

Durable Solutions / Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Context

After eleven years of conflict in Syria, more than half the population is displaced: 6.7 million people inside Syria (many of whom multiples times), 5.7 million in neighbouring countries, in addition to over a million elsewhere in the world.⁽¹⁾ **Syria has the largest displaced population in the world**⁽²⁾ and new displacements⁽³⁾ continue to substantially surpass returns.⁽⁴⁾ During the second half of 2021 **hostilities re-intensified** in northern and southern Syria, creating new displacement.

COVID-19 and economic crisis make living conditions for displaced persons even more precarious. The pandemic has further **limited access to health and education services, restricted work opportunities, aggravated a wide range of mental health conditions, and led to an increase in violence against women**, among other issues.⁽⁵⁾ Meanwhile economic crisis in Syria and Lebanon continues, putting already vulnerable groups in an impossible situation. For example, **90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in extreme poverty**,⁽⁶⁾ up from 55% in 2019.⁽⁷⁾

Durable solutions

A **'durable solution'** is reached when a displaced person no longer has any protection or assistance needs related to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination due to their displacement. There are **three internationally recognised durable solutions** for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees: **1. Voluntary return** to country/area of origin in safety and

Facts & Figures

The situation in Syria is dire and conditions are not in place for the safe return of displaced persons:

- **14 million** people are **in need of humanitarian assistance**;⁽⁸⁾
- **11.5 million** people are at risk of **explosive ordnance**;⁽⁹⁾
- **Hostilities continue** across the country and **returning refugees** have faced **harassment, discrimination, arbitrary detention, physical mistreatment and torture, and death**;⁽¹⁰⁾
- **12.4 million** people are food insecure – the **highest number ever recorded**; ⁽¹¹⁾
- **One third of schools and houses have been damaged or destroyed**;⁽¹²⁾
- **45% of all deaths in Syria** are estimated to be related to non-communicable diseases – a **40% increase** when compared with 2011 rates,⁽¹³⁾ and **nearly half of health facilities** are not fully functional;⁽¹⁴⁾
- **Nearly a third (30%) of Syrians aged 12 and up have disabilities**, increasing to **37% among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**.⁽¹⁵⁾

dignity, **2. Resettlement** in a third location or country and **3. Local integration** in the places of displacement. Each solution should result in a person's sustainable reintegration or integration into society.

1. OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', <https://www.unocha.org/syria>; Pew Research Center, 'Most displaced Syrians are in the Middle East, and about a million are in Europe', 29 January 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/>.

2. USA for UNHCR, 'Syria Refugee Crisis', <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>; PBS Frontline, 19 November 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/numbers-syrian-refugees-around-world/>.

3. This displacement is either inside Syria, leading someone to become an internally displaced person, or across international borders, leading someone to become a refugee. Refugees and internally displaced persons do not fall under the same legal regime; refugees have more protection under international law.

4. HNAP, 'Mobility And Needs Monitoring – January Overview', January 2021, HNAP Portal; NRC, 'The Darkest Decade: What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them', 8 March 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/darkest-decade-what-displaced-syrians-face-if-world-continues-fail-them>.

5. Regional Refugee And Resilience Plan, 'Regional Needs Overview 2021', November 2020, http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/RNO_17Dec2020.pdf.

6. UNHCR, 'UNHCR fixes homes to help Lebanese and refugees weather crisis', 18 November 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/11/61963e874/unhcr-fixes-homes-help-lebanese-refugees-weather-crisis.html>.

7. Regional Refugee And Resilience Plan, 'Regional Needs Overview 2022', https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Regional_Needs_Overview_100dpi.pdf.

8 and 11. OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', <https://www.unocha.org/syria>.

9. UNMAS briefing to the UN Security Council, 24 October 2019.

10. Amnesty International, 'You're Going to Your Death – Violations Against Syrian Refugees Returning to Syria', 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/4583/2021/en/>; Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Returning Refugees Face Grave Abuse - Struggle to Survive Amid Devastation, Property Destruction' 20 October 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan>.

12. UNICEF, 'After almost ten years of war in Syria, more than half of children continue to be deprived of education', 24 January 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/after-almost-ten-years-war-syria-more-half-children-continue-be-deprived-education>; World Bank, 'The Visible Impacts of the Syrian War May Only be the Tip of the Iceberg', 10 July 2017, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/07/18/the-visible-impacts-of-the-syrian-war-may-only-be-the-tip-of-the-iceberg>.

13. WHO, 'Emergency Appeal March 2021', <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021-whole-of-syria-appeal.pdf>.

14. WHO, 'HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report - Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic', January - June 2020, <https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/syri-EMRLIBSYR257E-eng.pdf?ua=1>.

15. Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), 'Syria Disability Prevalence and Impact – Summer 2021 Report Series', and 'Disability and Displacement in Syria 2021 IDP Report Series' 2021.

70% of refugees in neighbouring countries hope to return to Syria one day,⁽¹⁶⁾ although **only a fraction (2.4%)** plan to return to Syria in the next 12 months. The main reasons for not returning in the next 12 months are the **lack of work opportunities, safety and security, adequate housing, to avoid military services and inadequate basic services**. In 2021, there were 14,774 verified refugee returns to Syria, **the lowest since 2015**.⁽¹⁷⁾

Urgent Concerns

- It will take generations for Syria to be safe from explosive ordnance. Explosive ordnance contamination is **a major threat to civilians, including displaced persons, and limits safe access to services and impedes the delivery of humanitarian aid**. At least, 77,000 civilians have been killed or injured due to explosive ordnance since the start of the conflict.⁽¹⁸⁾ In 2020, there were on average 76 explosive incidents per day. In the past five years, **over a quarter of victims** of explosive ordnance have been IDPs.⁽¹⁹⁾
- An estimated **one-third of houses are destroyed or severely damaged**⁽²⁰⁾ and there is almost **no legal protection** for Syrian people looking to return and **claim their property**, while various government decrees, for example, Law 10 of 2018,⁽²¹⁾ restrict their access to do so. Further, there are reports that the Syrian government is auctioning off land of displaced persons.⁽²²⁾
- 1.9M people live in informal settlements and camps, a **20% increase** since January 2020. **Idleb, Aleppo and rural Damascus** host the most IDPs.⁽²³⁾
- As of December 2021, there have been nearly **200,000 recorded COVID-19 cases and 6,666 recorded deaths**.⁽²⁴⁾ However, this is considered the tip of the iceberg. Syria's **fractured health care system** is barely functional and is unable to respond to the pandemic. Displaced persons are especially vulnerable as they often live in **cramped conditions** and do not have **sufficient access to water, soap and other hygiene materials**, making it impossible to abide by WHO-advised preventive measures.
- Refugees and IDPs with **chronic diseases and disabilities who need rehabilitation services** are particularly at risk as they cannot access these services in many areas of Syria, and are **highly vulnerable** in neighbouring countries due to a multitude of **barriers – including COVID-19 – to accessing health services**.
- **Returnees with disabilities face additional challenges**, in particular related to work and education: only **a fifth** of returnees with disabilities **age 12-23 attend school** compared to **over half** of returnees without disabilities; and nearly **two-thirds** of returnees **age 16-26 are not in work or education** compared to **half** of returnees without disabilities.⁽²⁵⁾
- **The Syria Refugee Response and Resilience Plan**

has been **underfunded** every year since its inception in 2013. For instance, as of Q3 2021, less than a third of **funding required for Food Security, Shelter, WASH and Livelihoods** was received.⁽²⁶⁾ The lack of predictable funding leads to gaps in service delivery and **gaps in non-emergency care** that can lead to **disability**, such as when untreated diabetes results in an amputation.

- The situation of vulnerable Syrian refugees and host communities is **particularly dire in Lebanon** due to the worsening social, economic and health crisis. Hundreds of thousands of adults have lost their jobs and hundreds of thousands of children have lost several months of face-to-face education or have dropped out of school completely. The Lebanese Pound has **devaluated by 2000%** since summer 2019 and prices of basic goods have witnessed a manifold increase. Persons with disabilities are particularly impacted: **five rehabilitation centres** stopped providing services, **ten specialized schools** for children with disabilities shut down, and **113,000 Lebanese with disabilities** are no longer benefiting from subsidized access to health services.
- Growing nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment has swept Europe and North America and, since 2012, **less than 3 percent of the Syrian refugee population has been resettled through UNHCR**. Moreover, the number of resettlements to Europe and North America has steadily decreased since 2016. The fact that **opportunities for resettlement are extremely limited** disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, like **persons with disabilities**. Receiving countries tend to restrict the admission of refugees that will make a claim on health care and social service systems.
- Refugees continue to face **legal, administrative and practical barriers to accessing complementary pathways**, like scholarships and family reunification in a third country. Moreover, complementary pathways do not specifically focus on vulnerability but on other criteria that might qualify a refugee for entry into a third country.
- Even when the conditions in Syria are considered conducive for return according to UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters, **many refugees will still not be able to return** due to a well-founded individual fear of **persecution**. They should be able to rely on the **protection of host governments or obtain resettlement in third countries**.
- **Millions of people in communities hosting Syrian refugees** in neighbouring countries, and **communities hosting IDPs** in Syria, are also **highly vulnerable and in need of assistance**. In Lebanon, in particular, the spiralling economic and political crisis is aggravating further the vulnerability of Syrian refugees and host community members alike.

16. UNHCR, 'Sixth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan', March 2021, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85739>.

17. 'Durable Solutions Dashboard': Registered Syrian Refugees in Host Countries December 2020 / Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

18. Action on Armed Violence, 'Syria', <https://aoav.org.uk/explosiveviolence/syria/>.

19. UN OCHA, 'Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic', March 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview.pdf.

20. Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team, 'Returns Monitoring Report', December 2018.

21. Human Rights Watch, 'Q&A: Syria's New Property Law', 29 May 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>.

22. Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land', 8 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/node/378425/printable/print>.

23. UN OCHA, 'Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic', March 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview.pdf.

24. Security Council Report, 'Syria: Briefing and Consultations on Humanitarian and Political Developments', <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/12/syria-briefing-and-consultations-on-humanitarian-and-political-developments.php>.

25. H NAP, 'Returnee Report Series 2020 – Disability Prevalence and Impact'.

26. Regional Refugee And Resilience Plan, 'Financial Summary – Q3 2020', http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/3RP_fin_dashboard_Q3_2020.pdf.

Snapshot of two camps in Syria with particularly dire conditions

Al-Hol in northeast Syria

- It is the largest camp for refugees and IDPs in Syria⁽²⁷⁾ with a population of approximately 57,000 people – **nearly 95% of whom are women and children, and half are children under 12.**⁽²⁸⁾
- As of early 2021, 48% of Al-Hol's residents are from Iraq, 37% from Syria and 15% are 3rd country nationals from 60 countries around the world.⁽²⁹⁾
- The living conditions in Al-Hol are dire, residents lived in **cramped conditions and suffer from a lack of clean water, hygiene items and access to health care facilities.** This makes camp residents especially vulnerable to COVID-19.
- There is regular **violence and since January 2021, over 90 people – including children – have been killed in the camp, in addition to, two aid workers.**⁽³⁰⁾ Children face early and forced marriage, domestic violence and other forms of mental or psychological abuse.
- Currently only people from areas controlled by the Kurdish Self-Administration can leave the camp. Those from **elsewhere in Syria or foreign nationals rejected by their home countries are forced to remain.**⁽³¹⁾ Of particular concern is that repatriation of children from Al-Hol camp and others in northeast Syria dropped to an estimated 200 children in 2020, from 685 in the previous year.⁽³²⁾
- Syrians who can return to their places of origin face numerous challenges: damaged or destroyed homes, schools, hospitals, and a lack of work opportunities. Humanitarian actors struggle to access some of the areas of return.

Rukban in southeast Syria

- Opened in 2014 in a **completely arid demilitarized zone** that is a no-man's land between Jordan and Syria. The **environment** around the camp is **hostile**, with severe temperatures and extreme weather shocks, no vegetation, an almost total lack of infrastructure, and insecurity due to the presence of **various armed actors.**
- Once home to **approximately 75,000 people,**⁽³³⁾ Rukban's current population is estimated to be 10,000 -

the majority of whom are **Syrian women and children.**⁽³⁴⁾ According to media and NGO reports, the remaining population is concerned about leaving the camp because of fears of transfer to Government of Syria-controlled territory – the only available option.⁽³⁵⁾

- There are very **limited economic opportunities** and even fewer services available. **High gas prices** have led to people **burning plastic,** rubbish, and old tires for cooking and heating.⁽³⁶⁾
- People in the camp are heavily **dependent on aid** but, with responsibility for humanitarian aid subject to disputes between parties to the conflict, aid convoys are rare. It took 10 months of negotiation for the first one to arrive in November 2018,⁽³⁷⁾ and the **UN has been unable to deliver aid to the camp or conduct assessments since September 2019.**⁽³⁸⁾
- The UN has reported a number of children have died of preventable causes, due to lack of access to health services.⁽³⁹⁾ UN visits found that **sexual abuse and harassment are serious protection risks,** children commonly walk barefoot through mud and rain, some families have been there for at least four years and none of the children born in Rukban have civil documentation.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Safe and Principled Returns

Conditions in Syria are **not conducive for return in safety and dignity,** and have only been made worse by COVID-19 and the economic collapse in Syria. The international community and humanitarian organisations should continue to reject **large-scale, organised return operations** until **UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters** for refugee return to Syria⁽⁴¹⁾ are **met, and people can return in safety and dignity.** Self-organized returns at this time should also not be encouraged. However, if it is certain that returns are truly self-organised and voluntary, humanitarian actors can engage in planning, monitoring, counselling, service orientation and explosive hazard risk awareness. Syrian refugees should be informed of UNHCR's service provision in this regard. Discussions about durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons must prioritise people's ability to make **informed decisions,** while safeguarding their **right to return** to their area of origin.

In the meantime, with the strong support of international donors and humanitarian actors, **refugee host countries** should **guarantee continuous access to basic services,**

27. UN OCHA, 'United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, Imran Riza, and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Muhannad Hadi – Joint Statement on the Deteriorating Security at Al Hol Camp', 21 January 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-resident-coordinator-and-humanitarian-coordinator-syria-6>.

28 and 29. UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report End of Year 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/92156/file/UNICEF-Whole-of-Syria-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-End-of-year-2020.pdf>.

30. UN OCHA, 'Joint Statement on the killing of a humanitarian aid worker, Al Hol Camp', 12 January 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-resident-coordinator-and-humanitarian-coordinator-14>.

31. The New Humanitarian, 'Leaving Syria's notorious al-Hol camp, civilians find little to go home to' 14 January 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/01/14/syria-al-hol-camp-returning-home>.

32. Save The Children, 'Repatriation of foreign children in Syria slowed by COVID-19, as new footage emerges of life in camps', 1 February 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/repatriation-foreign-children-syria-slowed-covid-19-new-footage-emerges>.

33. See for instance <https://syriadirect.org/news/al-rukban-camp-faces-challenges-after-decline-in-assistance-and-services/>.

34. See for instance <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2019/2/5c6699aa4/critical-needs-syrian-civilians-rukban-solutions-urgently-needed.html>.

35 and 36. France 24, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211001-for-residents-of-syria-camp-slow-death-or-risky-exit>. Amnesty International, 'Syria/Jordan border: refugees at acute risk if returned to Syria under new UN plans', 10 September 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syriajordan-border-refugees-acute-risk-if-retuned-syria-under-new-un-plans>.

37. See for instance <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79385>.

38. UN OCHA, 'Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, 26 May 2021', <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-115>.

39. UN OCHA, 'UN in Syria and SARC provide humanitarian relief to thousands of internally displaced Syrians in Rukban', 12 September 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/un-syria-and-sarc-provide-humanitarian-relief-thousands-internally>.

40. UNHCR, 'Syria. Aid convoy reaches Syrians living in desperate conditions in Rukban', <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/se/syria-aid-convoy-reaches-syrians-living-in-desperate-conditions-in-rukban-2>.

41. UNHCR, 'Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria', February 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63223>.

like education, health and livelihood. Moreover, host countries and parties to the conflict should ensure that **humanitarian actors are able to access and deliver assistance** to all vulnerable populations in and outside of

Syria. Equally, third countries should accept and increase resettlement of Syrian refugees, in particular, for those who will likely never be able to return.

Recommendations

To donors and the international community:

- **Do not** prematurely **encourage the return of refugees or IDPs**;
- **Do not fund** projects that may create **'push' and 'pull' factors around return**, such as those in Syria's neighbouring countries that link humanitarian assistance to return;
- **Do not fund** projects that go against the **UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters** for refugee return;
- **Ensure that repatriations within Syria remain an individual/family decision**, as opposed to a collective evacuation. With regard to **Rukban** this should include exploring solutions for those who are unable or unwilling to depart the encampment, for example, through sending additional **aid convoys**;
- Expedite the repatriation of **their citizens** – in particular **children** – from Al-Hol and other camps;
- **Adequately fund** the humanitarian response by:
 - **fully funding** the aid appeal for the Syria crisis, such as the **Humanitarian Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan**;
 - committing structural and timely **funding to mitigate the effects of harsh weather conditions** in and outside of Syria and to improving the living conditions in IDP camps in Syria;
 - **increasing funding for bilateral and multilateral development support for refugees and vulnerable host communities** in Syria's neighbouring countries;
 - continuing to provide funding for the **ongoing humanitarian response, including sufficient funding for COVID-19 mitigation measures and vaccination programs**, and showing flexibility when it comes to **program extensions** and supporting **essential staffing costs** when organizations need to suspend non-essential activities.
- **Recognise the increased needs in IDP camps inside Syria** and help facilitate access for the humanitarian community to provide basic services.

To humanitarian actors:

- Ensure that programs do not create **'push' and 'pull' factors around return**, and do not link humanitarian assistance in Syria's neighbouring countries to return;
- Invite **refugees and IDPs to meaningfully participate in**

the development and implementation of programs.

To UN / UNHCR:

- Ensure conditions in IDP and refugee camps in Syria and neighbouring countries **guarantee a quality standard of living and safety for inhabitants**, for example, in Al-Hol immediately develop and implement a plan to ensure inhabitant and staff safety following a spate of killings;
- Invite **refugees and IDPs to meaningfully participate in humanitarian planning** and the implementation of any **returns policy**;
- Do active outreach about **services**, including those that provide **reliable information on documentation, for prospective returnees** and ensure that the **level of protection that UNHCR can offer on the way to and in Syria** is clearly communicated;
- Ensure that spontaneous returnees with **specific needs related to age, gender and disability receive the necessary protection**, information and services.

To countries that can facilitate refugee resettlement:

- Commit to **resettling Syrian refugees or increasing resettlement numbers**;
- Honour all commitments made under the **Global Compact on Refugees**;
- Commit to **other forms of humanitarian admission** of refugees, for example by offering **complementary pathways**, to assure safe and dignified access to third countries;
- Support refugees through the **provision of funds and assistance before and after departure from countries of first asylum** including for fees, transportation and subsistence;
- Recognise that **many refugees cannot return** to Syria, due to well-founded fears of persecution, and **commit to opening specific pathways** to countries where they can live in dignity.

To countries hosting Syrian refugees:

- Respect the **principle of non-refoulement** and ensure that Syrian refugees enjoy a **safe and protective environment**;
- Facilitate the work and access of humanitarian actors among refugees and vulnerable host communities, and **ensure access to basic services**, including health and education, and livelihood opportunities.



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