



CONFERENCE ON DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR DISPLACED SYRIANS: PERSPECTIVES FROM SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing violence in Syria has caused the largest displacement crisis of our time. While some have argued that the Syrian conflict is moving into a final stage, and discussions around reconstruction have started, conditions in Syria are still not conducive for repatriation in safety and dignity. With almost half of the Syrian population still displaced both in and outside Syria, questions around their future are more pertinent than ever.

What obstacles prevent displaced Syrians' return in safety and dignity and can they be overcome? What are the future prospects for those who remain in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan? What actions are needed from the international community to ensure their rights are protected, and what are the roles of local and international civil society organizations?

In order to find some answers to these questions, the Durable Solutions Platform (DSP) and the Columbia Global Centers (CGC) - Amman organized a conference on 'Durable Solutions for Displaced Syrians: Perspectives from Syrian Civil Society' on Thursday November 29, 2018 in Amman, Jordan. At this event, Syrian civil society representatives shared their knowledge and experiences with academics, NGO practitioners as well as UN and donor agency representatives on key issues facing displaced Syrians in the region. The conference brought together over 130 participants.



PROGRAMME

Conference opening

Dr. Saskia Baas (DSP) and Dr. Ahmad Mousa (CGC) welcomed participants to the event and stressed its timeliness and purpose.

As aid efforts are shifting towards prospects of reconstruction and facilitated returns, pressing questions on the future of refugees who choose to return or to stay in neighboring countries are left open-ended. For many Syrians, a decrease in funding could threaten their refugee status, not least by leaving a gap in service provision.

In this context, Saskia and Ahmad highlighted the importance of coming together to discuss the pressing issues ahead. While acknowledging that not all questions could be answered in a morning, they expressed the hope that the conference would provide a unique chance to reflect and listen to Syrian experts on these issues.



Panel discussion on the future of Syria and prospects for return

Following the opening remarks, the first panel discussion covered some of the key challenges inside Syria. Panelists addressed issues relating to 'post-conflict' development and governance in Syria including the human rights situation, prospect for justice and reparations and challenges faced by refugee returnees.

The panel was chaired by [Rawan Damen](#), an award-winning Palestinian documentary filmmaker. Rawan produced and directed thirty documentaries, including the award-winning documentary series 'Al Nakba'. In her introduction, Rawan drew on her personal and professional experiences on the Palestinian displacement setting, stressing the importance of long-term solutions for refugees.

The first speaker was [Hisham Dirani](#), co-founder and CEO of BINAA for Development, a local NGO that aims to support the Syrian refugee community in Turkey. Hisham provided a detailed account on the multi-faceted challenges a Syrian refugee returnee would face if they decided to return Syria today. These include numerous barriers, ranging from legal, socio-economic, security and protection risks, making return a very complex and risky course of action.



The second speaker was [Mounir Al-Fakir](#), board member of the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya prison, a solidarity association for detainees and missing persons from Sednaya prison and from Syrian prisons and detention centers. As a previous prisoner himself, Mounir provided an in-depth account into challenges Syrians face in imprisonment.

And third and last speaker on this panel was [Ibrahim Olabi](#), a legal specialist on international law and the founder of a non-partisan, non-governmental organization Syrian Legal Development Programme. Ibrahim laid out the legal framework for Syria's potential reconstruction and the possible negative repercussions they would have on displaced Syrians inside Syria and abroad, including Law 10.

Panel discussion on challenges and opportunities for Syrian refugees in the region

Following a coffee break, the second panel discussion moved from everyday realities inside Syria and obstacles for return, to exploring the key challenges and opportunities for Syrians residing in neighbouring countries Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. As of today, there are officially 5.6 million Syrian refugees in the region, with the unofficial number estimated to be even higher.

The panel was chaired by [Lana Stade](#), Specialist and Researcher with the DSP. Lana stressed that as the violent conflict in Syria has been going on for over 8 years, Syrians have been fleeing and rebuilding their lives mainly in Syria's neighbouring countries. While no one can deny the generosity of host countries in accommodating refugees in the millions, one also needs to acknowledge that serious challenges have to be overcome to preserve refugees' dignity, to

ensure they meet their full potential and have opportunities to positively contribute to their host communities.

This first speaker was [Amany Qaddour](#), Regional Director of Syria Relief & Development (SRD), a Syrian-American diaspora NGO working with Syrians in the region. Amany drew on her organization's experience working with displaced Syrians in Jordan. She highlighted the importance of targeting programmes to urban refugees, who make up to 70 percent of Syrian refugees in the country. Amany also raised the importance of facilitating Syrians' access to the Jordanian labour market as a way to improve their self-reliance and avoid push factors for return.



Then, [Mazin Al-Balkhi](#), board member of the Women Support Association (WSA) in Turkey, presented on the situation Syrians' face in Turkey. Mazin started his intervention by stating how important it is to have Syrians talk about the Syrian crisis. He continued with listing some of the challenges Syrians are facing in Turkey, such as the language barrier, unpredictable nature of the Temporary Protection regime and daily administrative and legal obstacles. Mazin also highlighted the positive contribution Syrians are making to Turkey, not least through the establishment of businesses.

Lastly, [Amy Rodgers](#), Head of Advocacy and Research at Basmeh and Zeitooneh, provided an overview of the situation for Syrians in Lebanon. Right at the start, Amy drew attention to the fact that none of her Syrian colleagues was able to travel due to severe mobility restrictions for Syrians in Lebanon and the region. Amy highlighted the many obstacles that exist for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including legal protection, lack of access to the formal labor market and issues regarding informal tented settlements. Lebanon presents perhaps the most challenging context for vulnerable Syrians to meet their basic needs. Despite the hardships, Amy highlighted the resilience of Syrians to persevere and improve their conditions.

Closing remarks

Experts were invited to share their reflections on the discussions of both panels. Those included David Welin (Senior Regional Legal Officer, UNHCR), Sam Koplewicz (Policy and Advocacy Adviser, OXFAM), Sara Kayyali (Syria researcher, Human Rights Watch) and Abdulhannan Aljouja (Turkey Country Director, Syrian Medical Expatriates Association).

Overall, the experts stressed the importance of continuing to work on all three durable solutions for displaced Syrians. As return in safety and dignity is currently not possible, continuing support to Syrians in neighbouring countries remains vital. The valuable contributions made by Syrian speakers and participants serve as a reminder to include Syrian civil society in the discussions around durable solutions.



ORGANIZERS

About the Durable Solutions Platform (DSP)

The objective of the DSP is to generate knowledge and promote dialogue and strategic approaches to the long-term future of displaced Syrians based on international best practice and principles. Based in Amman, Jordan, the platform is an initiative of International Rescue Committee, the Danish Refugee Council, and the Norwegian Refugee Council.

About the Columbia Global Center (CGC)

The CGC in Amman is one of the first in a network of nine Columbia Global Centers the University has launched around the world. The Center works to advance Columbia's global mission, by facilitating research and education engagement in the world, and to extend the University's reach to address the pressing demands of our global society. Over the past few years, the Center has provided a base for scholarly activities throughout the Middle East to advances the University's academic partnerships and programs in the region.



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