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Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq: how to organise and support international aid?¹

Memorandum

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons

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1. Introduction

1. Following the last report presented by Mr Giacomo Santini,² it is now expected that there will be over 3 million Syrian refugees by the end of 2013.³ I would underline that this figure has practically increased tenfold, as in October 2012 the number of people who had been forced to flee the country was put at approximately 294 000. Growing numbers of Syrians are arriving in Europe. In some countries, between 3 000 and 5 000 asylum seekers from Syria are arriving every month, and the trend is far from stopping.

2. The main aim of this report is to alert the international community to the extremely precarious situation in which Syrian refugees find themselves. They need to be provided with decent living conditions, with a particular focus on key aspects such as education, health and housing. At the same time, emphasis must be placed on the particularly tragic situation of women and children, with the latter making up 53% of the refugees. A further aim of the report is to ask member states again to show solidarity and share responsibility by taking the necessary measures to cater for Syrian refugees as effectively as possible.

3. For the purpose of preparing this memorandum, I visited Lebanon and Turkey from 19 to 22 August 2013. I should like to thank everyone who helped me prepare the visit, in particular the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

2. The situation in Turkey

4. According to the latest estimates from the Turkish authorities, approximately 200 000 refugees are living in around 20 camps and 300 000 are living with families. According to UNHCR estimates, it is highly likely that the figure of 1 million refugees will be reached by the end of the year.

5. As in Iraq and Jordan, the refugees are living in tents in camps. The situation in Turkey is completely different from what I saw in Lebanon.

6. The camps I visited near Hatay were housing some 6 500 people in 214 tents and 300 "rooms". The camps are run very well by the Turkish authorities. There is access to drinking water and electricity, and the camps have sanitary facilities, infirmaries and internet access.

7. The children are able to attend classes. Indeed, on the day of my visit, one of the refugees told me that some teenagers had taken the school-leaving exam that morning.

¹ Declassified by the Committee on 2 October 2013.

² Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, "The European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria", Report Doc. 13045 (2012), available at:

<http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=19028&Language=en>. The corresponding Resolution 1902 is available at: <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/XRef/X2H-DW-XSL.asp?fileid=19156&lang=en>.

³ Internet portals on Syria and the Syria regional refugee response, UNHCR, available at:

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php> and <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

8. The camp managers seek to keep families together as far as possible, and the refugees each receive a sum of 35 euros a month (set by the World Food Programme) for personal purchases. This enables the refugees to have a semblance of social life and have contacts with local residents living outside the camps.

9. The government and the Turkish Red Crescent Society help refugees in the border areas so that they are catered for as well as possible, as most of them live in precarious circumstances and a dangerous environment.

10. As the number of refugees has doubled since the beginning of 2013, dealing with the situation is now becoming an increasingly heavy burden for the country, on top of which comes the problem of security. The double attack which claimed 51 lives in Reyhanli in Hatay province, near the Syrian border on 11 May, is still fresh in people's memories. The Turkish government blames these attacks on Turkish Alawite extremists who support the Syrian regime.⁴ It should be pointed out that, following the attacks, some Syrian families began wanting to leave Reyhanli, which was sometimes seen as a focal point of the Syrian rebellion,⁵ to take the no lesser risk of returning to Syria. Moreover, since the end of our visit, there has been an upsurge in violence in the town of Hatay. For the record, the town of Hatay, formerly known as Antioch, was part of Syria under French mandate after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire until 1939, when it became part of Turkey. Many residents in Hatay are of Syrian origin and most of them belong to the Alawite community (unlike Reyhanli, which is almost entirely Sunnite). That is the reason why many residents find it hard to accept the influx of Syrian refugees who are mostly Sunnis.

11. Given the situation in Syria, which is continuing to worsen, talks are under way in Turkey with a view to considering the possibility of treating the Syrians as refugees rather than guests, which would give them more rights. However, the Turkish authorities are aware that any such change could have an impact on local residents, employment and security.

3. The situation in Lebanon

12. Lebanon is the bordering country hardest hit by the conflict, as it is estimated that 2 200 Syrian refugees arrive there every day, including large numbers of women and children experiencing great financial and humanitarian difficulties. According to data provided by UNHCR, there are at present around 764 000 refugees registered or awaiting registration, and latest estimations in Lebanon make one in four a Syrian refugee.

13. Focusing on the situation in Lebanon is not insignificant insofar as the country, which has approximately 4 million inhabitants, has taken in large numbers of Syrian refugees. This has put severe strain on its ability to cope, as the UNHCR predicts that approximately 1 million Syrians will have sought refuge in Lebanon by the end of the year.

14. The situation is all the more difficult because Lebanon itself is experiencing a period of political, social and economic crisis and the problems are only being exacerbated by the conflicts along the border with Syria.

15. Moreover, Syrian refugees have always been very present in Lebanon. Following the end of the Lebanese civil war and the 1989 Taif agreement and the agreements signed by Syria and Lebanon, many Syrians came to Lebanon looking for work, mainly in the Beirut region.

16. In this context, I would also underline the very precarious conditions affecting Palestinian refugees, most of whom live in lawless areas in camps without water or electricity.

17. According to the exchanges of views I had with Lebanese citizens, the situation of the Syrian refugees is complicated by the fact that there is currently no legal framework for helping them. The key reason for this is that the refugees are Sunnis and are willing to take up arms in Lebanon to overthrow the Syrian regime.

⁴ Le Monde, "Le sud de la Turquie craint d'être pris dans le chaos syrien" (Southern Turkey afraid of being caught up in Syrian chaos), 15 May 2013, available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2013/05/15/le-sud-de-la-turquie-craint-d-etre-pris-dans-le-chaos-syrien_3229570_3214.html

⁵ Le Monde, "L'attentat de Reyhanli fragilise la mosaique ethnique et religieuse turque" (Reyhanli attack threatens Turkey's patchwork of ethnic and religious relations), 13 May 2013, available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/13/l-attentat-de-reyhanli-fragilise-la-mosaique-ethnique-et-religieuse-turque_3176343_3218.html

18. It should be noted here that Lebanon does not officially recognise the status of Syrian refugees, but does recognise the status of Palestinian refugees.

19. During my visits to collective accommodation centres, I noted that most of the refugees there were poor and were living in extremely precarious circumstances totally at odds with our principles for the protection of human rights.

20. By way of example, during a visit to the Abu Eliwa accommodation centre, which is home to approximately 32 families or roughly 150 people, the refugees I spoke to described – without any aggressiveness, it should be noted – the conditions in which they were living: dirty water, no sanitary facilities, no aid, high rents and no schools for their children. There is also the issue of visas which have to be renewed, for approximately €250, which is an astronomical sum for them.

21. What they want most of all are basic necessities: baby's nappies, covers for winter, access to schooling for their children and access to mobile clinics, etc.

22. At the same time, some wealthier refugees have sought to find their own flats when their families could not take them in, which has put property prices up sharply.

23. Poorer refugees receive material and financial aid from the Lebanese government and international organisations such as Doctors without Borders (MSF), the UNHCR and UNICEF, while small local associations also do what they can to look after the young and the sick and help refugees to build dwellings.

24. My discussions with the Lebanese authorities showed that the massive influx of refugees is having an impact on peace in the country, with some discussion partners indicating that the situation at present was like being on a powder keg ready to explode. There has been a rise in crime and unemployment and a drop in salaries, for which the Syrians are blamed. According to a poll conducted in July 2013 by the French news agency, AFP, approximately 54% of Lebanese no longer wanted to take in Syrian refugees, believing that their presence was a threat to the stability of the country. There has also been an upsurge in attacks and outbreaks of violence and growing tension between the different communities. Naturally, this insecurity is also affecting tourism, which used to account for 20% of Lebanese GDP.

25. The scale of the crisis in Lebanon cannot therefore be underestimated and there is an urgent need to increase humanitarian aid so as to provide the refugees with water, food, health care and housing, as the conditions currently prevailing in the country are having an extremely negative impact on the situation of the refugees and humanitarian aid workers who are increasingly afraid for their lives.

26. I would also like to express my disappointment about the lack of adequate funding to enable local and international bodies to respond effectively to the needs of the people affected by the Syrian crisis. As it has only received 40% of the necessary funding from donors, the UNHCR, for instance, has been forced to discontinue food aid for some of the refugees as from 1 October 2013 and only provide "targeted assistance" to those most in need, along with health and educational assistance.

4. The situation in the other bordering countries

4.1. The situation in Jordan

27. There are currently approximately 525 000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, almost all of whom are Sunnis from areas which have been bombed. They therefore represent 10% of the population. Many of them come from Damascus and have financial resources of their own, while most of the remainder are from rural areas.

28. The first refugees stayed with their families or friends. Those arriving more recently, however, tend to live in camps or in the countryside, for lack of financial resources. It should be pointed out that there are only four camps in Jordan and that 85% of the refugees first pass through the Zaatari camp to have documents made. They are only allowed to leave the camp if a Jordanian citizen agrees to act as sponsor.

29. According to the information received, the living conditions in the camps are inhumane. For instance, Zaatari camp lies in a very arid, windswept region, with no water supplies. As is the case in most of the other bordering countries, this leads to problems with diseases and also to an increase in tension and violence, as well as prostitution. In addition, the refugees are not allowed to work, but many do so illegally anyway.

30. The situation in rural areas is much easier because village residents show greater solidarity. The refugees are able, for instance, to occupy empty garages or rent houses for low rents.

31. As already mentioned above, the UNHCR representative in Damascus also recently noted a wide gap between the actual contributions by the donors which the UNHCR had appealed to and the financial resources needed to help the refugees.

4.2. The situation in Iraq

32. Unfortunately, I was unable to visit Irak, however, I gathered from various exchanges of views that more refugees from Syria have been arriving in Iraq in recent weeks, in particular in the north of the country and in Kurdistan, where camps have been set up, in particular since 15 August.

33. Moreover, since the end of August 2013, fighting has resumed in the Kurdish region of Syria, leading to the arrival of almost 40 000 people. At present, there are around 193 000 Syrians registered there with UNHCR.

34. The humanitarian situation is quite clearly deteriorating very quickly. The Iraqi authorities have made an urgent appeal to alert the international community.

5. The situation in other Council of Europe member states

35. According to EU figures, 24 000 Syrian refugees sought asylum in EU countries in 2012. While these figures are up, they are nevertheless modest. UNHCR has set the arrival rate in Europe at around 10 000 persons.

36. In this context, I must welcome the German authorities' decision to grant asylum to 5 000 Syrian refugees. They will be given two-year residence permits, which may be extended depending on the situation in Syria. It should be stressed that that is the largest asylum programme for Syrian refugees in Europe. According to the German Ministry of the Interior, almost 1 000 asylum applications were lodged during August 2013 alone and some Syrian refugees who have not yet been registered are continuing to enter the country by unlawful and dangerous routes.

37. For its part, the Swedish government has decided to grant Syrian nationals already in the country permanent residence permits, and the right to family reunion. There are around 8 000 Syrian refugees who have entered Sweden since 2012 and been granted three-year visas.

38. The French government is also considering introducing more flexible measures for accepting Syrian refugees. According to UNHCR, since January 2013, around 850 Syrians have applied for asylum in France and 47 000 across the European Union.

39. As far as the rest of Europe is concerned, some refugees who have crossed Turkey have sought asylum in Greece and Bulgaria, where the accommodation centres are beginning to be overcrowded, forcing the authorities to house some of them in detention centres where conditions are extremely precarious.

40. According to recent UNHCR data, Italy⁶ is seeing an increase in Syrian refugees arriving by boat, mainly from Egypt and Turkey. Over a 40-day period, almost 3 300 Syrians, including over 230 unaccompanied children, entered Italian territory, mainly through Sicily.

41. According to some press reports, the Cypriot authorities have closed access to their territory and are refusing to grant Syrian refugees asylum.

6. The situation of displaced persons in Syria (to be expanded)

42. The situation regarding displaced persons in Syria is alarming. According to estimates by the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC),⁷ out of a total population of 21.9 million, over 4.25 million Syrians have been forced from their homes and livelihoods by the current conflict.

⁶ UNHCR Briefing Notes, "August sees big increase in Syrians arriving in southern Europe", 13 September 2013, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5232da9d9.html>

43. It should be underlined that the imbalances and needs generated by such displacement are worrying sources of instability which compound the already critical situation in the country.

7. Conclusion and recommendations (to be expanded)

7.1. To the parties in the conflict

- Respect humanitarian law and allow humanitarian workers to move freely.

7.2. To Council of Europe member states and other states

- Facilitate the obtaining of a visa and avoid « so-called transit visas» ;
- Show generosity and welcome Syrian refugees in their territory and provide appropriate facilities;
- Provide humanitarian organisations and NGOs with the administrative and financial resources for helping Syrian refugees, in particular in Lebanon;
- Take the necessary measures to enable Syrian refugees to live in decent conditions (housing, sanitary facilities, water, health, food, education);
- Afford international protection, in accordance with the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Geneva Convention);⁸
- Establish a resettlement programme from the host countries;
- Provide a specific education programme for Syrian children;
- Ensure proper protection for women and girls.

⁷ IDMC, press release, 16 August 2012, available at: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria> and [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/9D8B8577B60AF792C1257A5D00441674/\\$file/syria-press-release-aug2012.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/9D8B8577B60AF792C1257A5D00441674/$file/syria-press-release-aug2012.pdf)

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>