

Brussels VII Conference

The White Helmets Briefing Note

Introduction

This briefing is intended to provide recommendations for European Union (EU) member states and donors in the lead up to the Brussels VII Conference in June on proposed discussion topics and outcomes for the Conference.



About the White Helmets

The White Helmets is a humanitarian organization composed of almost 3,000 civilian volunteers dedicated to helping communities prepare for, respond to, and recover after emergencies. We provide emergency search and rescue services, primary and emergency healthcare and community resilience projects to more than 400,000 direct beneficiaries per year, and to a total population of more than 4.5 million people in northwest Syria. In our role as first responders, we have also become the primary witnesses to war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria and work to support accountability and justice for Syrians.

Context

The European Union will be hosting the seventh Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region' on June 12. The Brussels Conference is the main pledging and member state conference on the crisis in Syria and neighboring countries, with a day of dialogue for civil society consultations, and a ministerial level pledging event. It is an important opportunity to reassert the international community's commitment to and support for Syrians, refugees, and their host communities.

The Conference this year comes at a critical time. The humanitarian needs are at an all-time high following the earthquakes that hit Syria and Türkiye on February 6 and with over a decade of conflict. Prior to the earthquake, 15.3 million people were found to be in need of humanitarian assistance across all Syria,

exacerbated by the now 8.8 million people who were affected across Syria, primarily in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, and to a lesser extent Latakia, Tartous, Homs and Hama.¹ In Northwest Syria, eighty five percent of communities have been impacted by the earthquake, both directly and due to the influx of displaced persons from earthquake affected areas.² 55,000 families have been displaced and in need of shelter, WASH, multipurpose cash, and protection services.³

The earthquakes have also caused widespread damage to 10,600 buildings including schools, hospitals, and other essential infrastructure.⁴

Against this spiraling catastrophe, the Syrian regime has continued airstrikes, targeting non-government controlled areas in the northwest of Syria, which is severely undermining the humanitarian response to the devastating impacts of the earthquake. Although hostilities have for the most part scaled down, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks by the regime, Russian forces, their allies and other parties to the conflict continue including through the use of barrel bombs, mortar attacks and other explosive weapons in populated areas. Since the February 6 earthquake, the White Helmets has responded to 107 military attacks on 49 communities in northwest Syria. The lack of justice and accountability for war crimes and continued impunity has allowed the regime to continue the atrocities against the Syrian people unabated.

For over 12 years, the people of Syria have endured numerous crimes committed by the Assad regime against the civilian population, including the use of chemical weapons, forced displacement, targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and killing under torture. However, despite this grim outlook, the Brussels Conference offers a unique opportunity for the international community to revive political commitment and concerted efforts towards a resolution of the crisis and a political settlement in line with UNSC 2254.

Recommendations

The Brussels Conference is an important opportunity to mobilize the international community in support of a comprehensive and credible political solution to the Syria conflict, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. With this in mind, we have put forward the following recommendations, informed by our volunteers' local lived experience of the crisis in Syria.

¹ DFS, Syria Earthquake March 2023 Government-Controlled Areas, Bi-Weekly Highlights, Relief Web, March 3, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-earthquake-march-2023-government-controlled-areas-bi-weekly-highlights-03032023>.

² Post-Earthquake Rapid Needs Assessment, Syria Civil Defence, March 3, 2023.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

• Humanitarian Assistance

- *Center the voices of Syrians in all their diversity in discussions about Syria:*

States must ensure the meaningful participation of Syrians, including civil society organizations, both in the Brussels Conference and in other political processes or decisions about Syria.

- *Promote greater accountability to affected populations:*

It is of vital importance that affected populations remain front and center in all recommendations and statements of the Brussels Conference. This not only includes accountability to populations' humanitarian needs, but also safeguarding affected people's protection, dignity, and safety.

- *Promote a conflict-sensitive and nexus approach to humanitarian assistance:*

Operational environments such as Syria warrant a humanitarian-peace nexus approach to ensure that humanitarian assistance is not undermining peace and accountability efforts. All actors must ensure that all programs and interventions are designed in a conflict-sensitive manner. This includes understanding how our interventions may impact conflict dynamics on the ground and ensuring we prioritize minimizing the harm to affected populations.

- *Ensure the sustained, unfettered, and unhindered access of lifesaving humanitarian assistance to Syria through all possible entry points and advocate for a long term, sustainable solution to cross-border humanitarian assistance:*

Cross-border humanitarian assistance is a lifeline for Syrians in the northwest of Syria. We are concerned by the lack of a sustainable solution and uncertainty surrounding cross-border assistance. This, alongside limiting the discussions on cross-border to only one UN border crossing, Bab al-Hawa, reflects the continuously shrinking humanitarian space in the northwest and northeast of Syria. Further, discussions surrounding the cross-border mechanisms in the UNSC have been largely political, rather than focusing on the reality of humanitarian needs on the ground. Affected population's access to humanitarian aid must be absolute and not subject to approvals or authorizations from any parties. The Brussels Conference should be leveraged to generate momentum and coordinated action on humanitarian access in Syria and propose a long term and a more sustainable solution that would not be subject to political decisions.

- ***Exercise caution when considering the potential for cross-line assistance:***

The prospect of significant cross-line assistance from regime-controlled areas in northwest and northeast Syria remains very limited. Since the 6 February earthquakes, there have been no cross-line aid deliveries to northwest Syria from regime-held areas. There is well-documented evidence of aid manipulation, siphoning, and the deliberate withholding of aid for political and military gain by the regime.⁵ Such issues, in addition to the psychological impact on Syrians of receiving aid from the regime responsible for their forced displacement and humanitarian suffering, must be seriously considered and safeguarded against when proposing increased cross-line aid.

- ***Support efforts to ensure the new border crossing remain open, including through the UN and Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs:***

In the aftermath of the earthquakes, two additional border crossings were opened on February 14 – Bab al-Salameh and Al-Rai – for a total duration of 3 months following an agreement facilitated by the UN. These additional crossings have been essential for the scale of mobilization that is needed in Syria, but three months are not enough.

States should advocate for all border crossings to remain open to allow humanitarian actors to meet the level of need in northwest Syria and support efforts in this regard.

- ***Encourage discussion of the legal basis for UN cross-border aid:***

The Brussels Conference should be leveraged to generate momentum and coordinated action on humanitarian access in Syria. All humanitarian actors should express encouragement for more open dialogue, including on the legal basis for UN cross-border humanitarian access, and ensure that aid access is based on need and removed from the politicization of the UNSC to allow the Security Council to focus efforts on addressing the political process in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254.

- ***Increase support to address humanitarian needs in Syria:***

While there has been increased support to Syria in the aftermath of the earthquake, only 6.9 per cent of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for 2023 has been funded. At least 4.1 million people in northwest Syria rely on humanitarian aid to meet their most basic needs and this will only continue to grow. Donors must ensure continued multi-year and flexible funding to support the response in Syria.

⁵ See: Hall, Natasha, Rescuing Aid in Syria, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220214_Hall_Rescuing_Aid_Syria.pdf?hG4dKipxCaBNDRDaezmDvn2IHVmr8937; Fox, Tessa, “Assad regime ‘siphons millions in aid’ by manipulating Syria’s currency”, The Guardian, October 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/21/sad-regime-siphons-millions-in-aid-by-manipulating-syrias-currency>; UN Procurement Contracts in Syria: A “few” Bad Apples?, Syrian Legal Development Program, 2022, https://sldp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/SLDP_OPEN-UN-Procurement-in-Syria-En.pdf. February 14, 2022.

- ***Call for greater localization of humanitarian aid, including a localization strategy in Syria:***

The earthquake response and the continued challenges with cross-border assistance have reaffirmed that local organizations are the primary humanitarian actors in northwest Syria. In the absence of UN physical presence, agencies have relied on implementing partners, including local organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance in hard-to-reach areas. It is critical to develop a localization strategy for Syria to ensure the cementation of these efforts and a clear roadmap for progress.

- ***Increased support towards building the capacity of local organizations:***

While local organizations continue to play a critical role in Syria, the earthquake response brought to light some gaps in local capacities and highlighted the need for greater capacity building support to local organizations to respond at the scale needed. This is particularly critical given the uncertainties surrounding cross-border assistance. Donors must ensure dedicated support to local organizations, including capacity building support, to further enhance the overall response and community resilience in northwest Syria.

- ***Promote humanitarian early recovery:***

Early recovery is vital to enable recipients of humanitarian assistance to support themselves sustainably and reduce their reliance on humanitarian assistance. After 12 years of conflict, humanitarians must shift to a more sustainable and long-term vision to deliver humanitarian assistance in the most dignified manner.

At the same time, ambiguities surrounding early recovery support may risk framing this funding as reconstruction efforts when Syria, under the current conditions, does not fulfil the requirements for reconstruction, absent a credible political solution consistent with resolution 2254. Donors must ensure that support to early recovery remains strictly anchored in humanitarian assistance and is based on need.

- **Justice and Accountability**

- ***Prioritize pursuing justice and accountability for the victims of atrocities in Syria:***

Throughout the course of the conflict in Syria every major principle of international law has been violated including indiscriminate attacks on civilians, perpetrated sexual violence, attacks with chemical weapons and the obstruction of humanitarian aid. States must end the climate of impunity and work through all available legal and diplomatic channels to end impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Peace in the region cannot be sustainable without meaningful avenues for justice.

- ***Continue to enforce sanctions, including economic, diplomatic and political sanctions, until accountability is pursued:***

Despite the absence of accountability for the crimes that the Syrian authorities have committed or the critical reforms necessary for a political settlement in line with UNSC 2254, an increasing number of states have taken tentative steps towards normalizing diplomatic relations with the Syrian government.

There have also been increasing calls in the aftermath of the earthquake advocating to ease sanctions against the regime. We stress that sanctions are an important measure to ensure the protection of civilians in Syria including by depriving the regime of resources to commit acts of violence against civilians and preventing aid divergence by entities owned by designated war criminals to the extent possible. The international community must continue to apply pressure on the regime through sanctions and diplomacy until accountability and justice in Syria is actualized and ensure that all responses, measures, recommendations, and plans prioritize the protection, human rights, and well-being of Syrians.

- ***Addressing the impunity gap, including for the use of Chemical weapons:***

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' investigative teams have confirmed the use of chemical weapons in Syria on 13 instances and confirmed that the regime was the perpetrator of 9 attacks, and ISIS responsible for 2. With the truth of these attacks internationally established, states should create a fair process for victims and the family of victims of chemical attacks to seek justice and to demonstrate that the international community will not tolerate violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

- ***Support the process and contribute to the effectiveness of the Mechanism for the Missing:***

Truth is the first step towards justice and accountability.

The proposed Mechanism for the Missing seeks to establish the truth of what has happened to the estimated 111,000 victims of enforced disappearance in Syria.⁶ States should ensure that the Mechanism has the necessary authority and leverage to provide answers to the families of victims of the disappeared no matter the party responsible for their disappearance, including the regime.

- **Political solution**

- ***The larger political context cannot be ignored:***

The humanitarian needs have not emerged out of a vacuum but are rather a consequence of the Syrian regime's deliberate and systematic atrocities against the people of Syria. Without addressing this root cause of the crisis, the needs in Syria will only continue to grow. States must take concrete steps towards a political roadmap for Syria, and ensure justice and accountability for the people of Syria.

- ***Put pressure on the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict to put an end to attacks on civilians and civilian objects:***

Attacks on civilians, homes, civilian infrastructure and farmlands continue. Although the level of hostilities has reduced significantly over the past three years, shelling and airstrikes contribute to the upward trend in needs and ensure that Syrians living in northwest Syria continue to live in a state of fear.

⁶ Annual Report on Forced Disappearance in Syria, Syrian Network for Human Rights, August 2022. <https://bit.ly/3MJ4YOU>

Donors must call on the Syrian regime to put an end to all attacks including attacks on civilians and civilian objects like healthcare facilities.

- ***Reaffirm the importance of UNSC 2254:***

While humanitarian assistance is critical, affected populations in Syria continue to echo a united call for a political settlement and resolution to the conflict, and accountability for the victims of the atrocities. In this spirit of accountability to affected populations, all actors must continue to put pressure on the regime to take concrete steps to reach a political settlement in line with UNSC 2254 and prioritize efforts in this regard.

- ***Nothing about us without us:***

Ensure that the interests and voices of Syrians, including women, internally displaced people, refugees, and victims, are represented in diplomatic and political efforts towards a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria, in line with UN Resolution 2254.

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Syria Civil Defence