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Comments Submitted

by ASSEDEL

**Addressing the Challenges of Syrian Refugees in Europe following the
statement of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe**

ASSEDEL

(Association européenne pour la défense des droits et des libertés)

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has resulted in one of the most significant refugee crises of modern times. Millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their country due to widespread violence, human rights violations, and the collapse of state institutions. While neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon have shouldered the largest share of the crisis, a substantial number of Syrian refugees have sought asylum in Europe, testing the capacity and political will of European states to respond effectively. The exile of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow has further destabilized Syria, prolonging displacement and complicating international efforts to address the crisis.

The protection of refugees is enshrined in both international and European law. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol establish the fundamental rights of refugees and prohibit refoulement, the forced return of individuals to countries where they may face persecution or inhumane treatment. Additionally, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, Article 3) and the UN Convention Against Torture reinforce this protection, ensuring that asylum seekers are not subjected to degrading or life-threatening conditions. At the European Union level, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) sets out the legal framework for asylum policy, aiming to create a uniform approach among EU Member States. However, the Dublin III Regulation, which designates the first country of entry as responsible for processing asylum claims, has led to unequal burden-sharing, disproportionately affecting frontline states such as Greece and Italy. Furthermore, while the EU Temporary Protection Directive was activated for Ukrainian refugees in 2022, it was never applied to Syrians, exposing inconsistencies in EU asylum policy and raising concerns over differential treatment based on nationality.

Despite these legal obligations, European countries have responded to the Syrian refugee crisis in vastly different ways. Germany, under Chancellor Angela Merkel, initially adopted an open-door policy, accepting over one million Syrian refugees in 2015–2016, before later tightening its asylum laws due to political and social pressures. France has struggled with inadequate reception facilities and restrictive border controls, particularly in the Calais refugee camps. Belgium and the Netherlands have implemented structured but increasingly restrictive asylum policies, balancing humanitarian obligations with political considerations. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, especially post-Brexit, has pursued some of the most stringent asylum measures, including policies that limit asylum applications and propose offshore processing for refugees.

This report examines the situation of Syrian refugees across France, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, assessing their reception conditions, integration policies, and societal responses. It evaluates these national approaches in relation to international and EU legal obligations, incorporating insights from the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe and ASSEDEL. Furthermore, the report highlights systemic barriers—such as lengthy asylum procedures, housing shortages, and rising xenophobia—that hinder the effective inclusion of refugees.

France

France remains a key destination for Syrian refugees, with over 125,000 asylum applications recorded in 2024. However, its asylum system has faced criticism for inefficiencies. Refugees endure prolonged waiting periods for asylum decisions, which delay access to work permits, education, and integration services. Living conditions in reception centers are often substandard, with overcrowding reported in many facilities. In 2024, the French government launched a national strategy to enhance refugee integration, emphasizing language training and vocational programs. However, the quality and accessibility of these programs vary significantly between urban and rural areas. Societal challenges, such as racism and xenophobia, also hinder social cohesion. Initiatives like the "Refugees Welcome" mentorship program have made notable progress in fostering local engagement and mutual understanding.

This section outlines the concrete developments in France following this geopolitical shift and the measures undertaken to address the challenges. The French government initiated measures to expedite asylum processing, allocating additional resources to reduce decision times. Integration programs emphasizing language acquisition and vocational training were expanded, though disparities in accessibility between urban and rural areas persisted. Efforts were also made to upgrade reception facilities to address overcrowding and improve living standards. Public opinion in France became increasingly polarized. While programs like "Refugees Welcome" fostered local engagement and support, anti-refugee rhetoric gained traction, fueled by fears of economic strain and cultural shifts. This environment underscored the need for national campaigns to promote inclusivity and counter xenophobia. France played a key role in advocating for a democratic transition in Syria. The government prioritized diplomatic efforts to stabilize the region, aiming to mitigate further displacement. Simultaneously, France increased its humanitarian aid to Syria and neighboring countries hosting refugees.

The departure of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow exacerbated the already critical refugee crisis, leading to increased arrivals of Syrian asylum seekers in France. Before December 2024- France has been a key destination for Syrian asylum seekers, though specific annual acceptance figures are less detailed. After December 2024- France announced it was considering suspending the processing of Syrian asylum applications.

Commissioner for Human Rights Perspective

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe has called on France to ensure that its asylum system adheres to international standards. Recommendations include reducing bureaucratic delays, improving reception conditions, and adopting a zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination. The Commissioner also stressed the need for consistent funding of integration programs to prevent regional disparities.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

In our view, France's efforts are commendable but fragmented. The lengthy bureaucratic processes exacerbate vulnerability among refugees, especially families and unaccompanied minors. ASSEDEL believes that a decentralized but standardized approach—where local communities are empowered to manage refugee integration with federal oversight—could resolve many disparities. Collaboration between civil society and the government must be prioritized to close gaps in housing and education access.

ASSEDEL's Recommendations

1. Allocate more resources to asylum offices to reduce waiting times for decisions.
2. Renovate and expand reception centers to ensure humane living conditions.
3. Provide uniform access to quality language and vocational training programs nationwide.
4. Fund campaigns that promote acceptance and counter xenophobia.
5. Partner with community organizations to foster refugee-local interactions.

Germany

Germany continues to lead Europe in refugee reception, with over 1.2 million Syrian refugees residing in the country as of 2024. The government offers extensive support, including free language courses, vocational training, and education access. However, challenges persist. Housing shortages, particularly in major cities like Berlin and Munich, have forced many refugees into temporary shelters for extended periods. The German government recently announced incentives for employers to hire refugees, which has resulted in over 60% of working-age refugees entering the labor market. However, cultural and language barriers remain significant obstacles. Social cohesion initiatives, such as local community projects, have seen success but require broader implementation to address instances of xenophobia. The departure of Bashar al-Assad to Moscow intensified the refugee crisis, prompting Germany to strengthen its humanitarian and integration policies. This section outlines Germany's response and the associated challenges.

The German government accelerated the expansion of integration initiatives, including language courses and vocational training programs. Investments in temporary housing were increased, and incentives for employers to hire refugees were expanded. Despite these efforts, urban housing shortages and resource allocation imbalances persisted. Public opinion in Germany was polarized. While many recognized the economic and social benefits of integrating refugees, others expressed concerns over cultural cohesion and economic strain. Right-wing movements leveraged these concerns to promote anti-immigration narratives.

Before December 2024- Germany has been a primary destination for Syrian asylum seekers. In 2024, over 72,000 Syrians applied for asylum in Germany. After December 2024-Following Assad's departure, Germany temporarily suspended the processing of Syrian asylum claims, affecting approximately 47,000 pending applications.

Germany intensified its engagement in international efforts to address the Syrian crisis, advocating for a political solution to stabilize the region. The government also increased its financial contributions to humanitarian aid in Syria and neighboring countries to reduce displacement pressures.

Commissioner for Human Rights Perspective

The Commissioner has praised Germany's commitment to integration but highlighted concerns over housing shortages and the potential marginalization of refugees in overcrowded urban areas. The Commissioner has urged Germany to invest further in affordable housing and expand programs that facilitate refugee employment.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

Germany's proactive approach serves as a model for other European nations. However, ASSEDEL has observed that refugees in overcrowded urban centers feel increasingly isolated, which affects their long-term integration. We advocate for more investments in rural resettlement programs where housing is more available, paired with strong social cohesion initiatives. Employers should also be incentivized not just to hire refugees but to provide mentorship programs that support professional development.

ASSEDEL's Recommendations

1. Invest in affordable housing specifically for refugee families.
2. Provide additional tax breaks to companies hiring refugees and promote entrepreneurial ventures.
3. Expand access to language and job training nationwide.
4. Fund local projects that foster cultural exchange and social interaction.
5. Ensure refugees receive comprehensive legal assistance during the asylum process.

Belgium

Belgium's decentralized approach to refugee integration has resulted in disparities across regions. In 2024, over 45,000 Syrian refugees resided in Belgium, with many facing challenges related to housing shortages and delayed asylum decisions. Some regions provide robust support programs, while others struggle with limited resources. The Belgian government has increased funding for local integration initiatives, including language courses and job placement services. Despite these efforts, societal acceptance remains inconsistent, with periodic spikes in xenophobic rhetoric and public resistance to refugee resettlement.

Belgium's decentralized political structure posed unique challenges in responding to the increased influx of Syrian refugees after Assad's departure. This section highlights Belgium's efforts and obstacles. Before December 2024: Belgium has also been a destination for Syrian asylum seekers, though specific annual acceptance figures are less detailed.

Belgium allocated additional funding to regions most affected by the refugee influx, focusing on improving reception conditions and speeding up asylum procedures. Integration programs, including language training and job placement initiatives, were expanded but remained uneven across regions. Public sentiment varied widely. While grassroots organizations and local communities in some regions welcomed refugees, others resisted resettlement efforts, citing economic and cultural concerns. Periodic anti-refugee rhetoric from political groups further fueled societal divides. Belgium emphasized a coordinated EU approach to stabilize Syria and address the refugee crisis. The government supported increased EU funding for humanitarian aid to Syria and neighboring countries to reduce the burden on host nations.

After December 2024: Belgium temporarily suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications.

Commissioner for Human Rights Perspective

The Commissioner has emphasized the importance of ensuring uniformity in Belgium's refugee policies. They have recommended enhancing coordination between regional and federal authorities to address inconsistencies and expanding public awareness campaigns to combat xenophobia.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

From ASSEDEL's perspective, Belgium's uneven policy implementation undermines the resilience of refugees and local communities. Regional disparities create a patchwork system that leaves many refugees underserved. A national coordination body dedicated to refugee integration could streamline resource allocation and reduce inefficiencies. Additionally, public

awareness campaigns need to emphasize the economic and cultural benefits of refugee inclusion.

ASSEDEL's Recommendations

1. Improve coordination between federal and regional governments to ensure consistency in refugee services.
2. Develop nationwide initiatives to address housing shortages.
3. Allocate more funding to under-resourced areas for integration programs.
4. Launch targeted public campaigns to reduce resistance to refugee settlement.
5. Increase funding and collaboration with grassroots organizations assisting refugees.

United Kingdom

The UK has shifted from the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) to the UK Resettlement Scheme, accommodating over 30,000 Syrians since 2021. However, this transition has faced criticism for reduced scope and lack of transparency. Refugees continue to struggle with limited access to affordable housing and job opportunities. In 2024, the UK government launched a "Refugee Employment Pathways" initiative, focusing on tailored job training programs. Local councils and community organizations remain crucial in supporting refugees, offering language classes, cultural orientation, and job placements. However, anti-immigration sentiment remains a significant barrier to broader societal acceptance. The United Kingdom's response to the post-Assad refugee crisis was shaped by its restrictive immigration policies and focus on addressing the crisis at its source. Before December 2024: The UK experienced a significant increase in family reunification visas, with many recipients originating from Syria. In a recent year, more than 50 relatives of refugees were allowed to join them in Britain every day, with the numbers tripling to 19,154.

This section details the UK's approach and challenges. The government introduced the "Refugee Employment Pathways" initiative to facilitate refugee integration into the labor market. However, limited resettlement slots and strict border policies hindered broader efforts. Local councils and charities played a crucial role in supplementing government initiatives.

Public opinion in the UK remained divided. While advocacy groups called for more inclusive policies, anti-immigration rhetoric gained traction, fueled by economic concerns and cultural anxieties. Community-led initiatives in some areas helped foster acceptance, but societal divisions persisted. The UK prioritized diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of the Syrian crisis, emphasizing humanitarian aid and stabilization in the region. However, domestic refugee policies were criticized for falling short of international expectations.

After December 2024: The UK paused decisions on Syrian asylum claims following the fall of the Assad regime.

Commissioner for Human Rights Perspective

The Commissioner has expressed concerns over the UK's restrictive refugee policies and urged the government to expand its resettlement programs. The Commissioner also highlighted the importance of countering anti-immigration rhetoric through educational initiatives and fostering inclusive public discourse.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

In the UK, ASSEDEL's engagement has revealed a critical need to combat the rising anti-immigration sentiment that erodes public support for refugee programs. Educational initiatives that humanize refugees' stories and emphasize shared values can shift public attitudes. ASSEDEL also advocates for a more transparent resettlement framework that aligns with international standards and addresses gaps in housing and employment.

ASSEDEL's Recommendations

1. Increase the number of refugees accommodated under resettlement programs.
2. Fund affordable housing projects dedicated to refugee families.
3. Strengthen initiatives like "Refugee Employment Pathways."
4. Support educational initiatives that promote diversity.
5. Provide additional resources for community-based refugee support services.

Netherlands

The Netherlands has become a significant host for Syrian refugees, with over 80,000 Syrian asylum seekers residing in the country as of 2024. The Dutch government's approach prioritizes swift asylum processing and mandatory integration courses, including language and cultural orientation programs. However, the housing crisis presents a critical challenge. Many refugees face prolonged stays in temporary shelters, often in remote areas, which hinders their access to job opportunities and education. Moreover, public sentiment towards refugees has been polarized, with instances of resistance in some communities.

Despite these challenges, the Netherlands has implemented innovative initiatives to integrate refugees into the labor market. Programs like "From Refugee to Employee" provide tailored training and employment support. Local municipalities have also partnered with NGOs to foster community engagement, though these efforts remain unevenly distributed across the country. The Netherlands faced significant challenges and opportunities in managing the post-Assad refugee crisis. This section explores the Dutch approach and its outcomes.

The Dutch government expanded integration initiatives, such as the "From Refugee to Employee" program, which focused on labor market inclusion. Efforts to increase affordable housing and improve access to education were also prioritized, though rural areas often lacked sufficient infrastructure.

Public sentiment was mixed, with urban centers showing greater acceptance than rural areas. Anti-refugee demonstrations highlighted societal divides, while NGOs and municipalities worked to foster inclusivity through community engagement programs. The Netherlands emphasized multilateral cooperation to stabilize Syria and reduce displacement. It contributed significant funding to international humanitarian aid efforts and advocated for an EU-wide approach to the refugee crisis.

After December 2024 the Netherlands froze Syrian asylum application decisions for six months.

Commissioner for Human Rights Perspective

The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe has acknowledged the Netherlands' efficient asylum system but raised concerns over housing shortages and the limited scope of integration programs in rural areas. The Commissioner emphasized the importance of improving living conditions and fostering greater societal acceptance of refugees.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

The Netherlands' proactive stance on labor market integration is encouraging, but ASSEDEL emphasizes that more must be done to address housing shortages. Temporary shelters often isolate refugees, limiting their ability to contribute to their communities. We recommend fostering stronger partnerships between the private sector and municipalities to develop affordable housing near urban centers. Additionally, public campaigns that challenge stereotypes and highlight the successes of refugee entrepreneurs can build broader societal support.

ASSEDEL's Recommendations

1. Collaborate with private developers and municipalities to create affordable housing solutions for refugees, prioritizing proximity to urban centers.
2. Scale up successful programs like "From Refugee to Employee" and incentivize businesses to hire refugees through tax breaks and grants.
3. Ensure uniform quality of language and cultural orientation programs nationwide, including rural areas.
4. Increase funding for grassroots organizations that promote interaction between refugees and locals, fostering mutual understanding.
5. Launch a national awareness campaign to highlight the positive contributions of refugees to Dutch society, countering negative stereotypes.

Conclusion

The Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges in modern times, demanding both immediate humanitarian responses and long-term integration strategies. European countries have made notable efforts but face systemic barriers, including overcrowded reception centers, prolonged asylum processes, and inadequate housing. These conditions leave many refugees in unstable situations, exacerbating trauma and hindering their ability to rebuild their lives.

Housing remains a critical issue for refugees, with many facing overcrowded or substandard accommodations. Efforts must be made to expand affordable housing through government initiatives and collaborations with local communities and the private sector. Social integration is also vital, but refugees often encounter discrimination, making it harder for them to integrate. Public education campaigns and tailored support services, including language courses and vocational training, can help reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding.

Employment opportunities are limited by language barriers, unrecognized qualifications, and discrimination, leaving many refugees reliant on welfare. To address this, European countries must invest in job training programs, language education, and vocational opportunities, ensuring that refugees can contribute economically. Access to essential services, such as education and mental health care, is insufficient, further hindering integration and exacerbating isolation.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. Streamlining asylum processes, expanding affordable housing, and offering tailored employment support are critical steps. Governments must invest in programs that foster language learning, vocational training, and mental health services while promoting public education campaigns to combat xenophobia and encourage acceptance. Collaboration across European nations is essential to creating equitable and efficient systems for asylum processing, resource allocation, and integration. By adhering to international legal obligations, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, and fostering partnerships between governments, civil society, and refugees, Europe can transform this crisis into an opportunity for shared growth and resilience. Through systemic reforms and inclusive policies, refugees can become valuable contributors to their host societies, fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion.

ASSEDEL's Commentary

As an international non-governmental organization committed to defending human rights and freedoms, ASSEDEL views the Syrian refugee crisis as a profound humanitarian and moral challenge. The plight of Syrian refugees highlights the urgent need for a coordinated and compassionate response that aligns with the principles of international human rights law.

The challenges facing Syrian refugees in Europe are multifaceted. Many endure prolonged asylum processes, substandard living conditions, and barriers to employment and education. These systemic issues are compounded by societal discrimination and xenophobia, which hinder integration and perpetuate exclusion. From ASSEDEL's perspective, these problems reflect not only operational inefficiencies but also a failure to uphold the fundamental rights and dignity of refugees as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights.

ASSEDEL believes it can play a pivotal role in supporting the work of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. By providing field-based insights, advocacy, and expertise, ASSEDEL can amplify the Commissioner's efforts to hold states accountable to their obligations. Specific contributions could include:

- **Monitoring and Reporting:** ASSEDEL's presence in refugee-hosting regions allows for real-time monitoring of reception conditions, integration efforts, and instances of discrimination. These insights can inform the Commissioner's recommendations and interventions.
- **Capacity Building:** ASSEDEL can collaborate with local governments and NGOs to enhance the effectiveness of integration programs, ensuring they address the specific needs of refugees.
- **Advocacy and Awareness:** By raising public awareness about the rights and contributions of refugees, ASSEDEL can combat xenophobia and foster a culture of acceptance. Educational campaigns and storytelling initiatives that humanize refugees are particularly impactful.
- **Policy Recommendations:** Drawing on its grassroots experience, ASSEDEL can offer targeted policy advice to bridge gaps in existing systems and promote sustainable solutions.

In addressing the Syrian refugee crisis, ASSEDEL emphasizes the importance of a rights-based approach that centers the voices and experiences of refugees themselves. Collaborative efforts between governments, international organizations, and civil society are crucial to building inclusive and resilient communities. ASSEDEL is committed to fostering these partnerships and advocating for systemic reforms that uphold human rights.

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