

Mercy Corps' recommendations to the Biden-Harris administration on the crisis in Syria

The new administration takes over the Syria portfolio at a critical moment, nearly ten years into the conflict. While the fighting has decreased for the time being, the humanitarian crisis is still enormous. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated an ongoing economic collapse, leaving at least 80% of people below the poverty line and unable to meet their most basic needs.¹ 12.4 million people are now food insecure – a higher recorded number than at any other point during the war.² In May, Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken stated that a Biden-Harris Administration would “bring aid back to the center of our foreign policy.”³ A strong American policy underpinned by an effective aid strategy in support of the Syrian people is needed now to ensure that millions of people are able to provide for their families, begin to rebuild their lives, and seek a sustainable peace for their country.

Humanitarian recommendations

The United States is the largest humanitarian donor to the Syria crisis, providing more than \$12 billion in emergency funding since the start of the crisis. This funding has helped to save the lives and livelihoods of millions of Syrians inside Syria. Additionally, the U.S. government has been a positive diplomatic force for humanitarian access, ensuring aid reaches the most vulnerable Syrians wherever they may reside. Despite U.S. efforts, Syria is facing an unprecedented economic downturn, resulting in loss of livelihoods, currency depreciation and price increases. Challenges with already weak basic services have been exacerbated by COVID-19, driving an increase in extreme poverty and food insecurity and a widespread inability to meet basic needs. To address the worsening humanitarian situation, Mercy Corps recommends that the U.S. government:

- ***Ensure the forthcoming COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Syria equitably reaches the most vulnerable across the country and is properly resourced.*** Through the COVAX Facility, Syria is eligible to receive vaccines for an average of 20% of its population, focusing on health care workers and the most vulnerable groups. Two COVAX submissions for Syria have been put forward -- one from the Ministry of Health in Damascus which is meant to cover all of Syria except the northwest, and another led by WHO from Gaziantep which is meant to cover the northwest. The U.S. government should closely follow this process to ensure both campaigns are supported and that the Ministry of Health-led campaign from Damascus is able to appropriately reach all areas of northeast Syria through cross-line. If it is not able to facilitate such cross-line access, WHO and others must ensure that a viable plan B is set up to distribute vaccines in the northeast. The U.S. government should also encourage countries hosting Syrian refugees to include these refugees in their country vaccination campaigns, as Jordan has recently done.
- ***Continue to champion the UN Security Council cross-border resolution.*** The United States is a leading voice in calling for the renewal of the UNSC cross-border resolution. The resolution has allowed humanitarian actors to reach millions of the most vulnerable Syrians with emergency assistance in the most direct, efficient, and principled manner. As the negotiations for the renewal of the resolution begin in earnest in early 2021, the U.S. mission to the UN (USUN)

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/syria-another-year-crisis>

² <https://www.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic#:~:text=WFP%20estimates%20that%209.3%20million,people%2C%20including%20women%20and%20children>

³ <https://www.devex.com/news/what-would-biden-s-foreign-aid-policy-look-like-97930>

should lead diplomatic efforts, particularly with new member states, to ensure the resolution is renewed.

- ***Continue to shift humanitarian funding to more multi-year, multi-hub, multi-sectoral/multi-phase programs.*** Syria is a protracted crisis that requires supporting the Syrian people to meet their immediate needs as well as to gain the necessary skills and resources to provide for themselves in the future. Traditionally, humanitarian funding has been provided on a short-term basis with a focus on a particular sector and/or part of the Syria context. Ten years on, we encourage donors to continue to support more holistic programming in line with the Grand Bargain that provides funding over the course of multiple years across multiple sectors and covers the whole of Syria.

Stabilization recommendations

The U.S. government, alongside other western governments, has provided over \$1 billion in stabilization funding in opposition-controlled areas since the onset of the crisis.⁴ As the Biden Administration renews its commitment to the Syrian people -- including unfreezing stabilization funds previously frozen -- it is critical for the United States to fund programs which help Syrians respond to shocks and create more peaceful and stable communities. To strengthen prospects for a sustainable peace and support the self-reliance of the Syrian population, Mercy Corps recommends that the U.S. government:

- ***Continue to expand the traditional understanding of stabilization activities to include more civil society support and community-driven activities.*** The emergence of a diverse group of civil society actors is one of the few positive developments to come from a decade of conflict. These civil society organizations represent the future of Syria. While traditional stabilization activities that address the hardware needs are vital, the softer side of stabilization -- such as supporting civil society organizations -- is equally important.
- ***Continue to support market-driven livelihoods programming.*** There is a need to address structural challenges, ten years on. Once the stabilization freeze has been lifted, the U.S. government should double down on investments in programs that build the resilience of communities to absorb future shocks. To do so, we urge the Administration to include robust levels of funding under the Economic Support Fund (ESF) account for stabilization activities in Syria in its FY22 budget. These activities can support communities' efforts to rebuild their markets, social services, institutions, and social capital, making them more self-reliant and eventually less dependent on foreign assistance to survive.
- ***Increase investment in programs that facilitate access to financial services and business development services.*** Creating employment opportunities through the provision of grants to small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and apprenticeship programs is necessary but not sufficient to strengthen the labor market. While grants support businesses in the short to medium-term, individuals need to have the skills to manage and grow their businesses and the ability to secure appropriate financial services in order to sustainably grow their current businesses or start new ones.

⁴ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/26/dilemmas-of-stabilization-assistance-case-of-syria-pub-77574>

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