

Questionable Conference in Damascus

Humanitarian Aid Payments for Syria Unmask Regime-Rhetoric: A Return of Refugees is Currently Impossible

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Last week, the Assad regime hosted a two-day conference on the return of refugees to Syria. Important host countries stayed away from the meeting or were not invited, nor were representatives of relevant refugee organizations. The United Nations (UN) only came as an observer. The contents of the conference and the humanitarian commitment of Damascus and its allies clearly show that the gathering had other intentions than ending the suffering of millions of displaced persons.

A Meeting at the Behest of the Kremlin

Actually, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had no great desire to host a conference that, of all things, discussed the return of Syrians to their homeland. After all, the dictator had downright organized their expulsion. Since 2011, over 5.5 million people have left Syria and more than 6 million are displaced in their own country. It is estimated that at least 500,000 people have been killed.¹ The numerous human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime and its allies are responsible for death and flight: targeted displacement and confiscation of property², murder, systematic torture³ and the bombing of civil infrastructure.⁴

It can be assumed that only the pressure of Russian President Vladimir Putin who, *inter alia*, withheld urgently needed wheat deliveries resulted in Damascus agreeing to hold such a meeting.⁵ Syria's relationship with its supporters is not free of turbulence: Assad's unwillingness to compromise and the resulting continued international isolation of Syria is increasingly angering his allies. Both the Russian and Iranian governments want, at the very least, compensation for their war expenses after years of military engagement. Russia's military operation in Syria (since September 2015) is likely to have cost the Kremlin about 7.5 billion US dollars.⁶ But Damascus is broke. A strict regime of sanctions by the US and the

¹ See Human Rights Watch, Syria: "[Events of 2018](#)".

² The Syrian regime systematically confiscates or destroys the homes and property of refugees and opposition activists. Several decrees and laws passed since 2012 legalize this practice, which is a war crime according to the Geneva Convention. See Alaa Nassar and Walid al-Nofal, "[After Stealing their Dream of Freedom, Damascus Goes after Syrians' Assets](#)", *Syria Direct*, November 7, 2019.

³ The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates the number of people tortured to death by the regime since 2011 at 14,451. See "[Death Toll Due to Torture](#)", *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, status of September 2020.

⁴ See Belkis Wille and Richard Weir, "[Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure](#)", *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020.

⁵ Moscow lately increased the pressure and in October 2020 withheld food deliveries to Syria. See Bethan McKernan and Ahmad Haj Hamdo, "[Syria Introduces Limits on Subsidised Bread as Economic Crisis Bites](#)", *The Guardian*, October 5, 2020.

⁶ The figures on the actual costs of the Russian military operation in Syria vary. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain. According to the *Moscow Times*, Russia's engagement costs about four million US dollars per day. For the period September 30, 2015, the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria, until November 1, 2020, this amounts to 7.532 billion US Dollars. See Peter Hobson, "[Calculating the Cost of Russia's War in Syria](#)", *Moscow Times*, October 20, 2015.

European Union (EU) prevents an imminent improvement in Syria's economic performance and a normalization of diplomatic relations. The US and the EU attach strict conditions to a lifting of sanctions, including security guarantees for the civilian population, the return of refugees under dignified conditions and a political transition process in accordance with UN Resolution 2254.⁷

The sudden empathy for refugees therefore pursues the sole purpose of softening the international sanctions regime. The Syrian ally is to become solvent again. In addition, Russia and Iran hope to benefit from reconstruction aid. After almost a decade of war, about 50 percent of the country's basic infrastructure has been damaged.⁸ Reconstruction is expensive; experts estimate the costs at 200 to 400 billion US dollars.⁹ Neither the Assad regime nor its allies Russia and Iran are able to finance it. They need considerable international support. For this reason, the Russian government is urging Assad to make concessions on the refugee issue. In an interview with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Syrian political analyst Rime Allaf says the conference at the behest of Vladimir Putin was a "barely disguised cry for help".¹⁰ The Russian President is trapped in a financial "dead end" in Syria. He therefore urgently needs "the sacred cow of EU reconstruction money" to get out of there. For this, however, Assad must first create the necessary conditions and, for example, enable the safe return of refugees, otherwise the Europeans will not pay, Allaf explains.

Assad's Conference on the Return of Refugees

Details of the envisaged return of the Syrian refugees and the conditions needed were supposed to be discussed in Damascus at the two-day conference from November 11 to 12. Participants in the meeting included the United Arab Emirates, China, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan (a total of 27 states or organizations). The UN participated as an observer.¹¹ Numerous human rights organizations, the EU and the US criticized the fact that the conference did neither address the real causes of flight, nor the obstacles that prevent refugees from returning (expulsion, expropriation, arbitrary arrests, torture and murder¹²). Consequently, the EU, the USA, and most of the Arab states, including Jordan and Egypt, did not send any representatives. Turkey was not even invited to the conference because the Syrian government regards Ankara as a "sponsor of terrorism".¹³ Thus, important host countries for Syrian refugees (Turkey 3.6 million, EU around 1.2 million, Jordan 660,000, Egypt 130,000) stayed away from the meeting.¹⁴

The organizers were nevertheless optimistic. Russian President Vladimir Putin said that a majority of the refugees could return to Syria in the near future. According to the Kremlin, the level of violence has decreased considerably.¹⁵ Syria's President Assad added in a video message at the beginning of the conference that his government had created the appropriate

⁷ See [UN-Resolution 2254](#) of December 18, 2015.

⁸ See UN-OCHA, "[Syria in 2020: The Deadly Legacy of Explosive Violence and Its Impact on Infrastructure and Health](#)", December 18, 2019.

⁹ The UN (UN-ESCWA) estimated the cost of reconstruction at [388 billion US dollars](#) in 2018. The World Bank, however, put the cost at around [226 billion US dollars](#) in 2017.

¹⁰ Interview with Rime Allaf on November 15, 2020.

¹¹ See "[International Conference on the return of Syrian refugees starts tomorrow in Damascus](#)" (المؤتمر الدولي حول عودة اللاجئين السوريين ينطلق) (غداً بدمشق), SANA, November 10, 2020.

¹² The Lebanese Minister for Displaced Persons confirmed in November 2018 that he had information on 20 Syrian refugees who had returned to Syria from Lebanon killed by the Assad regime. See "[The Syrian Regime murders the Returnees](#)" (النظام السوري يقتل العائدين), *Al-Hurra*, November 2, 2018.

¹³ The Assad regime accuses the Turkish government of supporting terrorists. See the statement by Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Iman Sawsan in, "[International Conference on the return of Syrian refugees starts tomorrow in Damascus](#)" (المؤتمر الدولي حول عودة اللاجئين) (السوريين ينطلق غداً بدمشق), SANA, November 10, 2020.

¹⁴ For Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt, see the [statistics of the UNHCR](#); For the EU see Eurostat, "[Asylum and First Time Asylum Applicants by Citizenship, Age and Sex - Annual Aggregated Data](#)" (Accessed November 16, 2020). Data is collected for Syrian citizens for the years 2011-2019.

¹⁵ See "[President al-Assad During Video Talks with President Putin: Int'l Conference on Refugees' Return a Beginning for Solving this Humanitarian Issue](#)", SANA, November 9, 2020.

pre-conditions for a return and that a large portion of the Syrian refugees desire to come back to their homeland. The topic of returning refugees is claimed to be of top priority within his administration. The main reason, however, why refugees hesitate to return is the destruction and western sanctions that hamper reconstruction efforts, which creates an appalling humanitarian situation on the ground. Although the West pretends to defend human rights, the truth is, Assad claimed, that the western states ignore the harsh living conditions of the refugees and “politicize their return” in the “most heinous way” in order to keep the refugees outside Syria and to use them as “a leverage against its government”.¹⁶

However, numerous human rights organizations as well as the UN contradict this representation. In particular, they blame the brutal actions of the regime and its allies for the massive flight from Syria and the humanitarian crisis. The necessary conditions for a return under safe and dignified conditions have so far not been met at all. Manar Rachwani, editor-in-chief of the independent Syrian media platform *Syria Direct*, underpinned this assessment recently in an interview with the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation.¹⁷ The refugees have not fled Syria because of destroyed houses, but because of the regime, he said. When asked whether the regime was willing to rebuild the country, the journalist answered with a clear “no”. Only those loyal to the regime would benefit from reconstruction and humanitarian aid. Those who oppose the regime would not receive anything. “The people want safety. Even if the regime would build another Singapore, people would not come back”, emphasized Rachwani. Jihad Yazigi, publisher of the online newspaper *The Syrian Observer*, also made clear that the regime impedes a possible return. The lack of safety and the horrible living conditions are central obstacles. “There is really nothing that will convince people to return in the current conditions”, Yazigi said.¹⁸

At the conference, such essential prerequisites for return – i.e. safety and basic supplies for the civilian population – were hardly mentioned. Instead, Assad and his allies raised accusations against western states and Syria’s neighbors. However, data show that it is in particular these countries, which have shown the greatest humanitarian commitment to Syria since the beginning of the war.

The USA, Germany and Great Britain Largest Donor Countries to Syria

Over the past nine years (2011-2020), the international community has paid more than 20 billion US dollars to the UN for humanitarian purposes in Syria.¹⁹ The most important instrument for this is the *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (UN-OCHA).²⁰ There are also other aid programs of individual countries and bilateral aid for Syria outside the framework of the UN.²¹ The largest donors to UN-OCHA are the USA (5.5 billion US dollars), Germany (2.5 billion US dollars) and Great Britain (2.1 billion US dollars).²² The US

¹⁶ See Assad’s video message from November 11, 2020, [“The words of President Assad at the opening of the international conference on the return of Syrian refugees in Damascus”](#) (كلمة الرئيس الأسد في افتتاح المؤتمر الدولي حول عودة اللاجئين السوريين بدمشق). The video message was *inter alia* published on Assad’s Twitter account.

¹⁷ Interview with Manar Rachwani on September 8, 2020.

¹⁸ Interview with Jihad Yazigi on September 7, 2020.

¹⁹ The sum is based on the addition of all payments from various countries and institutions to UN-OCHA in the period 2011-2020. See the annual data from UN-OCHA for Syria aid in the period mentioned, [“Financial Tracking Service, Syrian Arab Republic”](#), UNOCHA, status of 2020.

²⁰ UN-OCHA collects data on aid to Syria from various organizations. This also includes payments from programs such as US AID. The aid funds from the individual countries have been used, among other things, to supply food and medicines. Based on this data, the aid payments made and pledged to Syria are compared below in order to gain an impression of which countries excel in providing humanitarian support. The UN-OCHA data distinguishes between aid payments already made and pledged obligations. It is not possible to determine the extent to which these commitments have already been made on the basis of the available data. For this reason, both positions (payments and obligations) are taken into account in the analysis.

²¹ A consideration of aid payments outside of the services listed by UN-OCHA cannot take place within the framework of this analysis. To ensure the comparability of aid payments, it is necessary to use verifiable and comparable data, which is ensured by UN-OCHA. Any payments that made through other channels would affect the validity and reliability of the present evaluation.

²² Specifically, the US paid \$ 5,540,090,419, Germany \$ 2,484,551,427 and the UK \$ 2,133,727,848.

consistently achieved record figures compared to all other countries and provided around 820 million US dollars for humanitarian aid in Syria in 2019 alone.

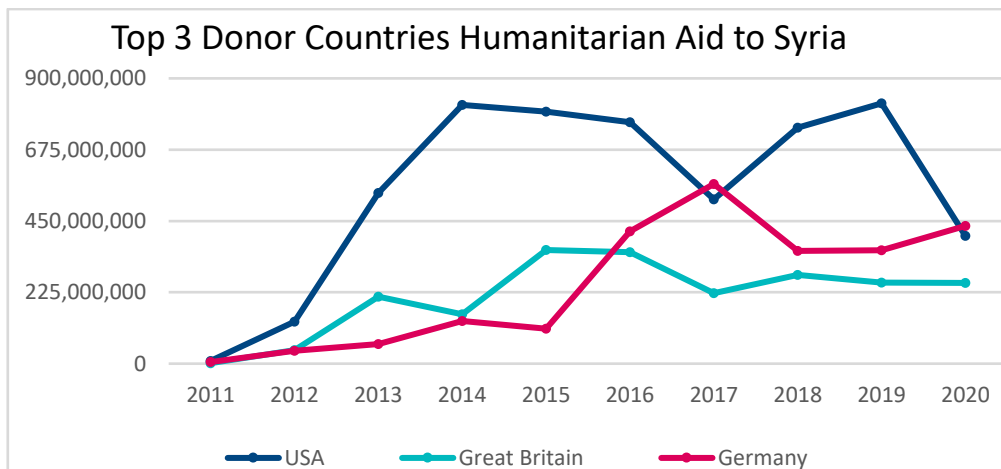


Table 1 – Humanitarian aid payments per year from the three main donor countries.

Norway and EU Stand out Positively, Russia, China and Iran Play a Subordinate Role

With the Syria conference last week, Russia and the Assad regime have put the future of the refugees on the political agenda. But what was the commitment of the regime and its allies in terms of humanitarian aid in recent years? Russia paid just 66.3 million US dollars. This corresponds to 0.33 percent of the UN-OCHA total budget. At the Damascus conference, however, Russia promised to provide 1 billion US dollar for the reconstruction of Syria, regardless of the low level of participation in terms of humanitarian aid payments.²³ Another ally of Assad is China. The country with the second strongest economic performance in the world paid approximately 11 million US dollars (0.06 percent). For Iran, the UN-OCHA does not list any financial aid at all. However, Russia and Iran sent a total of 880 tons of relief supplies to Syria in the period 2012-2013.²⁴ The financial contributions of Assad’s allies thus amount to less than 0.4 percent of the total UN-OCHA budget.

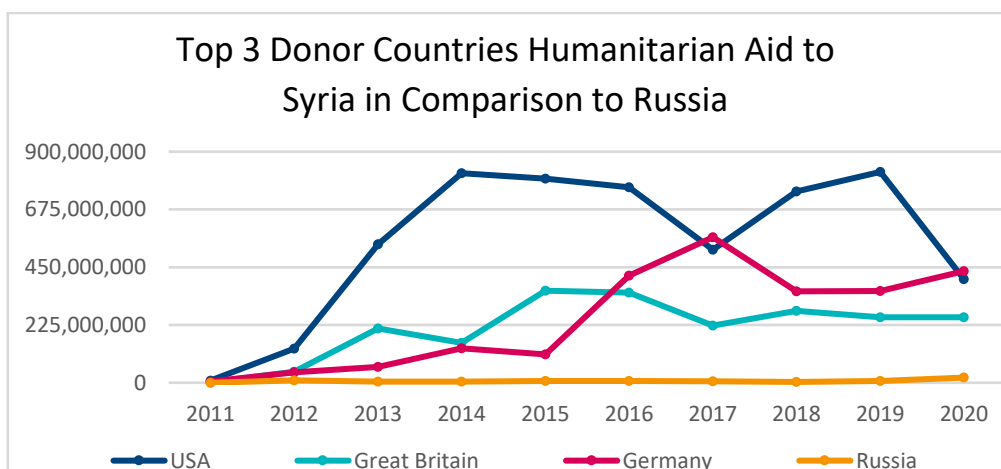


Table 2 - Humanitarian aid payments per year from the three main donor countries and Russia

²³ See “Head of Russian-Syrian Coordination Center on Returning Refugees: Russia Allocates More than USD 1 Billion for Reconstruction of Electricity Networks and Industries in Syria”, SANA, 11 November, 2020.

²⁴ See UN-OCHA’s database on Iran [2012](#) and Russia [2012](#) and [2013](#).

Besides the main donor countries the US, Germany and Great Britain, Norway exceeded in its contributions. The Scandinavian country provided a total of 798 million US dollars in the last nine years of the Syrian conflict. Another major donor is the European Commission, which allocated a total of around 1.5 billion US dollars, including an aid fund set up especially for the situation. Further, some Arab Gulf monarchies, which are in opposition to the Syrian government, stand out as major donors of humanitarian aid in Syria: The United Arab Emirates provided 423 million US dollars, Saudi Arabia 418 million US dollars and Kuwait 387 million US dollars.

Conclusion: No Solution in Sight for Syrian Refugees

The available data show that it is primarily western countries and the Gulf States that are engaged in humanitarian activities in Syria through the UN. The aid provided by Damascus' allies, on the other hand, is remarkably low. The accusation by the Syrian President and Russia that the West is responsible for the humanitarian crisis and the deadlocked return is therefore absurd. That it is actually the regime and its allies, who do not care about the actual plight of the Syrian population is proven not only by the poor willingness to pay to UN-OCHA, but especially, by Russia and China's vetoes in the UN Security Council, which led to the closure of three (out of four) border crossings for humanitarian aid to Syria in 2020.²⁵ In an interview with the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, Ayman Abdel Nour, head of the *Syrian Christians for Peace* organization, emphasized that the Assad regime uses humanitarian aid as a political tool to punish its opponents: "The regime keeps humanitarian aid to itself and its cronies. It does not forward any emergency relief to the areas where it is most needed." With the closure of the border crossings, the flow of humanitarian aid is even more concentrated in the hands of the regime. "This gives Assad almost complete control over the distribution of food and medicine," warns Abdel Nour, and calls on Europe and other donor countries to better monitor aid deliveries in the future.²⁶

The conference in Damascus deliberately did not address the main causes of displacement such as the ongoing violence, killings and political persecution by the Assad regime. The primary goal of the meeting was to overcome Damascus' international isolation. It was only for this purpose that the Syrian government feigned openness to the refugees. Political analyst Rime Allaf shares this assessment: "Instead of offering incentives for refugees to return home – merely in terms of reassurance, not finance, the regime continues to create impediments to the return of refugees [...] and very real threats to their safety." The conference was an attempt to pretend that international sanctions were preventing the return of Syrians. Putin finally wants to "start reaping the financial benefits of his Syrian adventure". Either by lifting sanctions or by allowing the refugees to return. Because he assumes that the Europeans would support "a large-scale return of refugees, which [...] would be copiously supported by vast EU funds," said Allaf. However, none of these options is currently in the interests of the Syrians or the EU, she emphasizes. Putin's and Assad's desired propaganda coup did not materialize however, and numerous states and organizations stayed away from the Damascus spectacle.

Finally yet importantly, with its absence, the US and Europe demonstrated that they do not readily agree to the barter deal 'refugees for the lifting of sanctions' that the Assad regime and its allies are hoping for. The Syrian government primarily needs to build the necessary conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced. It is therefore only right to render the return of the refugees as well as an easing of sanctions and possible reconstruction aid subject to reliable guarantees and firm political concessions. A hasty

²⁵ See the publication of the UN Security Council, "[Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council](#)", July 29, 2020; It is estimated that the closure of the border crossings will put the supply situation of around 1.3 million Syrians in opposition areas at risk.

²⁶ Interview with Ayman Abdel Nour on July 27, 2020.

compromise would only cement Assad's authoritarian rule. Thus, a political solution to the Syrian conflict would remain blocked.

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