

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs & Trade & Defence

Houses of the Oireachtas

5th March 2019

Opening Notes – Niall O’Keeffe, Trócaire

Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to address you today on this important issue.

The Syrian crisis, now in its 9th year, continues to be one of the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. Of a population of 22 million people in Syria originally, nearly six million people have been forced out of the country as refugees, over six million have been displaced inside Syria, and an estimated 500,000 people have been killed during the conflict.

Trócaire, working with local organisations, is providing humanitarian assistance both in Lebanon and in Syria. The assistance we provide includes the provision of food, shelter, basic household commodities (especially during the recent harsh winter months), support with counselling and psychosocial assistance to deal with the traumas of conflict, and we support people with skills and vocational training so that their years in asylum are not completely wasted. We are very grateful for the funding we have received from the Irish Government, from the EU, and the significant public contributions we have received in Ireland.

When it comes to the question of whether Syrian refugees or displaced people and if they want to go home? The answer is absolutely, yes.

If you are a Syrian living in Lebanon, you are most likely to experience the following:

- You will live on less than US\$2.90 per day, the minimum required in Lebanon, and over half of all Syrians in Lebanon live below this threshold¹;
- You probably don’t work, and only 43% have informal work – this reduces to only 16% for women²;
- You depend on borrowing money, and nearly nine out of every 10 households³ are heavily in debt;

¹ UN Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon report (VASyR2018), undertaken by three UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, 2018 – p.4

² Ibid – p.5

³ Ibid – p.4 The assessment found that 82 percent had borrowed money in the three months prior to the survey, demonstrating a consistent lack of resources for everyday needs.

- You are at least partially dependent on humanitarian assistance, but that assistance is not dependable – according to the UN, only 44% of overall humanitarian funding was received last year⁴;
- It is possible that you live in a building, but approximately one third of households (or nearly half if you are a female only led household⁵) live in tents or other unsuitable conditions⁶, this in a climate where temperatures can rise to the high 30s in summer and drop to sub zero in the winter;
- Your children are unlikely to go to school and more than half of refugee children (aged 3 to 17) are still out of school⁷;
- You are unlikely to have a legal permit allowing you to stay in the Lebanon and 73% of Syrians don't have, so you will spend your time avoiding roads with checkpoints, you will work in the black economy, often under exploitative conditions, and hope that your employer doesn't report you, all in fear of being arrested and taken to the border with Syria.

With all of this, your focus is on surviving day to day. If you ever think about the future, you have no idea what it holds for you or your family and you are very dependent on others, leaders in the region and in the international community, to determine your future.

But faced with these hardships as a refugee, of course you would consider returning home to Syria. UNHCR say over 16,000 Syrian have returned from Lebanon to Syria in 2018 – the figure is likely to be a little higher. However, there are over one million Syrians in Lebanon. They make up one quarter of the country's population and of course the government of Lebanon is encouraging people to return. There are lots of push factors.

But if you are a Syrian living in Lebanon, and are thinking of returning to Syria, you have to consider the following:

- You are likely to be unemployed and over half the population of Syria is unemployed⁸;
- Over 50% of the social services infrastructure either has been destroyed or is not operational⁹, so you are likely to be without water, health care, and other social services;
- It is likely that your home either has been destroyed during the conflict, or is occupied, and over 65% of people in a recent survey have said this is the case¹⁰.

But what really makes your decision very difficult, is fear for your own security:

- Conscription exists for 18 to 42 year-olds and avoidance is punishable with 5 years imprisonment¹¹ or being forcibly conscripted upon return;
- You faced harassment based on sectarian or assumed political views;
- You face various forms of violence up to and including rape at the hands of various militia groups (gov and anti gov);

⁴ <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/124/summary/2018>

⁵ UN VASyR2018 – p.6

⁶ Ibid – p.3

⁷ Ibid – p.3

⁸ SAWA, Unpacking Return, Feb 2019 – p. 37

⁹ Ibid, p-34

¹⁰ SAWA, Unpacking Return, Feb 2019 – p.34

¹¹ Ibid, p-30

- You risk being disappeared or killed in extrajudicial killings;
- And you are going back into a country where over half a million people were killed during the past eight years, the majority by Syrian government forces.

Faced with these considerations, would you go back?

There is no longer a push for democratic principles that we all saw on televisions nine years ago, those aspirations are long forgotten about and your focus now is simply on survival and security.

Trócaire, along with our local partners, have identified the following priorities:

- Any discussion on return for Syrian refugees, must have the minimum threshold of being voluntary, dignified and safe. The UNHCR have provided clear principles for return and Ireland and the EU should ensure that these are paramount.
- As we have seen, displacement is a multi-annual situation, and therefore, the Government of Ireland, working with the EU and through its influence in the UN should ensure there is multi-annual humanitarian funding.
- The Government of Ireland should encourage a renewed emphasis on the UN backed peace process, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which requires a Syrian owned peace process.
- And there must be accountability for the war crimes and countless human rights violations committed over the past eight years.

Without these, it is very difficult to see the 12m people displaced by the conflict having sufficient assurances to return home, and bring this humanitarian crisis to an end.

Thank you for your time.
