

Press Release, Brussels 3 April 2017

Activists' message to Brussels Conference on Syria: "Do not pay for what others broke without conditions to end the violence!"

The international community – including major donors like the US, EU and UN – should send a clear signal that reconstruction in Syria cannot start without a comprehensive political process grounded in principles of human rights and inclusion of all Syrians, said a new network of Syrian civil society organizations called **We exist!** today, as it prepares to be part of the upcoming **Brussels conference on supporting the future of Syrians and the region**, to be held on 4th and 5 April, 2017.

"Talks on reconstruction as a stand-alone project are unwise, if these are not closely pegged to an agreement among political parties involved in the Geneva talks, to address the root causes of conflict and provide for a rule of law and justice which guarantee human rights, instead of violence," said Hozan Ibrahim, director of Citizens for Syrian, and a founder of the new alliance.

The Brussels conference comes at a moment at which almost twelve million people have been displaced by the Syrian conflict and efforts to find a political settlement demonstrate little hope. Sieges and forced population displacement have become an intrinsic part of the tactics of fighting parties, including the Syrian government, leading to deep changes in the social and ethnic composition of areas such as Al-Waer in Homs, Eastern Aleppo or Madaya, Zabadani, Kafrya and Foua and areas in rural Damascus. Any discussions on the reconstruction of Syria should emphasize guarantees for the voluntary return of displaced people, the We Exist! alliance affirms.

"Reconstruction cannot just be about bricks and concrete. Displaced people will need to be able to return to their homes and live a life free from fear. Unless and until this happens, reconstruction risks being just another front in Syria's war economy and complicit in forced displacement." said Dr Rouba Mhaissen, director of SAWA for Development and Aid in Lebanon

To coincide with the Conference, twenty five leading Syrian humanitarian and human rights organizations launched the new **We exist!** alliance to promote the role of independent Syrian-led civil society organizations inside Syria and abroad. As attacks on aid workers have escalated and the space for independent civil society is ever more squeezed inside Syria, the group calls for joint work with other Syrian organizations committed to needs-based humanitarian relief and human rights, and for international allies to support them. **We exist!** strongly recommends participants to the Brussels Conference to focus on the protection of civil society and to systematically factor in human rights into any discussion on reconstruction.

"It is civil society that has kept Syrians alive and supported them these past six years," said Salma Kahale, head of Dawlaty, an NGO working on establishing a culture of citizenship and rights, and a founder member of We exist! "Syria's civil society should be at the table in Brussels and in what follows, not just in fringe meetings to tick the box."

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Practical details:

1. The **We exist!** launch event is in the Maelbeek Room at Residence Palace on Rue De La Loi in Brussels at 8.30am to 10.00am on Monday 3rd April. To register, please visit:
https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/we-exist-syrian-civil-society-launch-event-tickets-33184202844?ref=enivtefor001&invite=MTE3Mzk3MjYvbW9sbGV0dEBjYXJlaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbC5vcmcvMA%3D%3D&utm_source=eb_email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=in viteformalv2&utm_term=eventpage
2. **We exist!** members are involved in speaking at various preparatory events to the Brussels Conference, including a roundtable with ministers on women's rights inside Syria hosted by the Norwegian Embassy on 4th April and a panel event on EU Syria policy on the 5th April.

list of Syrian NGOs who have joined We Exist!

- Basmeh & Zeitooneh
- The Center for equal citizenship
- Citizens for Syria
- CODSSY
- Dawlaty
- Fazaa
- Hurras Network -Child guardians
- Initiative for a New Syria
- Palestinian league for human rights
- PEL-The civil waves
- Pour une Syrie laique et democratique
- Rethink Rebuild Society
- Sawa for Development and Aid
- SAWA Foundation, UK.
- Smile of Hope
- SPACE-Norway
- Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
- Syrian Legal Development Program
- Syrian Network of Human Rights
- Syrians for Truth and Justice
- UKSSD
- Urnamu
- Violations Documentation Centre
- Women now for development

This Initiative is supported by the following International NGOs

- Hivos
- Kvina Till Kvina
- PAX
- The Syria Campaign