

## ONLINE ROUNDTABLE

# Unpacking the issue of refugees' return to Syria

*Perspective of women mediators and experts on the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees to Syria*

Closed-door event, held under the Chatham House Rule

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, 14:30-16:30 CET

**Working language: ENGLISH (no translation will be provided)**

Zoom platform

## Background

Thirteen years since the start of the Syrian conflict, a myriad of overlapping peace processes have not yet brought peace and justice to Syria and its population.<sup>1</sup> The Syrian conflict and its broader consequences still hold the country and its people hostage in one of the largest forced displacement crises of our time, with over five million refugees from Syria registered in the region and an estimated one million having sought asylum in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The situation is rapidly deteriorating further due to increased levels of violence in the region, particularly in Lebanon, forcing Syrians, once again, to be on the move.<sup>3</sup>

UNHCR's 2023 surveys show that the majority of Syrian refugees in the region still want to return home eventually but different challenges continue to prevent them from doing so.<sup>4</sup> The issue of refugees' return to Syria has remained consistently anchored to international protection standards and the concerns of refugees. In the words of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syrian refugees must be protected wherever they are. They and their hosts must be supported".<sup>5</sup> Equally, should refugees eventually choose to return to Syria voluntarily, safely and with dignity, as is their right, they should be helped to make their return sustainable.<sup>6</sup>

However, in the volatile political debate on Syria, the question of how to solve the Syrian refugee crisis has "come and gone" while remaining largely unanswered, even as public opinion exerts increasing pressure on hosting governments in

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Cervi, 'The Aftermath of the Earthquake in Syria: An Opportunity for Peace?', Text, IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali, 16 May 2023, <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/aftermath-earthquake-syria-opportunity-peace>.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, '2024 Syria Situation Overview', Global Focus, 20 May 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, 'UNHCR Scales Up Support as People Flee Lebanon for Syria', UNHCR, 25 Sep. 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-scales-support-people-flee-lebanon-syria>.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 'Eighth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return To Syria', UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), 23 May 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/100851>.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, 'High Commissioner's Statement at the Brussels Syria Conference', 31 May 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/high-commissioners-statement-brussels-syria-conference-27-may-2024-enar>.

<sup>6</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Statement to the Security Council Briefing on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria', NRC, 27 January 2022, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2022/january/statement-to-the-security-council-briefing-on-the-humanitarian-situation-in-syria/>.

the region as well as in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Resolution of the issue of Syrian refugees is challenged by multiple disconnects.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the dire situation of those in exile and those still in the country has grown increasingly untenable.<sup>9</sup> For example, the majority of the population still in Syria has been pushed below the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, for those in exile, local integration has become more and more challenging.<sup>11</sup> This has resulted in further displacement, also due to intensified conflict in Lebanon, dwindling humanitarian resources, economic vulnerabilities of hosting countries, undignified living, lack of access to basic goods and services, shrinking livelihood opportunities and a wider range of protection challenges, all of which exerts renewed pressure within the country, in the region and in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2021, the **Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN)** has expanded its activities to the Syrian context. Past initiatives promoted activities aimed at enabling Syrian women mediators to reinforce their capacities, share experiences with each other, engage in a dialogue with other women in the MWMN in similar conflict contexts, and further strengthen their key role in **paving the way for durable solutions to the Syrian crisis**. Within this framework and in line with past efforts, in light also of the most recent tragic developments in Lebanon, the MWMN and its members, in cooperation with IAI, WIIS Italy and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has organised an online, behind closed doors roundtable **to take stock of the issue of refugees' return to Syria. The topic will be discussed from the perspective of international practitioners, women mediators and scholars** with extensive experience in the region. The event will reflect on the current challenges facing the Syrian refugees' prospects of return, and putting forward recommendations for achieving durable solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis. Participants in the event will be women mediators from across the Mediterranean region, UN and NGO practitioners, researchers, experts and members of public institutions.

### ***About the MWMN***

The Mediterranean Women Mediation Network (**MWMN**) was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy in collaboration with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy in October 2017. The MWMN aims at “promoting women’s effective participation in conflict prevention and mediation, as well as addressing their specific needs in peacemaking efforts”.<sup>13</sup> Since the onset of its activities, the MWMN has worked to increase the space for women in the Mediterranean countries for influencing peacemaking efforts in crises, post-conflict and stabilisation contexts. Today the MWMN has representatives from a wide range of Mediterranean countries,<sup>14</sup> with an ambition to further expand into those contexts witnessing peacemaking efforts and to continue working in synergy with other women mediator networks in the context of the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks. Since its foundation, the MWMN has grown by welcoming new members – more than 60 today – and has conducted numerous activities ranging from in-person and online trainings, to peer-to-peer exchanges, advocacy and outreach campaigns.

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<sup>7</sup> Sunniva Rose, ‘Europe under Pressure to Encourage “voluntary” Return of Syrian Refugees’, *The National*, 27 May 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/2024/05/27/europe-under-pressure-to-encourage-voluntary-return-of-syrian-refugees/>; Anadolu, ‘German Government under Pressure amid Calls for Stricter Asylum Policy’, 27 August 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/german-government-under-pressure-amid-calls-for-stricter-asylum-policy/3313667>.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, ‘High Commissioner’s Statement at the Brussels Syria Conference’.

<sup>9</sup> UN SC, ‘Syria Facing Highest Levels of Humanitarian Need Since Start of 13-Year Crisis, Briefer Tells Security Council’, 25 June 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-facing-highest-levels-humanitarian-need-start-13-year-crisis-briefer-tells-security-council>.

<sup>10</sup> UN OCHA, ‘2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic’, 3 March 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2024-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2024>.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Marks, ‘Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Crisis of Dwindling Humanitarian Aid’, 9 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/01/syrian-refugees-in-jordan-a-crisis-of-dwindling-humanitarian-aid?lang=en>; Natasha Hall and Will Todman, ‘Lebanon’s Dangerous Campaign against Refugees’, 6 April 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lebanons-dangerous-campaign-against-refugees>.

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, ‘High Commissioner’s Statement at the Brussels Syria Conference’.

<sup>13</sup> *Mediterranean Women Mediation Network*, ‘Background’, para. 1, <https://womenmediators.net/the-network/>, accessed on September 18, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> As of September 2020 the network has representatives from Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Croatia, Egypt, France, Jordan, Greece, Israel, Italy, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Monaco, Montenegro, Palestine, Portugal, San Marino, Slovenia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey.

## Agenda

### ONLINE ROUNDTABLE

## Unpacking the issue of refugees' return to Syria

*Perspective of women mediators and experts on the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees to Syria*

*An initiative of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN)*

Closed-door event, held under the Chatham House Rule

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In line with its past efforts and in light of the most recent tragic developments in Lebanon, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) and its members, in cooperation with IAI, WIIS Italy and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, promotes an online, behind closed doors roundtable **to take stock of the issue of refugees' return to Syria.**

**The topic will be discussed from the perspective of international practitioners, women mediators and scholars** with extensive experience in the region. The event will reflect on the current challenges facing the Syrian refugees' prospects of return, and putting forward recommendations for achieving durable solutions to the Syrian refugee situation. Participants in the event will be women mediators from across the Mediterranean region, UN and NGO practitioners, researchers, experts and members of public institutions.

The event will reflect on the following leading questions:

- How are political and socio-economic dynamics shifting in Syrian refugees' hosting countries, and how are these shifts affecting refugees' intentions and decisions to return home?
- What are the perspectives of Syrians in neighbouring countries on safe, dignified and voluntary return? What are the experiences to date?
- What would need to change for return?
- How can the danger of forced returns be avoided?

- 14:30 – 14:35 Welcome by the Head of the MWMN and IAI Senior Fellow, **Loredana Teodorescu**
- 14:35 – 14:45 Foreword by **Stefano Ravagnan**, Special Envoy for the Syrian Crisis, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation
- 14:45 – 14:55 Introductory remarks by **Gonzalo Vargas Llosa**, UNHCR Country Representative Syria (Damascus)
- 14:55 – 16:00 Panel discussion *“Unpacking the issue of safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees to Syria: A perspective from Mediterranean women mediators and experts”*

*Panellists:*

- **Rouba Mhaissen**, Founder and Director of Sawa for Development and Aid, Lebanon
- **Samar Muhareb**, Executive Director of Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development ARDD, Jordan
- **Corina Drousiotou**, Coordinator and Senior Legal Advisor with Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC)
- **Rim Turkmani**, Senior Policy Fellow, London School of Economics (LSE) IDEAS
- **Meriç Çağlar**, Post-Doctoral Researcher at SUGender, Sabancı University, Turkey
- **Şenay Özden**, Cultural anthropologist and researcher, expert on Syrian refugees in Turkey

*Moderator:*

**Anna Cervi**, Co-Founder of the Italian Initiative for International Mediation (3IM) and member of the MWMN

- 16:00 – 16:20 Open discussion and Q&A
- 16:20 – 16:30 Concluding remarks