

Policy statement for the Brussels Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region

Brussels 03/04/2017

On 4th and 5th April, the European Union, United Nations, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, and UK host the *Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region*. The Brussels Conference will tackle a range of issues impacting on both immediate life-saving humanitarian priorities as well as longer-term efforts to resolve the conflict. As the violence worsens inside Syria, and political efforts to resolve the conflict prove highly contentious, preparations towards the Conference have been fraught with controversy over if and how 'reconstruction' might feature on the agenda, and the political implications of this. The question of how civil society can participate at the Conference, or influence the decisions made, has also been controversial.

In this context, the ***We Exist!*** coalition of Syrian civil society organisations makes the following recommendations:

1. Facilitate meaningful participation by independent Syrian civil society groups at the Brussels Conference and follow-up processes – Unfortunately, the experience to date has been that local civil society has generally been the last to get invited into international policy processes on Syria that will impact on their work and the lives of the communities they directly serve. The co-hosts of the Brussels Conference, as well as the preparatory meetings hosted by the UN Office of the Special Envoy Stefan De Mistura and the High Representative Federica Mogherini, ECHO and DG NEAR, should take steps to ensure that diverse Syrian civil society organisations can participate and contribute to the process. In addition, they should ensure effective and inclusive participation in the follow-up process to implement, monitor and evaluate outcomes from the Conference, the Civil Society Chamber meetings and the other side events.

2. Affirm the protection and inclusion of civil society in the substantive commitments and outcomes agreed at the Conference – The Conference should issue a strong call in its final declaration as well as in statements by individual governments for the protection and inclusion of independent local civil society organisations in all aspects of the international, national and local response to the Syrian crisis. Attacks on civil society activists and the criminalization of independent civil society groups that has spiraled over the past six years should cease. Respect of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights norms should be strongly reaffirmed and accountability for violations by all parties to the conflict promoted. Parties to the conflict have fostered and manipulated social and other community differences to serve their political and military objectives. As such, support to civil society should embody principles of inclusion, with steps taken to ensure that

marginalized groups can engage and diversity in terms of gender, age, political, social and other relevant factors.

3. **Rethink Reconstruction** – Reconstruction cannot just be about bricks and concrete, it must address the political, social and economic root causes of the uprising and subsequent violent conflict. The political transition from violence towards sustainable peace should be inclusive and representing the aspirations of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity. Reconstruction should be for all of Syria and all Syrians, and not determined by the imperatives of conflict or political violence. As such, it should only start and be funded after credible steps toward a genuine transition. Accountability and justice are necessary for this to happen – without these, reconstruction efforts risk becoming new fronts in forced displacement, the dispossession of property, human rights violations and further rounds of violence. Donors and the UN should not conflate ‘early recovery’ with premature involvement without the political conditions for reconstruction being in place. Furthermore, the important role of independent Syrian civil society organizations should be affirmed in the political track of negotiations on conflict resolution inside Syria as well as in any eventual ‘reconstruction’ efforts following a political settlement. They have a central role to play in promoting human rights, justice, accountability, peace and reconciliation.