

Position Paper Dutch Relief Alliance – Roundtable Humanitarian Situation Syria

The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) – an alliance of 14 Dutch humanitarian organizations and tens of local and national organizations in the countries we operate in, in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs - is grateful for the opportunity to speak in Parliament. With the support of the Dutch government, the DRA is able to provide humanitarian support in two separate programs in Syria: one in the Damascus-based, government-controlled areas and one in north-western and north-eastern parts of the country. Because of our humanitarian mandate and the adhering principles that come with it, we aim to inform the participants of the upcoming Roundtable about the humanitarian needs and context in Syria. Our contribution during the roundtable will be updated with recent experience and data, as the situation changes on day-to-day basis.

Syrian Humanitarian Overview

More than 13 years of conflict and natural disasters have put Syria in a precarious state. With parts of the country in ruin, ongoing insecurities, violence and displacement have left many in need of mental health and psychosocial support. According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024, the estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria is 16.7 million. This number, which is already the highest since the start of the crisis in 2011, is increasing because of recent escalation of hostilities in Lebanon and north-west Syria.

Recent observations in government-controlled Syria

The Syrian humanitarian crisis has a history of more than a decade of violent conflicts, persisting economic turmoil and climate change impacts. The February 2023 earthquakes devastated regions like Aleppo and Idlib, reversing prior recovery gains. Declining purchasing power due to fluctuations in the Syrian Pound exacerbate poverty and undermine humanitarian efforts. Syria's critical infrastructures, such as healthcare facilities, water and irrigation systems, and electricity services, are on the brink of collapse. Fuel shortages and the absence of skilled professionals (taking refuge outside of Syria) have hindered recovery. Natural disasters linked to climate change intensify vulnerabilities. Humanitarian needs have significantly increased in the last months, because the region sees a new increase of violence:

1. Outbreaks of violence in Lebanon in September have meant that more than half a million Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian people fled to Syria. Many of the refugees are Syrians that fled Syria earlier in the conflict.ⁱ Before the unrest in Lebanon, many Syrians in Lebanon indicated that a return to Syria was not a viable option with safety and security concerns upon return being principle considerations, including possible detainment for evading forced conscription or being forced to conscript upon arrival.ⁱⁱ Many Syrian refugees from Lebanon are now hosted by relatives in Syria. This puts more pressure on already struggling households. Syrian refugees from Lebanon, particularly women, face patterns of human rights violations and abuses.ⁱⁱⁱ Syrians find their earlier homes as damaged and looted, with inadequate shelter as winter approaches. The increased pressure on Syrian communities raises concerns about social cohesion.
2. On November 27, hostilities increased between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian government. The increased violence in and around Aleppo has caused displacement of about 45,000 people, with the UN estimating that 400,00 Syrians could be internally displaced unless hostilities cease.^{iv} The situation has led to damaged civilian infrastructures, several deaths of civilians and further increased humanitarian needs.^v Humanitarian access is limited, as many main roads have been officially closed. Because of security concerns, humanitarian operations are harder to carry out, resulting in a considerable part of the humanitarian work being suspended. It is difficult to predict what the impact of these hostilities will be, as the situation changes every day and many factors remain unclear. The recently established ceasefire in Lebanon might be a reason for refugees to take refuge in Lebanon where it is more safe.

Recent observations in north-western and north-eastern parts of Syria

North-East Syria: The Democratic Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria was established through the Social Contract in January 2024 and governs about a third of Syria's total territory. The region has been subject to multiple Turkish military operations, as well as recent hostilities with the Syrian National Army. The conflict has destroyed critical infrastructure such as power stations and wells. The needs are high, especially for water, sanitation, and hygiene.

North-West Syria: Northern Aleppo and other areas bordering Turkey are under the control of the Ankara-backed Syrian National Army, whereas the area of Idleb is controlled by the militant Islamist group Hayat Tahrir-Sham (HTS). The conflict has left the area extremely overcrowded due to displacement, which results in increased pressure on services and infrastructure in the area. Many Syrians reside in refugee camps in the area. The humanitarian situation in these areas remains dire, with ongoing conflict and displacement, including the aftermath of devastating earthquakes. Current infrastructure is unable to support the refugees and internally displaced persons in the area. The renewed violence across the region since late November exacerbates the already existing humanitarian crisis in north-west Syria.

Our work in Syria

The DRA, working in close collaboration with local organizations, aims to provide humanitarian assistance where possible. We provide direct humanitarian assistance (by distributing basic needs), protect people in need (improving living conditions, for instance in refugee camps) and make the population more resilient (providing mental health and psychosocial support and livelihood support to the Syrian population). The circumstances for delivering support are however difficult because of security issues, limited funding and limited access:

- Despite growing needs, humanitarian aid for Syria remains grossly underfunded, with coverage dropping from 48.9% in 2022 to just shy of 30% in November 2024. This funding gap jeopardizes relief efforts, amplifying the challenges of addressing escalating crises and ensuring sustainable support for affected populations.
- Syria has been subject to a strict sanctions-regime. These sanctions have considerable effects on humanitarian actors. Firstly, the sanctions have instilled a sense of hesitation for donors, resulting in noticeable reductions in the available funds for humanitarian assistance. Secondly, the sanctions have severely impacted the abilities to acquire necessary commodities and items for humanitarian operations. Essential supplies are scarce in the local market due to trade restrictions, which is hindering program implementation efforts.

Recommendations

- The DRA urges the Dutch government to recognize the humanitarian needs in Syria. The Netherlands should call upon decreasing the funding gap for Syria in their international donor contacts.
- The DRA stresses the importance of humanitarian access in Syria. The Netherlands should take effort to ensure import of support goods into Syria, as there is an exception on the sanctions in place for humanitarian goods that hardly works in practice as humanitarian goods are interpreted in a narrow sense without leaving room for recovery and rehabilitation-related import.
- The DRA calls upon the Dutch government to take effort for adherence of International Humanitarian Law by all actors in Syria. Protection of humanitarian aid workers is essential for us to continue our operations.

ⁱ Emergency Response Brief, UNHCR, 17 November 2024 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112569>

ⁱⁱ Ninth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return To Syria, UNHCR Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, June 2024 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/109624>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Dire Human Rights Situation Facing Syrian Returnees, OHCHR, February 2024 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/syrian-returnees-subjected-gross-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-un>

^{iv} Syria INGO Regional Forum, 2 December 2024 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syria-surge-conflict-displaces-thousands>

^v North-west Syria: Escalation of Hostilities – Flash Update No. 2. 2 December 2024

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/north-west-syria-escalation-hostilities-flash-update-no-2-2-december-2024>