consumables, or the readiness of trained teams. The coverage of the needs of the health sector has not exceeded 29.9% of \$ 449 millions in regular programming within the response plan for 2019.

Uncomfortable Scenarios for Covid-19 infection

The worst scenario, as predicted by one of the studies, is that north west Syria may contain 185,364 cases of Covid 19 (4.4% of the population), and 11,066 deaths are expected in the

first eight weeks, so the health group focused on putting forward a set of recommendations within three basic broad lines that contribute to reducing the risk of the spread of this virus by:

- Providing urgent support to rehabilitate specialized hospitals to receive Covid-19 cases.
- Providing ventilators and medical equipment as preventive measures to fight infection control and,
- lifting any restrictions imposed by the EU countries on the export of these equipment to Syria.

Health program priorities can be summarized by continuing:

- Support of medical governance projects, and empowering administrative bodies in the health sector,
- Continuing the rehabilitation of destroyed health facilities and providing them with medical equipment that takes into account technological development in medical care,
- Renewing human medical resources by investing in medical education programs (in Idlib, for example, the ratio of medical doctors to the number of population is less than two doctors per 10,000 people, which constitutes a gap of 64% compared to international standards), in a way that ensures the availability of different health care services (primary, secondary and tertiary).

We conclude with the necessity of supporting the cost of medical treatment of refugees in public hospitals in neighbouring countries, especially in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, and providing support for medicines of chronic diseases.

Protection

The protection of civilians throughout Syria is one of the most important issues with the increase of violence and the collapse of safety social networks, thus we call for:

- Imposing comprehensive ceasefire and ending hostile actions, in light of the continuous violations of international humanitarian law, and protecting conflict areas from the risk of Covid-19 outbreak.
- The issue of detainees is a focal and a pressing humanitarian issue, that has not been solved yet to ease the suffering of hundreds of thousands of families of detainees', who want to know the fate of their beloved ones, or the way to achieve to justice. Therefore, we recommend supporting the organization of a specialized international conference on detainees and forced disappearances regardless of the progress in the political or constitutional process. We also recommend putting pressure for the immediate release, of all detainees and forcibly disappeared, from the regime prisons, especially with the risk of Covid-19 outbreak, given the disastrous conditions of detention, the thing that will impact negatively on them. We call for the urgent delivery of health services to them. We call on the EU and UN to secure access to the specialized committees to visit all detention centres, to submit reports on the situation

of detainees and forced disappearances, and to know the fate of the missing persons to inform their families.

Education and Child Protection

We call for:

- Increasing financial and technical support for education and child protection programs to improve the quality of education. We also call for facilitating access to formal and informal education in camps and areas of displacement, or allocating schools for Syrian refugees in asylum countries, particularly Iraq and Lebanon, and improving the quality of education by building teachers' capacities. Similarly, we call for improving the Internet infrastructure in Syria to allow the online educational process to take place, as a preventive response to Corona-virus, in addition to including support programs for conditional education to support parents' ability to continue their children's education.
- The programs should include support for all educational levels, including university education, and vocational training related to the labour market. We call for supporting the chances of accessing higher and vocational education inside Syrian, and in the host countries.
- Supporting tertiary education as well as concrete vocational training, can warrant the future of Syrian young women and men, and prevent them from drifting in negative mechanisms of adaptation such as early marriages, or armed recruitment.
- Making efforts to secure recognition in the educational process, outside the regime control, starting from primary schools, and ending with university degrees. We request the support and supervision of UN international organizations or agencies such as UNSECO and UNICEF to secure such a recognition, seizing the opportunity to spread a culture of distance education to obtain credit for school certificates from international recognition bodies without the need for physical presence because the absence of recognition in certificates is one of the primary of school dropout.
- Pressing the need for unifying school education curricula on all Syrian lands to build peace and future for Syrian children. This could be done through developing school curricula that contribute to building a unified Syrian national identity, and respect the privacy, and diversity of the culture of the Syrian people.

Justice and Social Cohesion for Syrians

- As a basis for achieving justice and ensuring sustainable peace, we call on the assembled states to adhere to a political solution based on the Geneva Declaration 1 (2012) and Security Council resolutions 2254 and 2118, beginning with a comprehensive ceasefire and the establishment of a credible transitional governing body, and the release of all oppressive detainees, and revealing the status of all missing and forcibly disappeared people. We call for holding all perpetrators accountable for war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and human rights violations. Moreover, we require condemning forced displacement/migration and the demographic change in all its forms and removing its consequences and preventing their recurrence in the future, returning properties that were stolen to their owners, and

ensuring that there is no reconstruction in Syria before achieving the political transfer of power and ensuring a stable and secure environment to guarantee the safe return of all refugees and displaced people.

- We affirm the importance of supporting human rights organizations working in the field of justice and supporting the paths of litigation and expanding them in Europe, and supporting the associations of victims and their families, in addition to supporting transitional justice mechanisms and achieving comprehensive accountability, and working with local partners to find better ways to deal with due diligence to combat terrorism instead of freezing or stopping programs, which threaten the lives of civilians, their dignity, and their well-being.
- We call on the EU countries to expand the circle of ongoing trials in several countries under universal jurisdiction to include everyone involved in committing violations in Syria, supporting investigation and prosecution units in countries that use this power, and encouraging other countries to include this global power in their laws, leaving the field open for personal allegations with evidence to prosecute known criminals by the families and relatives of the victims, depending on the efforts made by the international investigation committee and the independent and impartial international mechanism, and making use of the large and important number of documents carried out by the SCS Organizations and human rights organizations, and providing support to them to ensure the continuation of their work.
- We affirm the application of the Pinero rules for the protection of personal property since 2011 until now, the abolition of all laws, legislations and decisions issued during this period, facilitating procedures for IDPs and refugees to manage their properties, and continuing to support documentation efforts for violations of housing, land and property rights (HLP)

Civil Space

We hope that the EU will be a partner in the Civil process in Syria by supporting the transformation led by the SCS for civil policy, protecting civil spaces and supporting the active participation of the civil society in the constitution-drafting process that is currently taking place under the auspices of the UN. This partnership should include providing transparent mechanisms and channels of communication between the EU institutions and the SCS, increasing the opportunities of communication, meeting and networking among activists from different regions which will enhance the free civil dialogue among them. Additionally, we call for enhancing and strengthening the monitoring role of the SCS in humanitarian financing operations or in political tracks.

We should also recall the importance of supporting small local community initiatives, by reviewing the difficult grants conditions, and the necessity of adopting a policy of direct support of small local civil and humanitarian institutions by the agencies of the European donors.

In addition to supporting civil society institutions working in areas of development and human rights in northern Syria because of their active role in protecting the civil work space in the regions, protecting the interests of civilians, and confronting the dominant de facto forces.

Permanent Solutions for the Displaced Syrians

- The social and economic pressures in the host countries especially in light of Covid 19 crisis, lead to an escalation of "push factors" towards the involuntary return of the refugees Syrians to Syria. We call on the host governments more than ever to adopt a positive engagement in the search for a political solution in Syria as the only solution to the Syrian refugee crisis in their countries. We also call on the international community to share this responsibility by ensuring that its humanitarian and development funding enhances the best interests of the displaced Syrians. We also suggest establishing monitoring mechanisms to track and measure the physical and legal safety of Syrian refugees in the host countries.

- We believe that the evidence available to date is sufficient for the international community to understand that violations and discrimination against returnees of refugees and internally displaced people are systematic processes, to the point that the decision to return to their places of origin in Syria can be considered a life-threatening decision. Therefore, humanitarian aid and development agencies and their policies should not ignore the serious physical, legal and material risks facing the returnees to Syria.

The current return to Syria is based on a lack of other options, and therefore, cannot be described as “voluntary”, “decent”, or “safe.” The basic needs and conditions for a voluntary, dignified and safe return to Syria must be met before actors begin promoting or facilitating this return. The necessary steps for voluntary safe return are set out in the "Comprehensive Protection Strategy and Solutions for CPSS Returns". However, these steps cannot be achieved without a political solution that grass roots of the conflict. We, therefore, call for the establishment of a mechanism that includes Civil Society Organizations led by the displaced Syrians, along with the UNHCR to prevent any agenda that aims to change the original demography of Syria, which, when it occurs, will leave the returnees as IDPs again,

- Coordination mechanisms for the regional response of refugees lack the high-level attendance and participation of NGOs led by Syrian refugees. The strengthening of these mechanisms - in particular the 3RP and the Regional Group for Permanent Solutions - to include organizations led by Syrians / refugees is necessary for preventing further forced return from host countries.