

## **Situation in Syria and proposed recommendations for UK policymakers**

### **Background – Action For Humanity/Syria Relief**

Action For Humanity (originally named Syria Relief) was established in 2011 in response to the crisis. The organisation was formed by a group of Syrian heritage that came together to provide emergency humanitarian aid for what was initially assumed would be a short-term outreach. As the conflict grew, so did its operation, and now Action For Humanity supports 10 people around the world every minute.

Currently within Syria, the organisation provides support in vital areas such as food aid and security, education, health, WASH, livelihoods and shelter and camp management, as well as protection. We also undertake advocacy and communications work to ensure that policymakers, both in the UK and globally, protect the rights of Syrian civilians.

### **Introduction**

Around the world, Syrians are experiencing a renewed sense of hope. However, this shift does not diminish the deep suffering endured by the Syrian people, who continue to face an ongoing humanitarian crisis, conflict in parts of the country, and the search for justice and accountability for large-scale violations committed by the regime—many of which are only now being uncovered. This crisis, decades in the making, will require sustained support and renewed engagement, particularly considering recent significant developments.

This briefing paper outlines the latest on the humanitarian situation, priority needs as well as proposed recommendations from Syrians themselves to the international community.

### **Humanitarian situation**

When it comes to the latest humanitarian situation, our teams are seeing newly arrived families in liberated areas in dire need of food, especially ready to eat items. Extreme weather in the northern cities have left families in temporary collective shelters in a critical situation and households urgently require winterisation support, along with cash and livelihood assistance. In addition to this, schools are being used as temporary shelter for internally displaced persons, further disrupting children's education.

As it stands, Syria's humanitarian needs are at their highest, and funding to address them is more critical than ever.

### *Recommendations*

- Additional resources must be mobilised for Syria to address the return of displaced people, food insecurity, and the urgent need for healthcare and shelter.
- Donors must allow flexibility on existing grants and award new grants/pledge funding for humanitarian aid to respond to the immense scale of need. In addition, donors must prioritise providing aid to local and national organisations who are able to deliver effective humanitarian action. Specifically: -
  - Immediate actions such as distribution of ready-to-eat food parcels is required to keep children, pregnant and lactating women from malnutrition;
  - There is a need for carpets, blankets and mattresses particularly for families living in crowded conditions.;

- Other items urgently in need (particularly considering winterisation) include cooking stoves, cooking fuel and kitchen sets in all emergency collective centres (as well as heaters and heating fuel);
- There must be increased provision of cash and livelihoods assistance. Cash assistance offers flexibility, choice, enhanced dignity, and a much higher level of participation in the program delivery process.
- There is an urgent need to prioritise the rapid establishment of safe and temporary learning spaces for displaced children to ensure the continuity of their education. The ongoing situation has caused disruptions raising concerns about the potential loss of another academic semester.

### **Explosive ordnances**

Syria faces widespread contamination from landmines and other explosive remnants of war. It consistently has one of the highest casualty rates globally due to these dangers. In 2023, Syria had the second-highest casualty rate, and it ranked first in 2020, 2021, and 2022. It is estimated that half of Syria's population lives in areas contaminated by explosive ordnance.

#### *Recommendation*

- Humanitarian mine action is a key enabler to many aspects of the humanitarian response and clearance is the only way forward to permanently reduce the threat from explosive weapons.

### **De-escalation and respect for international law**

The security and humanitarian situation in the northern parts of Syria has remained volatile with continued clashes and shifts in territorial control. A ceasefire agreement – facilitated by the US – was reached between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian National Army (SNA) on 11 December. In recent weeks, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes across the country hitting most of Syria's weapon stockpiles.

#### *Recommendations*

- The international community, including the UK government, must unequivocally condemn any violations committed against civilians by all armed actors and there must be a reiteration of the need to respect obligations under international humanitarian law including the protection of civilians, humanitarian workers and medical personnel.
- Governments must continue to use their diplomatic influence to ensure de-escalation, that a ceasefire is maintained to protect civilians and violence is avoided. This includes condemning Israel's unlawful attacks on Syria and calling for end of its unlawful presence in the country which risks destabilising an already fragile context.

### **Syrian refugees**

Currently the assessment of humanitarian organisations is that Syria remains unsafe for the dignified and sustainable return of displaced individuals. This is due to ongoing insecurity though this is likely to change in the future. At this moment, UNHCR protection thresholds are still far from being met.

Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a situation where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and other irreparable harm. There is significant concern over recent decisions by countries, including the UK, to suspend asylum decisions following the regime's collapse and changes in authority.

### *Recommendations*

- It is critical that no asylum seeker is forcibly returned, in line with the non-refoulement principle, and that states continue to offer protection. Given the uncertainty of the situation, states must closely monitor developments and only make decisions when returns can be safe, voluntary, and dignified.

### **Justice and accountability efforts**

Syrians have endured a horrifying range of human rights violations, resulting in immense suffering on a massive scale, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and extermination, constituting crimes against humanity. There must be support for accountability measures and political solutions to address the root causes of human rights and humanitarian violations to date.

### *Recommendations*

- Courts should initiate a preliminary investigation of crimes against humanity committed by Assad and government representatives to demonstrate that there will be no impunity for rights violations. A truth and reconciliation commission should also be considered.
- Specialised support systems must be established for survivors of torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances to help rebuild their lives.
- It is critical, as under obligations of international law, that there is security and protection of mass graves and burial sites. Protecting these sites is crucial as they may contain vital information and evidence that will aid in ensuring accountability and help preserve the right to truth, effective remedies, and reparations for the families of the missing and deceased.

### **Way forward**

The UK government should leverage its position with the de facto authorities and should tie any recognition and/or engagement to compliance with international norms and progress towards a stable and inclusive authority. Facilitating an inclusive political transition is key to establishing stable, democratic governance that upholds human rights and prevents further instability. This transition must reflect Syria's ethnic, religious, and gender diversity, with significant participation from women, minorities, and civil society.

Comprehensive support for Syrians, including civil society, is crucial. Their voices must not only be heard but guide the process. There is a need for shared spaces where all Syrians can collaborate, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity. Syrians must shape their own future.

Given the evolving context, there must be consideration given to diplomatic relations with the new de facto authorities and a re-assessment of sanctions considering the urgent need for reconstruction.

**For more information, please contact Charles Lawley (Director of Advocacy and Communications) or Kafia Omar (Advocacy and Communications Manager) on [charles.lawley@actionforhumanity.org](mailto:charles.lawley@actionforhumanity.org) and [kafia.omar@actionforhumanity.org](mailto:kafia.omar@actionforhumanity.org)**