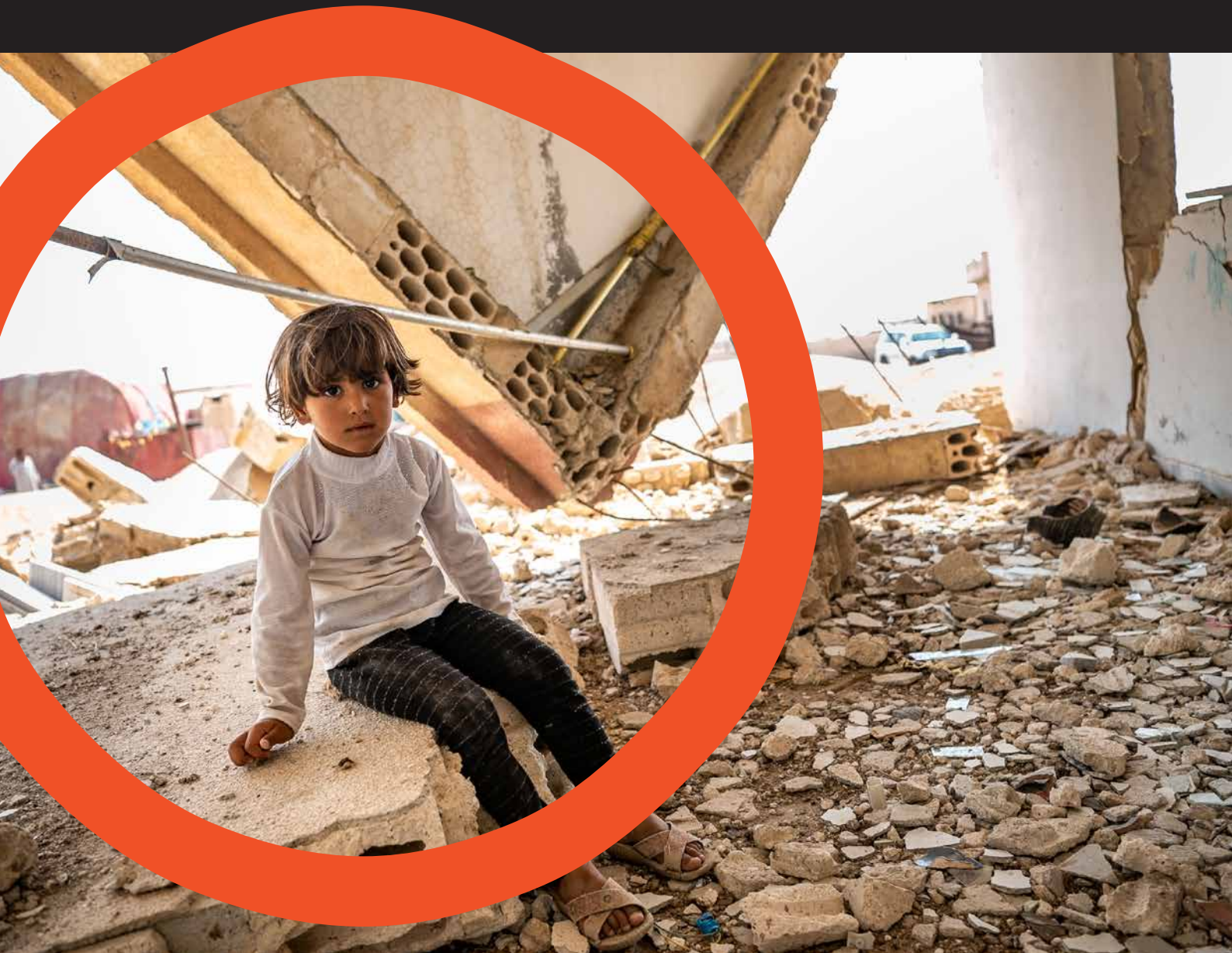


POLICY PAPER

Development and humanitarian activities of the Slovak Republic in the Middle East in response to the Syrian crisis

Author: Daniel Kaba

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Author: Daniel Kaba

Translation: Dagmar Sageder

Photography: UNHCR

Graphic designer: Michal Šandrej



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Development and humanitarian activities of the Slovak Republic in the Middle East in response to the Syrian crisis

In the introductory chapter, we deal with the Slovak Republic motives in the region and briefly present the development of the humanitarian situation in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria in the spring of 2021. The study continues with an analysis of the current steps of Slovak diplomacy based on strategic documents and statements, including a brief reflection on the effects of the global covid-19 pandemic. The following is a quick comparison of approaches from donors, similar in size to the Slovak Republic. Finally, we outline four possible scenarios for the further development of official development cooperation (ODA) of the Slovak Republic in the Middle East.

The beginnings of Slovakia's activities in the Middle East

An important starting point for understanding Slovakia's involvement in the Middle East is the perception of resolving the refugee crisis by political elites and the government in Slovakia.

The Slovak Republic did not have a tradition of development cooperation in the Middle East. The main impetus was the need to contribute to the so-called refugee crisis, which has become more pronounced in Europe since 2015. We must also note that we are working in this document with a definition of the Middle East, which includes the following countries: Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. Concerning the Slovak operations in the region, we narrow the term the Middle East only to Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

The Slovak Republic started helping the region in 2016, i.e. approximately five years after the Syrian crisis. However, after the Slovak Republic refused to redistribute refugees based on mandatory quotas as a sign of institutionalized solidarity, the V4 countries issued a joint opinion after an informal meeting



The impact of ten years of war in Syria on the lives of entire families. Photo: UNHCR

in Bratislava on September 16, 2017, in which they based their migration policies on the principle of the so-called flexible, later effective solidarity¹. It means that how the national governments of the EU Member States contribute to resolving the refugee crisis should remain within their discretion, with an emphasis on solidarity shown abroad, despite humanitarian aid to countries of origin and transit. In the case of Slovakia's position, especially towards Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Developments in the Middle East – after a decade of war in Syria

Dynamic development took place in Lebanon, where the Slovak Republic has an embassy² and several post-humanitarian projects compared to other countries in the region. In 2019, when the monetary crisis triggered massive mass protests, the state went bankrupt, and in 2020 Lebanon was hit by a coronavirus pandemic, with 375,033 cases officially confirmed from February 21, 2020, to February 28, 2021. A government regime based on sectarian principles and high levels of corruption has failed to trigger the necessary reforms in the country, and the number of people living outside the poverty line has doubled

¹ <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/flexible-solidarity>

² The Slovak Embassy in Beirut covers Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Syria diplomatically and consularly covers Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Syria.

in the last year, that being up to half of the total population.³ The Lebanese pound reached an exchange rate of 8,800 per dollar on the black market (in August 2021, the rate was 1 USD = 19,000 LBP), compared to the pre-crisis exchange rate of 1,507.5 pounds per dollar.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, more than 1.2 million children in Lebanon have not attended school. The blast in Beirut's port on August 4, 2020, killed more than 200 people and, according to the World Bank, causing damage in the amount between \$ 3.8 billion and \$ 4.5 billion. In addition, according to the Lebanese government, country still hosts about 1,5 million refugees.

In Iraq, of the 6 million people displaced during the conflict with the Islamic State, 4.7 million returned to their areas of origin, while 1.3 million remain displaced. Across the country, 4.1 million internally displaced persons and returnees continue to have humanitarian needs related to their physical and mental condition and basic needs.⁴

The sharp decline in oil revenues, the historical state's expanding role in the economy, and the competitive exchange rates of neighbouring countries pushed the Iraqi government into a budget deficit by the end of 2020.⁵ The subsequent decision to devalue the Iraqi currency and a significant increase in imports of material to Iraq also affected the activities of Slovak humanitarian organizations.

The conflict in Syria continues after ten years. According to the summary of needs and responses from 2021, about 13.4 million people need humanitarian assistance. In addition, the covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already precarious situation, including 6.7 million internally displaced persons. Of this number, around 5.9 million people urgently need humanitarian aid (a 20% increase since 2020).

The return of IDPs and Syrian refugees continues. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 448,000 internally displaced people returned to their areas of origin in 2020. In 2020, UNHCR verified 38,233 refugee returns. Humanitarian needs are increasing, and the security situation in some parts of the country remains volatile and unpredictable. The economic situation is desperate, including a nationwide fuel shortage⁶. Strong financial sector interconnections and trade through economically collapsing Lebanon and its financial institutions may further worsen the economic situation in Syria⁷.

The covid-19 pandemic hampered the demand for oil

The covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing global blockades in 2020 further hampered the demand for oil in the region. Iraq, the third-largest oil exporter, remains heavily dependent on oil, which contributes 90 percent of government revenue. Dependence is much higher than in other oil-exporting countries in the MENA region. This double shock of reduced demand and oil prices has hit the Iraqi economy and government budget the most. The average price of oil in 2019 was \$ 68 a barrel, which fell to \$ 21 a barrel by mid-2020, and a slight improvement took place to \$ 49 a barrel at the end of 2020. Oil revenues

3 Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021

4 OCHA / ReliefWeb, 2021

5 WFP, 2021

6 UNHCR / ReliefWeb, 2021

7 Kaba, 2021

are critical for Iraq. They primarily fund the government's universal food subsidy program, a public distribution system (PDS) that includes four essential commodities (wheat, rice, sugar, and vegetable oil) distributed to Iraqis each month. As a result of decades of its expansion, the Iraqi public sector is the country's largest workforce employer. Increasing spending on wages and pensions has strained government resources amid a shrinking oil budget. From 2014 to 2020, wage expenditures increased by 60% from IQD 40.2 trillion to IQD 64.2 trillion. The decline in government revenues was compounded by an uncompetitive Iraqi dinar against the names of the country's main trading partners, leading to reduced demand for Iraqi national products. The government has decided to devalue the Iraqi dinar by 18-20 percent against the US dollar (USD) to offset its budget gap of 80 trillion IQD. In December 2020, the exchange rate changed from 1,181 IQD / 1.00 USD to 1,450 IQD / 1.00 USD. The new exchange rate increased imports of basic commodities and raw materials, which immediately increased inflation throughout the country. By January 2021, Iraq's dependence on imported cereals had reached 40 percent. From a 38.4 mil population, 9.1 million suffer from chronic hunger, and 2.8 million people suffer from insufficient food consumption.⁸

New geographical priority of official development assistance of Slovak Republic

Slovakia has been operating in the Middle East for five years, so it is time to evaluate and ask questions such as how Slovakia wants to continue working in this region.

In 2016, Slovak diplomacy decided to expand the geographical focus of the Slovak Republic, adding the 4th geographical priority – the Middle East to the hitherto regions of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and East Africa. This change was also reflected in a more significant increase in total ODA by 23%, i.e. from 78 mils. EUR (2015) to 95.6 mils. EUR in 2016. Subsidy budget for grant calls of the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC), or, in other words, the funding that Slovak applicants can apply for, however, remained at the same 10-year level.

The Slovak Republic has been operating in the Middle East for a long time, mainly through humanitarian and post-humanitarian projects of SlovakAid and financial contributions to international organizations. Every year, approximately 1 million euros is contracted by Slovak non-governmental organizations, which implement projects with local partners.

Although the Middle East countries are on the list of geographical priorities in the medium-term strategy, other factors suggest that this may not be a signal of sufficient interest of the Slovak Republic to operate in the long term or deepen and expand its activities.

After 2016, the Slovak Republic reoriented its most considerable financial contributions to international organizations (MADAD program) in other regions, especially to North and East Africa (EUTFA program), which reduces the possibility of creating synergies between engaging in international organizations on the one hand and SlovakAid projects on the other.

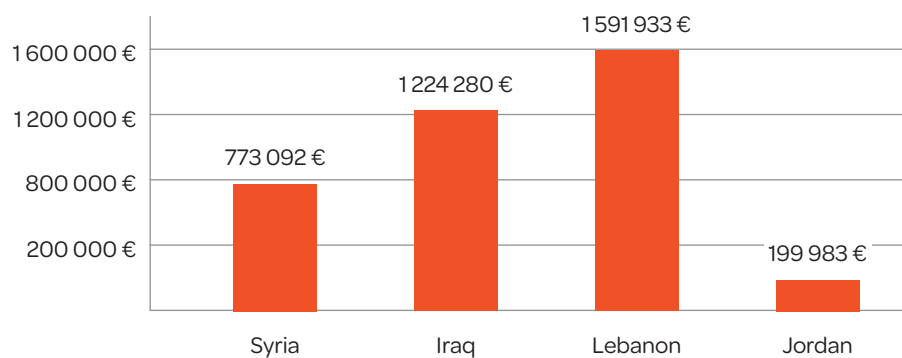
No evaluations of projects in the Middle East have been carried out in the five years; the overall allocation for SlovakAid's humanitarian projects has been stagnant for a long time.

8 WFP, 2021



Iraqi children waiting for school lessons. Photo: Tomáš Halász

Approved SlovakAid projects in 2016 – 2019



Source: SlovakAid

The non-existence and postponement of creating a humanitarian strategy for a longer time and the fact that, despite several arguments, none of the Middle East countries has become a SlovakAid program state multiply questions regarding the extent to which the Slovakia attaches importance to its humanitarian interventions, resp. the concept of so-called effective solidarity in the Middle East.

The need to create a humanitarian strategy of the Slovak Republic

The economic and other effects of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 failed to send a planned development diplomat to Beirut. Financial transfers in the budget due to the need to contribute to the response to the pandemic have had a positive impact, especially on the countries neighbouring Slovakia. However, they have not resulted in an increase in resources for the Middle East. As a result, the trips of high representatives of Slovak diplomacy were postponed.

An explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, left at least 220 people dead, 6,500 injured, and 300,000 displaced from their homes. The explosion was one of the enormous non-nuclear explosions ever recorded, registering in Beirut as a 3.5-magnitude earthquake in Cyprus, more than 100 miles away. According to the World Bank, the explosion caused damage ranging from \$ 3.8 billion to \$ 4.5 billion.

The rapid solidarity of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was both sympathetic and logical, given the fact that Lebanon is a partner country of SlovakAid⁹.

Three non-governmental organizations, which have been active in Lebanon for a long time, were immediately involved¹⁰ in providing material assistance. In addition, six Ambrela member organizations announced public collections to help the Beirut people.

Nevertheless, the practical side of the Slovak humanitarian system proved to be outdated and, among other significant shortcomings, confirmed slowness in action, a weak inter-ministerial coordination mechanism and the absence of certified rescue modules. The difficulties in the system sparked a discussion about the need to revise the Slovak humanitarian aid mechanism and the need for a strategy of humanitarian assistance.

In May 2021, an official state visit led by the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Ingrid Brocková, to Lebanon took place aiming of delivering material humanitarian aid and examining the possibilities and forms of how Slovakia can contribute to resolving the humanitarian crisis there. The delegation also included three representatives of Ambrela¹¹, and part of the three-day visit was a presentation of the results of the health and social project of the St. University of health and Social work with the support of SlovakAid – in the Dbayeh refugee camp in Beirut, as well as handing over the water reservoir for use. The reservoir was built in partnership between ADRA Slovakia and ADRA Lebanon with the support of SlovakAid and will serve 21,000 local and 8,000 Syrian refugees who have found safety in the Baalbek region from the war in Syria.

Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (MFEA SR) states that business investments and cooperation projects originating from Slovakia are highly valued and welcomed. As a part of former Czechoslovakia, Slovakia has economic and professional 'know-how' concerning Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. However, unlike some similar donors (Czech Republic¹²), Slovakia is still looking for its approach and comparative advantage in this region.

⁹ SlovakAid, 2019

¹⁰ Markovič Baluchová, 2020

¹¹ Ambrela, 2021

¹² MFA Czechia, 2021



Part of the state delegation of the Slovak Republic during a visit to SlovakAid projects in Lebanon. Photo: Ambrela

Czech Republic has kept embassy in Damascus remain in operation throughout the crisis. It was the only EU member state to have a diplomatic corps with valuable access to information and local relations directly in the field. It is an example of how a small member state can significantly increase and benefit from its influence in EU foreign policy. In 2016, it adopted a multi-annual assistance program (for the years 2016 – 2019 in the total amount of CZK 195 million and 2020 – 2022 in the total amount of CZK 150 million). Thanks to this, the Czech Republic continues to provide humanitarian and stabilization assistance – from distributing material assistance to the displaced population, through the equipping of medical facilities with devices and medicines, to the renewal of basic infrastructure¹³. Leading representatives of the Czech Republic¹⁴ visited the region in April 2019. In addition, CR also links humanitarian aid with trade, cultural and academic cooperation. An example is establishing a Consulate General in Erbil to strengthen economic development cooperation or the issuance of a special B2B grant call¹⁵ for the Syria and Iraq region.

As for Poland, in September 2018, this neighbour updated its ‘Multiannual Development Cooperation Program’ for 2016-2020 and added Lebanon as a priority country. Austria started operating in Lebanon as early as 2012 – either through financial contributions to the UNHCR, ICRC, WFP, the EU Trust Fund (MADAD), or Austrian NGOs.

It would be worth exploring how Slovakia can link humanitarian aid with development cooperation and economic diplomacy, or academic or cultural exchange, and where it can build on the legacy of

¹³ MFA Czechia, 2021

¹⁴ MFA Czechia: B2B, 2021

¹⁵ MFA Czechia: B2B, 2021

Czechoslovakia or join forces in current activities, for example, with CR or other EU countries. The question remains with use existing platforms, for example the Slavkov format¹⁶ (cooperation between Slovakia, Czech Republic and Austria), which it considered by Slovakia to be successful in other SlovakAid partner countries.

The scenario of further development of assisting the Slovak Republic

Long-term inconsistent approach to the strategic setting of humanitarian aid in the Slovak Republic, together with an insufficient focus on efficiency and non-increase of financial resources can lead to latent 'fatigue' of implementers and long-term capacity "not-building" of the Slovak organizations operating in the region. It seems necessary to consider stronger and more focused support with a clear goal, with involvement of various instruments and partners, greater flexibility, capacity building resources, as well as increased diplomatic effort in bilateral relations and international organizations with aim to increase effectivity of Slovak humanitarian assistance.

It will be important to establish a systematic dialogue with all humanitarian assistance actors, including the identification and / or building of comparative advantages of the Slovak Republic¹⁷, and that the Government of the Slovak Republic and the MFEA SR as a coordinator of humanitarian assistance provide them with capacities for their development promote them towards relevant international organizations. It may include, e.g. (i) the ability to operate in localities where large donors cannot / do not want to go, while they do not have to be necessarily dangerous areas from the point of view of life and health protection (this is partly happening, although perhaps not entirely systemically), (ii) the speed of humanitarian intervention, or (iii) significant flexibility of projects. It is also worth considering the possibility of the so-called filling gaps, where, in addition to geographical, there may be sectoral, cross-sectoral gaps, assistance to specific target groups or the ability to take a more individual approach to the needs of the beneficiaries and partners.

Further development can be summarized in the following four scenarios (eventually their various combinations).

1. Gradual regression and decrease in support of the region:

Prerequisites: a decline in funding for humanitarian projects and a shift in focus to other humanitarian crises. Such a development could indicate several steps, such as prioritizing sending a development diplomat to Tbilisi over Beirut in 2019 despite clear arguments from the point of view of the effectiveness of development cooperation. In recent years, the Slovak Republic has concentrated many times more funding through financial contributions to EU projects in North Africa (Libya, Morocco) or Turkey compared to Turkey. The Middle East. This scenario confirms the fact that until May 2021 (visit of State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic in Lebanon), no high representative of the Slovak Republic (president, minister, state secretaries of foreign affairs) visited the region for more than five years, i.e. since it is engaged in the area, that is since 2016.

¹⁶ MFEASR, 2017

¹⁷ SlovakAid, 2019

2. Continuation of status quo without a clear vision and greater ownership of the agenda:

Prerequisites: Continuation of non-change with occasional minor improvements at the level of SAIDC project management (SlovakAid). Ultimately, there would probably be an effect in scenario no. 1, only slower and less visible. Negative consequences include deepening the frustration and depletion of NGO resources (including staffing resources), insufficient retention of 'know-how' and valuable ties and relations with local organizations in the Middle East, the departure of some NGOs from the region, and the potentially capacity-intensive further shift attention to another area.

3. Gradual minor system improvements and a clear strategic vision:

Prerequisites: significant improvements on the part of SAIDC (SlovakAid in the form of adjusting projects to consider the specifics of the added value and needs of Slovak entities, including building their capacity), the development of a humanitarian strategy, the greatest possible depoliticization of humanitarian aid. Identification and implementation of the comparative advantage of the Slovak Republic. Preparation of the mechanism, 'matching funds' and greater concentration at the strategical-political level on the region. Exploration of the possibilities of closer cooperation within the Slavkov format or with a selected international organization.

It is crucial that these changes would not significantly burden the state budget. As a result, it could lead to Slovak entities being able to use SlovakAid financing as a leverage effect to obtain larger financial volumes and increase the visibility of the SlovakAid brand and open up further opportunities for the Slovakia. At the same time, such a scenario would not require either significant organizational-political or legislative changes at the level of Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (SR).

4. Significant and rapid improvement:

Prerequisites: as in scenario no.3 plus a significant increase in the budget for grant grants SAIDC (SlovakAid) to at least the level of 2 million Euros per year compared to the current situation in the amount of 1 million Euros. Strengthening the embassy staff in Beirut and initiating inter-ministerial cooperation in trade, education and culture. Strategic focus on linking humanitarian and post-humanitarian activities with the development part (reconstructing the region after the humanitarian crisis). This scenario is probably the least realistic.

This analysis of strategic documents on the activities of the Slovakia in the Middle East is followed by a separate Ambrela's policy paper "The Challenges of Slovak NGOs in Providing Humanitarian Aid in the Middle East Region"¹⁸ concerning the specific activities of Slovak NGOs in the Middle East and containing their current challenges in providing humanitarian assistance to the population and people on the run, as well as proposals for improving the project implementation system (for donors and other stakeholders).

Note: The opinions expressed are those of the author only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, SAIDC or Ambrela official position.

¹⁸ Kaba, 2021

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Ambrella

Ambrella – Platform for Development Organisations

Miletičova 7, 821 08 Bratislava

e-mail: info@ambrella.org

www.ambrella.org



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