

## Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and Refugees in a Time of Pandemic – A Global Challenge

Col Arcangelo Moro, ITA Army, CCJ5 CSAG, 8

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### Key Points

- Due to conflicts and natural disasters, the number of IDPs has reached the record figure of 50 million, far exceeding the number of refugees, which, in 2019, was around 19.8 million.
- A third of IDPs/refugees are located in the Central Region.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the already dramatic situation of people fleeing conflict zone or in IDP/refugee camps, and especially this of fragile categories such as women, children, and elderly people.
- Due to the pandemic, the humanitarian crisis could easily turn into a humanitarian disaster.
- Humanitarian support and assistance must focus on lifesaving needs, improve the resilience of people and communities (including that of host countries), and promote community stability by addressing the root causes of conflicts at the local level.
- A firm political commitment at the highest level is deemed urgent to mobilize national, regional and global actors. The current situation demands the implementation of an effective international coordination and cooperation to ensure maximum synergy between all actors. The UN institutions could be a natural C2 center or hub, capable of synchronizing all efforts to finalize the political, financial and economic objectives set.
- Financial support to all the countries involved is not sufficient to guarantee greater timeliness, predictability, coherence, and effectiveness of the aid, which must be oriented towards local initiatives with sustainable solutions towards those at the forefront.
- The ability to collect data in quantitative, qualitative and assistance analysis and progress made on IDPs/Refugees appears limited and needs to be implemented with the sharing of best practices.
- Access to resettlement remains a priority with complementary paths, in terms of safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation.
- Sanctions can undermine the ability of countries that are engaged in IDPs/refugees management and prevent access to food, essential health and medical supplies, especially in a time of pandemic (Syria, Iran, Turkey, etc.).

### Definitions / Introduction

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) describes **IDPs** as *“People who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.”*<sup>1</sup> The 1951 Refugee Convention

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, “*IDPs definition*”, Emergency Handbook, April 4, 2020, <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/67716/idp-definition>.

defines a **Refugee** as “Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>2</sup>

At the end of 2019, IDPs totaled 45.7 million. This far exceeds the estimated at 26 million refugees.<sup>3</sup> According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020 from the Geneva Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC),<sup>4</sup> 90% of the IDPs the world departed their homes due to armed conflict and violence. Both refugees and IDPs have each fled their communities to survive. The difference between the two is refugees crossed an international border to find safety and IDPs have relocated somewhere within their own country. As such, refugee status entitles individuals to certain rights and international protection (UNHCR), while being an **IDP is not a legal status** since IDPs are still under the jurisdiction of their own government and may not claim any rights additional to those shared by their compatriots. In short, IDPs are neither covered nor protected by international conventions, even if they have been forced to flee home to escape violence and survive.

Today, an estimated 18 million of the 50.8 million IDPs are children below the age of 15, while 3.7 million are over 60. According to the IDMC<sup>5</sup> (and beside Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan) **Syria (6.495 million)** and **Yemen (3.635 million)**, which are both in the Central region, are among countries with the highest number of IDPs. However, and though not touched upon in this strategy paper, Afghanistan (2.993 million) and Iraq (1.555 million) also remain in the top 10 countries with the most IDPs. According to the Regional Refugees and Resilience Plan (3RP),<sup>6</sup> 5.6 million Syrian refugees are mostly hosted in five neighboring countries, i.e. **Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt**, along with other refugees and asylum seekers of many different nationalities (such as Palestinians, especially in Jordan and Lebanon).

Considering these facts, modern societies are characterized by a “globalization of indifference.”<sup>7</sup> The economically most-advanced democracies have indeed become more and more individualistic and oriented towards strong competition and normalization. Such tendencies are further exacerbated by mass media behaviors. In this context, migrants, refugees, displaced persons and victims of human trafficking are symbols of exclusion because beyond what their condition already entails, they are often considered a security problem and, above all, a social anomaly that nobody really wants to recognize.

Today, the problem of IDPs and refugees is exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic which, due to its severity and geographical spreading, has reshuffled humanitarian priorities that still plague millions of people yet, thus relegating international essential initiatives and investments to save lives at the bottom of national political agendas. However, one cannot turn away from acute humanitarian emergencies because today's unsolved problems risk backfiring, at higher and likely unsustainable costs, in a near future. As His Holiness Pope Francis stated, the answer to the current challenges could lie in four verbs, i.e. “*welcome, protect, promote and integrate,*” thanks to the rediscovery of the true meaning of humanity, which goes far beyond the political, religious, racial or gender dimensions.

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR – USA, “What refugee is?”, Official website, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/what-is-a-refugee.html>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, “Global trends – Forced displacement”, Official website, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

<sup>4</sup> iDMC, “Global Trends Report on Internal Displacement 2020”, Official website, June 18, 2020, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>

<sup>5</sup> iDMC, “Country profiles”, Official website, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries>

<sup>6</sup> Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) “2019 Annual Report: 3RP in response to the Syria Crisis”, Official website, April 2020, <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org>

<sup>7</sup> 49th World Day of Peace (1 January 2016). Message released by Pope Francis.

The following analysis is thus an attempt to highlight the issue of IDPs and refugees in the Central region, which is one of the hardest and global challenges of our time, with terrible consequences due to COVID 19, not only for all those affected but also for the whole stability of the area.

## Analysis

According to the IDMC report, 2019 (considered an *annus horribilis*) saw a dramatic surge in IDPs with 33.4 million new displacements, the highest figure since 2012. If almost 25 million (74.5%) is due to environmental disasters, more than a quarter (8.5million - 25.5%) is due to conflicts. This data highlights both the number of displaced persons and displacement occurring multiple times to the same persons. In particular, the Middle East and Central & South Asia represent more than a quarter of IDPs/refugees globally, not only because of conflicts and violence, but also due to natural disasters and unfavorable environmental conditions (water scarcity, droughts, flooding, earthquakes, food shortages, etc).<sup>8</sup> To make the matter worse, conflicts and natural disasters can occur simultaneously. In the Central region, where environmental catastrophes often strike, protracted conflicts have triggered mass population movements, especially in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan, with ripple effects into neighboring countries (Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon). The current situation and worsening economies represents serious challenges to the stability of the region and offers Jihadist organizations with disruptive opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

Pre-pandemic economic growth was already stagnant throughout the region, with dramatically increasing debt-to-GDP ratios and surging rates of poverty and unemployment. The inclusion of the coronavirus pandemic with the economic situation hinders host nations' support to IDPs and refugees.<sup>10</sup> This disastrous situation has profoundly affected all Central Region's countries (with 1,272,235 officially reported cases in the Central Region on 9 July 2020) with far-reaching medium-term socio-economic damage. The World Bank estimates that the economies of the Middle East and Central Asia will respectively face a downgrade of growth of approximately 4.2 and 4.7 percent, which, together with the rest of the world, should reverse years of positive development.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the vast majority of IDPs/refugees live in urban or peri-urban environments, often in poor and densely populated areas or in improvised refuges where social distancing and limitation of outdoor activities are nearly impossible to implement. These environments and situations are often scenes of sexual abuses, gender-based violence, and child labor.<sup>12</sup>

Related problem sets:

- reduction of security levels and infiltration of jihadist terrorist organizations;
- reduction of family income/livelihoods;
- reduction of access to food both due to increases in food prices and to the blocking/reduction of humanitarian assistance;
- reduced access to public services (accommodations, water, sanitation, and waste management);
- reduced access to primary education and vocational training;
- reduced access to health services (for COVID 19 treatments and other services);

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<sup>8</sup> “Severe winter weather, snowstorms, floods, and earthquakes have also forced people to flee their homes in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan”, pag. 29, Part 1 Internal Displacement in 2019, iDMC, GRID 2020 Report, official website. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/downloads/2020-IDMC-GRID-part1.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Strategy Pape Strategy Paper n.15, “COVID 19: Daesh’s Best Ally?” - CSAG, June 02, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> July 6, 2020 update of World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, “The Global Economic Outlook during the COVID-19 pandemic: a changed world”, June 8, 2020,

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – Arab States Regional Humanitarian Response Hub, “Report on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Settings” a Journalist’s Handbook Second Edition, March 2020. [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Journalists\\_Handbook\\_-\\_March\\_8\\_-\\_English.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Journalists_Handbook_-_March_8_-_English.pdf)

- changes in the gender dynamics of families;
- disruption of social cohesion with reduced access tangible and intangible cultural heritage domains;
- increased cultural tensions between cultural sub-groups;
- increased social tensions between refugees and host communities due to employment competition for unskilled jobs and opportunities for sustenance and access to services.

In addition to the above-mentioned problem sets, the fourth annual Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC 2020) of the World Food Program (WFP) highlights that in 2019, 43 million people were estimated to be acutely food insecure and in need of urgent care in 10 countries in the Middle East and South & Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> Of these, millions of children under the age of 5 in the Middle East and South Asia are severely malnourished and need urgent nutritional assistance (Yemen 46, 5%, Pakistan 46.5%, Afghanistan 41.0%, Syria 27.5%, Iraq 10%, and Palestine 7.4%). Specifically, Yemen has 2 million malnourished children aged between 6 and 59 months, including 400,000 severely. In Afghanistan, the number of severely malnourished children under the age of 5 in needs life-saving care reaches 690,000.

**Syria and Yemen are the two most critical countries of the Central Region, on which a more detailed analysis was deemed necessary.**

▪ **SYRIA**

Since March 2011, the war in Syria has claimed more than 400,000 lives and caused approximately 6.5 million refugees. This ongoing conflict has turned into one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. According to the UNHCR, between 1 February and 31 March 2020, 312 civilians were killed in Syria following airstrikes, improvised explosive devices, and targeted killings carried out by all belligerent parties.<sup>14</sup> These include the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, fighting against various rebel groups for power and control. A record number of IDPs have gathered in the northwestern province and city of Idlib, a key location occupied by rebels in the northwest and a potential outpost to reach Turkey. The area which has almost 4.5 million IDPs remains under the tight control of the militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), since last December, when hostilities intensified with repeated air strikes on Idlib by Russia and the Syrian government, 846,000 people were evacuated and are still displaced (half evacuated to Idlib in February 2020).<sup>15</sup> More than 60% of these displaced are children. This crowding has already raised concerns on an international level because Idlib communities, living in extremely harsh conditions, could be severely affected by a COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

The WHO and Johns Hopkins University states, there are only 372 officially reported cases of in Syria, 14 deaths, while 126 people are said to have recovered. However, data is not absolutely reliable because of the inability to carrying out large-scale swabs. Gathering of accurate data is difficult due to the killing of 900 medical professional in Syria since 2011 and many others have fled high-intensity combat zones.<sup>17</sup> After a first death related to COVID-19 registered in north-eastern Syria, the authority that controls the area they have set up a dedicated hospital in the area, and the authorities in Idlib plan to do the same. Despite encouraging

<sup>13</sup> Food Security Information Network (FSIN), “Global Report on Food Crises”, 2020. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2020-global-report-food-crises>

<sup>14</sup> Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), Report of the UN Secretary-General, April 20, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/%5BEN%5D%20S2020327.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Syria, IDPs Tracking, UNOCHA service, as of April 2020. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima/idps-tracking>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul McLoughlin, Syria Weekly: Coronavirus outbreak sparks more fears of epidemic, The New Arab, April 5, 2020.

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/4/5/syria-weekly-coronavirus-outbreak-sparks-more-fears-of-epidemic>

<sup>17</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, “Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria, as of February 2020. <http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/findings>

endeavors, the situation in the camps of Al-Hol and Rukban remains gruesomely worrying,<sup>18</sup> especially since a massive outbreak of COVID 19 would definitely have dramatic effects.

Between 2010 and 2019, Syria's population fell by 20% (from 21.4 to 17.1 million) against the backdrop of considerable increases for neighboring countries: 15-16% for Turkey and Israel, 30-40% for Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. Over a million of Syrians, who have found asylum in Europe. One million refugees live in Lebanon (134 per 1000 inhabitants). In Jordan and Turkey, refugees respectively occurred 65 and 44 per 1000 inhabitants. These proportions give the outline of the pressure the refugees exert on host countries, which easily explains President Erdoğan's intent to resettle most of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey into the so-called "security belt," the area beyond the border with Syria which has recently been cleared of Kurdish militants.

According to the WFP, the price of an average food plan in May stood at 56,668 SYP, 11% more than in April, and 133% more than in the same period of 2019. In the meantime, several traders have reported a significant drop in their stock levels, with some raw materials now unavailable, including vegetable oil and sugar, which explains why wholesalers await informal exchange rate stability. Shortages of other essential products, such as medicine, have also been reported. Before the COVID 19 crisis, about 80% of people in Syria were already living below the poverty line, with high levels of food insecurity. An estimated 9.3 million people in Syria are now deemed in food-insecurity, an increase of 1.4 million in the past six months.

In January 2020, UN Security Council Resolution 2504<sup>19</sup> extended the "Authorization for the delivery of cross-border aid" in Syria until 10 July. UN Secretary General António Guterres, recently reminded the Syrian government that since 2012, based on the needs of the OHCHR S-18/1 and 19/22,<sup>20, 21</sup> this should allow for a UN field presence to protect human rights, but after nine years, nothing has happened.

History teaches that among the communities of exiles and refugees, there is a natural force calling people to return to their homeland when conditions permit. This was the case for the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as it will presumably happen to Venezuelan refugees should Nicolás Maduro's regime fall. In the case of Syria, the refugee issue is likely to remain a threatening powder keg for a long time due to the delicate and sensitive regional balances in the Middle East. One can assume the Syrian refugees will for long remain a demographic wedge stuck in the very heart of the region.

The July 2018 Fourth Regional Survey on the Perceptions and Intentions of Syrian refugees on the return to Syria (Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan), 85% of interviewees believe that coming back to Syria will not be possible in the near future.<sup>22</sup> The interviewees indicated that the main conditions for re-entry are linked to risks to physical safety, availability of basic services, access to education, job opportunities, fear of being enlisted by force, and fear of punishment for leaving or for having refused to fight. Other critical issues are linked to goods, supplies, COVID 19, and numerous other obstacles of a bureaucratic nature. There is also a

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<sup>18</sup> Middle East Eyes "Coronavirus: Syria's Kurds set up dedicated hospital following first death", Official website, April 20, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-syria-kurds-first-hospital-death>

<sup>19</sup> UN – Meeting coverage and press release, "Avoiding Midnight Deadline, Security Council Extends Authorization of Cross-Border Aid Delivery to Syria, Adopting Resolution 2504 (2020) by Recorded Vote", SC/14074 January 10, 2020 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14074.doc.htm>

<sup>20</sup> UN – Meeting coverage and press release, "Avoiding Midnight Deadline, Security Council Extends Authorization of Cross-Border Aid Delivery to Syria, Adopting Resolution 2504 (2020) by Recorded Vote", SC/14074 January 10, 2020 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14074.doc.htm>

<sup>21</sup> UN – Human Rights Council Sixteenth special session, "S-16/1. The current human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic in the context of recent events", Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, April 29, 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRC-RES-S-16-1.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> UNHCR, "Regional RPIS In Egypt, Iraq, Jordan And Lebanon (Round Iv)", Official website, July 2018 <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/66198>

widespread suspicion that Assad has agreed to filter the returns to deliberately slow down the flow of returnees in order to prevent the opposition from reemerging in the country.

Last February, in a televised speech, Assad encouraged refugee returns by “promising their duty to the country,” promising forgiveness “for the honest.”<sup>23</sup> Although Damascus has signed up for a reconciliation policy, the flow of returns remains extremely slow. According to the UNHCR, 28,000 refugees returned to Syria in 2016, 51,000 in 2017 and 56,000 in 2018. Very few refugees were relocated to third countries, often reluctant to host refugees. However, refugees themselves seem reluctant to relocate. Indeed, out of over half a million refugees who are entitled to protection because of their status, only 28,000 opted for relocation in 2018.

Unfortunately, despite a massive flow of donations, living conditions in host countries remain incredibly precarious due to the significant amount of refugees. In these countries, mistrust, if not open hostility towards refugees is often widely spread. Most of Syrian refugees do not feel ready to return due to destroyed infrastructure, essential services in pieces, and above all, ongoing fighting. Even once the fighting ends, Syria will likely remain a country with little attraction for hoping a return of refugees, especially if the COVID-19 spreads further with limited medical supply and facilities.

The reconstruction of Syria will cost hundreds of billions of dollars (about 200 billion for the World Bank - more according to other estimates). This will remain a major challenge, especially for an international community on guard for the pre-eminent role assumed by Russia in the pacification of the country. Bashar al-Assad is likely to remain in power, whereas the Syrian people had partly risen against him. Wedged between the anvil and the hammer, millions of refugees will remain and continue to pose severe coexistence problems in neighboring countries that are expected to continue to push them back, especially as they also strive to curb the spread of COVID 19.

#### ▪ **YEMEN**

Yemen’s civil war has triggered one of the worst humanitarian disaster ever. Despite meagre progress and UN-brokered calls for ceasefire, the country remains divided and now even faces a more insidious enemy, i.e. the of a widespread COVID 19 pandemic.

In Yemen, the COVID 19 deaths could indeed exceed the overall toll of war, disease, and famine of the five past five years. According to a report commissioned by the UN to the University of Denver, COVID 19 could easily claim 230,000 lives. Such alarming warnings came after a 2 June 2020 meeting that failed to raise the \$2.4 billion needed by the UN and various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In 2019, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE promised \$1.5 billion but in 2020, only the Saudis have committed to a \$500 million donation. Whether to prevent diversion of aid by the Houthis (a common complaint among donors), Yemenis are lacking much needed support and the consequences could be devastating.

According to the 25 June 2020 UNHCR operational update, 80% of the population, 24.1 million people, have requested humanitarian assistance. Since March 2015, 3.65 million have been internally displaced (80% for over a year). 16,397 families have been displaced at least once in 2020, while 66,499 families were already displaced in 2019. Of the reported \$252.1 million worth of required for 2020, only \$23.3 million has been received (less than 10% as of June). The lack of funds means half the rations for 8.5 million hungry Yemenis, among whom about 2 million children under five years old suffer from acute malnutrition. Before the

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<sup>23</sup> Louisa Loveluck, “Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation”, The Washington Post, June 2, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html)

pandemic, 2 million children did not attend school but, now another 5 million are out of school. An estimated 10% of Yemenis depend entirely on remittances but, Oxfam reports, money transfers declined 80% between January and April, thus worsening an already dire situation. In addition, migrants from the Horn of Africa continue to transit through Yemen to seek livelihoods in the wealthy Gulf countries. In 2019, over 140,000 migrants crossed the Gulf of Aden in Yemen, which has become the busiest maritime migration route in the world. Most are Ethiopian citizens under the age of 25.

Predictably, the Yemen civil war has decimated the country's healthcare sector with at least half of the medical facilities rendered dysfunctional whereas Yemen again faced the worst cholera outbreak in modern times with 110,000 cases last April. About 20% of the country's 300 districts have no doctors, and the number is thinning. Now, because of a lack of minimum protection and treatment facilities, the pandemic is worsening the situation, forcing doctors and medical staff to leave the country for fear of infection. Yemen indeed only has 500 ventilators available and 700 intensive care beds. According to the UN, more than 30 of the 41 major UN programs in Yemen will close in 2020 if additional funding fail to arrive. About 10,000 health workers have already lost payments from the UN, which also had to stop health services for women giving birth in 150 hospitals.

In early June, official sources cited 400 pandemic cases and 87 deaths. However, the UN, Doctors without Borders, and other organizations believe that such figures do not reflect the reality, given the limited testing capacity. As of 9 July 2020, according to Johns Hopkins University's COVID 19 Dashboard, only 1,318 people were officially reported positive to coronavirus (with 351 deaths) out of 29 million Yemenis. The UN and other humanitarian agencies are nonetheless operating on the basis that a community transmission (i.e. widespread, uncontrolled transmission) is taking place across the country due to inadequate protection equipment and lack of treatment facilities. The official death toll in Aden is allegedly low, but CNN reported that the city recorded 900 deaths in the first two weeks of May, far above the official 351 deaths. This staggering number, which already reaches half of the victims that the city suffered in 2015 during heavy fighting, tends to show the pandemic should soon surpass the war-related death toll.

## **Conclusion**

For years, there has been a constant increase of IDPs/refugees in the Central Region. The underlying conditions that cause forced displacements of people, such as conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine) and environmental disasters (Afghanistan, Pakistan) have remained unabated and even worsened. In fact, forced displacements tend to become chronic. The current pandemic is however aggravating the already dramatic situation of people fleeing, the majority of whom being fragile categories, such as women, children, and the elderly. Coupled with an already dire situation, COVID 19 thus has a realistic probability that the current humanitarian crisis turns into a humanitarian disaster.

For this reason, political and diplomatic urgency is required to mobilize national, regional and global actors. The current situation demands the implementation of an effective international coordination and cooperation (UN, EU, the World Bank, IMF, the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as major powers such as the US, Russia and China) to ensure maximum synergy between all actors. The UN is a natural C2 center or hub, capable of synchronizing all efforts (NGOs) to finalize the diplomatic and economic objectives. The underpinning idea would be to prevent rather than to cure through structured medium and long-term policies.

In this respect, good practices and lessons need to be identified. A possible model exists in the "The Fourth Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region," which took place on 30 June 2020 under the aegis

of the EU and the UN.<sup>24</sup> The conference aimed at renewing and strengthening the political, operational, humanitarian, and financial commitment of the international community in support of the Syrian people, neighboring countries, and the communities most affected by the ongoing conflict. In addition, all studies, assessments, analyses, and reports issued by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UNHCR, OCHA, the UN Development Program (UNDP), the WFP, and the WHO do represent another solid basis for guiding such support policies.

Pragmatically, as general concepts, it can be assessed that countries with robust governance mechanisms (Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Pakistan, and Gulf countries) or in the process of consolidation such as Iraq (thanks to new PM al-Kadhimi) with a clear division of responsibilities between sectors and administrative levels, adequate human, technical and financial resources, are in the best position to meet IDP/refugee related problem sets. National legislation and policies must be aligned with international standards, which means that regional and global initiatives should act as catalysts for national and local commitments. To benefit from international support for reconstruction, countries like Syria and Yemen, need credible political solutions based on UNSCR 2254 (2015) for Syria, and on the Stockholm (December 2018) & Riyadh (November 2019) agreements for Yemen. The reconstruction process demands a democratic and inclusive government that guarantees the country's security and the safety of people, and fully committed to stability and the implementation of economic development strategies. Unfortunately, none of these conditions are currently met in Syria and Yemen. A stronger will and determination of the whole international community is now deemed necessary to end ongoing conflicts and start a democratic process that could allow the return of displaced persons.

The international community seems to be the only way to guarantee the humanitarian and basic needs of IDPs, refugees, migrants, but also of host communities, if one really seeks to ensure a sustainable response. In line with the UNHCR and IOM recommendations, support will have to focus on areas where needs are more acute with the following strategic lines:

- meet the lifesaving needs of individuals and communities, provide first-line multisector assistance and alleviate suffering;
- improve the resilience of people and communities through the restoration of essential services and infrastructures, better access to income generation, socio-economic exploitation, and capacity-building opportunities at the community level, taking into account the impact of the COVID 19. In a context where space for civil society is limited and is likely to close, such support can help strengthen social cohesion, linked to local communities to identify their needs and defend their rights, or to use a more protective environment by limiting the use of harmful coping strategies such as child labor or early marriage;
- promote community stability by also addressing the driving factors/causes of conflict at the local level.

To achieve the above-mentioned strategic objectives, it is essential to provide (financial) support to all countries involved in the management of displaced persons, expanding the resource base and ensuring greater timeliness, predictability, consistency, and effectiveness of assistance. In particular:

- funding priority to local initiatives with sustainable solutions;
- International organizations (IO) and development banks must act as intermediaries and protection because they are less able to finance or support small-scale projects that many donor countries prefer;
- decentralized budgets managed by local administrations must follow planning, programming, implementation of projects/activities, monitoring and evaluation of progress, transparent reporting;

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<sup>24</sup> Building upon the work of the conferences held in Kuwait (2013-15), London (2016) and Brussels (2017-19), the Conference brought together 84 delegations including 57 States, 10 regional organisations and International Financial Institutions as well as 17 UN agencies. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/30/brussels-iv-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>



- subsidized loans can be a solution to provide support to countries seeking to manage large influxes of refugees.

In this context, the IVth Brussels Conference announced higher commitments for both Syria and the region: \$5.5 billion for 2020 and multi-year commitments of almost \$2.2 billion for 2021 and beyond. Financial institutions and international donors have lent loans on soft terms for approximately \$6.7 billion.

Another challenge is to improve a country's capacity to account for the number of IDPs/refugees on its territory, to carefully monitor and progress with better coverage, quality, and availability of data and related analysis. A global partnership to seek, evaluate, and systematically share best practices and experiences and help peer-to-peer learning and support could also be a viable option. It would indeed allow the coverage of a series of operational and political practices, to study data analysis and common standards for planning and communication, for coordination and collaboration, for developing integrated policies and monitoring progress also made with the use of new technologies.

All IDPs/refugees must be provided access to resettlement and parallel paths, with the highest priority granted to safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation. In particular, and according to the provisions of the UNHCR Report on the Global Resettlement Needs for 2021,<sup>25</sup> it is considered necessary to:

- promote freedom of choice as IDPs/refugees have the right to return to their country of origin by deciding when they can do so, in a safe, dignified and sustainable way, based on their circumstances and desired return;
- prevent directly or indirectly forced return, observe international law;
- strengthen operational support for returnees with unrestricted humanitarian aid access;
- work to remove obstacles to return, while removing concerns inhibiting IDPs'/refugees' return, such as concerns about security, housing, livelihoods, and access to services;
- resettlement objective must cover several areas, including securing, mental health, and psychosocial support, including de-radicalization, housing, land, and property, as well as civil documentation.

Finally, the US and the EU should waive sanctions that can undermine the ability of countries that are particularly engaged in IDPs/refugees management to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and medical health support to respond to the COVID 19 pandemic as in Syria, Iran or Turkey and in accordance with international law. If sanctions are activated, remove delivery barriers for humanitarian aid, essential medical equipment and supplies needed to combat COVID 19.

### **Recommendations for the US / for USCENTCOM**

- Coordinate with US Department of State a greater diplomatic and financial support through IOs and NGOs.
- Promote multinational agreements, in particular with the EU, the GCC, Russia and China, to stabilize Syria and Yemen politically and economically, thus encouraging the return of IDPs and refugees.
- With international partners, prepare long terms security plans to support fragile partner governments in the area that could face increased difficulties related to COVID 19.
- Implement humanitarian, civil and military cooperation projects (CENTCOM/CJTF-OIR) aimed at meeting local challenges and answering basic needs, along with a robust strategic communication campaign.
- Limit the negative impacts of sanctions (Syria, Iran, Turkey) on the delivery of humanitarian aid and necessary medical equipment/supplies aimed at curbing the COVID 19 pandemic.
- Support all international efforts to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Syria's IDP/refugee camps.

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<sup>25</sup> Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2021, UNHCR, June 15, 2020.

<https://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/5ef34bfb7/projected-global-resettlement-needs-2021.html>