

Press release

Statement of the Working Group for Building Free Syria on the declaration of the EU and the UN, co-chairs of the Brussels IV conference on the future of Syria and the region



The co-chairs of the Fourth conference of the Future of Syria and the region (the European Union and the United Nations) issued a declaration on the outcomes of the conference.

The Working Group for Building Free Syria (WGBFS)¹, as we noticed that this forth conference, similarly to the third conference of last year, fell short of fully endorsing the General Principles for the rebuilding process of Syria issued by our group at the

¹ We are a group of Syrian civil society organizations that gathered on a common vision of the general principles that rebuilding process of Syria must include. These principles focus on ensuring that the process realizes the aspirations of the Syrian people, contributes effectively in founding sustainable civil peace, involves local communities, guarantees justice and transparency, aims at socioeconomical development for all and is liked to transitional justice paths.

Our objectives are:

- To contribute to providing visions, recommendations and policies on the rebuilding process in Syria that are inspired by the local situations and that are based on the general principles that the workgroup have defined;
- To promote and advocate in order to gather Syrian and International public opinion to excuse pressure on the Syrian and the international actors to take into consideration the general principles as well as the visions and recommendations proposed by our group;
- To monitor the rebuilding process and its respect of transparency and the international humanitarian laws and principles.

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end of 2018 and adopted by 43 Syrian NGOs/CSOs; **we welcome the fact that the declaration of the cochairs did however include some of these fundamental principles:**

- The declaration used in its 24th paragraph the term “**rebuilding the Syrian society**”. The term “Rebuilding” is what our group has adopted as we explained that we aim at is the full rebuilding of country (covering the economical, the societal, the administrative and the political aspects). This term is more profound and more important than that of “Reconstruction”, mainly used to talk about the infrastructures and the economy;
- The declaration included several important sentences and precautions that are in accordance with the General Principles that we issued: in paragraph 26, when talking about large-scale voluntary return, the declaration mentions “**conditions of safety and dignity in line with international law**” and it emphasizes on the fact that the right to return “**should not contribute to demographic engineering**”; in paragraph 29, the declaration talking about the support to Syria mentioned that it “**can help enhance social cohesion, empower local communities to identify their needs and defend their rights, and ensure a more protective environment limiting the recourse to harmful coping strategies**” and that “conflict sensitivity is key to the success of this approach”; and finally in paragraph 30, the declaration states that “**community participation and empowerment in the articulation and prioritization of needs remain key**” and that “**funding decisions shall be gender responsive and conflict-sensitive, be based on independent needs assessments, shall in no way benefit or assist parties who have allegedly committed war crimes or crimes against humanity and shall not condone, or indirectly entrench, social and demographic engineering**”;
- The declaration repeated in its final paragraph 48 that “**reconstruction and international support for its implementation will only be possible once a credible political solution, consistent with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva Communiqué, is firmly underway**”, and that a successful reconstruction process “**also requires minimal conditions for stability and inclusiveness, a democratic and inclusive government guaranteeing people’s safety and security, an agreed conflict-sensitive development strategy, reliable and legitimate interlocutors as well as guarantees in terms of funding accountability**”. According to the declaration, “**none of these conditions are currently fulfilled in Syria**”.

Our group has **nevertheless noticed in this declaration the appearance of several terms the use of which could be dangerous without clear definitions of their content, defined policies about them and precise implementation and monitoring mechanisms associated with them**, all being based on the same General Principles that we issued about the rebuilding process:

- When talking about the return of IDPs, the declaration in paragraph 25 notes "**the importance of humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance to work towards the removal of obstacles to return ... including through a stronger integrated resilience approach**". Our group calls for paying attention when handling the issue of removing the obstacles to return about **the risk of evidence hampering related to war crimes, of their perpetuation** (expropriation) or even of committing new crimes (construction on stolen properties);
- In paragraph 29, the declaration explains that "**efforts should be stepped up to support early recovery, resilience, community capacity-building and self-reliance through to the provision of basic services, livelihoods and local economic development taking into account those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, including women and youth**" and in paragraph 44: "**the Conference underlined the importance of continuing to work with and support Syria's civil society, welcoming efforts to go beyond emergency and life-saving responses and to also focus on early recovery, resilience and self-reliance needs of communities in Syria in order to preserve the country's social fabric**". While our group **sees the importance of caring about early recovery**, we consider it as an **important pre-phase of the rebuilding process and therefore should be done respecting the same General Principles** that we issued in order to insure that early recovery efforts do not rights-based and human-rights-respecting principles that aim at sustainable peace in Syria. **Our fear of chaotic approaches** of this phase and our determination to have defined rules for it have **led us in the first half of 2019 to analyze the UNDP Early Recovery Guidance Note** (issued in 2008 and updated in 2016) **and to issue a paper** exposing the risks associated with the application of these guidelines in the case of Syria and **providing important recommendations about their adaptation to the Syrian case**. This fear **also incited us at the end of 2019 to have a clear reply on the report of the International Crisis Group** entitled "Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum" in which we saw recommendation of a risky partial approach.

We repeat and confirm the importance of our call on all participants of the conference as well as all of stakeholders of assistance provision for Syria that goes beyond the emergency humanitarian response to:

- **Take into account the totality of the General Principles that we have previously issued** when making decisions or defining policies for all non-humanitarian-emergency response assistance going to Syria; in addition to insisting on the comprehensive nature of the rebuilding process going beyond the economical and infrastructure reconstruction to the rebuilding of the country and the nation;
- **Affirm the mandatory role of the Syrian civil society, the Syrian local communities and their local democratically elected inclusive local administrations** in the design, implementation and monitoring of the rebuilding process. The role of free media in the monitoring is also crucial;
- **Consider “Stabilization”, “Local Development” and “Early Recovery” actions as preparatory phases and part of the Rebuilding process of Syria.** Therefore the donor countries in general, and the EU and the concerned UN agencies in particular, should: **1. define clearly the content of each of these terminologies when they are used, 2. decide on well-defined policies for them, inspired by the General Principles that we issued on by any other principles avoiding the risks that these General Principles aim at preventing; and 3. establish precise implementation guidelines backed by sufficient, comprehensive and transparent monitoring mechanisms** for all kinds of support of such actions.

In addition, based on the information and facts known for us, we in the **WGBFS call on all the concerned countries** to:

- **Emphasis on the importance of accountability** in reaching justice and sustainable peace in Syria and therefore **put in place effective monitoring mechanisms and apply human-rights due diligence of the humanitarian assistance for humanitarian assistance** to ensure transparency and it reaching those who are most in need as well as that it is not benefiting perpetrators and/or funders of human rights violations;

- Work swiftly and in coordination to **define and activate clear and official mechanisms that enable and facilitate the use of the exemption clauses in the different sanctions related to Syria** for all seriously engaged actors and those actors who are committed to the General Principles as well as those involved in humanitarian emergency-response; allowing all of them to provide assistance to civilians all over the country.

