

Sweden's Regional Strategy for the

Syria Crisis

2016 – 2020



REGERINGSKANSLIET

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**Government Offices
of Sweden**

Sweden's Regional Strategy for the Syria Crisis 2016–2020

1. Focus

The aim of the activities within the scope of this strategy is to contribute to strengthening the resilience of the Syrian population and of vulnerable groups in Syria's neighbouring countries that are being severely affected by the conflict. The strategy will also contribute to strengthening democracy and gender equality and to greater respect of human rights in Syria and for refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries. The strategy will apply to the period 2016–2020 and will comprise a total of SEK 1.7 billion.

The initiatives encompassed by this strategy are expected to contribute to:

Strengthened resilience, human security and freedom from violence

With a focus on livelihood opportunities

- Improved lasting livelihood opportunities for women and men in Syria
- Improved lasting livelihood opportunities for women and men, including refugees from Syria, who are in a vulnerable situation in neighbouring countries as a result of the Syria crisis

With a focus on increased access to public services

- Improved access to inclusive and equal basic public services for people in Syria
- Improved access to inclusive and equal basic public services for people, including refugees from Syria, who are in a vulnerable situation in neighbouring countries as a result of the Syria crisis

With a focus on reduced gender-based violence

- Gender-based violence is combated and prevented to a greater extent in Syria
- Gender-based violence is combated and prevented to a greater extent among people, including refugees from Syria, who are in a vulnerable situation in neighbouring countries as a result of the Syria crisis

Strengthened democracy and increased respect for human rights

With a focus on a stronger civil society

- Strengthening the capacity of Syrian civil society organisations and local structures to conduct advocacy work, participate in dialogue and contribute to peacebuilding and statebuilding
- Strengthening the capacity of Syrian media organisations to provide independent reporting and to promote democratic development and greater accountability

With a focus on respect for human rights

- Increased knowledge about human rights, including the rights of the child, and gender equality among Syrian civil society organisations and in Syrian society

2. Country context

The conflict in Syria is very serious and the prospects of a peace agreement appear to be remote. The war has resulted in the world's worst humanitarian disaster. A continued violent conflict is the single greatest barrier to development in Syria. Since the conflict broke out, average life expectancy has decreased by 25 years. In large parts of the country, the state and public structures have collapsed and the territory is controlled by many different armed groups. The terrorist organisation ISIL/Daesh controls a significant part of the country. Half of the Syrian population, twelve million people, has been forced to flee so far, over four million of whom have fled to Syria's neighbouring countries.

The conflict in Syria has thus had far-reaching consequences for the countries bordering Syria. The neighbouring countries most affected are Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Iraq is also affected, but its challenges have been assessed to be mainly of a domestic nature, rather than a consequence of the conflict in Syria. The majority of refugees from Syria live in normal communities, known as host communities, in neighbouring countries, often in areas with high levels of poverty. Increased competition for jobs, lower wages and increased housing costs have led to tensions between refugees and the local population. The political climate has become tougher in neighbouring countries and has resulted in restrictions on freedom of movement, housing and opportunities to work for Syrian refugees. One exacerbating circumstance is that the refugees lack opportunities to influence their life in neighbouring countries.

Syria is now considered a low-income country rather than a middle-income country. The economy has transitioned to a war economy with large elements of criminality such as smuggling, paid recruitment to armed groups and kidnapping, which constitute barriers to peace. Employment and livelihood opportunities outside of the war economy have been severely restricted. Refugees from Syria are vulnerable and do not have permission to work in neighbouring countries, where there is also a lack of livelihood opportunities. As a result, refugees often end up in informal work, which increases the risk of child labour, forced labour and child marriage. This has an impact on the labour market in host countries and contributes to increased tension. In accordance with

the *Decent Work Agenda*, it is therefore important to work both to protect refugees in working life and to reduce the tensions between local populations and refugees. The lack of opportunities to work constitutes a push factor that encourages people to flee from Syria and neighbouring countries.

Large parts of the population in Syria lack access to basic public services such as education, healthcare, electricity, water and sanitation. Children are particularly affected by the conflict and many are growing up without an education. A quality education that encompasses both girls and boys and does not stop after primary school is a prerequisite for building a future for Syria, avoiding radicalisation and promoting gender equality. There is huge pressure on public services in neighbouring countries, which has negative consequences for both the local population and refugees from Syria. In both Syria and neighbouring countries, basic public services are provided by local institutions and civil society, among others. In many places inside Syria, this is done by local councils and other local structures that constitute embryonic local administrations.

Gender-based violence has increased sharply not only in Syria, but also in neighbouring countries. Rape and other forms of gender-based violence are used systematically by many of the parties involved in the conflict as a military tactic. Gender-based violence has also increased within families. There has been a detrimental impact on society's norms, one example being the increased acceptance of child marriage.

Before the outbreak of the conflict, Syria was one of the region's most repressive police states, governed through a system based on division of power, repression and corruption. The judicial system and media were not independent and civil society was very weak. Peaceful mass demonstrations in 2011 were brutally suppressed by the Assad regime and gradually escalated into a violent conflict. However, the conflict has led to a growing and more active, although still fragile, civil society. After several years of war, there is an almost complete lack of respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. Civilians often constitute direct targets in the war. There is insufficient knowledge about rights and an absence of

democratic institutions, which are a prerequisite if citizens' rights are to be guaranteed. Torture, kidnapping and arrest are constant threats that are forcing more and more democratic voices to leave Syria.

In spite of the ongoing conflict, implementing initiatives in Syria within the strategy's proposed areas is relevant and is deemed to be feasible. However, the situation may change and there is a risk that the conditions for conducting development cooperation in Syria will deteriorate during the strategy period. The conditions for conducting development cooperation in neighbouring countries are significantly better than in Syria, but there is still a risk of the conflict spreading to these countries.

Since the conflict broke out in 2011, Sweden has had an extensive humanitarian involvement in Syria and its neighbouring countries. Since 2012, Sweden has conducted development cooperation focused on human rights and democracy in Syria within the scope of the Regional Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa. Sweden has also contributed to funds for reconstruction in opposition-controlled areas in Syria and for strengthening resilience in Lebanon and Jordan.

3. Activities

Sweden's development cooperation in Syria and its neighbouring countries will be based on and characterised by a rights perspective and by poor people's perspective on development. The rights perspective involves human rights and democracy being regarded as fundamental to development. This approach means that individuals and groups that are discriminated against, excluded and marginalised are being made visible prior to each contribution. This is because people have to be able to enjoy their rights, regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion or other belief, sexual orientation or transgender identity or expression. Poor people's perspective on development involves poor women and men's and boys and girls' situation, needs, circumstances and priorities being used as the basis for poverty reduction and the promotion of equitable and sustainable development.

Swedish development cooperation will be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, as well as gender equal. A comprehensive view of the challenges, needs and conditions of people and society is the foundation of development cooperation. The guiding principle is that economic, social and environmental conditions and processes are to be interpreted and managed in an integrated context. Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment and rights are goals in themselves, as well as prerequisites for and means of sustainable development. Violence and armed conflict are one of the greatest barriers to economic and social development and development cooperation is an important aspect of conflict prevention. Consequently, a conflict perspective, a gender equality perspective and an environmental and climate perspective will be systematically integrated into Swedish development cooperation in Syria and affected neighbouring countries. A children's rights perspective will also be integrated systematically.

The complex, unstable and dangerous context in Syria places great demands on the flexibility, monitoring and application of a conflict-sensitive way of working. The security situation and the limited possibility of a field presence are also deemed to be a hindrance to the planning, implementation and follow-up of assistance in the future. Continual conflict sensitivity analyses will be conducted during the strategy's implementation. The risk level is assessed to be very high in Syria and moderately high in neighbouring countries. The risks of corruption, that Swedish support is misused or used as a sign of political support, that armed groups take control of resources and the risks to the safety of partner organisations and individuals will also be identified, evaluated and managed during the strategy's implementation.

The strategy makes it possible to implement initiatives in Syria and the neighbouring countries Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Initiatives in Iraq may be considered if the country is affected to a greater extent by the Syria crisis.

The basic premise of initiatives in Syria will be that collaboration should be sought, to the greatest extent possible, with actors, including multi-lateral organisations, that provide equal support for all. The intention is

to contribute to development for the whole of Syria. However, opportunities to provide development assistance in ISIL/Daesh-controlled areas are severely limited. No resources will be channelled through armed groups. Swedish development assistance is not to be utilised for political purposes. Sweden will not cooperate with the Assad regime. Assistance may be provided through partner organisations at a local and technical level to an administration that provides public services in order to preserve existing administrative structures at a technical level and avoid institutional collapse, with the intention of eventually reforming the administration so that it provides services to all on equal terms. This becomes increasingly important in the event of an agreement concerning a transitional government. At the same time as Swedish assistance is not to be used to give legitimacy to a certain opposition faction, assistance can be provided through partner organisations with opposition organisations and others in opposition-controlled areas who, for example, provide public services. This also avoids Swedish initiatives being limited to local administrations in regime-controlled areas. Support for human rights defenders can be considered throughout the whole of Syria, in areas where they can benefit from Swedish support without exposing themselves to excessive risk.

Syria's national plans and frameworks are out of play, many donors' aid initiatives in Syria are politically motivated or confidential and there is a need to improve donor coordination. In neighbouring countries on the other hand, there are both regional and national frameworks that Sida will take into account, including UN plans. Several new instruments are being created in order to address the Syria crisis, which makes donor coordination all the more important.

Synergies between the different areas in the strategy are to be sought. Synergies with other Swedish strategies are also to be sought, primarily the Regional Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa, the Results Strategy for Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey and the Strategy for Special Initiatives for Human Rights and Democratisation. Synergies and coordination with development assistance provided by the EU and UN will be sought and Sweden will work towards a well-functioning and unanimous UN at the country level. Activities that aim to strengthen

resilience in Syria and neighbouring countries will be based on joint analysis and will be planned and implemented so that they unburden and complement Sweden's humanitarian assistance. It is important that initiatives within the scope of this strategy are implemented in a way that ensures the distinctive nature of humanitarian assistance and does not undermine its fundamental principles. Sida will ensure that there is a holistic view of all the support provided by Sweden to Syria and affected neighbouring countries.

Both areas of activity contribute to improving the conditions for a future peace in Syria and sustainable reconstruction. The areas are also well suited to contribute to the reconstruction of, for example, local administration, the provision of public services and democratic processes in the event of a future peace agreement.

Strengthened resilience, human security and freedom from violence, with a focus on livelihood opportunities, increased access to public services and reduced gender-based violence

The target group for initiatives in this area is people in Syria and people in a vulnerable situation in neighbouring countries, including refugees from Syria. In neighbouring countries, this means that assistance should benefit both refugees from Syria and vulnerable groups from the local population so as not to increase the tensions between them. The vulnerable situation has to be connected to the Syria crisis. Women, children and young people will be prioritised specifically.

Sweden will contribute to strengthening resilience in Syria and its neighbouring countries by improving the employment and livelihood opportunities. Improved access to labour markets in neighbouring countries for refugees from Syria is a priority, as is promoting women's economic empowerment. The prohibition on forced labour and child labour should be protected.

Activities will contribute to strengthening resilience by supporting local actors in Syria and neighbouring countries to supply inclusive basic public services on equal terms, but without undermining national structures in

neighbouring countries. Public services can include, for example, education, healthcare and sanitation. Initiatives in the field of sanitation will be environmentally sustainable. The choice of services will be based on local needs and conditions. Reinforcing local capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable people is a priority and an area in which Sweden has extensive experience. Analyses of suitable partners will be conducted for the assistance provided to public services through local structures.

Strengthened resilience by counteracting and preventing gender-based violence will also be supported. Prevention and rehabilitation will be prioritised, as will norm-critical activities that aim to change attitudes. Sweden has experience of working in the region to tackle gender-based violence.

Joint, multi-donor programmes may be considered.

Strengthened democracy and increased respect for human rights with a focus on a stronger civil society

The target group for initiatives in this area is people in Syria and people from Syria in neighbouring countries. Women, children and young people will be prioritised specifically.

New and existing civil society organisations will be strengthened in a way that is adapted to the difficult and high-risk Syrian context. Strengthening Syrian civil society organisations that are working for a peaceful solution to the conflict and a democratic future for Syria is a priority. In addition, the capacity of local councils and other local structures to contribute to peace building and state building will be developed. These initiatives are important in order to lay the groundwork for future reconciliation and the building of democratic institutions. If and when it becomes possible to support reconciliation at the national level, this should be prioritised.

Activities will contribute to improving the conditions for gender equality by facilitating Syrian women's participation in peace negotiations, local administration and local and national processes. Support will be provided to Syrian civil society organisations' activities that safeguard human

rights and create the conditions for reconciliation and justice. Targeted awareness-raising initiatives in schools and for young people concerning human rights, including the rights of the child and gender equality, are a priority. Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to systematically document and communicate the situation for human rights and international humanitarian law, including future legal action, is a priority.

Increasing the capacity of media organisations and networks of activists to provide independent information in Syria and neighbouring countries is a priority. In the long term, these activities can contribute to the development of a more professional independent media. Support that strengthens freedom of expression contributes to democratic opinion, increased awareness and accountability in the long run.

Sweden is one of few donors in Syria that focuses on gender equality and takes a long-term approach to strengthening the capacity of Syrian actors. This can contribute to creating a vision for the future, in spite of the difficult situation that exists today.

Activities in this area are politically sensitive and support should be provided primarily through international organisations that have the capacity to reach Syrian organisations and, in some cases, through Syrian organisations. Joint, multi-donor programmes may be considered.

The forms used for follow-up are described in the Government's guidelines for strategies. All initiatives within the scope of the strategy will be monitored continually. Evaluations will be regarded as an integral aspect of continuous monitoring and will be implemented when necessary. Various methods will be used to follow up results, with both qualitative and quantitative information about results. Efforts should be made to achieve a balance between short-term and long-term results in the portfolio of contributions in order to ensure that the development assistance contributes to equitable and sustainable development.