



On the 24th and 25th April 2018, the international community will take part in the second Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region'. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) believes the following concerns should guide international efforts in the lead up to and following the Conference:

1) Violence shows no sign of abating: Syria remains unsafe for refugees to return

With no end in sight, the war in Syria continues to be fought with outright disregard for international humanitarian law and for the efforts of the UN to protect civilians and end the violence. The suspected chemical attack carried out earlier this month in the rural Damascus town of Douma only serves to further demonstrate that civilians are utterly exposed. UNHCR estimates that 133,000 people fled Eastern Ghouta between March 9th and April 10

In light of the continuing fighting, lack of livelihood opportunities in the communities of origin and limited humanitarian access to people in need, any premature talk about returns risks creating push and pull factors that are likely to expose Syrian displaced people to further danger and harm.

Recommendations

The EU and Member States must use the Brussels Conference as a forum to seriously assess the best course of action at a diplomatic level. The EU must use all its diplomatic leverage with Russia, Iran and Turkey to create the conditions for the implementation of UNSCR 2401, ending Russian opposition to the renewal of the Joint Investigative Mechanisms and securing international humanitarian law. This must include the immediate lifting of remaining Government sieges and facilitating unhindered, safe and sustained humanitarian access to all those in need.

In light of increasing levels of violence and barbaric use of force, the Brussels Conference provides a high-level platform for the EU and the wider international community to send a strong and unequivocal message that Syria is not safe for returns. While it is important to consider and identify interventions to support those who return to Syria in ways that do not create pull factors, the EU must be categorical in its position that commits to the principle of non refoulement and does not support efforts to return refugees to Syria. This must be accompanied by a strong message that it stands ready to support host communities to continue to provide a safe haven for Syrian refugees for as long as needed and until the war is over.

2) Humanitarian access remains insufficient

Humanitarian access remains grossly inadequate and often deeply politicised. Continuous arbitrary administrative and bureaucratic restrictions have resulted in a severe reduction in cross-line access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas. 2017 saw a 40% reduction in the delivery of assistance to these areas as compared to 2016 (OCHA)². Only 27% of requested cross-line convoys were approved in 2017 and that figure has dropped to only 5% in the first quarter of 2018 (OCHA).³ Furthermore, armed groups - and particularly those allied with the Government of Syria - have consistently interfered with aid deliveries and removed life-saving medicines and medical supplies, with nearly 100,000 medical supplies refused or removed from convoys in the first half of 2017. It remains to be seen whether the large population of Eastern Ghouta will at last be able to access the aid they urgently need, now that they are no longer living

Despite talks of de-escalation, close to 2.3 million people in need live in hard-to-reach areas that humanitarian actors are unable to reach in a sustained manner. The renewal of UNSC resolution 2165 that allows cross-border assistance into Syria was vital for the 15 million people who benefitted from it since its adoption in 2014. In 2017, more than 40% of aid was delivered through cross-border assistance reaching an average of 2.76 million people per month, with a peak of 3.8 million in December 2017.

Whilst cross-border assistance remains the only possible modality for delivery in most of the remaining opposition-held areas, Russia and the Government of Syria have expressed reservations about renewing the resolution. Furthermore, since cross-line assistance remains inadequate, it is critical to ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to ensure those in opposition-held areas continue to receive assistance.

Recommendations

As government, its supporters and neighbours and particularly on permanent and elected members of the UN Security Council - to push for increased humanitarian access in opposition-controlled areas and to protect cross border humanitarian access into Syria.

As the Government takes control of more territory and the delivery of cross-line assistance is increasingly restricted, sustained diplomatic engagement with the permanent and elected members of the Security Council is needed to ensure that people in opposition-held areas continue to receive assistance by all available means, including cross-border access.

3) Investment in the region remains critical

IRC research conducted with refugee returnees in Homs, Idl

4) Inside Syria, supporting resilience must be at the core of international efforts

The 7-year long conflict that has ravaged the country has left millions of people inside Syria deprived of livelihood, cash and savings. The aid Syrians have been receiving is quickly depleted, and with ongoing conflict dynamics causing further displacements and insecurity, people continue to struggle to support themselves and their families. It is estimated that the conflict has brought Syria's development back four decades⁷.

In 2017, four out of five Syrians were living in poverty and the Syrian economy has shrunk by 40% from 2011. The shrinking economy has resulted in a massive loss of livelihoods for the majority of Syrians. Over 50% of working age Syrians do not have a job – a figure that increases to 75% among youth of working age. Without access to reliable work, many Syrians resort to harmful coping strategies to meet their basic household needs, such as sending children to work, joining armed groups, survival sex, early and forced marriage, and working in dangerous conditions. Being unable to access work and become self-sufficient also has serious effects on mental health and wellbeing, leading to elevated levels of stress and a sense of

and emotional wellbeing.

Access to livelihoods can reverse these trends by giving people dignity, the ability to feed their families, to feel productive, pay for healthcare and education, contribute to host economies and recover from conflict-related shocks. Livelihoods programming, when designed in a way that addresses multiple humanitarian outcomes, including economic wellbeing, education, health and safety, allows beneficiaries to be the drivers of their own future. Economic wellbeing has the potential to build self-sufficiency in other areas from preventing negative coping mechanisms to ensuring families have the means to purchase food, medicines and pay school fees. Further, the skills gained from livelihoods interventions such as trainings, small enterprise development and apprenticeships are lifelong assets for beneficiaries, transferable to any other context. In addition to benefits in terms of socio-ability to access sustainable income can help to support improved outcomes in terms of protection, freedom of movement, access to better healthcare, food security

Whilst no large-scale reconstruction efforts should be supported unless a meaningful and inclusive political transition is in place, the international community must continue to invest in humanitarian assistance inside Syria that supports livelihoods, early recovery, and the longer-term resilience of households and communities, thereby contributing to the long-term recovery of Syria without pre-empting a political resolution.

Such a resilience-focused approach must be conflict-sensitive and address humanitarian needs while strengthening the ability of individuals and communities to recover from the losses they have endured and be prepared for

key in order to effectively address the broad range of challenges Syrians face and foster inclusive, community-based, economic resilience for Syrians. However, in 2017, the early recovery and livelihoods sector of the Humanitarian Response Plan was only funded at around 17% of the target, thus preventing the scaling-up of such activities to meet the needs.

Recommendations

As part of the forward-thinking exercise

Commit to stepping up their contributions to the early recovery and livelihoods sector of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, with a view to rebuilding markets and supporting agriculture, small businesses and livelihoods opportunities for particularly vulnerable groups.

Ensure support for UN agencies is complemented by direct support to INGO platforms working

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