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Syrian refugees: how to organise and support international assistance?

Report¹

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Summary

Since the start of the conflict in Syria, 2.2 million Syrians, including 1.1 million children, have fled the country, while 6.8 million people in Syria need humanitarian aid and 4.25 million have been internally displaced.

In spite of the various appeals by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons and the Prime Minister of Turkey, and notwithstanding the aid provided by neighbouring countries and Council of Europe member States, the situation is steadily worsening and those affected by the conflict are continuing to suffer from lack of drinking water, food, clothing and decent housing.

Of particular concern is the extent to which women and children are suffering sexual and gender-based violence in some of the refugee camps.

States must, *inter alia*, show generosity and solidarity with Syria's neighbours so as to relieve the pressure on them, draw up a contingency plan for dealing with any further mass influx of Syrian refugees and take all necessary steps to provide vital resources.

1. Reference to committee: Reference 3958 of 26 April 2013.

Contents	Page
A. Draft resolution	3
B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Bockel, rapporteur	5
1. Introduction	5
2. The situation in Turkey.....	5
3. The situation in Lebanon.....	6
4. The situation in the other bordering countries.....	7
4.1. The situation in Jordan	7
4.2. The situation in Iraq	8
5. The situation in other Council of Europe member States	8
6. The situation in African countries.....	8
7. The situation of displaced persons in Syria	9
8. The situation of women and children	9
9. Conclusion and recommendations.....	9

A. Draft resolution²

1. According to estimates provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), some 2.2 million Syrians have fled the country in order to request protection from neighbouring countries, including 1.1 million children. In Syria itself, according to the same sources, there are some 6.8 million people in need of humanitarian aid (including 3.1 million children) and 4.25 million internally displaced persons whose situation requires attention.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly backs the appeal launched by Mr Chaloka Beyani, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, calling on the parties to the conflict to provide international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with the necessary resources for helping the internally displaced persons, particularly women and children, and all vulnerable groups.
3. The Assembly reiterates its gratitude to the Turkish, Jordanian, Lebanese and Iraqi authorities for having taken in an enormous number of refugees, despite all the logistical problems this entails, and thanks the member and non-member States of the Council of Europe which have agreed to accommodate Syrian refugees in order to relieve some of the pressure from Syria's neighbours. These countries include Armenia, Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Sweden and Switzerland.
4. The Assembly appreciates the initiatives taken by member States to provide family reunion possibilities for Syrian refugees on their territory, notes the steps taken by the Swedish and Swiss authorities in this respect, and encourages other States to follow this example as far as possible.
5. The Assembly regrets, however, that member States have, in general, not adopted general policies on Syrian refugees and that most of them are continuing to assess Syrian asylum applications individually.
6. The Assembly notes that the situation in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon is becoming increasingly critical, as the responsibility of taking large numbers of refugees combined with the economic downturn and unemployment are exacerbating existing tensions between the local populations and the refugees.
7. The Assembly is deeply shocked by the extremely insecure living conditions of Syrian refugees, particularly in Lebanon. This country lacks the necessary infrastructure for receiving large numbers of refugees and as a result the refugees suffer from lack of drinking water, food, clothing and housing. The Assembly takes the opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the international organisations, particularly the UNHCR, in their efforts to nonetheless provide humanitarian assistance as best they can in difficult circumstances.
8. The Assembly would also like to thank the Turkish authorities and the Turkish Red Crescent for their work in setting up reception structures where the Syrian refugees can live in decent conditions and where the children can continue their studies. It fully supports the appeal for international aid launched by the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, calling on the international community to help his country cope with the increasing influx of refugees.
9. The situation of women and children, who account for the great majority of Syrian refugees, is of increasing concern. Children have been the first victims of the Syrian conflict, and they need emergency assistance. Most of them have problems with access to education and some are forced to work under conditions contrary to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, while many women suffer sexual and gender-based violence (rape, forced marriage and prostitution).
10. The Assembly also draws attention to the situation in the countries of North Africa, which have taken in almost 15 000 Syrian refugees and which are increasingly affected by the mass influx of refugees. The situation is also worrying in Egypt, which has taken in over 126 000 refugees, including Syrian refugees, some of whom are reportedly being expelled to third countries. There are also concerns in Egypt about refugee children being placed in administrative detention.
11. The Assembly asks the parties to the conflict to respect humanitarian law and to authorise the humanitarian workers to have access to displaced persons in Syria, especially women, children and vulnerable groups, in order to provide them with the requisite assistance.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 20 November 2013.

12. Consequently, the Parliamentary Assembly invites the member States of the Council of Europe, the observer States to the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly, and other States concerned by the situation of Syrian refugees to:

12.1. consider the possibility of providing temporary or international protection to Syrian refugees in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees ("1951 Geneva Convention") and allowing them to work during this period, following Turkey's example;

12.2. implement the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and suspend the forcible return of Syrians to Syria and its neighbouring countries, in view of the difficulties which these countries are experiencing in managing the influx of Syrians;

12.3. ensure maximum access to their territory and to asylum procedures, provide appropriate reception and ensure that Syrian asylum seekers have access to efficient, swift and fair asylum procedures, avoiding so-called "transit visas";

12.4. avoid administrative detention for Syrians entering the territory irregularly or without identity papers, and only implement such detention in exceptional circumstances as a last resort, after having considered all alternatives to detention;

12.5. facilitate issuing visas and residence permits for Syrians, including for education, work, humanitarian or family purposes;

12.6. simplify and expedite procedures for family reunion;

12.7. provide humanitarian organisations and NGOs with administrative and financial resources for assisting Syrian refugees, particularly in Lebanon;

12.8. show generosity and solidarity in admitting Syrian refugees to their territory, ensuring a balanced distribution amongst countries and providing the necessary infrastructure to guarantee decent accommodation, sanitary facilities, water, education, health care, food, etc.;

12.9. draw up a contingency plan in case of a further mass influx of Syrian refugees and provide additional development aid for Syria's neighbours to enable them to host refugees in dignity and respect for their human rights;

12.10. take steps to provide all vital resources, including food, clothing, medical aid and temporary shelter, for displaced persons in Syria and refugees in the neighbouring countries;

12.11. support a specific education programme for Syrian children in each host country and back the efforts to promote education for internally displaced Syrian children;

12.12. ensure proper protection for women and girls;

12.13. provide specific support for internally displaced persons living in deplorable hygiene conditions;

12.14. establish a resettlement programme from the countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees, possibly with the help of the Council of Europe Development Bank;

12.15. ask the Governor of the Council of Europe Development Bank to consider a donation from the selective trust account in order to step up the action of the UNHCR in favour of Syrian refugees.

13. The Assembly invites the member States of the European Union to:

13.1. bring into effect, as necessary, Directive 2001/55/EC of the Council of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof;

13.2. support, as a form of solidarity and responsibility sharing, the European Union countries receiving the largest numbers of Syrian refugees, and reinforce their reception capacities.

14. The Assembly appeals to all the neighbouring countries of Syria to open, or keep open, their borders for refugees fleeing from Syria.

B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Bockel, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. Since the last report presented by Mr Giacomo Santini,³ the situation of Syrian refugees has steadily worsened: it is now expected that there will be over 3 million Syrian refugees by the end of 2013, according to the latest information from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I would underline that this figure has practically increased tenfold in a year, 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 Syrian crisis has gone on for too long and is having unacceptable humanitarian consequences. In spite of the efforts of host countries, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors, the conditions in which the refugees are living are worsening steadily. The main aim of this report is once again to alert the international community to the extremely precarious situation in which Syrian refugees find themselves and to ask it to show solidarity with Syria's neighbouring countries which have taken in most of the refugees and are on the verge of being overwhelmed. Above all, it is necessary to help these countries to provide decent living conditions for the refugees, with a particular focus on key aspects such as education, health and housing, and also to take in refugees so as to relieve the burden on the bordering countries.

3. Bearing in mind that women and children make up more than 75% of the refugees, it is essential to focus on the precarious situation they find themselves in.

4. Lastly, in the light of the appeals for aid made by the leaders of various bordering countries, the report's key purpose is to reiterate our appeal to member States to show solidarity and share responsibility by taking the necessary measures to cater for Syrian refugees as effectively as possible.

5. For the purpose of preparing this report, 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 UNHCR and the Turkish authorities.

2. The situation in Turkey

6. According to the latest estimates from the Turkish authorities, approximately 200 000 refugees are living in 21 camps and 400 000 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.

7. 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.

8. The camps I visited near Hatay were housing some 6 500 people in 214 tents and 300 "containers". 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.

9. The camp managers seek to keep families together as far as possible, and the refugees each receive a sum of 80 Turkish Lira (around 30 euros) a month, set by the World Food Programme and Turkish Authorities for personal purchases. This enables the refugees to have a semblance of social life and have contacts with local residents living outside the camps.

10. The government and the Turkish Red Crescent Society, in accordance with applicable standards in the area of international humanitarian law, help refugees in the border areas of the Syrian side, so that they are catered for as well as possible, as most of them live in precarious circumstances and a dangerous environment.

11. 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 fragile 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 terrorist groups of the radical left.⁴ It should be pointed out that, following the attacks, some Syrian families began wanting to leave

3. [Doc. 13045](#), report on the European response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and [Resolution 1902 \(2012\)](#)

Reyhanli, which was sometimes seen as a focal point of the Syrian rebellion,⁵ to take the no lesser risk of returning to Syria. 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 belong to the Alawite community.

12. 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.

13. Against this background, I cannot but support the appeal by the Prime Minister of Turkey, Mr Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, mentioning the difficulties his country is facing in dealing with the growing influx of Syrian refugees and pointing out that his country has provided free food, education and medical care for the Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

3. The situation in Lebanon

14. 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 the UNHCR, there are at present around 764 000 refugees registered or awaiting registration, and the latest estimates are that one in four people in Lebanon are Syrian refugees.

15. 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, according to the UNHCR, it is predicted that approximately 1 million Syrians will have sought refuge in Lebanon by the end of the year.

16. 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.

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. 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 the threat posed in Lebanon by the refugees who are Sunnis and willing to take up arms to overthrow the Syrian regime.

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

21. 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.

22. 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.

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: 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 mosaïque ethnique et religieuse turque" [Reyhanli attack threatens Turkey's patchwork of ethnic and religious relations], 13 May 2013: www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/13/l-attentat-de-reyhanli-fragilise-la-mosaïque-ethnique-et-religieuse-turque_3176343_3218.html.

23. What they want most of all are basic necessities: baby's nappies, covers for winter, as well as access to mobile clinics, etc.
24. 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.
25. 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.
26. 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 gross domestic product (GDP).
27. By way of example, I was informed that in Jezzine, the main Christian town in southern Lebanon, the municipality had taken drastic measures and banned gatherings of Syrians, following complaints arising from an upsurge in crime, and the municipal police had evicted around 30 families from commercial premises, even though they had been paying rents.
28. In Aley, a tourist resort near Beirut, the municipal authorities have introduced a curfew for Syrians. These examples show the uneasy balance prevailing in Lebanon.
29. 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.
30. 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.
31. 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

32. The situation in the other bordering countries is also just as tragic, as there are dire shortages in these countries in the areas of education, health, water and energy resources and, if nothing changes, it is more than likely that the population will start to put pressure on the governments to close their borders, meaning that large numbers of refugees will come to Europe.

4.1. The situation in Jordan

33. 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 around 10% of the population of Jordan. Many of them come from Damascus and have financial resources of their own, while most of the remainder are from rural areas.
34. 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.

35. 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.

4.2. The situation in Iraq

36. I was unable to visit Iraq, but I gathered from various exchanges of views that more refugees from Syria have been arriving in Iraq, in particular in the north of the country and in Kurdistan, where camps have been set up, in particular since 15 August 2013.

37. 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 197 844 Syrians, including those pending registration.

38. 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

39. According to European Union figures, 24 000 Syrian refugees sought asylum in European Union countries in 2012. While these figures are up, they are nevertheless modest. The UNHCR has set a target of around 10 000 persons arriving in Europe. At the time this report was drafted, approximately 17 States had agreed to take in Syrian refugees to relieve the burden on Syria's neighbouring countries.

40. 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 this 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.

41. 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. Around 8 000 Syrian refugees have entered Sweden since 2012 and been granted three-year visas. Switzerland has also decided to facilitate family reunion as much as possible.

42. Following the calls by the UNHCR, the French Government has also introduced more flexible measures and agreed to take in 500 Syrian refugees "in a vulnerable situation". According to the UNHCR, since January 2013, around 850 Syrians have applied for asylum in France and 47 000 across the European Union.

43. 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.

44. According to recent UNHCR data, Italy 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, are reported to have entered Italian territory, mainly through Sicily.

6. The situation in African countries

45. Even though this report mainly deals with the situation of refugees in bordering countries and in Council of Europe member States, attention should nevertheless be drawn to the situation of the refugees in Egypt. They have mostly been expelled to third countries, this also applying to children, while others have been placed in administrative detention without any charges having been brought against them. Nevertheless, these examples are not confined solely to Egypt and many North African countries are increasingly being affected by the population movements caused by the crisis in Syria. My recommendations will therefore be addressed firstly to the parties in the conflict and, above all, to member and non-member States of our Organisation so that they take all measures possible to support and assist Syrian refugees, as well as measures for coping with the massive influx of refugees both in terms of humanitarian aid and in terms of development aid.

7. The situation of displaced persons in Syria

46. The situation regarding displaced persons in Syria is alarming. According to estimates by the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC),⁶ out of a total population of 21.9 million, 6.8 million Syrians have been forced from their homes and livelihoods by the current conflict. At present, and according to information from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), adaptation mechanisms and resources are practically exhausted. It is becoming increasingly difficult for agencies in the field to gain access to displaced families, leading to problems in terms of food, water, medicine and decent housing. Security issues have also forced the UNHCR to reduce its activities in the country.

47. The needs for protection and assistance for displaced persons in Syria have increased recently as the situation in the country has deteriorated, and those concerned are subject to increasing levels of threats, harassment, domestic violence and abductions. They are also hardest hit by rising prices, lack of livelihoods and rocketing rents in the regions said to be the safest. Most of the displaced persons have become entirely dependent on the aid supplied by the UNHCR and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

48. 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.

8. The situation of women and children

49. The figures mentioned earlier mainly concern women and children, who make up approximately 53% of the refugee population. Most of the refugee women have also been sexually abused or forced into marriage, while the children are denied access to education and are forced into work. Many of the children have also witnessed assaults, crimes and sexual violence, if they have not themselves been victims. Most of them have fled the country without their families and, in the absence of support or assistance, are forced into work or prostitution. According to Ms Melissa Fleming, UNHCR spokesperson, the growing number of unaccompanied children is due to the very high cost of travel (between 2 000 and 5 000 dollars per person), which means that some families are resorting to sending their children on their own or with friends or relatives.

50. Moreover, international organisations have started to set up family planning centres and advice centres in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq dealing with, *inter alia*, the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

51. During a visit to Geneva in September, the Lebanese Government made an appeal to the international community highlighting the low level of aid received and the extremely precarious situation of the children, who are receiving no education because of the lack of places in schools. Most of the time, the refugee children receive ad hoc teaching from volunteers in the same camps. In this connection, I would praise the arrangements in the camps in Turkey, where the children can attend classes – indeed, I was informed on the day of my visit that young Syrian refugees had taken the school-leaving exam that morning.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

52. In conclusion, and in the light of the above findings, the international community has a duty to respond and take all the necessary measures to put real humanitarian aid in place. If it is to be effective, however, such aid should also be accompanied by development aid concerning infrastructure, services and the construction of schools and health-care centres.

6. IDMC, press release, 16 August 2012: www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria and [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).