

**Ministry for Foreign Affairs**

## Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2016–2020

*Amended and extended to apply in 2021–2023*

### 1. Focus

The aim of the activities within the scope of this strategy is to contribute to strengthening the resilience – the ability to withstand, adapt and recover – of the Syrian population and of vulnerable groups in Syria's neighbouring countries that are severely affected by the conflict. The strategy will also contribute to strengthening democracy and gender equality, and to greater respect for human rights in Syria and for refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries.

The strategy was initially adopted for 2016–2020 and provided a total of SEK 1.8 billion. The strategy period has been extended to apply in 2021–2023, with a total volume for 2016–2023 of SEK 3.210 billion. The objectives of the activities remain the same, but include an increased focus on accountability. The description of the implementation context has been updated.

The initiatives encompassed by this strategy are expected to contribute to the objectives below.

### ***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 equitable basic public services for people in Syria
- Improved access to inclusive and equitable basic public services for people in a vulnerable situation in neighbouring countries, including refugees from Syria, 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 gender equality, and increased respect for human rights**

*With a focus on a stronger civil society*

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

*With a focus on respect for human rights and accountability*

- Increased knowledge about human rights, including the rights of the child, and gender equality among Syrian civil society organisations and in Syrian society
- Strengthened capacity of organisations to contribute to increased respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, accountability and reconciliation.

## **2. Country context**

The situation in Syria is very serious and the prospects of a political solution to the conflict appear remote. The conflict has resulted in one of the world's worst and most protracted humanitarian disasters. The continued volatile security situation, including recurrent and extensive outbreaks of armed violence and a growing war economy, is the single greatest barrier to development in Syria. The State and public structures have largely collapsed, and the territory is controlled by a number of armed actors. The most active part of the conflict has been concentrated to limited areas of the country. At

the same time, most of the population are living in conditions that continue to be difficult, and are in urgent need of protection, other emergency assistance, food security and basic public services. More than half of the Syrian population – 14 million people – have been forced to flee; of these, more than 7 million have fled to Syria's neighbouring countries. The fight against Daesh has had a profound impact on Syria, especially in the north-eastern parts of the country. Despite the organisation's military defeat in 2018, its effects are still evident today and, not least in camps such as Al Hol, vulnerability is widespread among both children and adults.

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 the challenges there 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. The deteriorated economic situation in the neighbouring countries, combined with increased competition for jobs, lower wages and increased housing costs, has led to tensions between refugees and the local population. The political climate has become tougher in the neighbouring countries and has resulted in restrictions on freedom of movement, housing and work opportunities for refugees from Syria. One exacerbating circumstance is that the refugees lack opportunities to influence their lives in neighbouring countries.

After a decade of conflict, Syria is now considered a low-income country rather than a middle-income country. The economy has transitioned to a war economy with extensive criminal activity including smuggling, paid recruitment to armed groups and kidnapping, which constitute barriers to peace. Livelihood opportunities outside of the war economy have been severely restricted. Refugees from Syria are vulnerable and, in general, 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. Therefore, and in accordance with the Decent Work Agenda, it is important to work both to protect refugees in working life and to reduce the tensions between local populations and refugees. The lack of livelihood opportunities is a push factor for people to flee Syria and neighbouring countries.

Large proportions of the Syrian population lack access to basic social services, such as education, health care, electricity, water and sanitation. These services have primarily been provided in the form of short-term measures within the framework of humanitarian assistance. 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, preventing radicalisation and promoting gender equality. There is huge pressure on public services in neighbouring countries, which has negative consequences for both local population and refugees from Syria. In both Syria and neighbouring countries, basic public services are provided by local structures, organisations and civil society, among others.

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. Social norms have been adversely impacted; for example, acceptance of child marriage has increased.

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 many years of war, there is an almost total lack of respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. Civilians and civilian infrastructure are often direct targets in the conflict. Impunity is very widespread. There is insufficient knowledge about rights and an absence of democratic institutions, which are prerequisites 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, particularly areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

In spite of the ongoing conflict, implementing initiatives in Syria within the strategy's proposed areas is relevant and 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 a risk that the situation will deteriorate during the implementation period.

Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis is linked with several other Swedish strategies, most closely with the strategy for Sweden's humanitarian assistance. Since the conflict broke out in 2011, Sweden has had an extensive humanitarian involvement in Syria and its neighbouring countries, based on UN humanitarian response plans. Humanitarian assistance is needs-based and its primary aim is to save lives and alleviate suffering. Since 2012 – within the scope of the Regional Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa – and since 2016 – within the scope of the Regional Strategy for the Syria crisis – Sweden has conducted development cooperation focused on strengthening the resilience of civilians in Syria and Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries, and increasing respect for human rights and democracy in Syria. Sweden has also contributed to 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 perspectives on development. The rights perspective involves human rights and democracy being regarded as fundamental to development. This approach means giving visibility to individuals and groups that are discriminated against, excluded and marginalised prior to each contribution. This is to ensure that all individuals can enjoy their rights, regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion or other belief, sexual orientation, or transgender identity or expression. Poor people's perspectives on development means that the situation, needs, circumstances and priorities of poor women, men, boys and girls must be used as the starting point for poverty reduction and the promotion of equitable and sustainable development.

Sweden's development cooperation will be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, and gender-equal. Development cooperation is based on a comprehensive approach to the challenges, needs and conditions of people and societies. The guiding principle is that economic, social and environmental conditions and processes will 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, achieving 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-sensitive approach, a gender perspective and an environmental and climate perspective will be mainstreamed into Swedish development cooperation in Syria and affected neighbouring countries. A child rights perspective will also be mainstreamed.

The complex, unstable and dangerous context in Syria places great demands on the flexibility, monitoring and application of a conflict-sensitive approach. It is expected that the security situation and the limited possibility of a field presence will continue to be a hindrance to the planning, implementation and monitoring of development cooperation. A continuous conflict sensitivity analysis will be conducted throughout the strategy's implementation. The risk level in Syria is assessed as very high and in neighbouring countries as medium. The risk of corruption, of Swedish support being misused or used as a sign of political support, and of armed groups taking control of resources will also be identified, evaluated and managed during the strategy's implementation along with the risks to the safety of partner organisations and individuals.

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

Initiatives are intended to contribute to development for the entire population of Syria. The basic premise will be that collaboration should be sought, to the greatest extent possible, with actors, including multilateral organisations, that provide equal support for all. No resources will be channelled through armed groups. Swedish development cooperation will not be used for political purposes. Sweden will not cooperate with the Syrian regime. Assistance may be provided through partner organisations at 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. While Swedish development assistance will not be used to give legitimacy to a certain political actor, cooperation may be conducted through the UN and other partner organisations with local structures that are the embryos of local administration in areas beyond the regime's control. This may involve, for example, the provision and rehabilitation of public services. This also avoids Swedish initiatives being limited to local administrations in regime-controlled areas. Support for

human rights defenders may be considered throughout the whole of Syria, in areas where they may benefit from Swedish support without exposing themselves to excessive risk.

Many donors' aid initiatives in Syria are politically motivated or confidential and there is a need to improve donor coordination. In neighbouring countries, there are both regional and national frameworks that Sida will take into account, including UN plans. New instruments are being created to address the Syria crisis, which makes donor coordination all the more important.

Synergies between the different strategy areas will be sought. Synergies will also be sought with other Swedish strategies, primarily the strategy for Sweden's humanitarian assistance, the Regional Strategy for Sweden's Development Cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa, the strategy for Iraq, the Results Strategy for Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, the results strategy for Global Contributions for Human Security, and the results strategy for Special Initiatives for Human Rights and Democratisation. Synergies and coordination with EU and UN development assistance will be sought, and Sweden will work to promote an effective and coherent UN at country level. Activities that aim to strengthen resilience in Syria and neighbouring countries 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 an integrated approach in all Swedish support to Syria and affected neighbouring countries.

Both areas of activity contribute to improving the conditions for future peace in Syria and for 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 initiatives 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 specifically prioritised.

Sweden will contribute to strengthening resilience in Syria and its neighbouring countries by improving 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 rehabilitating basic public services to meet ongoing development and humanitarian needs effectively and sustainably. The needs are huge and sustained measures need to be scaled up. While activities will contribute to this, Sweden will not contribute to reconstruction in cooperation with the Syrian regime.

Activities will contribute to strengthening resilience by supporting local actors in Syria and neighbouring countries in providing inclusive basic public services on equal terms, but without undermining national structures in the neighbouring countries. Public services may include education, health care, sanitation and energy supply. Sanitation and energy initiatives will be environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient. 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. For support to public services through local structures, analyses of suitable partners will be carried out.

Strengthened resilience by combating 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.

To help prevent violent extremism, activities will contribute to efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate people who have been affected by, or taken part in, the conflict.

Joint, multi-donor programmes may be considered.

**Strengthened democracy and gender equality, increased respect for human rights and increased accountability, with a focus on a stronger civil society**

The target group for initiatives in this area comprises people in Syria and people from Syria in the neighbouring countries. Women, children and young people will be given particular priority.

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 actors and other structures to contribute to peacebuilding and statebuilding will be developed. These initiatives are important for laying the groundwork for future reconciliation and the building of democratic institutions. If and when it becomes possible to support reconciliation at national level, this should be prioritised.

Activities will improve 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 protect 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. Increased accountability is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable peace in Syria. Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to systematically document and report on violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and providing education about these, is a priority. This may contribute to accountability and future legal action. Support to international organisations may also be considered.

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

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 may 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 certain cases, through Syrian organisations. Joint, multi-donor programmes may be considered.

Follow-up and monitoring procedures are outlined in the Government's guidelines for strategies. All initiatives within the scope of this strategy will be monitored continuously. Evaluations will be regarded as an integral part of continuous monitoring and will be implemented when necessary. Various results monitoring methods will be used that include both qualitative and quantitative results information. Efforts should be made to achieve a balance between short-term and long-term results in the contribution portfolio to ensure that development assistance contributes to equitable and sustainable development.