

# Durable Solutions / Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

After ten years of conflict in Syria, **more than half the population is displaced**: an estimated 6.7 million people are displaced inside Syria (many of whom multiples times), 5.6 million are refugees in neighbouring countries, in addition to over a million elsewhere in the world.<sup>(1)</sup> **Syria has the largest displaced population in the world**<sup>(2)</sup> and new displacements<sup>(3)</sup> continue to substantially surpass returns.<sup>(4)</sup> An escalation in hostilities in northwest Syria in early 2020 resulted in the most intense period of displacement since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. **Nearly a million people were displaced** between December 2019 and March 2020 – **eighty percent of whom were women and children**.<sup>(5)</sup>

**COVID-19 and related lockdowns** 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.<sup>(6)</sup> In **Lebanon**, Syrian refugees have suffered from discriminatory implementation of lockdowns and/or movement restrictions, which target them disproportionately, and stigmatization in case of contracting the virus.<sup>(7)</sup> In **Jordan** where **80 percent** of Syrian refugees were already living **below the poverty line** before the outbreak of COVID-19, Syrians living in refugee camps have been unable **to leave camps during lockdown** to go to jobs or find work,<sup>(8)</sup> and schools and community centres have had to close.<sup>(9)</sup>

## 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

## Facts & Figures

The situation in Syria is dire and conditions are not in place for the safe return of displaced persons. According to the latest available UN figures, which do not fully take into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **13,4 million** people are **in need of humanitarian assistance**, with **6 million** in acute need;
- **11,5 million** people are at risk of **explosive hazards**;<sup>(10)</sup>
- **9,3 million** people are **food insecure**, the highest number ever recorded;<sup>(11)</sup>
- **One third** of schools and houses have been **damaged or destroyed**;<sup>(12)</sup>
- **41 percent** of the population in Syria requires treatment for **non-communicable diseases**, and **nearly half** of health facilities are not fully functional;<sup>(13)</sup>
- **Over a quarter** of people (over the age of 12) **have a disability**;<sup>(14)</sup> increasing to a **third** among IDPs.<sup>(15)</sup>

Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees: **1. Voluntary return** to country/area of origin in safety and 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, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/numbers-syrian-refugees-around-world/>, 19 November 2019.

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. H NAP, 'Mobility And Needs Monitoring – January Overview', January 2021, H NAP Portal.

5. IDMC, 'Internal displacement 2020:Mid-year update', <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020%20Mid-year%20update.pdf>.

6. Regional Refugee And Resilience Plan, 'Regional Needs Overview 2021', November 2020, [http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/RNO\\_17Dec2020.pdf](http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/RNO_17Dec2020.pdf).

7. Refugee Protection Watch, 'Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria - The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees', October 2020, <https://www.basmeh-zeitooneh.org/trapped-in-between-lebanon-and-syria-the-absence-of-durable-solutions-for-syrias-refugees#pdf-viewer/>.

8. Middle East Research and Information Project, 'Refugees at Risk in Jordan's Response to COVID-19', 8 April 2020.

9. ECHO, 'Jordan Fact Sheet', 13 January 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/jordan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/jordan_en).

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

11. WFP, Syrian Arab Republic', <https://www.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>.

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. UN OCHA, '2019 Humanitarian Response Plan Syrian Arab Republic' <https://hno-syria.org/#key-figures>.

14. UN OCHA, '2020 Humanitarian Response Plan Syrian Arab Republic', <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20-%20Humanitarian%20Response%20Plan%20%28December%202020%29.pdf>.

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

The latest available data from 2019 showed that **three-quarters of refugees** in neighbouring countries hope to return to Syria one day,<sup>(16)</sup> although almost all **did not intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months**. The main reason for this was the **lack of safety and security**, with respondents highlighting the risk of **indiscriminate violence** or risks of **targeted reprisals** as key obstacles. Further, this data was obtained before the devastating outbreak of COVID-19 and economic collapse in Syria, which could further deter return: the number of refugees returning to Syria in 2020 was the lowest since 2016.<sup>(17)</sup> Of those that did intend to return in the subsequent year, **over half stated that they did not have sufficient information** about the situation in their intended area of return.<sup>(18)</sup>

## Urgent Concerns

- As of February 2021, there have been over **40,000 recorded cases** of COVID-19 which led to **1700 deaths**. However, this is considered to be the tip of the iceberg with estimates that there have been at **least 100,000 cases** in Government of Syria-controlled territory alone.<sup>(19)</sup> 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.
- There is no reliable data on explosive hazard **contamination levels** in Syria. However, where data is available, for example Raqqa, it is estimated that clearance of explosive remnants of war (ERW), landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) will take **more than 30 years**.<sup>(20)</sup> These explosives are an **immediate physical threat to civilians, including returnees, limit safe access to services and impede the delivery of humanitarian aid**. In fact, with **over 87,500 deaths and injuries** (likely an undercount), **Syria is the most impacted country in the world** when it comes to explosive hazards.<sup>(21)</sup> Further, since 2019, **over a quarter of victims** of explosive ordnance have been **IDPs**.
- An estimated **one-third of houses** are destroyed or **severely damaged**<sup>(22)</sup> 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,<sup>(23)</sup> restrict their access to do so. Further, recent media reports claim that the Syrian government is auctioning off land of displaced persons.<sup>(24)</sup>
- **Over 1 million IDPs live in camps – predominantly in Idleb, Aleppo and rural Damascus** host the most IDPs.<sup>(25)</sup> A surge in IDPs in northwest Syria has exasperated overcrowded conditions in camps and communities, creating additional risks of COVID-19 transmission.<sup>(26)</sup>

- **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.<sup>(27)</sup>
- The **Syria Refugee Response and Resilience Plan** has been **underfunded** every year since its inception in 2013. For instance, only approximately a third of **funding required for Food Security, Shelter, WASH and Education** was received by October 2020.<sup>(28)</sup> 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.
- 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**. Their **discrimination** is a concern in the resettlement policies of receiving countries as 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 conducive for return per UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters, **many refugees will still not be able to return** due to a well-founded 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, 'Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan', March 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68443>. The 2020 intentions survey was postponed until 2021 and is likely to be published in March.

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

18. UNHCR, 'Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS): Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan', March 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68443>.

19. WHO, 'Syria Arabic Republic: Coronavirus COVID-19 case' [Dashboard](#); WHO, COVID-19 Response Tracking Dashboard northwest Syria, [Dashboard](#), [NES Dashboard](#) 20. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/11/08/women-at-forefront-of-humanitarian-demining-efforts-in-syria>.

21. Action on Armed Violence, 'The Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapon Use in Syria', January 2019, <http://www.inew.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Reverberating-effects-of-explosive-weapons-in-Syria.V5.pdf>; Action on Armed Violence, 'Syria', <https://aoav.org.uk/explosiveviolence/syria/>

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

23. 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>

24. France 24, 'Syria's regime auctions off land of the displaced', 30 December 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201230-syria-s-regime-auctions-off-land-of-the-displaced>.

25. Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), 'Population Assessment, Syrian Arab Republic', November 2020.

26. See for instance: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/idlib-families-open-air>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/10/syrians-flee-idlib-turkish-border-humanitarian-crisis/>.

27. HNAP, 'Returnee Report Series 2020 – Disability Prevalence and Impact'.

28. '2019 Progress Report 3RP Refugee Resilience Response Plan', <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Midyear2019.pdf>; 3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, 'Financial Summary – Q3 2020', [http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/3RP\\_fin\\_dashboard\\_Q3\\_2020.pdf](http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/3RP_fin_dashboard_Q3_2020.pdf).

# Snapshot of Camps in Syria

## Al-Hol in northeast Syria

- It originally opened in the early 1990s to provide shelter to refugees from Iraq and is now the largest camp for refugees and IDPs in Syria<sup>(29)</sup> with a population of 64,000 people – nearly **95% of whom are women and children, and half are children under 12.**<sup>(30)</sup>

- As of early 2021, 48% of Al-Hol's residents are from Iraq, 37% from Syria and 15% are 3rd country nationals,<sup>(31)</sup> many of whom are held in a heavily guarded annex to the camp.

- 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 residents of Al-Hol especially vulnerable to COVID-19, which reported its first case in August 2020.<sup>(32)</sup> In the same month 12 health facilities had to suspend operations due to staff becoming infected or lack of personal protective equipment.<sup>(33)</sup>

- There is regular **violence**, which has increased significantly since August 2020. In January 2021 alone, over **20 people were killed in the camp** and numerous aid workers have been attacked.

- In 2019 and 2020, an estimated 6,500 Syrians left Al-Hol and returned to their communities. However, returnees 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.

- 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.<sup>(34)</sup> 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.<sup>(35)</sup>

## Rukban in southeast Syria

- Opened in 2014 in a **completely arid demilitarized zone** that has become 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,**<sup>(36)</sup> Rukban's current population is estimated to be 12,000 <sup>(37)</sup> the majority of whom are **women and children.**<sup>(38)</sup>

- 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.<sup>(39)</sup>

- 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,<sup>(40)</sup> and the **UN has been unable to access the camp since September 2019** and informal commercial routes are closed.<sup>(41)</sup>

- The UN has reported a number of **children have died** of preventable causes, due to lack of access to health services.<sup>(42)</sup> 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.<sup>(43)</sup>

## 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<sup>(44)</sup> 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**, 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.

29. '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>.

30- 31. 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>.

32. United Nations, 'Amid Rising COVID-19 Infection Rates, Medical Supply Shortages in Syria, More Testing Key to Gauging Extent of Outbreak, Humanitarian Chief Tells Security Council', 16 September 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14306.doc.htm>.

33. UN News, 'Widespread' COVID-19 transmission, limited testing, deepen Syria's humanitarian woes', <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1071222>

34. 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>.

35. 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>.

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

37. 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>.

38-39. See for instance <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2019/2/5c6699aa4/critical-needs-syrian-civilians-rukban-solutions-urgently-needed.html>.

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

41. 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>.

42. 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>.

43. UNHCR, 'Syria. Aid convoy reaches Syrians living in desperate conditions in Rukban'.

44. 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>.

# 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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