FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 13.06.2024 | Lydia Both

Little relief

With billions of euros promised for Syria, the EU remains the largest donor. But much of this aid fails to reach those in need

Representatives of the European Union Member States, neighbouring countries and other partner states, as well as international organisations, met in May 2024 for the eighth edition of the EU annual donor conference on Syria. There, the international community pledged €7.5 billion to Syria and its neighbours to mitigate the civil war's catastrophic consequences. Although more than the previous year, it's not enough: the United Nations needs €4 billion for humanitarian assistance in Syria *alone*. However, most of the funds will go to the surrounding countries that are hosting the most refugees.

After 13 years of civil war and no political solution in sight, the global community is increasingly losing interest in Syria, as western donors also have to deal with other crises, such as those in Sudan or Gaza. Yet, the people on the ground in Syria are in urgent need of humanitarian aid.

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The EU pledged a total of €2.12 billion – 560 million each in 2024 and 2025 – to support refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, along with another €1 billion for Turkey. The EU and its Member States therefore continue to be the largest donors: between 2011 and today, they have granted more than €33 billion for humanitarian assistance and development, economic and stabilisation aid. Germany has pledged the lion's share: more than €1 billion.

The EU acknowledges that humanitarian need in Syria is greater than ever. But the international community also appears to be more clueless than ever about how to solve this. With budgets strapped and humanitarian assistance cut worldwide, along with a string of new humanitarian crises, the UN has not been able to reach its goal of €4 billion for Syria for this year alone.

This will cause devastating consequences: already 90 per cent of Syrians live in poverty and 16.7 million depend on humanitarian assistance. These are the highest numbers since the start of the war in 2011. Since then, more than half of the population has been displaced. The under-resourced UN has only been able to reach 625 000 Syrians affected by food shortages in the north-west — while 3.6 million risk hunger. Healthcare centres and clinics may be forced to close.

Internal disputes

So it is surprising that, just before the Brussels Conference 'on supporting the future of Syria and the region', the EU found €1 billion for a migration deal with Lebanon. How much those funds will benefit Syrian refugees is highly questionable.

While the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell reiterated in Brussels that current circumstances prevent the safe return of Syrian refugees, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen seems to be turning a blind eye to Lebanon's practice of returning refugees. This shows major internal EU contradictions: one hand distributes humanitarian aid to countries hosting Syrian refugees while the other gives Lebanon money to 'manage migration' that is de facto used for deportations. This also reflects the differing attitudes of countries within the EU. For example, a recent German Foreign Office report spelled out that human rights violations, torture and arbitrary detentions mean that no safe return to Syria is possible. But eight other EU countries are demanding that the situation in Syria be re-assessed in order to be able to repatriate refugees. One of them is Cyprus, under whose pressure the EU migration deal with Lebanon came about.

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This makes it all the more urgent for the EU to seek consensus on its 'three no's' towards the Syrian regime: *no* to lifting sanctions, *no* to normalising relations with the Assad regime and *no* to reconstruction as long as there is no political solution in line with UN Resolution 2254. The EU just extended sanctions against the Assad regime until June 2025. The bank accounts of 3 160 individuals and 86 legal entities have been frozen, and account holders are barred from entering the EU. But even this would remain purely symbolic politics if the EU funds for humanitarian aid were to end up in the hands of Assad and his henchmen. A large

part of EU funds goes to the UN, which is not bound by EU and US sanctions, with figures showing that most money goes to organisations linked to the Assad regime that are likely to have committed human rights violations. The Syrian economy has totally collapsed in recent years and the Assad regime can only survive by raking in UN aid money and running the Captagon drug trade.

This is why the EU must demand that the UN be more transparent and that, at least with respect to itsfunds, sanctions on Syria be upheld. Internally, the EU also has to ensure against individual members normalising relations with Assad in the name of supporting 'safe' return for refugees. After so many years of war, the EU and other donors cannot only try to contain and defuse the conflict. Insisting on the need for a political solution must be more than talk. The international community must not allow Assad to politicise access to humanitarian assistance. Yet, since 2023, his regime has totally controlled *whether* and *how* UN aid enters the regions in the north that it does not control.

In the first four months of 2024, a mere 150 aid trucks reached north-west Syria. In previous years, there were 600 to 700 trucks *a month*. Besides its way of waging war – laying siege and attacking civilian infrastructure – the Assad regime appears to have set a precedent for other conflicts as well. The EU must use its influence to prevent this. Humanitarian aid cannot depend on the whims of individual governments, but must reach people in need.

The EU cannot be content to be the greatest humanitarian aid donor if that is grossly insufficient. Nor can it rely solely on its annual Brussels donor conference to keep Syria on its agenda. Emphasising that a political solution is needed is no help if the EU fails to involve Syrian civil society and puts aside the 'Syria' dossier after each conference. Above all, the EU cannot try to leave the problem for Syria's neighbours, who have admitted by far the most Syrian refugees. The problem is complex — and therefore requires so much more than symbolic politics.



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