

Ten years of war in Syria: Perspectives from CAFOD

Briefing for UK Parliamentarians | March 2021

Background

Monday 15th March will mark the 10th anniversary of the Syrian crisis. The conflict is still ongoing and the situation in Syria and the region remains critical. On March 29th-30th the international community convenes for a major conference “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” to take stock of international aid to Syria and protection efforts in the crisis.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise the protection of Syrian refugees, wherever they have fled to, and oppose any moves to forcibly return them to Syria in the absence of any meaningful guarantees of safety.
2. Strengthen support for local Syrian civil society groups working to save lives and uphold human rights. In the context of global aid cuts, local groups risking their lives on the frontline should be prioritised for UK funds.
3. Champion political negotiations which address the root causes of the crisis and tackle all forms of ongoing violence, including arbitrary imprisonment, sexual violence, and attacks on civil society space.

Refugee Protection

Over 12 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes in Syria since 2011. Over 6 million are displaced internally, 5 million are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries and over 1 million more have fled to Europe or elsewhere. The majority of people displaced in and from Syria have no viable prospects for a solution to their displacement in the near future.

UNHCR, the UN agency responsible for refugees, has come under increasing pressure by some governments to expedite returns of refugees. These calls come despite the lack of effective mechanisms to guarantee or monitor the protection of those that return, and a lack of any options for returnees to report any concerns and seek redress.

Yet, CAFOD’s partner organisations in Lebanon have already documented cases of forced returns of Syrian refugees from Lebanon. There have been reports that some of those forcibly returned have since been arrested and their fate is now unknown.

Policies and practices have also been enacted by governments in neighbouring host countries which make life unbearable for the refugees. This includes refusing to renew their legal registration, undertaking arrests and other forms of harassment of refugees engaged in the informal economy.

Donor governments, including the UK, have significant influence on the approach of national authorities to protecting refugees.

Syrian civil society

Throughout the conflict, local Syrian NGOs have played an essential role on the frontline providing life-saving humanitarian assistance and protection. They have also played a wider role in support of human rights and greater accountability.

As the British Government moves to cut its aid budget, serious concerns have been raised over the fate of funding for the Syrian crisis response in general, and for local civil society groups in particular.

Some FCDO officials have argued that UK funds channelled through the UN can still reach local organisations, but the reality is that UN agencies and funding mechanisms are notoriously inconsistent in their approach to partnering with local NGOs, and UN sub-grants to local NGOs are often short-term, inflexible and do not adequately cover their basic core running costs.

According to [analysis](#) in 2019, only 0.8% of total funding reported through the UN system in Syria was allocated to local and national actors directly; and less than 20% of humanitarian appeals by Syrian NGOs were funded.

A key argument made for integrating FCO and DFID into FCDO was to foster a more contextualised, politically-informed approach to aid. To deliver on this, the FCDO should direct funds through regional or country-level partnerships and platforms which foster local NGO leadership. This approach would get resources directly to local groups and foster better dialogue between Embassies and local civil society.

Some CAFOD partners have benefited from UK funds. For example, UK funds supported a grant through the START Network, which helped a local organisation address health impacts of Covid19 in Idlib. START is one example of an NGO-led platform setting clear and meaningful metrics on empowering local civil society, there are other examples of Syrian NGO-led platforms specific to the context, these deserve increased UK support.

Political negotiations

The UN Special Envoy [this month warned that](#) “without constructive international diplomacy Syria’s peace process will not move forward.” Pope Francis has made several [statements](#) calling for a return to negotiations and a political settlement to the conflict; guaranteed by the international community.

But as of January 2021, the UN-facilitated ‘Geneva’ political negotiations, including work through a Constitutional review committee, have ground to a halt.

Another political negotiation process – the ‘Astana’ process - taken forward by Russia, Iran and Turkey does not have issues such as the internal drivers of violence and peacebuilding on the table.

Whilst the challenges are manifold, the UK has an important role to play in engaging with other actors to press for revived and effective political negotiations. To work towards addressing root causes of the violence, practical indicators for progress on this, or lack of it, must be established, prioritised and championed through UK diplomacy.

Ending all forms of violence

For this reason, we highlight the importance of tracking efforts to defend the space for civil society to operate safely and independently, and action on arbitrary detention and imprisonment.

In common with other civil society groups, some of CAFOD's local partners have seen members of their staff, activists and volunteers inside Syria detained, tortured, killed and disappeared. This month, the UN Commission on Inquiry published a [report](#) documenting the horrific and extensive human rights abuses perpetrated against detainees. The report outlines how the Government of Syria, and to a lesser extent other parties to the conflict, are deliberately prolonging the suffering of their family members and loved ones.

The fate of tens of thousands of civilians who were forcibly disappeared, many nearly a decade ago, remains unknown. Many are presumed to have died or been executed, while some are believed to be held in inhuman conditions of detention.

CAFOD partner [Women Now For Development Syria](#) has provided support to [Families For Freedom](#), a network founded by relatives of the detained and disappeared. A ['Truth and Justice Charter'](#) has been produced with other groups campaigning on these issues outlining a common vision on both immediate priorities like the release of detainees and the provision of information about their whereabouts to their families; as well as steps towards justice, redress and accountability. We call on the UK Government to champion this Charter as an urgent priority.

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