1. A long war
1.1 The premise of this contribution is that the humanitarian crisis that emanates from the Syrian conflict is likely to be a protracted one. This expectation needs to be recognised in current planning for direct aid, resettlement programmes and multilateral cooperation. It is true that the conflict may be brought to an end by a military victory by one party or by a negotiated hand-over of power. These possibilities, however desirable, are nevertheless unlikely, and even if they were to occur would not bring the humanitarian crisis to a speedy conclusion. The average duration of a modern high level insurgency has been various estimated at between seven and fifteen years, and the military and financial strength of rival sides in Syria at present, together with their respective international backing, indicates that the duration of this conflict and the resultant humanitarian crisis may exceed that average.
1.2 Few would deny the importance of the direct provision of basic goods and services to vulnerable populations, or the aspirations that come with international mediation at Geneva II for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. It would be short-sighted though to allow the efforts that go into these activities to forestall measures that could be taken to plan ahead for alleviating the humanitarian impact of a crisis that is likely to continue until the next decade. This note draws out three themes that concern such longer term measures.

2. An on-going mechanism for coordination
2.1 The potential for the provision of assistance within Syria remains precarious, particularly to regions that remain contested between government forces and the rebel movements; 2.5 million Syrians live in besieged and hard to access areas. Since 2012, access has been negotiated by individual institutions and through ad hoc channels. Whilst negotiations led by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator have extracted commitments from both the Syrian government and some rebel groups to permit access, the sporadic fulfilment of these commitments is apparent. Moreover there are limitations that come from relying upon high-profile international attention for securing access to zones of conflict when that attention will be intermittent, and over time will likely diminish even as needs escalate.
2.2 With this in mind, the Committee may wish to consider if existing mechanisms for inter-institutional coordination and communication with the diverse authorities in Syria are adequate and durable. Whilst access ultimately depends upon the consent of the de facto authority in place, it would nevertheless be advantageous for neutral forums to be bolstered within which discussions of emergency assistance can take place.
2.3 The Syrian crisis exemplifies the limits to the likely effectiveness of a stance oriented around condemnation to secure humanitarian ends. Many of the countries that have pressed hardest on securing humanitarian access have also been those which have strongly backed one set of combatants, those who accept a representative role for the Syrian National Coalition, in the civil war. This includes the US, UK and France. The perceived partiality of these countries entails that alternatives need to be maintained to engage with the authorities ruling over most of Syria’s territory and population for the humanitarian effort, but that these institutions need to be properly resourced whilst preserving their strict neutrality.

3. Aid and conflict
3.1 The scale of aid provided by the UK and others within Syria cannot avoid having an effect upon the conflict itself: UK aid so far alone amounts to 1% of Syria’s pre-war GDP. It has been widely recognised
that the delivery of aid creates a set of intermediaries and brokers whose social standing is bolstered; strengthens an informal economy that commonly runs alongside the trade in weapons; and politicises a relationship with external donors that itself becomes a basis for contestation. Even if relief supplies themselves do not fall into the hands of armed groups or government forces, their decision to permit supplies to flow to vulnerable people can serve as a form of leverage over them, as a basis for recruitment to militia or fund-raising. Partnership arrangements with government ministries and rebel service institutions may be necessary, but they also work to legitimise those bodies.

3.2 Whilst it is impossible to prevent the politicisation of long-standing relief operations within Syria, it is important to ensure that its consequences are evaluated. The negative experiences in Afghanistan between the Soviet invasion and the takeover of the Taliban in 1996, in which aid for both humanitarian and strategic purposes was widely considered to have had serious and unanticipated political repercussions, led to the creation by some development organisations of peace and conflict impact assessments. Such assessments, if not currently made, can be considered a useful tool if conducted on a regular basis for evaluating the extent to which aid becomes a factor in heightening oppression or tension, and can be acted upon if deteriorating.

4. Regional stability
4.1 It must not be forgotten that the civil war in Syria is also a regional crisis. Whatever happens with European (including UK) offers of resettlement, it should be remembered that the large majority of refugees will remain within the territories of the immediate neighbours of Syria. This poses significant economic difficulties for Jordan and Turkey, but the long-term risk to political stability that comes from the large scale presence of Syrian refugees and the existence of safe havens for combatants has been most acute in Lebanon and Iraq.

4.2 Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been a focus of considerable international attention, including through funding ventures by DFID; the fragility of the caretaker government in Lebanon is exacerbated by the rivalry between groups that have made alliances with opposing Syrian counterparts. The extent of related problems in Iraq is more opaque, but just as troubling. There are almost a quarter of a million Syrian refugees in Iraq, mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, the conflicts in Syria and the uprisings in western Iraq have to a great extent fed off each other. Western Iraq was extensively militarised especially over the period from 2006-09. Since then, the Iraqi government has taken a largely uncompromising attitude towards tribal and salafi groups there. This has led to an end to local ceasefires, extensive defection to those who use the al-Qa’ida brand, and the articulation of a new militant strategy that creates rebel-held areas in outlying regions of Iraq and Syria from which to supply the uprisings across the borders.

4.3 This zone of instability brings a major threat to regional stability. Whilst the primary problem is one of political reconciliation within Iraq, with mainstream groups within western Iraq excluded from national political processes, it also has a strong developmental slant to it: lack of public employment, the contraction of economic opportunities and a perceived decline in services all remain part of rhetoric of exclusion. Although Iraq, outside of the Syrian refugee camps, has not been a central focus of DFID work since the British military withdrawal in 2009, without an initiative through multilateral efforts to reengage with disaffected populations across Syria’s eastern border, the radicalisation and prolongation of the conflict there seems likely.