



Statement regarding suspension of activities of international organizations in northern and eastern Syria

The Syrian crisis is entering its fourteenth year, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and displaced. According to the United Nations, over 16.7 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance. A report by the International Red Cross indicates that 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line. These shocking statistics should inspire increased support, in an effort to end Syrians' suffering and promote stability in Syria and the region. However, the opposite is happening. Recent developments have worsened Syria's humanitarian crisis, with Syrian refugee arrivals in Europe reaching the highest level in seven years as of October 2023, according to the UN.

In North and East Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrian and foreign displaced persons, including families of former ISIS affiliates, live in both official and unofficial camps operated by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Recently, intense aerial attacks conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces targeted essential infrastructure in these regions, depriving over a million people of water, electricity, and basic services, violating international humanitarian law. Furthermore, civilians have been targeted and killed in Turkish airstrikes. These lethal, unprovoked attacks amount to war crimes, according to a UN Human Rights Committee report. These events, among others, increase the burden on the Autonomous Administration and humanitarian organizations working in North and East Syria. For instance, al-Hol camp hosts tens of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, including many foreign families of ISIS members. Additionally, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are holding over 30,000 former ISIS fighters in prisons and detention centers. This crisis requires significant efforts from the local authorities and humanitarian organizations to ensure the safety, protection, and care of both local people, displaced persons, and the detainees themselves.

Unfortunately, some donors are considering reducing the support to these camps and centers, without sufficiently considering the consequences. While continuing camp support may discourage peoples' return to original areas, this is only true if suitable conditions for return exist. Most camp residents in North and East Syria are either third-country national, ISIS-linked families whose home governments are refusing to take the responsibility of repatriating them, instead leaving them as a burden on the Autonomous Administration; Syrians fleeing regime-controlled areas, who face abuse including execution if they were to return; or Iraqi citizens, who also lack safe conditions for return.

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Reducing or cutting funding for local organizations and UN agencies working to support refugees and other affected people will undoubtedly have dire consequences. The recent decision by the World Health Organization to stop receiving secondary healthcare cases from camps including al-Hol, al-Arishah, Roj, Washokani, and others due to funding shortages is a stark example. Reevaluating such decisions before the eighth Brussels Donor Conference is an urgent requirement, if we're to continue with our humanitarian duty of aiding refugees and the displaced while supporting efforts to build long-term stability in the region.

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