

Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2027

1. Starting points and added value

The civil war in Syria and the ensuing crisis have had extensive consequences for the Syrian population in particular, but also for the region and the rest of the world, including for Sweden, in the form of increased insecurity, violent extremism and terrorism, and forced displacement and irregular migration.

This regional strategy for the Syria crisis forms part of Sweden's overall development assistance and foreign policy, and will contribute to the building of functioning public institutions and the promotion of democratic and economic development. The strategy will also contribute to strengthening local resilience and conditions for returns and repatriation of the Syrian population, and for Syrian refugees and vulnerable groups in host communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye, which are major recipients of Syrian refugees. Sweden's engagement also 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. Direction and objectives of Swedish development assistance

The aim of Sweden's international development assistance is to create conditions to improve the lives of people living in poverty and oppression. The starting point of this strategy is the Government's reform agenda for Swedish development assistance: [Development assistance for a new era – freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth](#) (UD2023/17726).

The strategy focuses on improving conditions for positive development by contributing to increased capacity and legal certainty of public institutions. It will increase the local resilience of the Syrian population, refugees from Syria and vulnerable groups in neighbouring countries. This also discourages irregular migration from the area and enables more assistance in the neighbourhood. Activities will, where possible, support efforts to implement relevant international climate and environmental agreements. 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 2024–2027 comprises a total of SEK 1.175 million.

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 will 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

- Strengthened democratic development, with increased respect and accountability for human rights and freedoms and the rule of law.
- Increased gender equality, freedom and empowerment of women and girls, including enhanced efforts to counteract and prevent gender-based violence and resist norms and customs that restrict women and girls in Syria and neighbouring countries.
- Increased freedom of religion, including the right to be non-religious, and protection of religious minority rights, not least those of Christians, in Syria and neighbouring countries.
- Improved conditions to prevent violent Islamism, extremism and terrorism in Syria, including through local stabilisation initiatives.

Migration, refugee situation and returns

- Reduced forced displacement and irregular migration and their root causes.
- Better conditions for increased returns and voluntary returns to, and sustainable reintegration in Syria.
- Greater capacity in neighbouring countries to ensure a sustainable situation for refugees and host communities.

3. Country context

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has been a drastic change for Syria and the region. After decades of oppression, opportunities were created for the Syrian people to shape a freer and more democratic Syria. However, the political context remains complex, as a number of different actors control territory in various parts of the country to varying degrees. The need for reconstruction of infrastructure is considerable. There is also a

clear need to re-establish trust between different groups in society. The complex and multi-layered conflicts in Syria have resulted in one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters, in which more than 16 million people need humanitarian assistance in order to survive. The situation for the population is characterised by armed violence, insecurity, economic collapse, widespread poverty and food insecurity, drought and lack of access to water. After the fall of the Assad regime, humanitarian needs increased further due to the return and repatriation of internally displaced people and Syrian refugees in nearby countries.

The risk of violent extremism is widespread. Although the terrorist organisation has been decimated, it still poses a threat. The fall of the Assad regime and the subsequent transformation of political governance have contributed to a fragile situation that may be exploited by terrorist groups. Ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, are particularly vulnerable and have been severely impacted by violence and oppression over the past two decades. Several minority groups may be at risk of completely disappearing from their regions of origin.

More than half of the Syrian population, about 14 million people, are displaced within or beyond the country's borders. Of these, about 7 million are Syrian refugees, including in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. The political, social and economic situation in those 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 outbreak of the conflict, Syrian citizens have been one of the largest groups of asylum seekers to the EU Member States, of which Sweden has been one of the main recipient countries. After the fall of the Assad regime, a break in this trend was noted, with a marked increase in the number of Syrians returning to Syria. Large-scale repatriation and returns require a greater degree of stability, security and economic recovery.

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. The price of food, medicines and fuel has increased dramatically. Climate change has particularly affected poor communities with few resources for climate adaptation. Severe drought combined with decades of poor water management has led to reduced harvests, which has contributed to widespread food insecurity. Large segments of the Syrian population also lack access to basic public services such as education, health and medical care, electricity, water and sanitation.

Over the years, human rights violations and abuses and violations of humanitarian law have been widespread, large-scale and systematic. Many

countries, including Sweden, have the possibility to investigate and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. The fall of the Assad regime is a major opportunity to demand accountability for crimes committed against the Syrian population. However, Syria is not a functioning state governed by the rule of law. One positive development during the years of conflict is the emergence of an active, albeit fragile, Syrian civil society and some independent media outlets.

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

4. Activities

The strategy will be implemented in all of Syria and, in the area *Migration, refugee situation and returns*, include initiatives in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. Activities in Syria will contribute to strengthening the population's resilience. Swedish support can contribute to strengthening the capacity for good governance by public administration at local and central levels so as to contribute to democratic and economic development and to the reconstruction of critical infrastructure. Swedish support to and through public institutions and civil society must be continuously assessed on the basis of principles of transparency, anti-corruption and increased respect for human rights and democracy. Activities will contribute to strengthening ethnic and religious minorities' situation and rights. Democratic civil society can play a vital role in fulfilling the strategy's objectives. Support must not promote violent ideologies, extremism or Islamism. The precautionary principle should be applied.

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, attempts by armed groups to exert influence, inadequate institutional capacity in public administration 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. The risk of development assistance funds being misappropriated is substantial, placing particularly high demands on governance, control, scrutiny and monitoring. Together with other donors, Sweden will continue to be a driving force for effective and transparent development assistance to Syria, including in matters relating to UN procurements. Risks should be addressed in dialogue with the EU and other key international partners, such as the UN and the World Bank.

Syria's complex, unstable and risky context places great demands on the flexibility, adaptability, monitoring and application of a conflict-sensitive approach. An adaptive approach to implementation is crucial. The implementation of the strategy will include regular close dialogue and, if necessary, additional consultations between the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Swedish Embassy of 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 embassies concerned. Moreover, it must be possible to quickly adapt activities to changing contexts in the country.

Where possible, the strategy will be implemented with a Team Sweden approach that involves and engages the Swedish resource base, including the Syrian diaspora and Sweden's civil society and business sector. Synergies and coordination with EU development assistance based on the Team Europe Approach, and with 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, including with the World Bank. Synergies between the different strategy areas will be sought. Synergies will also be sought with other Swedish strategies, including the strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation on migration, returns and voluntary repatriation, and the strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation activities in the areas of human rights and rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law.

Activities will help reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance and, in time, reduce the need 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 on in line with what is prescribed in the current guidelines for development assistance strategies. The annual strategy report will include reporting, analysis and assessment of the results of the activities in relation to their stated objectives. Gender-disaggregated statistics should be included in the reporting of activities. 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.

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*, activities will be mutually reinforcing and have the aim of contributing to a sustainable and

inclusive economic recovery in Syria. Within the objective of livelihood opportunities, activities will, where possible, strengthen and develop institutions and financial infrastructure that promote economic development. Activities will support the development of private enterprise. Support will consistently seek to strengthen women's economic empowerment and participation as a fundamental aspect of economic growth, including through strengthened conditions for education, entrepreneurship and job creation. In neighbouring countries, the focus should be on businesses and market potential that offer both host communities and Syrian refugees opportunities to make a living. To counteract tensions, activities should benefit Syrian refugees and vulnerable groups in host communities.

Within the basic public services objective, activities will support local and national capacity in Syria and neighbouring countries in the rehabilitation and provision of basic public services and critical infrastructure such as water, energy, sanitation, education and health care. Activities will also promote improved access to services within sexual and reproductive health and rights. Capacity support at the technical level and to local and national government in Syria should also be sought where possible.

Within the area of *Promoting freedom and combating repression*, activities will strengthen the capacity and legal certainty of public institutions, Syrian civil society organisations, human rights and democracy 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, a multi-party system and accountability in Syria. Support will be provided to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to systematically document and report 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 to ensure accountability for people who have disappeared in Syria since the outbreak of the conflict. The strategy can also promote transitional justice and transitional safety that benefit women and men, young and old.

Activities will help strengthen women's empowerment and participation by supporting local and national organisations in Syria and neighbouring countries. Activities can also promote an inclusive transition process in which women and minorities are allowed to meaningfully participate and influence state-building and conflict prevention. 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 in places where it is customary or legal.

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 working for better living conditions in Syria and for refugees in neighbouring countries, the activities will counteract the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration, respectively. Activities will help strengthen neighbouring countries' capacity to ensure a sustainable situation for refugees and host communities and prevent secondary irregular migration, 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 in recent years has meant that large-scale voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation has been limited. The fall of the Assad regime is an opportunity to improve the conditions for returns and voluntary repatriation of Syrians from the region, the EU and Sweden. Based on the prevailing conditions and circumstances during the strategy period, concrete support for repatriation, returns and sustainable reintegration will be prioritised, in consultation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.