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Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2026

1. Starting points and added value

The Syria crisis is into its second decade. The Syrian population continues to endure one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters under a repressive and authoritarian regime. The situation in the country is characterised by armed violence and insecurity, economic collapse, widespread poverty, drought and inadequate access to food and water. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced, either within or outside the country. The lack of respect for human rights is pervasive. The Syria crisis has had extensive repercussions for the region and the rest of the world, including Sweden, in the form of increased insecurity, violent extremism and terrorism, forced displacement and irregular migration.

This regional strategy for the Syria crisis forms part of Sweden's overall development and foreign policy and will help to strengthen local resilience among the Syrian population, Syrian refugees and vulnerable groups in the refugee-hosting communities of neighbouring countries Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye, all of which are major regional recipients of Syrian refugees. Sweden's engagement focuses on alleviating the dire humanitarian situation, addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration, contributing to efforts to prevent violent extremism and terrorism, and promoting accountability in Syria.

2. The direction and objectives of Sweden's development assistance

The objective of Sweden's international development assistance is to create conditions that help improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression. The objectives of the strategy are based on Sweden's added value in the regional response to the Syria crisis and past experience and results achieved in the operational areas.

The strategy focuses on increasing the local resilience of the Syrian population and of refugees from Syria and vulnerable groups in neighbouring countries. This also discourages irregular migration from the region and enables more assistance in neighbouring areas. These activities provide a link between humanitarian assistance and longer-term development assistance, and support efforts to achieve the Paris Agreement's climate goals. Based on the principles of development effectiveness, Sweden's development assistance to the Syria crisis will be effective, results-oriented and implemented in line with the EU Council conclusions.

Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2026 comprises a total of SEK 880 million. The work must be adaptable and flexible and complement the large-scale humanitarian assistance to Syria.

The strategy governs the use of funds allocated under appropriation item 1:1 Development assistance and appropriation item 17 The Middle East and North Africa in the appropriation directions for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for each respective budget year.

Activities should contribute to the following objectives:

Livelihood opportunities and basic public services

- Improved livelihood opportunities for women and men and increased access to basic public services in Syria and neighbouring countries.

Promoting freedom and fighting oppression

- Strengthen civil society, human rights defenders and independent media in their efforts to promote human rights and freedoms and the

rule of law, democratic development and increased accountability in Syria.

- Increased gender equality, freedom and empowerment of women and girls, including greater counteraction and prevention of gender-based violence, as well as counteracting norms and customs that restrict women and girls in Syria and neighbouring countries.
- Increased freedom of religion or belief, including the right to be non-religious, and protection of religious minorities' rights in Syria and neighbouring countries.
- Enhanced conditions to prevent violent Islamism, extremism and terrorism in Syria, including through local stabilisation initiatives.

Migration, current refugee situation and returns

- Counteract forced displacement and irregular migration, along with the root causes thereof, while promoting opportunities to increase returns.
- Strengthen the conditions for voluntary returns and sustainable reintegration to Syria where possible.
- Enhanced capacity in neighbouring countries to ensure a sustainable situation for refugees and host communities.

3. Country context

The complex and multi-layered conflicts in Syria have resulted in one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters, where over 16 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in order to survive. The Syrian regime, which controls two-thirds of the country's territory, continues its repressive and authoritarian policies. The situation for the population is characterised by repression, armed violence, insecurity, economic collapse, widespread poverty and food insecurity, drought and lack of access to water. In addition, conditions in the non-regime-controlled areas are dire. Here too, the political context is complex, with a range of actors controlling the territory in northeastern and northwestern Syria. The earthquakes of February 2023 further aggravated the situation.

Risk of violent extremism is widespread. Even though the Daesh terrorist organisation has been substantially decimated, it still poses a threat. Ethnic and religious minorities, especially Christians, are particularly vulnerable and have been severely impacted by violence and oppression in the past two decades. Several minority groups are at risk of completely disappearing from their regions of origin.

The country is also an arena for power struggles between global and regional powers. A political solution to the conflicts still seems very remote, with frozen lines of conflict and stalled political negotiations. Without a political solution in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the situation in Syria is expected to continue to generate significant uncertainty in the neighbourhood, with a direct negative effect on Europe in terms of violent extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, forced displacement and irregular migration.

Syria has been in diplomatic isolation since the outbreak of conflict in 2011. The League of Arab States decided in early 2023 to lift the suspension on Syria's membership. So far, the normalisation of bilateral relations with the Syrian regime has been relatively restrained. The EU's non-normalisation line and restrictive measures in response to the Assad regime's brutal oppression of the civilian population are expected to continue for as long as progress in the political process fails.

More than half of the Syrian population, about 14 million people, are displaced inside or outside the country. Over 7 million Syrians are refugees, including those in neighbouring countries Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. The political, social and economic situation in these countries affects livelihood opportunities and access to basic public services for Syrians and vulnerable groups in host communities. Intensified political rhetoric towards Syrian refugees and, in some cases, even tensions between refugees and host communities have therefore increased over time. A deteriorating situation for Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries risks driving secondary migration to Europe. Since the conflict's outbreak, Syrian citizens have been one of the largest groups of asylum seekers to the EU Member States, where Sweden has been one of the main recipient countries.

These protracted conflicts mean that Syria has gone from being a middle-income country to a low-income country. The economic crisis has limited

people's livelihood opportunities. Young people make up a large and increasing proportion of the population. The price of food, medicines and fuel has increased significantly. Climate change has particularly affected poor communities with few resources for climate adaptation. Severe drought combined with decades of poor water management have led to reduced harvests, which has contributed to widespread food insecurity. A deterioration in access to clean water has resulted in cholera outbreaks. Large proportions of the Syrian population also lack access to basic social services such as education, health and medical care, electricity, water and sanitation.

The lack of democratic space, respect for human rights and international humanitarian law is pervasive in Syria. Civilians and civilian infrastructure are often subjected to deliberate attacks. Torture, kidnappings and arbitrary arrests are common, and a large number of people are subjected to enforced disappearances, including human rights defenders who are also at risk of harassment, intimidation and violence. Freedom of religion or belief is curtailed. Impunity is prevalent and there is a widespread lack of accountability. Many countries, including Sweden, have the possibility to investigate and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. One positive development during the years of conflict is the emergence of an active, albeit fragile, Syrian civil society and independent media.

Despite increased responsibility to make a living, women and girls generally have weaker economic empowerment and influence than men and boys. Gender-related violence is a growing problem in Syria and widespread in neighbouring countries as well. Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls is severely limited.

4. Activities

The strategy should be implemented in all of Syria and include initiatives in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. The aim of these activities in Syria is to contribute to local resilience in the whole country's population. Sweden will not collaborate with the Syrian regime or associated actors. Nor will Sweden contribute to a reconstruction in Syria until steps have been taken towards a political solution of the conflicts in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Recipients of support in civil society need verification that they do not have links to violent ideologies, extremism or Islamism and that they support democratic values and human rights.

Support may be provided through partner organisations for technical and local administration and to local entities that constitute embryonic forms of local administration, including in areas beyond the regime's control.

Syria's complex, unstable and risky context places great demands on the flexibility, adaptability, monitoring and application of a conflict-sensitive approach. Due to ongoing conflicts, the situation may change and there is a risk that conditions for conducting development cooperation in Syria deteriorate during the strategy period.

The risk level is considered to be very high in Syria and medium in neighbouring countries. Risks that should be identified, prioritised and managed include extensive corruption, abuse or instrumentalisation, armed groups' attempts to influence, and the security of partner organisations and individuals. Corruption in Syria is rife and poses a challenge in neighbouring countries, which affects conditions for all international development assistance. Risk of development assistance funds being misappropriated is substantial, placing particularly high demands on governance, control, scrutiny and monitoring. Sweden, together with other donors, will continue to be a driving force for effective and transparent development assistance to Syria and, in dialogue with the UN, address challenges such as risk management issues, exchange rates and payment routes, and corruption. Sweden will also continue to be a driving force in the donor community regarding issues such as UN procurement in Syria.

In light of the high levels of risk and complexity, regular consultations will be conducted between the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Embassy of Sweden in Beirut/Damascus and Sida. Assessments of local conditions for implementation of assistance in Syria and its neighbouring countries will be updated on a regular and joint basis, including with the concerned embassies. Sida's operations should be flexible and able to quickly adapt to changing contexts in the country. Geographical distribution of assistance will be reported within the framework of annual strategy reporting, in terms of both distribution between the countries concerned and within Syria.

Synergies and coordination with EU development assistance based on the Team Europe Approach, as well as the international community and UN assistance, will be sought, and Sweden will work to promote an effective and cohesive UN at country level. Joint donor programmes should be

investigated. Synergies between the different strategy areas and with other Swedish strategies will be sought.

Activities will help reduce dependency on humanitarian support and, in the longer term, reduce needs for assistance. Climate and environmental impact will be taken into consideration where relevant. Interim climate objectives can be included in actions where possible. All relevant activities must consistently take a gender equality perspective into account.

Activities will be followed up and reported in line with what is prescribed in the current guidelines for development assistance strategies. The annual strategy report will include an account, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to the stated objectives. Gender-disaggregated statistics should be included in the reporting of activities.

In its strategy reports to the Government, Sida can highlight how activities contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in relation to the strategy's priorities. These areas of activity are particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: No poverty, SDG 2: No hunger and SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions.

Within the area of *livelihood opportunities and basic public services*, the activities of livelihood opportunities and basic public services should be mutually reinforcing. Within the objective of livelihood opportunities, the activities should support the development of local private enterprise, including micro-enterprise in Syria, with a focus on agricultural markets and the food sector. Support for small-scale agriculture is a priority, where the sustainable use of natural resources, including water, is central. Support should consistently strive to reinforce women's economic empowerment. Young people are an important target group. In neighbouring countries, the focus should be on employment opportunities in small and medium-sized businesses that offer both host communities and Syrian refugees opportunities to make a living. To counteract tensions, activities should benefit both Syrian refugees and vulnerable groups in host communities.

Within the community service objective, the activities will support local capacity in Syria and neighbouring countries in the rehabilitation and provision of basic social services such as water, sanitation, education and health care. Activities will also promote improved access to services within

sexual and reproductive health. Capacity support at technical level and to local government in Syria should also be included where possible.

Within the area of *promoting freedom and combating repression*, activities will strengthen the capacity of Syrian civil society organisations, human rights defenders and independent media to work for the promotion of human rights and freedoms, including freedom of religion or beliefs, the rule of law, democratic development and accountability in Syria. Support will be provided to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to systematically document and communicate human rights violations and to contribute to the investigation and prosecution of people responsible for crimes under international law in Syria. Support will also be provided to organisations working with the issue of accountability for people who have disappeared in Syria since the outbreak of the conflict.

The activities will help strengthen women's empowerment and participation by supporting local and national organisations in Syria and neighbouring countries. Support will also be provided to activities in Syria and neighbouring countries to counteract and prevent gender-based violence. Work against child marriage should be prioritised where it is customary or legal.

The activities will also contribute to improved social cohesion to prevent violent extremism and terrorism in Syria. This includes efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate people affected by the conflicts. Activities should contribute to local stabilisation efforts, including taking into account the needs identified within the framework of the global coalition against Daesh, which includes Sweden.

Activities within the area of *migration, refugee situation and returns* are closely linked to other areas. By contributing to conflict resolution and promoting better living conditions in Syria and for refugees in neighbouring countries, activities should address the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration, which also helps to reduce the frictions and societal problems that extensive, illegal migration also entails for Europe. Activities will help strengthen neighbouring countries' capacity to ensure a sustainable situation for refugees and host communities, and cooperation with authorities in this area should be considered. Support to neighbouring countries' capacity to manage the large Syrian refugee population can also be expected to prevent

secondary irregular migration. The situation in Syria means that large-scale voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation is limited. Based on the different conditions that apply and depending on how circumstances change during the strategy period, support for repatriation, returns and sustainable reintegration will be prioritised, in consultation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.