



Updated June 21, 2018

Syria's Humanitarian and Protection Crisis: Current Status

The humanitarian and protection needs of the Syrian population have increased in manifold ways since the start of the Syrian conflict in March 2011. Years of war have contributed to the vulnerability of millions of Syrians and led to an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 deaths since 2011. The majority of Syria's remaining population (estimated to be about 17 million in 2016) requires humanitarian and protection assistance. The United States is the largest humanitarian donor to Syria, and Congress may seek to further review U.S. funding and programs as well as address ongoing challenges, such as those associated with civilian protection.

Scope of the Humanitarian Needs

In its 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that nearly 69% of the Syrian population lives in extreme poverty, with a majority in dire circumstances.

Syrian Population: Key Indicators of Need

- 9 million people are food insecure (54% of population);
- 7.6 million people are estimated to be in need of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) assistance;
- 11.3 million people require health assistance (due to injuries, disease outbreaks, serious medical conditions and disabilities), and many have limited or no access to health services due to attacks on health infrastructure and personnel;
- 1.75 million school-age children are out of school; and
- millions of people need shelter, and many others are without adequate housing due to damage or destruction of infrastructure.

For the 5.3 million children affected by the conflict, the impact can be seen in profound, life-changing ways. Many have lost parents and siblings and experienced psychological trauma or physical injury. Experts note a sharp increase in child labor and other activities of an exploitative and illicit nature involving children.

Population Displacement and Movement

Shifting frontlines, changeable territorial control, and high levels of violence also make the provision of humanitarian assistance difficult if not impossible in some areas. As of May 2018, an estimated 13.1 million people inside Syria, more than three quarters of the population, need assistance, including 5.6 million Syrians facing particularly acute needs due in part to conditions of displacement, exposure to hostilities, and limited access to basic goods and services. Approximately 2.98 million people of those in acute need are living in hard-to-reach areas controlled by Syrian government forces, opposition forces, or terrorist organizations.

Experts estimate that there are more than 6.1 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria, but this

number is imprecise and fluid. Displacement shifts as the situation on the ground evolves. Many Syrians, some of whom have been displaced multiple times within the country, leave their homes to escape violence and then return when conflict in their area decreases. It is not clear how many IDPs are affected by repeat displacements, or if, or how often, they are included in IDP counts. Many IDPs stay in unofficial shelters, unfinished buildings, makeshift accommodations, and unofficial camps. IDPs are predominantly women, children, and the elderly. The most vulnerable members of communities hosting refugees have been targeted for assistance. Syria also hosts refugees from elsewhere, including 30,000 Iraqis. Other populations have been vulnerable to the conflict, particularly the remaining 420,000 Palestinian refugees. New displacements continue to occur in areas where there is fighting.

In addition, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 5.6 million Syrians have registered as refugees abroad, with most fleeing to countries in the immediate surrounding region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt) as well as Europe, where many Syrians have applied for asylum. Experts recognize that some fleeing Syrians have not registered as refugees and have chosen instead to blend in with the local population, living in rented accommodations and makeshift shelters, particularly in towns and cities. UNOCHA estimates that 85% of all Syrian refugees are living outside camps in mostly urban settings, where refugees are often more difficult to identify and assist.

Civilian Protection and Access Concerns

Systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) have been widespread by all parties, including the Islamic State. Civilian protection concerns include mass executions, systematic rape and sexual violence, torture, and appalling treatment of those in detention. Conflict has also resulted in high levels of civilian casualties, exposure to explosive hazards, and indiscriminate attacks. Groups with greater vulnerability include children, youth, women and girls, people with chronic illness, disabilities, and injuries, and the elderly. According to many observers, religious and ethnic minorities have been under threat, and the security situation has had a major impact on their wellbeing.

The protection of civilians in conflict is closely intertwined with a lack of access to populations and the safe provision of assistance.

National and international humanitarian efforts have been severely constrained in providing assistance and protection to IDPs and others affected by the conflict in Syria due to restrictions imposed by the parties to the conflict. Government and opposition interference, the closure of key border points, bureaucratic procedures, and resource

shortfalls continue to hinder aid delivery, particularly to those living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Beyond the security situation for aid convoys, the United Nations also has reported on the challenges of procuring the necessary permits from the Syrian government to deliver aid to several areas it is otherwise ready to reach.

International Response

The international humanitarian response is massive and complex and aims to keep pace with urgent developments as the crisis in the region continues to escalate. U.N.-led, multiagency cross-line convoys (between government-held and opposition-held areas) and cross-border operations (from Turkey and Jordan to Syria) provide humanitarian assistance to millions of people across the country each month, including when possible to besieged locations, with basic, life-saving relief including food and medicine.

Selected Civilian Protection Efforts in Syria

- In 2013, the United Nations activated a “Level 3 (L3) Emergency” for Syria to mobilize resources for the humanitarian response. The provision of assistance remains dependent on guarantees from all parties to the conflict of safe and unhindered access, which has not yet been achieved. L3 status has been extended until the end of December 2018.
- In 2014, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolutions 2139 and 2165 aimed at increasing humanitarian access and aid delivery in Syria. The resolutions (and subsequent related resolutions renewing their mandate) have explicitly recognized Syrian sovereignty, while authorizing the expanded delivery of humanitarian assistance without the government’s permission.
- Reports of the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic continue to highlight the need for civilian protection.
- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) continues to raise awareness about the obligations of States to ensure that the parties they support within Syria respect and comply with International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

In the region, the types of assistance and shelter options available to refugees vary in the countries that are hosting them. The added economic, energy, and natural resource pressures of large Syrian refugee populations weigh heavily on neighboring countries, particularly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The impact on many host communities has become overwhelming, especially as the percentage of registered refugees, compared to a country’s overall population, continues to grow.

A priority for the international community has been to increase assistance to host countries and communities and to encourage neighboring states to keep their borders open to those fleeing conflict in Syria. However, as the conflict has continued and escalated, neighboring countries have taken steps to greatly limit official border crossing points or effectively close the border to refugees entirely, leaving thousands of Syrians stranded. Lack of assistance has reportedly led to an increase in negative coping strategies, such as begging, survival sex, and higher debt. Deepening poverty, lack of legal work options, limited education, and

insecurity are attributed to the decision by some to risk the dangerous journey away from the region, with many fleeing to Europe and expanding the crisis’s impact.

Humanitarian Funding

In December 2017, the United Nations, along with humanitarian partners, launched several 2018 appeals for Syria, including the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for \$5.61 billion and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for \$3.51 billion. Since 2011, U.N. appeals have consistently remained underfunded and resulted in cuts to food aid and cash assistance. According to UNHCR, chronic funding shortages greatly limit aid programs for refugees and host communities in the region. As of June 21, 2018, the 3RP appeal was 36.9% funded and the appeal for Syria was 27.3% funded. Despite multiyear donor pledges and possible loan options from international financial institutions to widen the resource base, funding remains insufficient for immediate needs.

The United States is the largest humanitarian donor to the Syria crisis and since FY2012 to May 11, 2018, has allocated more than \$8 billion to meet humanitarian needs using existing funding from global humanitarian accounts and some reprogrammed funding. U.S. humanitarian policy is guided by concerns about humanitarian access and protection within Syria, the large refugee flows out of the country that strain the resources of neighboring countries (and could have a negative impact on the overall stability of the region), and a significantly protracted and escalating humanitarian emergency. Given the complex and dangerous operating environment, there are many challenges in the delivery of assistance, including security of staff and oversight and remote management of programs.

The Administration’s FY2019 budget request for global humanitarian assistance totals \$6.3 billion, which is roughly 33% less than the FY2018 enacted amount (\$9.4 billion.) The allocations for Syria have not yet been specified. In keeping with established international humanitarian standards, U.S. humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need alone and according to the principles of universality, impartiality, and human dignity.

Outlook

Areas where fighting has abated often remain unstable and humanitarian priorities include establishing freedom of movement for civilians, facilitating civilian demining activities, and providing assistance through humanitarian organizations. Access is critical to any ceasefire as well as movement towards a political solution, and the pressure on humanitarian actors to deliver assistance, regardless of these broader developments, remains high. Challenges in the provision of lifesaving assistance, ongoing concerns about protection of civilians, and extensive violations of IHL have also brought into question the limits of humanitarian action in Syria. Congress may debate humanitarian assistance and civilian protection measures as it considers the Administration’s FY2019 budget request.

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IF10648

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