

DFID/NGO Roundtable 1 November 2017
DFID, 22 Whitehall, 3pm-5pm

1. Welcome and Introductions - Ben Mellor, Deputy Director (Syria, Turkey, Iraq), DFID

- Ben introduced himself as the Deputy Director responsible for Syria, Turkey and Iraq, taking over the role from Matthew Wyatt. He is keen to hear what people have to say. Ben raised the issue of timing between the meetings and confirmed his attendance to return to quarterly schedule.
- Ben gave an overview of the sustained challenges in Syria, and the UK's response, noting that this possible feels like a point of change in the way the crisis is seen and the conflict dynamic. We as international community need to be agile and able to respond to conflict dynamics.

2. HMG overarching Syria policy – Katherine Wilde, Head, Syria External Team, FCO

- Katherine gave an overview of the UK approach to Syria and its 4 main objectives – minimise humanitarian suffering; build regional resilience; maximise chances of a negotiated political settlement; and countering extremism. The UK's view is that the only long-term solution to the situation in Syria is a sustainable political settlement based on transition away from Asad to a government that can protect the rights of all Syrians, unite the country and end the conflict. It is for Syrians to decide how that happens, as part of a Syrian-led, inclusive political transition process.
- The UK has been, inter alia, **working through diplomatic channels** – supporting the Geneva process and supporting the moderate opposition (MO). The Foreign Secretary hosted the Syrian opposition High Negotiations Committee in London in 2016, and Lord Ahmad led a recent debate on political support to MO.
- Katherine gave a detailed **outline of the support the UK provides** through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). UK has also played a key role in pushing for EU sanctions, most recently 16 individuals were listed in July linked to chemical weapons use. We are committed to **accountability for human rights violations** – funding collection of evidence and support to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism. UK supports **peace building and track 2 initiatives** to ensure views of diverse range of Syrians are included within political dialogue. UK also supports Track 3 negotiations through training and mentoring programmes – capacity building and network building.
- Katherine thanked the NGOs for their reports on de-escalation zones/areas (DEAs). The UK continues to support all genuine efforts to reduce the level of violence in Syria to protect civilians and create the right conditions for a successful political process. Efforts to de-escalate violence in particular areas must be seen in the context of the need for all parties to observe a nationwide cessation of hostilities.
- DEAs / Astana areas have only resulted in nominal, if that, ceasefires in many of the areas – no marked improvement in humanitarian access. MoS Burt visited Lebanon last week and heard from UN about humanitarian access issues – raised with Russian Ambassador too. UK continues to call on the Syrian regime and its backers to ensure immediate, full and unhindered UN humanitarian access across all of Syria and calls on all parties to adhere to agreed ceasefires and cessations of hostilities, to allow full and unhindered humanitarian access, and to respect international humanitarian law.

- **QUESTION: There is limited space for civil society within Syria – what is the UK doing to protect this space?**
 - Deep concern about this major issue. The UK Government is providing a range of support to Syrians to help save lives, bolster civil society, counter extremism, promote human rights and accountability, and lay the foundations for a more peaceful and democratic future.
- **QUESTION: Geneva – constantly being side-lined – all files being moved to Astana. Syrian international dialogue of Congress, for example – what are you doing to stop this?**
 - The only way to end this terrible conflict is through a negotiated political settlement. We will continue to support negotiations to achieve transition to an inclusive and sustainable political settlement in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254.
- **QUESTION: UK resettlement programme changing its criteria – how does this impact Palestinian Refugees from Syria?**
 - See covering email.
- **QUESTION: What is the UK involvement in the Astana talks?**
 - UK not involved in Astana talks. Astana has not yet delivered on any of its humanitarian promises – there has been no access as agreed as part of the DEAs. The UK supports fully the Syrian peace talks taking place under the auspices of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura in Geneva. Geneva remains the path to peace.
- **QUESTION: Astana now putting pressure on Geneva and leading the discussion. What opportunities are there for promoting the legitimacy of the Geneva process?**
 - UK policy driven by pragmatism, not pressure from Astana – do not agree that Astana is leading the way. Remain firm in our support for the efforts of the UN Special Envoy and in our backing for negotiations to achieve transition to an inclusive and sustainable political settlement in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254.
- **QUESTION: What more can UK do to more effectively protect civilians on the ground – in particular are you considering airdrops?**
 - Further to the support mentioned above, to help protect civilians, the UK supports the White Helmets – a civil defence group who have saved over 90,000 lives. A fuller discussion of aid drops will follow.

3. Humanitarian situation and DFID's response - Martin Leach, Head, Syria Programme Team, DFID

- Martin set out that DFID's work is set with HMG's humanitarian objective for Syria; our activities make an important contribution to the delivery of the UK's overall strategy. Our operational objective is to target the people who are in the most acute need, and to influence the international system to do the same. This year we have ensured that a higher proportion of our spending goes to cross-border operations, as this work generally reaches those in greatest need. We have grants to NGOs and UN agencies and the Red Cross – all assessed from an open call for proposals.

- We were asked about **our long term strategy** - we give multiyear grants so many partners have grants up to 2020 – these are our clear agreements that we expect to deliver. Within this we need flexibility, so we work with our partners, within contexts of long term agreements, to make sure our programmes can respond to the changing context.
- We were asked about whether there is a planned **reduction in DFID livelihoods** work. We would be interested in evidence of this as there is no policy to do this. No plan to explicitly increase or reduce in any sector. We will work according to need. For info, in 2017/18 we expect that about 24% of our portfolio is in the health sector; 17% in food security; and 11% in livelihoods and agriculture.
- **Our approach to Raqqa** - It is difficult and challenging for everyone. We have allocated an additional £10 million to partners working on health, trauma and mine clearance (along with other areas) in Raqqa over the last 3-4 months. How our programme develops will depend on how the situation unfolds.
- Aware that some NGOs find our **due diligence (DD) requirements** challenging and question whether they are too restrictive. HMG staff are not allowed to visit Syria. So we need best oversight of our money as possible. We are accountable to the taxpayer and need to give them the best assurances.
- Nick Ward (Deputy Head, Syria Policy and International Engagement Team) addressed the earlier point about **airdrops**. The UK is clear the most effective way to get aid in is through convoys – air drops cannot deliver at scale, cannot deliver drinking water or medical support. Conditions needed to deliver airdrops require communications with people on the ground and we need to ensure the safety of those receiving any aid - this is not the case in many areas across Syria. Not going to happen at the current time – along with the above, a large, slow moving aerial vehicle is at risk of being attacked and we cannot but lives in danger.
- **QUESTION: Currently there is heavy pressure for humanitarian actors to work on reconstruction and livelihoods – what is your view?**
 - Humanitarian technical experts “dance on the pin heads” of what is reconstruction and what is “humanitarian plus”. Diplomacy does not go into this sort of detail – so see different agencies doing different things and interpreting the words differently.
 - The UK and EU will provide no support for reconstruction in Syria until a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly underway.
 - UK position is any reconstruction that supports the Assad regime is not something we should support. We will get some areas where we will be working with local communities – building institutions and resilience – so it may look less like pure humanitarian work. The UK can be clear that anything we are doing is not benefiting the regime – but want to do what we can do to help the people of Syria.
- **QUESTION: Mentioned levels of support in Eastern Ghouta – are you doing psychosocial support there?**
 - See covering email
- **QUESTION: You say airdrops are a last resort – what does that look like?**

- The Foreign Secretary communicated the UK's view on airdrops clearly in Parliament. Slow planes put lives at risk – large risk for very little benefit to scale of need. Repeatedly make the point to the regime to allow cross-line access. We continue to explore all options – we are not saying never.
- **QUESTION: What is UK doing to ensure money through the UN doesn't go to the regime?**
 - Do enhanced Due Diligence on UN agencies. Working with a third-party monitor on our UN projects. UN is not allowed to give their UK aid to agencies or people closely associated with the regime – and if we have evidence of this we would revisit the programmes.
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- **QUESTION: Does DFID's stringent approach to DD and knee-jerk reactions to fraud accusations treat NGOs as being guilty until proven innocent?**
 - British people some of the most generous in the world. They want civil servants to do the best they can to make sure that money is being spent where it is trusted.
- **QUESTION: Raqqa – access must have improved – are you working with local groups? How are you supporting IDPs from Deir Ez Zour?**
 - The conflict in Raqqa has reduced but there is still a substantial risk of unexploded ordnance especially in Raqqa City. Not yet safe for residents or humanitarian agencies to be returning. Our partners engaging with local groups under the umbrella of coordination.
 - To respond to displacement from Deir Ez Zour we have provided increased support to some of our partners with flexibility about how they can spend the money – so that they can adapt to situation as it changes.
- **QUESTION: Negotiations coming up on 2165 – should NGO lobbying be public or private?**
 - Value the voice of NGOs in calling for its renewal and the ability to reach those who need help most effectively. Would welcome your knowledge and feedback based on experiences as deliverers of aid. Will keep in touch as this unfolds.
 - Important for all NGOs to be working through OCHA and standard reporting procedures to establish what is being delivered across border – compelling figures for how much is delivered XB but only if that data is recorded.
- **QUESTION: How does coordination between CSSF stream and DFID Humanitarian stream work?**
 - Ben is the chair of CSSF board for DFID and senior responsible owner of the humanitarian programmes – he has oversight of both and they should be complementary.
- **QUESTION: how is the ICAI review going?**
 - First meeting with head commissioner has happened. The review is ongoing and we look forward to result. Useful report that is well timed. Hope all our partners are able to fully cooperate with report.

4. Humanitarian access – Martin Leach

- On humanitarian access, Ben Mellor set out that the only way to get real genuine access is a political solution and an end to the violence. NGOs are absolutely right to challenge the UK to do all it can, and we share the frustration about the lack of access. We are doing all we can, and

considering our last resort options. It is not good enough to argue that ex-Damascus is enough, we need the renewal of 2165.

- On the **Turkey operating environment**, Barry Armstrong (Humanitarian Adviser, DFID) said that we recognise the administrative difficulties of operating cross border. The UK's Ambassador to Turkey met with INGOs in Turkey last week to discuss this issue. It is a key concern for the UK as we need our partners to be able to operate. Our Ambassador has approached the Prime Minister of Turkey, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Deputy Minister of the Interior on this issue. When the Home Secretary visited Turkey, she raised this issue with her opposite number. Alongside engagement, we are working with OCHA and other donor groups to bring about framework where this can be more systematically addressed.
- On **working with AFAD and TRC for cross-border operations**, DFID's position is that we are not supportive of this particular modality as we haven't had sight of downstream partners. The Ankara donor working group are trying to establish position to do advocacy on this. TRC met with DFID rep today – Ambassador will be raising concerns with AFAD. OCHA has successful in its dialogue with Turkish government to steer operating modality to delivery thanks to collective push back – so we are having some success on this issue. The UK is working hard on this on a daily basis with this with the Turks.
- Shaun Edgerley (DFID Iraq) spoke about the issue of **cross-border access from Iraq** following the Kurdish referendum. Government of Iraq (GoI) initially reasserted control over international borders including with airspace restrictions, and since mid-October has moved to take control over disputed areas – pushing Kurds back close to 2003 lines of control. There are potential access issues including for registration, visas and humanitarian supply chains now that certain territory has switched control. UK recognises the right of GoI to control its borders and control who comes into its country and actors will likely to have to regularise their status. But want to see a consistent, fair, transparent, speedy process to do this that that prioritises humanitarian access. Lobbying on-going - Embassy colleagues met Cabinet Secretary in Baghdad, Ben Mellor met with Deputy Minister of Migration, as well as further meetings in Erbil. We continue to urge restraint, dialogue, and solutions for access. DFID funding to OCHA and INSO is also supporting access, and DFID is working with the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq to push the GoI NGO Directorate to streamline procedures. Next steps are to pin down specific lobbying messages that fit the new reality, and to target them appropriately.
- **QUESTION: Welcome UK doing what it can to ensure renewal of 2165. In case it is vetoed what will the UK's long term plan be if that were to happen?**
 - No indication that it is going to be vetoed. It would be the end of UN cross-border access. NGOs still be looking to use this part of their programming.

5. Refugees and returns (Robin Nataf, DFID Lebanon, by phone) – 10 minutes

- Robin Nataf (DFID Lebanon) set out UK policy on returns – it is clear and has always been clear – want any returns to be in-line with international law. UK has been working with others on our messaging and Germany and INGO forum who we met last week on this issue. Trying to be more specific in our asks of the government and to counter rhetoric about the country being ready for returns. Recently, DFID Minister met with PM of Lebanon to discuss returns and UK policy.

- Engagement with **France and their returns conference**. Plans are still being firmed up and not yet clear what exactly will be covered but we are engaging with the process.

QUESTION: what's your response to the recent Washing Post article that said Lebanon wants to re-classify the way it groups refugees so that some would lose this status?

- There are rumours that this is one of the measures being proposed now by the Lebanese government. UK follows UNHCR leadership on the issue – and UNHCR are not advocating for any change.

6. AOB & Close – 5 minutes (Martin Leach)

- **QUESTION: Workshop on besieged areas - What is DFID doing to help get aid into these areas and did the April workshop have any effect?**
 - Fundamentally a really positive initiative – conducted under Chatham House Rules, however, which mean that limited outputs can be shared. There have been numerous discussions bilaterally that have happened since then, helping to build dialogue and communications with agencies working in this area.
 - In terms of DFID's response, we have used a new model – our Emergency Response Mechanism – to get additional programming into these areas.
 - Due to a lack of evidence, research has also been commissioned around the feasibility and appropriateness of cash-based support in besieged and hard-to-reach areas – – results due next week.
- **QUESTION: How should NGOs approach commercial contracts?**
 - Speaking with DFID's Commercial and Procurement Department may help – your finance colleagues should be in touch with them.
- **QUESTION: Do you have priorities for the Brussels Conference next year?**
 - EU are still in very early stages of planning, we are waiting to see their proposal.
- **QUESTION: Are you still providing support to local councils through CSSF?**
 - See covering email.