

Position paper from the Netherlands Red Cross regarding the roundtable discussion on the situation in north-east Syria

Situation in north-east Syria

After the prolonged conflict that began in 2011 and affected the entire population of Syria, a new chapter began at the end of 2024. Although there is a significant need for recovery and reconstruction after years of armed violence, the recent fighting is once again bringing these efforts to a halt. In several areas, including the city of Aleppo, people were once again being forced to flee. Although the current situation no longer centres on large-scale frontline combat, the transformation in control and authority, and all its implications, continues to evolve and requires close monitoring.

For civilians to have any prospect of stability, it is essential that a stable situation without violent eruptions will endure. In addition, a substantial increase in resources for reconstruction is necessary to meaningfully improve the humanitarian situation in Syria. The international community must commit to this. At the same time, current international funding is insufficient, reflecting a global trend of declining budgets for development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Existing sanctions regimes and overcompliance also hinder economic recovery efforts.

Role of the Red Cross in Syria and the Humanitarian Needs

Due to the recent fighting in the north-east, humanitarian needs which were already high before the recent violence have further increased. The Red Cross is active throughout Syria. The national society of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement—the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)—is the largest humanitarian organization in the country. In several areas, SARC is the only actor able to provide essential services, such as ambulance services. With humanitarian aid budgets shrinking, services are already stretched thin across communities, while the humanitarian needs are extremely high. Any further cuts will almost certainly result in the immediate loss of access to basic healthcare and other essential services.

During the violent eruption in north-east Syria in January, SARC mobilized approximately 2,000 staff and volunteers in the impacted branches, including Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Hassakeh, Tartous, Idlib, Homs and Hama. Until 24 January, SARC trucked 889,000 cubic meters of water, supported 11,000 people with medical services and offered protection services to 405 people.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), present in Syria since 1967, works in accordance with its mandate in the context of armed conflict. The ICRC visits detention facilities, reminds all parties to the conflict of their obligations under IHL, supports SARC where possible, and works to reunite families who have been separated.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) supports SARC and coordinates the efforts of other national societies providing assistance in Syria.

This combined presence is crucial. The humanitarian situation in Syria is highly complex and exacerbated by years of destruction to the civilian infrastructure, natural disasters—such as earthquakes and floods—and the impact of international sanctions. In this context, the Red Cross is one of the few organisations able to operate nationwide and maintain access to communities.

Broader Regional Context

Not only in Syria but across the region, instability is widespread. With the outbreak of the international armed conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran, tensions and uncertainty have increased further, posing risks for civilian populations in Syria and neighbouring countries.

The Red Cross is alarmed by growing threats to the safety and dignity of civilians in Iran, Israel, Lebanon and the wider region as major military operations continue to escalate. Civilians are already paying a very heavy price. They are being killed and injured, and civilian infrastructure including houses, schools, hospitals and airports are being impacted. The Red Cross calls on all parties to respect IHL: civilian infrastructure must be protected, humanitarian assistance must be safeguarded, and must be allowed to continue at all times.

Actions requested from the Netherlands

To stabilize the situation and improve humanitarian conditions, action from the Netherlands and the European Union is essential. The priority must be to create an enabling environment for impartial humanitarian operations amid persistent financial and liquidity constraints. Although sanctions have been formally lifted, the systems required for economic recovery—such as secure pathways for enterprises and functioning mechanisms for USD clearance—are not yet operational. This continues to generate exchange-rate volatility, liquidity risks, and pressure to shift payments into local currency, causing delays and driving up operational costs. Humanitarian exemptions must therefore be upheld and effectively implemented. Organisations—including SARC—must be able to reliably pay suppliers, support staff and volunteers, and maintain access to communities. This is particularly critical in rural areas, where cash-based support is often the only feasible modality.

We ask for sustained and flexible support to meet the ongoing humanitarian and early recovery needs of people in Syria. Vulnerability remains widespread, and predictable multi-year funding for essential services is vital to safeguard principled, neutral, and needs-based assistance. Additionally, protect humanitarian financial channels so that over-compliance in the banking sector does not obstruct life-saving activities, and ensure that humanitarian action remains shielded from political considerations.

We call on Parliament and the government to:

- Urge all parties to the conflict to **comply with IHL** at all times;
- **Scale up humanitarian assistance** and encourage other donors to do the same. While reconstruction discussions are started, giving humanitarian aid at the same time remains essential in the current situation.
- **Work toward structural improvements for the Syrian population**, including creating opportunities for recovery and economic activity.