

## ACT Alliance Syria Forum message to the VIII Brussels Conference on “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”

April 2024

A complex humanitarian emergency in Syria of more than 13 years, had led to the near collapse of the country’s economy and its physical infrastructure. This crisis was exacerbated by the 2023 earthquakes, and is far from being over. In fact it is getting worse. Today, Syrians are unable to provide the most basic needs for themselves and their family members. They are left with limited choices: buy food or pay rent; buy medicine or send their children to school. For millions, even these simple choices are no longer an option. Taking care of one’s health and purchasing warm winter clothes are the vaguely remembered luxuries of a distant past. Constant conflicts and widespread poverty, combined with the international community’s unwillingness to fund needed disaster risk reduction programmes<sup>1</sup>, early recovery and reconstruction have taken a toll on the Syrian people. If not addressed, critical looming challenges threaten to significantly worsen the already dire situation of the Syrian people. The overlap of Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCMs), sanctions imposed on the country in 2011 by other states, with these multiple crises have created a shortage of essential goods and major restrictions on financial flows. This has led to skyrocketing prices, the loss of purchasing power, and an extremely high rate of unemployment<sup>2</sup>. Today, an estimated 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> The cost of living, as measured by the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB), has more than doubled compared to this period in 2023, a 122 percent increase. The Syrian Pound (SYP) remains relatively weak in 2024 and has lost more than half its value on the parallel market.

In addition to natural and political factors, the direct, indirect, accumulative and combined impact of UCMs will perpetuate the impoverishment and suffering for the population of the country without affecting their officially intended targets.

Members of the ACT Alliance Syria Forum<sup>4</sup> include national and international organizations that have operated in Syria since 1994. In this letter submitted to the Brussels conference, the Forum would like to address important matters that are much needed to alleviate the suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Schuler McCain, Haley (2023, April 24), *How the earthquakes could spark progress for disaster risk reduction in Syria*. The New Humanitarian. [Online Access: [The New Humanitarian](#)]

<sup>2</sup> Andronik, Byron, ‘An Inhumane Response. The Humanitarian Consequences of Sanctions: A Case Study of Syria’, UCL Global Governance Institute Working Paper Series, 2018/1, September 2017.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. (2024, March 13). *Syria refugee crisis explained*. UNHCR. The Un Refugee Agency. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

<sup>4</sup> The ACT Alliance Syria Forum comprises the membership of [ACT Alliance](#) operational in Syria.

of more than 16.7 million Syrians needing humanitarian assistance<sup>5</sup> within Syria as well as its neighboring countries.

### Regional Impact

Since October 2023, the escalation of hostilities in northwest Syria has led to unprecedented levels of suffering, as reported in the 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). This includes numerous casualties, forced displacements, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Given a level of destruction and suffering not seen since 2019, proxy conflicts and internationally-supported military actions persist in various parts of the country. Increased airstrikes have been observed on civilian facilities (airports), vital infrastructure and civilian neighborhoods in and around Damascus where international non-governmental organizations operate, affecting the delivery of essential humanitarian support.

In Northeast Syria (NES), civilian infrastructure, such as power and water stations, have been deliberately targeted. This has severely undermined the region's ability to meet people's essential needs, especially in harsh winter weather. The effects of the attacks are expected to continue as the infrastructure requires extensive repairs beyond the capabilities of humanitarian organizations.

In Northwest Syria, clashes between the Government of Syria and non-state armed groups continues. This has led to forced displacement of civilians and is obstructing access to vital services. Civilian infrastructure, including healthcare facilities and schools, continues to be targeted by airstrikes and shelling, increasing the humanitarian crisis in the region.

### Reduced Funding

Funding to support the Syrian crisis was substantially reduced in 2022. ACT Alliance members operating in Syria made the difficult decision to choose between delivering food, or medicine or shelter. These basic needs must be met and **more support must be allocated to humanitarian organizations working within Syria**. The international community is urged to distinguish between the political and humanitarian aspects of the crisis and ensure that the human rights of the Syrian people come first.

### Unilateral Coercive Measures

Organizations operating in Syria today still face significant limitations in designing their activities. They face restrictions in the selection of local suppliers and service providers. Excessive compliance requirements create challenges in access to international procurement and receiving funds.

The December 2022 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2664 provides broad humanitarian exemptions meant to mitigate the impact of counter terrorist measures on the delivery of humanitarian aid. In the spirit of this Resolution **we ask for humanitarian exemptions to be systematic, clear, and harmonized between jurisdictions**. The Unilateral

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<sup>5</sup> Andronik, Byron, 'An Inhumane Response. The Humanitarian Consequences of Sanctions: A Case Study of Syria', UCL Global Governance Institute Working Paper Series, 2018/1, September 2017.

**Coercive Measures** negatively impact the delivery of humanitarian support by delaying the response. This reduces its potential and increases both its cost and the daily hardships faced by the Syrian people.

We call for:

- **A comprehensive revision of the sanctions' framework from a legal perspective, conforming with both International Law and International Humanitarian Law** to avoid any breach.
- **A sincere analysis of the sanction's intended, unintended and counterproductive impacts on the Syrian people** from a humanitarian perspective.

The ACT Alliance Syria Forum denounces the double standards shown following the 2023 earthquake that greatly affected Syria and Turkey. We urge the international community and the European Union to see the restrictions and pre-conditions imposed on reconstruction-related activities from a humanitarian perspective rather than a political lens. We call on the international community to **support national and international organizations that are re-establishing access to essential infrastructures to meet the basic needs of the Syrian people.**

### **Renewed International Commitments**

The ACT Alliance in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon also request renewed international commitments to long-term actions for refugees and host communities which are centered on empowering their agency and autonomy. This includes - but is not restricted to - inclusion, income generation and labour market participation. Ensure that the needs and preferences of refugees and vulnerable populations are reflected in national response plans, compensation schemes, and economic packages as well as social protection schemes supported by international financial institutions and that such commitments translate into inclusion in service provision. There is also a dire need for more funding as the needs are ever growing.

We urge the Brussels conference and the international community to **understand how coercive measures, the lack of funding and aid politicization have and continue to hinder the delivery of a principled, timely and efficient humanitarian response** which the population of Syria is entitled to, and to take the necessary actions to tackle those challenges.