Section 1: The International Rescue Committee

1. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) works in conflict-affected and fragile countries around the world to deliver life-saving assistance to people affected by violent conflict and disaster, and remains working with communities to assist with rebuilding through the post-crisis phase. We work to empower communities to lead their own recovery and development, and to restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and dispossessed. Our presence in over 40 countries in education, health, protection, women’s protection and empowerment, and economic recovery provides us with a unique understanding of the humanitarian and development challenges in the context of conflict and fragility.

2. The IRC has one of the largest operational presences in the Middle East. We are working in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq to respond to the increasing needs of refugees and host communities in those countries. We work directly, as well as with a network of partners, inside Syria to provide life-saving assistance to internally displaced persons. Overall, the IRC has provided assistance to hundreds of thousands of Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, as well as inside Syria, and over the past year has produced a series of policy papers highlighting the impact of the Syria crisis on the region.

Section 2: Introduction

3. The IRC welcomes the decision of the International Development Committee to conduct an inquiry into the UK’s development work in the Middle East, and is grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback on the UK’s humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict. We also welcome the opportunity to express our appreciation to the UK Government for its generous support to the Syria crisis response. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian relief effort, and its commitment to date of £600 million to assist those affected by the conflict should inspire other countries, particularly in Europe, to reflect and improve on their current levels of support. The IRC takes this opportunity to convey our appreciation to the UK Department for International Development (DfID) for its strong support for our work, both financially and in its advocacy for stronger responses from UN
agencies and others to underserved issues (particularly protection from and responding to sexual violence, as well as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene [WASH] and coordination efforts).

Section 3: Summary of recommendations

4. We encourage the UK to continue its strong support to the Syrian crisis response, to put diplomatic pressure on countries that have not contributed sufficiently, and to raise awareness among the British public of the continuing need for humanitarian aid in Syria and neighbouring countries, as well as the challenges of humanitarian access inside Syria.

5. To address ongoing humanitarian access challenges, the UK should (i) push for a UN Security Council resolution calling for unimpeded humanitarian access within Syria and from neighbouring countries; (ii) apply diplomatic pressure on the Government of Syria to allow humanitarian assistance to be delivered across its borders, on all parties to the conflict to ensure humanitarian workers’ safety, security and free movement, on relevant countries to press the Government of Syria and opposition elements to facilitate humanitarian access, and on Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey to maintain open borders; (iii) push the high-level contact group on humanitarian access to explicitly address access issues in opposition areas; (iv) push the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to improve its access monitoring and support systems and to report monthly on besieged and inaccessible areas.

6. The scale of the Syria crisis calls for an unprecedented, long-term response that includes flexible funding for both humanitarian and development needs. The UK should work with UN agencies to ensure that the UN has a unified approach and facilitates elements of NGOs’ cross-border work. DfID, along with other humanitarian and development actors, should also support programming aimed at service provision, rebuilding livelihoods, providing education, increasing rights awareness and empowering community-based organisations inside Syria.

7. Syria’s neighbouring countries have shown great generosity to Syrian refugees, and development and humanitarian donors must work together in coordination to continue to meet current acute needs and provide longer-term, holistic funding. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) need to play a larger role in this context, while DfID, in concert with other key donors, must press development and humanitarian actors to work collaboratively to create and implement the Comprehensive Regional Strategy.
8. Donors should continue to increase funding for responses for refugees in non-camp areas, and advocate with host Governments to ensure that non-camp refugees can receive sufficient support in their areas of displacement. The UK should push the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to develop benchmarking criteria to monitor coordination, leadership and outreach to non-camp refugees in all countries affected by the Syria crisis, and should also closely monitor the implementation of the recommendations made in the July 2013 real-time evaluation of UNHCR’s response to the Syrian refugee emergency, as well as UNHCR’s December 2013 management response.

9. Women and girls affected by the Syrian conflict face various forms of gender-based violence (GBV), and existing gender inequalities increase their vulnerability. However, their specific needs are largely unmet and are not prioritized by the current humanitarian response. The humanitarian community must step up its efforts to empower women and girls to exercise their agency and diminish the risk of their facing GBV. The UK must implement policy and provide funding and programmatic support to ensure that specific material needs of women and girls are met, services for GBV survivors are provided, local capacity is built and women’s participation and economic empowerment is promoted.

Section 4: Millions in need are beyond the reach of humanitarian aid

10. According to OCHA, almost 2.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance are unable to receive it due to challenges related to humanitarian access. Ongoing assessments of needs inside Syria by the IRC indicate severe shortages of medicine, healthcare, blankets and other basic necessities; with the outbreak of polio in Syria, the need to ensure humanitarian access throughout the country is even more urgent.

11. Security and political obstacles prevent aid agencies from reaching people in need. Humanitarian agencies struggle to access hard-to-reach and besieged areas in rural Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, and ongoing fighting impedes humanitarian access in many other towns. Government and opposition checkpoints remain a concern for impartial agencies delivering assistance, with detention, confiscation of goods and kidnapping constituting real risks. Parties to the conflict have further reduced humanitarian access by targeting civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and electric and communications systems.

12. The Syrian Government has permitted just 15 NGOs to operate in the country (the IRC is not among them), with significant bureaucratic hurdles imposed in terms of visas, customs and border crossings. More broadly, obstacles created by a variety of actors mean that
humanitarian agencies attempting to deliver vital humanitarian supplies across borders must confront frequently changing bureaucratic regulations, closed strategic border points and volatile frontlines on the Syrian side of border crossings.

13. The IRC welcomes the UK’s efforts to bring about improved humanitarian access within Syria and from neighbouring countries, including through its support for the 2 October 2013 Statement by the President of the UN Security Council (PRST)\textsuperscript{ii}, its engagement with the high-level contact group on humanitarian access convened by OCHA, and its recent attempts to secure Security Council consensus on a press statement calling on all parties to fully implement the October 2013 PRST. However, given that there has been little meaningful improvement on the ground, the UK should push for a legally binding UN Security Council resolution calling for unimpeded humanitarian access within Syria and from neighbouring countries, in order to put additional pressure on parties to the conflict to comply with international humanitarian law. The UK should also push the high-level contact group on humanitarian access to explicitly address access issues in opposition areas, including those faced by NGOs operating from neighbouring countries, and to engage with all parties to the conflict and states that support them, both to identify immediate solutions to reaching specific civilian populations in need across Syria and to establish an over-arching, durable ‘humanitarian consensus’ for the country.

14. The UK should also apply diplomatic pressure on the Government of Syria to allow humanitarian assistance to be delivered across its borders, to reduce restrictions on setting up field offices and international NGO sub-offices and to reduce hurdles around visas, customs and border crossings. It should also apply diplomatic pressure on (i) all parties to the conflict to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian workers and allow them freedom of movement to deliver aid to those most in need; (ii) Russia, China and Iran to press the Government of Syria to facilitate humanitarian access; (iii) Saudi Arabia and Qatar to press elements of the opposition to facilitate humanitarian access; and (iv) Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey to maintain open borders.

15. The UK should also push OCHA, through the OCHA Donor Support Group or otherwise, to improve its access monitoring and support systems and, in monitoring implementation of the 2 October 2013 PRST, to report monthly on besieged and inaccessible areas, including information on numbers and locations of civilians therein, as well as on the nature of obstacles to access and efforts to overcome them. Such reporting would necessarily include
tracking access impediments experienced by all humanitarian actors in Syria, whether they operate from neighbouring countries or from Damascus.

**Section 5: Ineffective coordination in aid delivery**

16. The scale of the Syria crisis calls for an unprecedented response from humanitarian and development actors. Donors have consistently been calling for a comprehensive and coordinated approach in terms of understanding the most critical needs and gaps, prioritising interventions, and tracking funding in order to ensure an efficient and effective response. While UN agencies and host Governments have taken significant steps in order to improve coordination and streamline appeal processes, substantial gaps remain. In particular, there continues to be a lack of information sharing and coordination between agencies providing assistance from Damascus and agencies providing assistance from neighbouring countries.

17. DFID was a key actor in supporting IRC in establishing its operation out of Turkey into Syria, and along with other donors has funded IRC to reach hundreds of thousands of Syrians with medical supplies and winterisation kits from Turkey and Jordan across the Syrian border. This has been achieved through working with partner organisations that have established cross-border networks and in-country transport networks and have operational capacity within Syria. However, limited interpretations of the 2 October 2013 PRST have left many UN agencies unable to fully commit to playing a proactive role in coordination and logistical support of cross-border assistance, hindering their ability to fulfil their mandate in the humanitarian system. For example, OCHA has been unable to create comprehensive maps of needs and – more importantly – gaps in service provision within Syria. In many governorates where aid is delivered via cross-line supply routes and from neighbouring countries agencies are unable to determine who is doing what where. Some agencies have been brave in integrating elements of a cross-border approach to cross-line assistance, but the UK needs to work with UN agencies to ensure that the UN has a unified approach and facilitates elements of NGOs’ cross-border work, including through coordination, information and analysis, and logistical support.

**Section 6: Inadequate planning for a long-term response to the Syria crisis**

18. Almost three years on from the beginning of the Syria crisis, it is clear that this is a protracted, regional disaster which will have a profound impact on the entire region for years, and even decades. The response to the Syria crisis must therefore be a long-term vision that
includes flexible funding for both humanitarian and development needs. While the 6.5 million Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) have many immediate needs, they also require assistance that is focused on the longer term, and DfID, along with other humanitarian and development actors like UNDP, the World Bank, Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid, and the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department of the European Commission (ECHO), must also support programming aimed at service provision, rebuilding livelihoods, providing education, increasing rights awareness and empowering community-based organisations (on which international NGOs like the IRC rely to address community needs in the absence of functioning State institutions).

19. Syria’s neighbouring countries have shown great generosity to Syrian refugees. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt have together taken in over 2.4 million registered Syrian refugees, as well as an estimated 700,000 unregistered refugees. The majority of refugees have settled outside of camps, and the urban dimension of this crisis has exacerbated the impact on host countries – the burden of hosting these exceptionally large numbers of refugees in camps and in urban settings amongst host communities across the region is immense. Development and humanitarian donors must work together to continue to meet the current acute needs and provide longer-term and holistic funding – through a diversity of channels, including UN agencies, international NGOs and local civil society organisations – to address and anticipate the needs of a protracted humanitarian crisis. Donor coordination is critical to ensure the effective use of funds, while funding and programming must also support local institutions and infrastructure in host communities and provide direct assistance to vulnerable host families, in order to build the capacity of local governance structures to address the unique needs of refugees and avoid creating parallel systems.

20. UNDP, the World Bank, and other IFIs such as the IMF need to play a larger role in this context. There have been positive steps taken in Lebanon (the World Bank’s Lebanon roadmap) and Jordan (the establishment of the Host Community Platform with the Government of Jordan), but the role of these institutions is still lacking in the Turkey and Iraq responses, and worrying questions persist regarding the initiatives in Lebanon and Jordan (financing mechanisms for NGOs and civil society organisations remain unclear, long term coordination structures require greater definition). The recent publication by UNDP of its Resilience-based Development Response to the Syria Crisis is a welcome development, but UNHCR and UNDP must do more to ensure that regional and national response plans are streamlined and coordinated. Furthermore, the Comprehensive Regional Strategy, a process
led by UNOCHA, remains a document heavily weighted toward a humanitarian framework, unable to truly bridge the gap between humanitarian and development programming. Simple issues of data sharing have yet to be agreed upon by key UN agencies, including UNHCR, and the World Bank and other IFIs could offer significant insight for the Comprehensive Regional Strategy consultation process. DfID, in concert with other key donors, must press development and humanitarian actors to work collaboratively to create and implement this strategy.

21. DfID has been an exceptionally generous donor to the Syria crisis response. Unfortunately, other countries, particularly within the European Union, have failed to show similar levels of support. We encourage the UK to continue this strong support, to put diplomatic pressure on European and non-European countries that have not contributed sufficiently to the humanitarian response, and to raise awareness among the British public of the continuing need for humanitarian aid in Syria and neighbouring countries, as well as the challenges of humanitarian access inside Syria.

Section 7: A non-camp approach to supporting refugees, States and host communities

22. The Syria refugee crisis is an urban displacement crisis. According to UNHCR, some 85 per cent of refugees across the region have fled to urban centres, towns and villages outside of formal refugee camps. Whilst the scale of displacement in urban areas and impact on host communities has forced policy makers and operational agencies to recognise needs, serious gaps remain in the protection and support afforded to refugees displaced outside of camps, who face distinct challenges and vulnerabilities in terms of economic empowerment, access to services, lack of registration with UNHCR and lack of awareness of legal rights and/or sources of support. The impact on those communities hosting refugees is also significant.

23. Donors, UN agencies and humanitarian relief NGOs have been largely unable to adequately address the needs of refugees and the communities that host them. The main challenges in providing a strong coherent urban response are inadequate assessment and coordination mechanisms, bifurcated development and humanitarian approaches, a lack of donor funding that recognises the urban dimension of the crisis, and legal frameworks that inhibit refugees from becoming resilient. The IRC welcomes recent investments by DfID to ensure that non-camp refugees in Iraq receive adequate assistance; in Jordan, with DFID funding, we have been able to provide medical and psychosocial services and case management to Syrian refugees (including gender-based violence [GBV] survivors) at clinics in Ramtha and
Mafraq, while DfID has also supported our cash-based and livelihood programming in Lebanon. Donors should continue to increase funding for responses to refugees in non-camp areas and advocate with host Governments to ensure that non-camp refugees can receive sufficient support in their areas of displacement.

24. The UK should push UNHCR to develop benchmarking criteria to monitor coordination, leadership and outreach to non-camp refugees in all countries affected by the Syria crisis. To measure progress and increase the effectiveness of the response in meeting Syrian refugees’ needs, the UK should also closely monitor the implementation of the recommendations made in the July 2013 report “From Slow Boil to Boiling Point”\(^{viii}\), a real-time evaluation (RTE) of UNHCR’s response to the Syrian refugee emergency, and UNHCR’s December 2013 management response to the recommendations of the evaluation.\(^{ix}\) It would also be prudent to conduct a follow-up RTE prior to the mid-term review of the Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP6), to ensure that the response continues to be improved and strengthened.

Section 8: Women’s protection and empowerment

25. GBV assessments undertaken by the IRC in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have revealed that the most common forms of GBV experienced by Syrian women and girls across the region are intimate partner violence, sexual violence, early and forced marriage and sexual exploitation. While specific needs vary from context to context, they are vast, largely unmet and not prioritized by the current humanitarian response. The IRC is one of two key NGO actors working on violence against women and girls (VAWG) inside Syria and across all host countries, and was one of the first international NGOs to bring the issue of VAWG in the Syria conflict to light internationally. In August 2012, we published an external version of our GBV Rapid Assessment of Syria Refugee Populations in Lebanon\(^{x}\), while protection concerns of women and girls featured prominently in our January 2013 Syria: A Regional Crisis report\(^{xi}\).

26. Over the last 12 months, the IRC – with DFID support – has helped to mitigate the risks faced by thousands of Syrian refugee women and girls in Lebanon and Jordan. As part of a multi-faceted and innovative programme the IRC has provided over 1,400 women with ongoing individual and group psychosocial counselling services; organised awareness raising sessions for over 1,500 women and men on the basics of GBV and VAWG; responded to hundreds of VAWG case reports through holistic case management services; provided over 8,500 women and girls with hygiene kits through IRC clinics and partner organisations; and provided over 2,300
women-headed households with cash assistance payments. We are also providing cash assistance to 700 vulnerable Syrian women and girls to address their immediate needs and reduce the risk of forced and early marriage and other types of GBV that women and girls experience.

27. Much more needs to be done, however. The IRC is hoping to scale up these efforts in 2014 by reaching thousands more Syrian refugee women and girls, as well as those affected by the conflict inside Syria. The UK, along with other donors and UN agencies, must adopt and implement policy and provide funding and coordination support to: (i) meet the specific material needs of women and girls, such as the distribution of female hygiene or dignity kits and handheld solar lights; (ii) support medical providers to meet the health needs of GBV survivors in line with the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP); (iii) support women’s and girls’ coping mechanisms by establishing safe spaces in areas of displacement, accompanied by group-based psychosocial support activities; (iv) build capacity of case workers already working with local organisations, enabling them to provide private, confidential case management and support services to women and girls where it is safe to do so; (v) ensure that women and girls participate actively in humanitarian assistance coordination as well as longer-term peace, recovery and development efforts; (vi) establish feedback and complaint mechanisms that can be readily accessed by women; and (vii) increase women’s and girls’ access to economic resources and strengthen the resilience of women’s household economies through economic activities such as cash assistance, cash for work, financial literacy, support with economic decision making, and life skills.

31 January 2014

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x Available at [http://www.alnap.org/resource/9166](http://www.alnap.org/resource/9166)

xi Available at [http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/Syria-%20A%20Regional%20Crisis.pdf](http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/Syria-%20A%20Regional%20Crisis.pdf)