

**The Future of Syria – Organisation of Focus Groups Discussion in Mafraq and Amman**

**24th to 28th of February 2019**

**How do you feel regarding/ how do you see the current situation of Syria?**

Women in Mafraq (FGD 1) and Amman (additional elements):

* Pain, concerns, sadness, fear, lack of hope for the future of the country, violence (e.g: kids killed in front of their parents), no security guarantees, daughters were given to foreigners
* Concerns regarding their family members that stayed, the lack for working opportunities, of education and housing (law passed that if they do not go back in 6 months to prove it is their home then the house will become the property of the government
* Fear of military conscription, that has no limit anymore (legally speaking)
* But also the wish to keep fighting and to keep some “minor” hope while following the situation from outside, and the wish to transform the “weakness” into “strengths”.
* Nostalgy of the past: country was a paradise before the war, now everything has changed, the people and the country.
* Wish to reunite the families: a lot of the families are split up in different countries and it has been years since they have not seen them
* What is said in the news and social media showing Syria and Damascus as safe places are lies : there is no electricity and lack of water& food, streets are empty, people feel watched and are feared to talk, also over the phone because of “security services”.

\* Political considerations: the neighbours countries have destroyed Syria, such as “Shia Lebanese”.

Men in Mafraq and in Amman (usually older and coming from Homs, left education early and worked as farmer, builder, butcher, bakery, etc. most of them do not work in Jordan and have medical disabilities): //women:

+ Tragedy for children that are exposed to such violence, bombing, rape, etc

+ Issue of corruption and extorsion: to go to one point to the other, you have to pay hundred of checkpoints and everybody want his commission.

+ surveillance and fear to speak, move, think. Completely control of the population with various checkpoint and unique entry to city that controls whoever comes and leaves.

+ “lost generation” of qualified people: of people that had studied or started to study at university and now does not have the possibility to exploit what they learn because no job opportunity fits their qualifications

+ Increase in religious and sectarian tensions

+ There is three government in Syria (???): the zones under the regime are terrible. The soldier of the government can do whatever they want, if they don’t like your name (Sunni names) or your face, even if you laugh or smile when they are there and they don’t like that, they can just kill you or take you in prison while accusing you of being a terrorist: there is no accountability for their crimes because they are with the government.

* Even in the zones that are more peaceful at first, the government send militias to mess them up, giving them an excuse to intervene in these areas.
* Hezbollah is in control of the areas close to the Syrian-Lebanese border (even Syrian government don’t go there): they have taken the houses and massacred the people that were living there.

+ Feeling of betrayal from the international actors supporting the regime: they were surprised by the international response to the crisis, the world does not seem to care about their situation and the atrocities they live, the international community has no interest in the conflict.

+ while not surprised by the regime’s actions.

\* political considerations: problem of the Iranian sectarian tribes presence in Syria

Youths in Mafraq and Amman:

* Fear of military conscription (first preoccupation)
* Economic concerns regarding the costs of living that are very high, in comparison to very low incomes, with difficulties to have gas/electricity.
* “Foreign occupation”: some zones in Damascus are completely full of foreigners (Russian, Iranian, etc) and nobody speaks Arabic there. After 5pm there is nobody of the streets because it is not safe enough, feeling of being observed all the time and no freedom of speech.
* Stabilisation of the situation : also opinion that things are now as it used to be, that the situation is improving, at least in Damascus, in comparison to some areas that are still impacted by fights and struggles. The social media videos showing current Damascus look better
* Feeling that the future is gone
* Clear traumatic memory of the bombings, violence, threats, etc. // horror movies => permanent fears when they play games also

**1. How do you see the future of Syria?**

Women in Mafraq:

* General lack of hope: no safety, stability, security, No job perspective, no money, no housing for some
* The situation won’t change if the same people stay in power, the land has to be given back to the people. But fear that even if Assad goes the Alawites will take the power and nothing will change
* + various militias prevent the return to security: incapacity of the government to ensure protection from these “outside” marginal militias/gangs/sectarian organisations
* The weapons have to be all get off the country
* Syria has to get rid of the dictatorship system, the new generations have to understand there are other models possible and learn about human rights that were denied to their generation.

Men in Mafraq: // women

* Important need of a new government that is legitimate and a new constitution, the situation can only worsen with this one. need to give the country to the people and change governance system.

+ Need to put all the weapons out and to force foreign militias to leave the country, as well as foreign powers (Russian, Iranian, etc).

+ Need of an international peacekeeping task force to restore peace and ensure that no sects has more poser than the other.

Youth in Mafraq:

* Want to have a Syria that looks like before, seen as paradise, with the building and the people as they were, with security and trust among the people. But also fear that nothing will be never the same
* But need for foreign actors to leave, as well as armed militias (// new government) + Hezbollah has to give back the land they took, such as the Kurds.
* Need to change the law and constitution, remove of military service
* Political power: Sunni should be in power because they are the majority: there is the need of more equality between the sects
* But also for some that the Alawites go back to their villages and that not all the jobs in government are taken by them.
* Have to work on religious extremism, which increased after the crisis;
* + release of prisoners

**Zaatari refugee**: there might be two years chaos even if an agreement is in place, as there are groups with their own agenda and supporting foreign countries => need of an international peacekeeping force.

**Final group session**: need of civil elected government (and not a monarchy disguised in republic), with a new constitution where everybody is equal without security services that act with impunity.

**2. How do you see your role / the role of Syrian refugees in the future of Syria?** Do you think you cold use your “experience” of living out of Syria? What would you do if the situation was better and you could return?

Women in Mafraq and in Amman:

* Willing to work, open businesses, use the skills women have learned because their husband were not there (had to join the army, killed, stayed in Syria, etc). There is also more women than men now, so there is the wish from women to work more outside the house than they used to, such as in organisations and help in reconstructing Syria, first in safer zones (e.g. Jordan border), even if there are still black traffic issues etc., and then little by little extend to the other zones. (interpretation: wish to see more empowerment of women in the reconstruction of the country).
* ??? (to be confirmed): wish to set in place psychologic centres to help in traumatism of the war, the bombings, killings, massacres and other atrocities, especially for children. There are some in Jordan but not in Syria.
* Want the have a Syria more open to religious freedom and family model like in Jordan for example which is a country more open in that regards.

Men in Mafraq and in Amman (// women)

* willing to rebuild the house, go back to their business to have the financial means to rebuild.
* Proud to say that Syrian people are working and active people, that would need only a short period of time to rebuild everything, but they need the mean/proper conditions to rebuild. They showed they can adapt to worse situation so certainty they will manage to rebuild their country if they had the occasion to. => people/refugees have acquired new skills and experienced situation where they have to deal with bad conditions, that would be necessary to rebuild a “better” Syria than before the war.

Youth: in Mafraq:

* wish to use the skills they have learned to rebuild Syria: idea that there is no need to employ people because they have learned last years to do manual things by themselves.
* Want to study law, medicine, in Jordan or elsewhere in order to return and help their country; work as ambassador, merchant, pharmacist, ingenior, family housewife, teacher, etc.
* Wish to also bring some cultural and languages considerations and discoveries they had in foreign countries, and bring the ideas to Syria.
* the problem is that they have lacked education and there is the need for youth to start studying engineering, architecture, etc in order to rebuild the country.
* but the increase in early marriages are an issue, as the youths leave schools after getting married very young: there is a lack of education but once they will put their “mind at it”, then they will be able to do it.

**3. Imagine that the conflict in Syria comes to an end… What does it take for reconciliation to be possible? *How do you feel when thinking about the possibility of being back in your home town/home community?***

Women in Mafraq and in Amman

- more sceptical about the social cohesion post-conflict: lack of trust, lack of solidarity (in comparison to before) as the situation is so desperate that the needs of money is what drives people, even if takes to “betrayed” their friends/neighbours, even in the camps there is spying activities.

It will take years for the country to heal and to come back to what it was if the situation allow it, as too many horrible things have happened.

+ increase in sectarian/religious/identity conflicts than it used to be before the crisis, people are increasingly identifying themselves according to their religious affiliation. Today according to what is your religious affiliation you got arrested. People are forced (either directly or indirectly in consideration for their family etc) to change their ideas and believes in order to become Shia.

>< other opinion: people think less about identity than at the beginning of the crisis as the situation has become to desperate in terms of basics needs that the latter come first.

But everybody, from all the religious sides and even people within the government have suffered, the war has impacted everybody.

* And there is the need to work hand in hand to rebuild the country despite past issues, and everybody want to return to rebuild the country. They will take few years to rebuild social cohesion, the reconciliation will follow more quickly than rebuilding the country in terms of security and rebuilding of houses etc. Before the war they coexisted together with all different sects and religions. The Syrian people is good and general opinion that they will focus on reconciliation rather than revenge. They want everybody to be respected and equal, because they know that revenge will only lead to another war. But for that all weapons have to get out of the country to make sure everybody is equal.

Men in Mafraq and in Amman:

- the feeling of revenge will maybe take 15 years to disappear.

- but Syrian people are forgiving people, they will give them so bread and a place to stay. If the government is ready to “forgive” everyone and move forward (no fear of persecution, etc.) then it will be easy for people to move on and focus on the rebuilding/reconciliation: they do not want to return for more conflict => Need of a general amnesty.

- other opinion: hopefully they will understand why they left, but generally people advice to not come back and would like to leave themselves if they had the chance. Some advice the elders to come back, but no the youth because they won’t have a future and risk too much to be taken to military services or arrested.

Youths in Mafraq and Amman

* trust issue with friends, neighbours: change of the social network that won’t be the same => fear to not recognise their friends and neighbours. Fear for some that neighbours became enemies, that the social links are destructed, that too much happened and prevents reconciliation to happen. The new generations do not know each others and a lot of people of older generation died
* even within family different ideas and feeling of revenge.
* Fear that even if Assad leaves there will be a new civil war
* But general feeling that if the situation get stable, there will be forgiveness and the situation could back to what it was before the war.
* Not the impression to be blamed for leaving as people in general tell them to stay in Jordan and that they would like to leave themselves.

Refugees in Zaatari camp:

- debate between the people that look for a quick reconciliation and emphasises the good willing of the Syrian people to work together to rebuild the country (with the different sects)

>< no possibility for some to live with people that have participated in killing their families and committed crimes with the regime. The wish for revenge is strong for some and the possibility of forgiveness small, specially towards the Alawites.

**4. Do you ever think about / could you imagine yourself returning to Syria before the conflict comes to an end? Why?**

Women in Mafraq:

* yes because:
* hard living conditions in neighbouring countries (no job, hope for future, difficult access to education ,etc.). the basics needs are covered but there is no opportunity and possibility of future in Jordan, specially for the kids that do not have access to education
* no because:
* military conscription of their children and husband, even if some have already served
* risk of prison, exposition to persecution, kidnapping and general security issues, still registered as “wanted people”, either directly or through their family: + the risk to come back is to be taken in hostage to force children coming back.
* no work opportunities, no basic incomes and no mean to rebuild the houses
* really bad living conditions of Syrian that stayed in the country, without gas, electricity, food & water, lot of pain and fear, no money to live and impression that if the borders would be open everybody would leave the country. Impression that usually people that have returned regret it and that the ones who stayed want to leave.
* Organ black trade is rising
* Why going back when there is nothing to return?

Men in Mafraq and in Amman:

* Yes because: // women

+ no work/ social security in Jordan, no hopes and quality of life.

=> no statue that allow them to have some rights in Jordan and proper working opportunities & exploitation of Syrians in Jordan: if they are older than 50 then Jordanian do not hire you. They are paid miserably and sometimes even not. They have to work 16hours a day in order to be hired for 20-25 JD/day.

=> a lot of them are starting to have medical disease because of the stress of the war and the tough living conditions in Jordan, + the lack of hope for their future and the future of their children.

=> the assistance of international organisation and UNHCR has been cut off lately and there is less and less international aid to help them survive in Jordan: they have more and more to remove their children from school to make them work to help them paying the rent and basic food.

\* zones close to the Turkish border is the best hope they got.

* No because: // women

+ No future for the country with this government

+ The militaries/soldiers of governments have every rights, if they want something (e.g: a home) they can just take it.

+ their business is gone, and for example for the farmers their property have been taken by militias and they have no land/animals anymore: why would they return when they have nothing left and no guarantee?

Youth in Mafraq:

* Yes (once they have the age – 18) because:

They have family is in Syria, and even if there is a risk of military conscription prefer to do it in order to get rid of it.

+ feeling to not be accepted in Jordan

\*Condition for some: need to finish school first

* No because: military conscription (for them or their husband for young married ladies than do not want to go back alone), fear to have to fight their own people, the situation is too bad and there is no safety, fear of being kidnapped or their family members, fear of prison, no opportunities for education (also because of the military service), house and family business damaged and nothing left => why returning?

***What if the conflict was finished?***

Women in Mafraq: All want to return if the security situation was good enough, the security issue being the first preoccupation.

// Men and youth: if they see the situation is safe enough they would like to return and rebuild, but need for general forgiveness/amnesty for that

Youth: hopefully, but “conditions” if the conflict finished to go back :

* No army **conscription**
* Studying possibility
* Security ensured by military against militias.

***In case of a negative answer****,* ***what alternatives are you and others considering?***

Women and men in Mafraq; one think that the country is completely destructed and that she will never return.

* Some alternatives considered:
* Staying in Jordan or another Arabic country for cultural reasons and because of the proximity to Syria.
* Going to western countries (Europe, US, Canada): mostly for the children education, economic conditions and work opportunities. + even if really grateful towards Jordanian, feeling of being pressured in Jordan because the economic issues/pressure is increasing, feeling to not be welcomed anymore in Jordan.
* Division even within families about that point, husbands are more willing to return usually.

\*Usually the youth (children of participants) are more willing to go abroad because of education and work opportunities perceived as higher abroad.

\* Also wish to reunite the families that for some are spread over the world (members in different countries).

Youth:

* if after school there is working opportunities in Jordan then some would prefer to stay in Jordan, also because it is closer to Syria in case return will be possible one day (most of them).
* They are now used to their lives in Jordan with families and friends there, specially for the one having access to education (// better integration??)
* Arabic country: for cultural and social integration reasons.
* some would like to go to Canada/US, also because they have some family members there + also wish to go abroad to learn other languages, cultures.
* Europe: idea of better life conditions such as work, housing, education and more respect for different sects.

**Message to address to foreign countries?**

Women in Mafraq and Amman:

* the Syrian civilisation is a great civilisation, they are very proud of their culture and want the rest of the world to make the distinction between the war in Syria and the Syrians.
* They wish to be able to work, to have their business, to drive and be treated as people capable of these things, as anyone else, in other countries.
* They call for help for rebuilding their country and allow their children to go to school.
* The foreigners and foreign militias have to leave and all the weapons have to get out of the country, like this no one would be able to have more power than others.
* They need help in getting the dictator out of the country and he has to be judged in an international court for his crimes.
* Propaganda of the media showing that Syria is better is just lies.

Men in Mafraq and Amman:

* Hypocrisy of international actors (e.g. Russian, Iranian, Hezbollah) that are making profit of the situation : “help us or leave us”

demand for helping in the reconstruction, to solve the crisis, to return safely, to change the regime, and the release of political prisoners: Hope that the international community would help with the reconstruction but it has to come mostly from the Syrian government

* Get rid of militias and particularly Hezbollah (// Homs areas).
* More attention from the EU and international community in general to the conflict wanted + more help and assistance than it has been done so far. They want their problem to be seen and heard. They wish there would be some legal immigration routes to facilitate immigration.
* Need of international assistance as they lack working alternatives at the moment to cover their basic needs, in order to continue the education of their children.
* They wish Jordan will treat better the refugees and allow them to have some rights regarding working and driving for example.

Youth in Amman:

* Need help to bring peace and not only in Syria, but everywhere in the world.
* Want to be treated with humanity and respect, and like criminals.

**Additional considerations from the Zaatari camp: principal element is the lack of future foreseen, and the unknown scenario for their country.**

* The camp facilitations are improving but the conditions for living remain really tough in terms of housing, food and medicine.
* They need permission to leave the camp.
* Most of them would like to be resettled in Europe, but this is generally possible for the Syrian refugees living un urban settlements and not in the camps.
* The assistance to refugee in general is clearly declining
* The return will be possible if they feel safe, treated with dignity and in security
* Rumor for one year or so that refugees in the camp will have to go