

The Darkest Decade

What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them

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Methodology:

The findings of this paper are based on analysis of NRC reports published on the regional Syria crisis over the last ten years, including internal assessments, and program experiences across the region. NRC also reviewed secondary data and reports published over the decade, including collating and analysing new funding, resettlement figures, and displacement figures; projections on emerging humanitarian crises; economic analysis and forecasts; assessments on access to livelihoods, food insecurity, and access to legal residency. The data was validated through further analysis of 29 semi-structured interviews conducted with displaced Syrians in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and northern Iraq.

Cover Photo: The Sahela border crossing between Syria and the Kurdistan region of Iraq saw thousands of refugees crossing in the early years of the crisis. Photo: Christian Jepsen/NRC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today, displaced Syrians in the region are worse off than ever before. The spread of Covid-19 and the economic pressures that have come with it have exacerbated humanitarian needs that have emerged over the last ten years. More than 23 million people inside Syria and in neighbouring refugee-hosting countries are now in need of humanitarian assistance,¹ some of the highest recorded figures of people in need of aid since the conflict started one decade ago.

If the trajectory of the conflict continues the way it has the last ten years, these factors will likely continue to drive displacement for the next ten years, while returns – whether from within or outside Syria – will likely continue at a much slower pace. Though neighbouring governments in the region hope that Syria’s refugees will return home, recent assessments have shown that return is not a realistic option anytime soon. Meanwhile, authorities in the region continue to execute policies including restrictions on freedom of movement in camps, barriers on the right to work, and access to legal residency that threaten their ability to live safely and securely in the region. Furthermore, the international community’s support for refugees has largely been designed with a ‘returns’ lens, characterised by temporary, piecemeal solutions to problems that have become protracted over time, leading to a cycle of aid dependency that is not sustainable for the coming years. Syrians continue to live in dire conditions in the region, as donor funding fails to keep up with growing needs and resettlement rates to third countries remain abysmally low.

There is little to indicate that the next ten years will be any different for the world’s worst displacement crisis. Analysis by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) demonstrates that another ten years of conflict in Syria could see millions more displaced, fewer options to seek safety, and opportunities to rebuild their lives, either inside or outside Syria, completely thwarted. Military operations, mass displacement, economic decline, and skyrocketing poverty rates in the region continue to drive humanitarian needs inside Syria and will likely continue for years to come.

New research by NRC, reveals that displaced communities – despite a desire to one-day return home – have lost hope in being able to do so in the next five to ten years. Many of those interviewed by NRC lamented that living conditions have become progressively worse in recent years, particularly their ability to earn a decent living. The few who said they would consider returning home in the near future, said they could only do so if there was a political settlement or their safety was guaranteed

– conditions they do not expect to be met anytime soon. Refugees who were interviewed did not even see a future for themselves in the region, recognising that conditions had deteriorated both inside Syria and in host countries where they sought safe haven. Across the board Syrians were more concerned about putting food on the table for their families, paying the rent, or taking care of medical expenses than envisioning a future back home.

If the international community and countries in the region are to avert another ten years of displacement in destitute conditions, serious action must be taken. A nationwide ceasefire that has held delicately in place since March 2020 must translate into steps towards a political settlement. Barriers preventing refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from one-day returning home must be addressed by the Syrian authorities. Guarantees of safety, security, and access to livelihoods and basic services are the only ways to ensure safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable returns home. But return must not be the only pathway to a durable solution available to displaced Syrians. Conditions in refugee-hosting countries in the region must improve; policies that enable refugees to exercise their basic rights and increase their self-reliance are essential. Furthermore, countries in the region should not be expected to shoulder the responsibility of hosting Syria's refugees alone. The international community, particularly high-income governments, must do their fair share in supporting more sustainable solutions, including through maintaining aid funding and increasing resettlement opportunities. And most importantly, all solutions to Syria's displacement crises must be rooted and underpinned by the perspectives and preferences of all those affected by the conflict, including IDPs and refugees.



Photo: Ingrid Prestetun/NRC

TEN YEARS OF DISPLACEMENT: WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN FOR THE NEXT DECADE

Ten years of relentless conflict in Syria has displaced millions of Syrians, both within and outside the country. What started as civil unrest has unravelled into one of the biggest humanitarian crises of our time.

Today, Syria is reeling from a conflict that has killed nearly half a million people, displaced over half of its population, and destroyed its citizens' homes and social infrastructure. Syrians have endured a decade consisting of indiscriminate bombardment, deliberate targeting of civilian locations, and besiegement causing widespread civilian harm.² In neighbouring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, refugees are living in protracted displacement, with little sign that they can return to Syria any time soon, or fully integrate where they are. Difficulties obtaining or maintaining legal residency and the legal right to work have led to a slew of issues made all the more challenging given the regions worsening economic environment, with both refugees and host communities struggling to meet their basic needs. With economic pressures mounting in the region, there is reason to worry that the welcome refugees originally received from their hosts is now fading. And with more countries abroad shutting their borders in the last year as part of measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, options for resettlement in third countries are almost non-existent, with 2020 witnessing the fewest number of resettlement departures in recent years. Without action from the Syrian government, refugee host governments in the region, and the international community, NRC's analysis indicates these trends are likely to continue for years to come.

Syrians will likely continue to be displaced in large numbers. Displacement will continue to be fuelled by conflict, insecurity and increasingly by economic factors as well.

The last ten years of conflict in Syria have been characterised by mass forced displacement, with no signs of this waning. More than half of Syria's pre-conflict population has been displaced. Nearly 5.6 million refugees have sought safe haven in neighbouring countries and a million fled to Europe.³ Many of them have lived in these circumstances for the better part of the last decade. This includes more than a million Syrian refugee children born into life in exile in countries where their future appears grim and filled with uncertainty.⁴ There are an estimated 6.5 million people internally displaced inside Syria.⁵ About 70 per cent of IDPs have now been displaced for over five years and nearly a quarter have been displaced at least four times, with every displacement further eroding their capacity to cope with life in displacement.⁶ One internally displaced Syrian woman interviewed by NRC, Um Iyad,ⁱ originally fled from Aleppo and is now living in Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. She had been displaced ten times over the last years and told NRC "The future is unknown for us," and said her family cannot even begin to set a timeline to return home.



NRC legal assistance staff doing outreach work in an informal settlement for Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon. Photo: Christian Jepsen/NRC

i. All names have been changed to ensure the safety of those interviewed.

Drivers of recent displacement

Throughout the last decade conflict and military operations have driven the majority of displacement inside Syria, even in recent years. In the northeast, where Kurdish groups formed a semi-autonomous zone and has experienced relative stability, a Turkish incursion in late 2019 displaced two hundred thousand Syrians in a matter of a couple of weeks.⁷ And in February 2020, a Government of Syria (GoS) and Russian-backed offensive saw the displacement of nearly a million people in Idlib, the single biggest displacement since the start of the conflict ten years ago⁸

On average, an estimated 2.4 million new displacements occurred in and outside the country every year since the start of the conflict.⁹ 2020 was not much different than the previous nine years. In 2020 alone, 1.8 million displacements occurred inside Syria.¹⁰ Meanwhile, only 467,000 people (refugees and IDPs) returned home,¹¹ meaning for every person who managed to return, nearly 4 more people were displaced. More than 600,000 displacements – the largest number within and between Idlib and Aleppo – occurred between March and December 2020, after a ceasefire following the Idlib offensive was put in place. If conditions in Syria continue at their current rate, the next decade could still see at least six million more displacements.¹²

Though insecurity drove the majority of displacement in 2020 with 65 per cent of all IDPs displaced due to security concerns,¹³ a significant portion of last year's displacement – nearly 20 per cent of those recently internally displaced – cite economic deterioration as a push factor as well.¹⁴ In January 2021 alone, 23,124 new displacements occurred inside Syria. Of those that were displaced in January, 32 per cent said it was due to lack of access to basic services and 28 per cent said it was due to economic deterioration.¹⁵ As the economies in Syria and in neighbouring countries continue to deteriorate, economic factors may become a more prominent driver of displacement.

Current economic forecasts for Syria over the next ten years remain grim. In 2019, one academic study found that if the conflict continued in its current trajectory, Syria would only recover and reach the 2010 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030.¹⁶ This study was concluded prior to the worsening economic situation in Lebanon – which has been found to be intertwined with Syria's economy – and the global economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had dire consequences inside Syria and in the wider region.

Even before the pandemic, the deteriorating Syrian pound,¹⁷ causing widespread inflation, increased prices across all sectors, including food.¹⁸ Covid-19 significantly exacerbated the situation with food prices hitting an all-time high in June 2020. In February 2021, the Syrian pound hit a new record low, forcing the Syrian government to reduce subsidies on essential items.¹⁹ At the start of 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced that 12.4 million people, 60 per cent of the entire population, was food insecure.²⁰ This was a sharp increase from the 9.3 million reported just six months earlier. IDPs and returnees were found to be more vulnerable to food insecurity in a recent study.²¹ This is unsurprising; a study undertaken by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in mid-2020 found that 90 per cent reported losing jobs or revenue in the past months.²²

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A child helps his family collect basic household items at an NRC distribution in Eastern Ghouta. Photo: Tareq Mnadili/NRC

Economic despair in the wider region also risks resulting in secondary displacement of Syrian refugees or premature returns to Syria, including as a result of loss of income, inability to pay rent and subsequent evictions.²³

More conflict-driven displacement

In Syria, there have been numerous ceasefires brokered between the Government of Syria (GoS), Russia, Turkey and non-state armed groups over the years, all of which eventually broke down. The conflict has destroyed a third of all homes inside Syria²⁴, left more than 7,000 schools damaged or destroyed²⁵ and only 50 per cent of hospitals are able to function. Nearly half a million civilians have been killed, including 470 aid workers.²⁶ More than a year after he fled, 10-year-old Imad, a Syrian refugee in Bardarash camp in northern Iraq who fled the Turkish incursion in October 2019, said: “I am still scared of the warplanes, tanks and what I’ve experienced during the shelling.” It is no surprise that displaced Syrians say a lasting ceasefire and a political settlement are conditions needed to even consider return. Lack thereof is a primary driver of displacement and prolonger of the conflict.

Following a GoS-led and Russian-backed offensive in Idlib in February 2020, a ceasefire in Syria was brokered between Russia and Turkey.²⁷ The ceasefire has largely held for much of 2020, but localised insecurity and fighting between groups and parties to the conflict still caused some displacement. There have also been signs of potential escalation on the horizon. International Crisis Group has described the ceasefire as “bear[ing] all the flaws of its predecessors and may therefore also erode.”²⁸ Key differences between warring parties remain: Turkey aims to keep the Syrian government out of Idlib until a political settlement is agreed upon and Russia supports the Syrian government’s ambition to retake Idlib.²⁹ The costs of such escalation are significant and would almost definitely cause more mass displacement towards the border with Turkey. This could possibly result in the largest humanitarian crisis seen yet.

In northeast Syria, there are also fears of renewed conflict. Turkey has previously indicated using military force to diminish what they view as the Kurdistan Worker’s Party’s (PKK) presence along its borders is not out of the question.³⁰ In February 2020, Turkish President Erdogan pledged to “fully eliminate” them,³¹ following the killing of 13 Turkish hostages in northern Iraq.³² Previous speeches made by Erdogan have come with Turkish military activity against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), currently in control of northeast Syria, leading to large scale displacement in the area.

Displaced people NRC interviewed in northern Syria feared the impact of potential escalations. “It would be a big problem if we have to flee again,” Abu Ahmed, a father of six children now living in a displacement camp in Idlib, told NRC. He and his family have already been displaced eight times over the course of the conflict. They fled shelling multiple times where they were sheltering. Describing the tent his family live in Abu Ahmed said: “It is a temporary living arrangement; we have no idea when we might have to flee again.”



Families at a displacement camp by the Turkish border. Many Syrians have been displaced multiple times. Photo: NRC

“It is a temporary living arrangement; we have no idea when we might have to flee again.”

Abu Ahmed, a father of six children now living in a displacement camp in Idlib told NRC.

With borders shuttered, those fleeing Syria will likely have few options to seek refuge. Some countries in the region hosting refugees may pressure refugees to return – in some instances deporting them – to Syria while it is still not safe to return.

Though nearly two million people fled their homes in Syria over the last year, no major arrivals of refugees were recorded in neighbouring countries. Borders remain largely shut to those seeking asylum in the region.³³ But this does not mean the need for safe havens has diminished. When more than 900,000 Syrians fled a GoS-led offensive on northwest Idlib in early 2020, they were met with closed Turkish borders,³⁴ forcing tens of thousands of families to shelter along the Turkish border in camps which were forced to accommodate people “five times their intended occupancy.”³⁵ Many of them had been displaced several times before that last military operation.

This was not the first or even the second time a neighbouring country has closed its borders to those fleeing from conflict. In Jordan and Lebanon, Syrians are only allowed to enter the country if they meet certain criteria and are in possession of the correct documentation. Seeking asylum is not one of those categories. Thousands of Syrians have been denied the right to seek asylum even when borders were open due to security concerns. Approximately 10,000 Syrians remain stranded in Rukban, an informal site in the desert along the border between Jordan and Syria, with little to no assistance for people, including women and children.

Deportations

Some countries have resorted to returning Syrian refugees to conflict-ridden areas, in a clear violation of international law and the principle of *refoulement*,³⁶ which prohibits states from returning people back to areas where their lives may be at risk. Deportations back to Syria have been reported in a number of neighbouring countries, though the number of deportations varies considerably from one country to the next.

Though the Government of Lebanon has affirmed its commitment to the principle of non-*refoulement*, securing and maintaining residency in Lebanon for Syrian refugees continues to be a challenge. Deportations from Lebanon back to Syria have also been documented.³⁷ In fact, in 2019, the General Security Organisation in Lebanon announced they had deported 2,731 Syrians between May and August, with deportations continuing over the following months.³⁸

In Turkey, the government continues to provide Syrians “temporary protection” under national laws,³⁹ which also comes with access to basic services through public institutions. Though there is a strong legal framework protecting Syrian refugees in the country, human rights organisations accused Turkey of violating the principle of “non-*refoulement*” on several occasions. From January through October 2017, Turkey “apprehended and returned to Syria approximately 250,000

“I am still scared of the warplanes, tanks and what I’ve experienced during the shelling.”

10-year-old, Imad, a Syrian refugee in Bardarash camp in northern Iraq who fled October 2019 Turkish incursion



An unfinished house in Lebanon hosting Syrian refugees. Photo Christian Jepsen/NRC

Syrians at their border.”⁴⁰ In 2019, human rights groups reported that Turkey likely deported dozens of Syrians back to Syria.⁴¹ Many included refugees living in Istanbul who were registered in another province. This raised concern that Syrians’ welcome in Turkey, a country that showed great level of generosity hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the region, may be expiring.⁴²

In Jordan, the number of recorded deportations has significantly declined compared to early 2017 when humanitarian agencies documented an average of 400 refugees deported per month.⁴³ But nonetheless deportations continue on a sporadic basis. The reasons for deportation are often unknown to those who are deported, though anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of cases are security related.

Some European countries have also pursued deportations of Syrians despite the overwhelming evidence that Syria is not yet safe for return. In March 2021, Denmark became the first European country to declare that Damascus, Syria’s capital, is safe and revoked residency of nearly 100 refugees originally from that area. This decision will potentially strip hundreds more Syrian refugees of their residency in Denmark.⁴⁴ In December 2020, Germany’s deportation ban on Syrians who may pose a security risk to Germany expired, putting into question the status of a number of Syrians in Germany who may have committed crimes.⁴⁵ Both countries have signed up to the UN refugee convention and are also bound by international law barring countries from returning refugees to places where they may face danger or risks to their lives.

High income countries will fail to do their fair share in providing safe haven for refugees, leaving countries in the region to shoulder the bulk of the responsibility.

It is no surprise that countries in the region have chosen to close their borders when high income countries have shirked from their responsibility of also providing safe haven to refugees from Syria. To date, only 156,792 Syrian refugees have actually departed from the region and been resettled in third countries.⁴⁶

Accompanying a surge of solidarity from populations in Europe in 2016 after the image of three-year old Syrian-Kurdish refugee Alan Kurdi on Turkish shores made headlines around the globe, resettlement departures reached their peak in 2016, but then reduced by around 50 per cent the following year.⁴⁷ In the last five years they have steadily declined, despite growing needs. They reached a record low in 2020, with only 9,377 refugees actually departing to third countries, less than 0.2 per cent of the total number of Syrian refugees. UNHCR estimates that 579,031 Syrian refugees are currently in need of resettlement.⁴⁸ However, projections show that the number of resettlement spots offered by third countries will likely continue to decrease.⁴⁹

Though resettlement options have dwindled, refugees from Syria interviewed by NRC still see more hope in a future abroad than one in the region as they recognise that living conditions have even deteriorated for their host communities. One young male refugee, Malik living in



Many refugee families in Lebanon live in precarious conditions. Photo: Nadine Malli/NRC

Akkar in Lebanon, fled Syria to avoid military conscription. He has been unable to renew his legal residency in Lebanon because he does not have a Lebanese sponsor and is therefore living in Lebanon at great risk of being detained. He told NRC “The situation is bad in both Syria and Lebanon. There are no job opportunities (...) we can’t go back to Syria due to the obligatory military service and we can’t stay in Lebanon since there are no job opportunities and even the security situation is a bit risky, so I think resettlement is the best option.”

But across the globe, resettlement figures have fallen to their lowest numbers in decades,⁵⁰ and refugees from Syria are no exception. The new Biden administration has vowed to significantly increase global resettlement opportunities to the U.S.; however, it will take time to build up the structures and capacity that were cut by the previous administration and numbers pledged still remain low.⁵¹ There has been little indication, however, that countries in Europe and elsewhere will follow suit. Without a significant surge of political will, resettlement opportunities for Syrian refugees in the future will likely be very few and an almost impossible option for displaced Syrians.

Though most Syrians are displaced in cities and towns, many will remain in camps, languishing in limbo, with limited mobility, mostly reliant on humanitarian assistance.

In the absence of local policies that enable integration into surrounding communities, whether inside Syria or in neighbouring countries, Syrians will continue to live in sprawling camps across the region – sometimes in detention like conditions – where freedom of movement is restricted.

For example, in northeast Syria, nearly 30,000 internally displaced Syrians, 30,000 Iraqis and nearly 10,000 Third Country Nationals live in Al-Hol camp, the biggest camp in that region. Syrians in Al-Hol live a life akin to exiles in their own country, out of suspicions of being associated with the Islamic state group (IS). Many lived under the IS rule until their very last enclave, Baghouz, was taken by the SDF and Coalition forces. Though these families – made up mostly of women and children – have been screened and considered civilians, their ability to leave the camp is almost non-existent, with the exception of medical emergencies. Returning home is only possible to Syrian IDPs in possession of all their civil documentation and who originate from areas currently under SDF control, criteria that only a limited portion of the camp population actually meets. Leaving the camp to work, to be reunited with family or to attend school is not allowed. The security situation in Al-Hol has greatly deteriorated over the last years, while tensions have been on the rise. Since the start of the year, at least 12 Syrian and Iraqi camp residents were murdered in the camp, according to the UN.⁵² The uptick in attacks started in August 2020 and have continued as living conditions in the camp remain harsh.

In Syria’s neighbouring countries, an estimated 279,000 refugees live in camps.⁵³ While some camps, such as Za’atari in Jordan, have businesses and commercial activity with strong linkages to the surrounding communities, in other camps, opportunities to work or socially integrate



Displacement camp in Idlib. Photo: NRC

into the local community are all but absent. Most camp residents face restrictions on movement – such as needing to apply for a work or leave permit to leave the camp formally. The movement of refugees residing in ‘Village 5’, a section of Azraq camp, the second largest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, is fully restricted. ‘Village 5’ has a population of 9,500, of which over 50 per cent are below the age of 18. Residents of ‘Village 5’ cannot apply for work permits and are barred from leaving the compound except under exceptional circumstances. Restrictions on movement for camp residents were further curtailed in 2020 due to camp-wide lockdowns in response to Covid-19, which lasted significantly longer than Jordan’s nationwide lockdown.

Displaced people who live in camps where their movement is restricted are vulnerable to disruptions in aid delivery. In many camps both inside Syria and across the region, access to quality services is limited. For example, in November 2020, local authorities temporarily suspended the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)’s operations, which included food distributions, waste management and health services to the tens of thousands of residents living in Al-Hol and Roj camps,⁵⁴ two of the camps with the most severe restrictions on mobility in all of northeast Syria. This means that for a period of nearly a week, SARC’s assistance was not delivered to camp residents. In another instance in 2020, UN partners were not given permission to distribute food assistance by the GoS.⁵⁵ Without this assistance, camp residents do not have the means to survive, as they are unable to make a living outside of the camps.

As displacement inside Syria continues, the number of people turning to the camps for shelter is also increasing. Between January 2020 and 2021, there was a 20% increase in IDPs living in camps and informal settlements.⁵⁶ But displacement camps, whether formal camps or informal sites,⁵⁷ are a last resort option for the majority of displaced people. Harsh weather, particularly during the winter months, makes these camps hardly sustainable in the long term. Just this winter, tens of thousands of IDPs in Idlib and other parts of northwest Syria were displaced yet again due to massive flooding caused by winter rains, inundating camps and making it dangerous for children to walk around. In Za’atari camp in Jordan, which was set up as a refugee camp seven years ago, 54 per cent of the 24,000 shelters in the camp had leaking roofs and damaged structures.⁵⁸ Um Mohammad, a resident of Areesha camp (another IDP camp in northeast Syria) who fled Deir Ezzour back in 2014 told NRC, “In terms of shelter, my tent needs to be replaced as it is worn out and does not protect us from the rain in winter.” Bashir, a Syrian refugee in northern Iraq said: “Life in the camp is difficult. When it’s cold, rainy and windy during winter, we can’t sleep because we worry that the tent will fall on us. And when it is summer, it’s very hot and unbearable.”

In Lebanon, most of the Syrian refugee population live in cities and villages in the context of the governmental policy prohibiting the establishment of formal refugee camps. The remaining fraction live in spontaneously set-up tented settlements throughout the country. Over half (58 per cent) of Syrian refugee households live in shelters that are either overcrowded, have conditions below humanitarian standards and/or are in danger of collapse.⁵⁹

Displacement camps or informal settlements are meant to be temporary solutions for people who have fled conflict.⁶⁰ But the reality is the average length of time that a refugee remains displaced is between 10 to 26 years.⁶¹ Though most reside in urban or rural areas – not in camps – the infrastructure set-up in camps are not designed to be durable or long lasting. Still, large numbers of Syrian IDPs and refugees will likely continue to live in camps for years to come. Camp-based Syrians interviewed by NRC who had no other option, voiced the preference to remain in the camps until they had the means to leave. Um Mohammad who is also a widow responsible for four children said: “Living in the camp is difficult, but it is still better than living outside the camp, as we do not have any provider and we do not have the financial capacity to rent a house and live in the host community. We feel safer in the camp.”

With many missing civil documentation, displaced Syrians will continue to live undocumented with poor access to services and denied their basic rights as Syrians, making it more difficult to return home or integrate in their current location.

Possession of civil documentation, such as national identification documents, family booklets, passports, birth certificates, and marriage certificates, are essential building blocks on the road to recovery, return, and durable solutions to displacement. Not possessing these basic documents has been found to impede individuals from accessing basic government services like education and medical care, or social welfare. In Syria, lacking these documents often translates into restrictions on freedom of movement, putting individuals missing these documents at heightened risk of being arrested or detained. Recent humanitarian assessments have found that most Syrians inside Syria lack some sort of civil documentation,⁶² with one assessment indicating that up to 83 per cent of families reporting lacking or having lost civil documents.⁶³

NRC’s programs and research, both inside Syria and in neighbouring refugee-hosting countries, have found that the majority of displaced Syrians face tremendous barriers to issuing and renewing legal and civil documentation, whether to replace lost, missing, destroyed or out-of-date documents; to obtain civil documents for the first time; or to reflect new life events, like marriages or births and to validate in Syria documents obtained in host countries. Even in Self-Administration (Autonomous Self-Administration of North and East Syria)-controlled parts of Syria, where Syrian government-run institutions are present, IDPs who want to secure their documents are afraid of approaching these institutions out of fear of being arrested or conscripted in the military. This is particularly the case for men, and is a major challenge in northeast Syria. In one humanitarian assessment conducted in the area, 67 per cent of IDPs in a camp interviewed did not have identification documents in their possession.⁶⁴

The situation is also perilous for children whose births may not be registered. They face the possibility of not being recognised as Syrian nationals and risk being made stateless. They are also more vulnerable



Obtaining legal residency in Jordan and Lebanon continues to be a challenge. Photo: Hussein Amri/NRC

to trafficking, child labour, and other protection threats. Children in female-headed households whose fathers are missing or deceased, face even greater obstacles registering marriages and births due to Syria's gender-discriminatory nationality and personal status laws. Another humanitarian assessment conducted in northeast Syria found that while 89 per cent of respondents were able to register the birth of their children prior to 2011, only 42 per cent reported registering their children born after 2011.⁶⁵ Some families in non-government-controlled areas have chosen to obtain documentation issued by the de facto authorities, but fear potential repercussions if their area once again comes under GoS control and are found with documentation issued by other non-governmental entities.

This issue is even more acutely felt amongst the refugee population who have almost no ability to access Syrian government institutions to obtain Syrian documents and for which access to host country issued documents is linked to meeting residency requirements. Back in 2017, NRC found that more than 70 per cent of Syrian refugees did not have their national identity card. Four years later, the level of possession of national identification amongst refugees is likely much worse.

Without their legal and civil documents, displaced Syrians face difficulties in accessing a broad range of rights. Inside Syria, their future remains extremely uncertain; they may face immense challenges trying to reintegrate back into society at home or in their current location. One Syrian IDP in a camp in northeast Syria said, "To have an ID is the most important thing, more important than food and water, because without an ID you cannot move (...) without it you are trapped."⁶⁶ In hosting countries, lack of or incomplete documents proving identity or family lineage threatens the ability to acquire and maintain legal status, to enjoy freedom of movement and to ensure a cohesive family unit while in displacement.

A large number of refugees from Syria will continue to live without legal residence or long-term residency rights in countries of asylum, making their stay in refugee-hosting countries in the region ever more precarious.

Obtaining and sustaining legal residency for refugees in neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon continues to be a challenge. Hundreds of thousands of refugees in the region – mostly in Lebanon – are believed to be living without legal residency (government-issued permission to stay in their host countries). In addition to the risk of being reprimanded by authorities, those without legal residency are also unable to access basic services.

In Lebanon alone, a total of 356,060 people, equal to 80 per cent of refugees over 15 years of age,⁶⁷ do not have legal residency. This is an increase from previous years, which have been fuelled by Lebanon's spiralling economic crisis and refugees' inability to cover costs associated with renewing their residency, ranging from fees to transportation costs.⁶⁸ This acutely impacts Palestine Refugees from Syria currently residing in Lebanon, around 55 per cent of whom do not possess valid



Legal awareness information session organised by NRC for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Photo: Hussein Amri/NRC

legal residency documents.⁶⁹ In many cases, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not even registered by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). In 2015, the Lebanese government prohibited the UN from registering Syrian refugees,⁷⁰ leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees unaccounted for in the country. These refugees have no proof they are even seeking asylum. Syrians in Lebanon without legal residency are at heightened risk of being detained, arrested or deported back to Syria. As a result, they face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. In addition, they are unable to access basic services like education and healthcare. Though Lebanon has previously issued “fee waivers” to make it easier for Syrians to afford maintaining their legal status, the reality is that this is not consistently applied across government offices and they are often still required to obtain a Lebanese “sponsor” to apply on their behalf.

In Jordan, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees also have no way to legalise their status in Jordan, including those who missed out on the Urban Verification Exercise,⁷¹ a way for the Jordanian authorities to register Syrian refugees in the country, and in turn issue them cards from the Ministry of Interior (MoI). The MoI cards secure their legal status and enable them to access services in the country.⁷² This exercise ended in March 2019, after which Syrian refugees no longer have had a pathway to register with UNHCR and obtain international protection and regularise their status in Jordan. Similarly, no pathway exists for Syrian refugees who entered Jordan through informal channels or those who lack sufficient documentation (undocumented and under documented Syrian refugees) to regularise their status. Without regularised legal status these people are forced to live on the margins of society, unable to access basic services, apply for work permits for formal employment, register life events that occurred in Jordan and/or legalise life events that occurred in Syria. They are also under constant threat of detention or forced relocation back to the camps, or even to Syria, if caught by the Jordanian authorities.⁷³ Similarly, Palestine Refugees from Syria currently in Jordan who do not possess valid Jordanian identification document “face restrictions on employment, limited access to courts, civil status and registration processes, and are continuously exposed to the risk of arrest, detention and potential forced return to Syria.”⁷⁴

More than 90 per cent of Syrian refugees in Iraq have a residency permit in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). However, the federal Iraqi government – like Jordan and Lebanon – has not signed up to the UN refugee convention and possessing of KRI residency does not allow them to enter or move freely within federal Iraq. Iraq lacks a legal framework that would ensure longer term residency rights for the refugee population.⁷⁵ But legal residency in the KRI does allow refugees to work. Masoud, a Syrian refugee living in Bardarash camp in northern Iraq, told NRC: “The camp is safe, but I wish there would be a job opportunity for me to earn a living for my family. But even if I found a job opportunity outside the camp, I can’t work because I still don’t have a residency card. Hopefully when we get the residency card, it will be easier for me to find a job.”



The majority of Syrians live below the poverty line. Photo: Sam Tarling/NRC

With economies interconnected, the region will continue to reel from overlapping crises, having dire knock-on effects on Syrian civilians, refugees, and their host communities alike.

In 2019, the UN estimated that 83 per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line.⁷⁶ Experts agree that since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the situation has significantly worsened. In 2020 alone, the region's GDP dropped by an average of 7.4 per cent, wrecking local industries and pushing more people into poverty than in the last decade of conflict.⁷⁷ Lebanon's economic crisis and the depreciation of the Syrian pound has increased food prices inside government-controlled Syria by as much as 247 per cent in recent months, forcing thousands to queue in long lines simply to buy bread,⁷⁸ a phenomenon unheard of in Syria even during the past 10 years of conflict. The economic decline in these countries – resulting in widespread loss of income – have had grave knock-on effects on vulnerable populations, including displaced people.⁷⁹ It has also exacerbated inequalities and vulnerabilities that existed pre-pandemic across the region. For example, education has been one of the services that has suffered the most over the last decade and has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, an estimated 2.4 million children inside Syria and hundreds of thousands across the region are out of school.⁸⁰ The Covid-19 crisis pushed many more children out of school than in previous years.

Refugee-hosting countries neighbouring Syria, like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, have had their resources and public services overstretched as a result of the refugee crisis. Many of these countries are dealing with their own domestic turmoil, resulting in overlapping crises that have contributed to significant economic decline, affecting refugees and their host communities alike. Furthermore, policies that were designed to temporarily provide refuge for the region's refugees are now creating new sets of problems as the issues have become protracted. This has culminated in a situation where the quality of services has deteriorated for both Syrian refugees, as well as their host communities. And though these countries have received significant international support over the years, across the region living conditions have deteriorated and are now worse than they have been in the whole of the last ten years.

Lebanon

No country has suffered the weight of the economic and displacement crisis in the region like Lebanon. The arrival of more than a million Syrian refugees has impacted Lebanon's fragile economic and social systems. In addition to hosting 1.5 million refugees, more than a quarter of the country's population, in recent years, the country has also suffered from political paralysis and unprecedented economic collapse. In addition, the massive explosion that took place in Beirut in August 2020 saw more than 300,000 people in the city become homeless and 70,000 jobs lost overnight.⁸¹

In Lebanon, where the government has a “no camp” policy, hundreds of informal settlements have sprung up across the country. However,



Lebanon's "no camp" policy means that refugees live in the most vulnerable conditions. Photo: Joshua Berson/NRC

arrangements between the Syrian refugee families and local Lebanese landowners of these sites are often tenuous. The Lebanese landowners typically lease the land to refugees, sometimes even informally employing them. Yet in recent months conflict between Syrian refugees and Lebanese hosts have culminated in violence. Just in December 2020, more than 300 refugees were forced to flee after a set of tents were set ablaze over a local dispute.⁸² With economic decline in Lebanon, tensions in marginalised communities run high. Anti-Syrian refugee rhetoric is on the rise and exploited by the political class as these tensions faced by host communities increase.

Today, nine in every ten Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living below the poverty line, on less than US\$2.90 per day.⁸³ This is a stark increase in comparison to 55 per cent of refugees last year.⁸⁴ In January 2021, a rapid survey conducted by CAMEALEON, an NRC-led research network, found that more than half of the respondents were not working prior to the Covid-19 lockdown measures, while 36 per cent said their work had been impacted by the lockdown and only 2 per cent were still working during the lockdown.⁸⁵ The complete lack of livelihoods opportunities which have pushed more people into poverty also prevent people from meeting their basic needs, like rent. A recent study by UNHCR found that 8 per cent of Syrian refugees were living under eviction notice and more than 40,000 Syrian refugees were evicted since August 2019 due to inability to pay rent.⁸⁶

Meanwhile, donor funds have not kept up with these needs. While the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) remained underfunded, the livelihoods sector faced a nearly 70 per cent funding gap, which makes transitioning people from cash assistance to more sustainable livelihoods opportunities impossible and the reduction of aid dependency in the short term unlikely.

Jordan

Though Jordan fares better than Lebanon, the country still faces significant challenges. The Jordanian government has taken a proactive approach in developing national response plans and frameworks to support refugees and has made significant strides in developing policies that are responsive to refugee needs. Still, significant difficulties remain, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, an estimated three quarters of the population have said they faced difficulties meeting their basic needs and only 2 per cent of refugee households have said they are able to meet their basic food needs without resorting to negative coping mechanisms.⁸⁷ There are reports of refugee families cutting down on meals, pulling children out of school to work instead, and engaging in early marriage. In one year alone, the percentage of children going to work rather than school increased from 1 per cent in 2019 to more than 13 per cent in 2020.⁸⁸

While Jordan has made significant progress enabling Syrian refugees to earn an income, further work can still be done to expand these opportunities. Prior to 2016, non-Jordanians, including refugees, were barred from working legally in most sectors. In 2016, the Jordanian government and the international community formally recognised the tremendous economic contributions refugees could make to the



Work permits issued by the Jordanian government to Syrian refugees. Photo: Leen Qashu/NRC

Jordanian economy⁸⁹ and has since issued 215,668 work permits that allow refugees to work legally.⁹⁰ In 2020, the government even exempted Syrian refugees from work permit fees, providing some financial relief to those seeking permits.⁹¹ However, the Jordanian government has also increased the number of employment sectors closed to non-Jordanians with an additional 13 categories.⁹² There are also concerns that more Syrian refugees are working in Jordan's growing informal economy, which often translates into lower wages, longer hours and unsafe working conditions. In addition, only 5.8 per cent of the work permits have been issued to women.⁹³ Though Jordan has made some important reforms on this front in the last years, there is still space for improvement in the coming years.

The Government of Jordan also re-introduced double shift schools – with Jordanian students attending morning shifts and Syrian students attending afternoon shifts – to accommodate Syrian refugee students in Jordan's public school system. While welcome, afternoon shifts provide fewer teaching hours than the national average, and often poorer quality teaching, which has negatively impacted the learning outcomes of Syrian refugees. Students in refugee camps receive even fewer teaching hours than their counterparts enrolled in afternoon sessions in host communities, often with less qualified teachers as a result of the precarious nature of teacher contracts in camps. As such, school dropout rates for Syrian students are much higher than for Jordanian students, with only 25 per cent of eligible Syrian refugee students enrolled in Grades 10-12 of secondary school, 47 per cent lower than Jordanian children.⁹⁴

Turkey

Hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees,⁹⁵ Turkey is hosting the highest number of refugees in the region, the majority residing in host communities.⁹⁶ There is however reason to worry that the initial generous welcome towards Syrian refugees in Turkey is fading.⁹⁷ One recent interagency assessment found that the social segregation between refugees and Turkish host communities was deepening.⁹⁸ In the last year, Syrian refugees have also been targeted with violence in attacks across the country,⁹⁹ a result of tensions building up for some time. Complicating the situation further is that Turkey is the main transit country for onwards movement towards Europe.¹⁰⁰ As such, the international community and the Government of Turkey's policies towards Syrian refugees have been viewed through that lens.

In Turkey, much like the rest of the region, vulnerabilities and basic needs have increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, more than 60 per cent of Syrian families in Turkey lived close to or below the poverty line.¹⁰¹ There has been considerable loss of livelihoods and income opportunities for Syrian refugees and their Turkish hosts alike. In fact, recent rapid needs assessment found that 80 per cent faced negative changes when it came to employment and access to income.¹⁰² There is a high degree of stress on households, resulting in heightened risk of gender-based violence and violence against children, particularly for those confined to the home during this time.¹⁰³



Displaced Syrians at the Turkish border. Photo: NRC

Though Turkish officials have revelled in the “positive” impact Syrian refugees have made on the Turkish economy, the sentiment has not always been felt by Turkish citizens who may view Syrian refugees as competitors for jobs.¹⁰⁴ Though 132,497 work permits have been issued to allow Syrian refugees to work formally,¹⁰⁵ these permits must be obtained through employer sponsorship and cumbersome bureaucratic hurdles may impede refugees and local employers from applying. As a result, an estimated 750,000 - 950,000 Syrians were believed to be employed in the informal sector.¹⁰⁶

The Turkish government has made significant efforts to provide education for school aged Syrian refugees, more than 460,000 remain out of school. Children who are out of school tend to face a number of protection risks, including psychological distress, child marriage and child labour, and are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse.¹⁰⁷

Iraq

Iraq hosts more than 240,000 registered Syrian refugees, most of whom live in the KRI. Though conditions in the KRI are generally favourable towards Syrian refugees, most of whom are of Kurdish origin, three out of four Syrian households reported increased levels of stress at home as a result of Covid-19.¹⁰⁸ Lack of sustained access to employment and livelihood opportunities remains one of the primary causes of vulnerability, leading to a range of other protection concerns. Taking on additional debt has been identified as one of the most common coping mechanisms, but many are still unable to cover costs such as “renting adequate accommodation, purchasing food for the household, ensuring children’s school attendance, and accessing adequate healthcare services.”¹⁰⁹ An estimated 4,800 people, 2 per cent of Syrian refugee households, were under threat of eviction due to inability to pay rent.¹¹⁰

Access to education remains a major challenge for school-aged Syrian refugees in Iraq. Of the nearly 69,000 school-aged refugee children in Iraq, only 37,000 are recorded as being in school as of 2020.¹¹¹ Within camps, only 50 per cent were enrolled in primary school and dropped to 29 per cent for secondary school. In urban areas, where the majority of Syrian refugees reside, these rates were even lower, at 29 per cent for primary school and 8 per cent for secondary school.¹¹² One of the biggest obstacles hampering Syrian refugee children’s access to quality learning are the language barriers, with the majority of schools in the KRI not offering classes in Arabic or Kurmanji Kurdish, the languages common in their areas of origin in Syria. Though all schools in federal Iraq and the KRI shifted to e-learning at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, relying on smart mobile devices where online content was sent from the KRI’s Ministry of Education, “four out of ten Syrian refugee households with at least one child of school-age reported not having access to alternative types of school during Covid-19.”¹¹³ These factors are expected to worsen already low enrolment rates amongst school-aged Syrian children.

Egypt

Though Egypt hosts a much smaller Syrian refugee population than fellow countries in the region, at 130,187 registered refugees, the majority live in crowded accommodations where access to water,



Syrian children from Kobani living in poor housing in Mamzawa, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC

sanitation and proper hygiene are major concerns.¹¹⁴ Two thirds of Syrian refugees are reliant on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs, and similar to other countries in the region, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted access to livelihoods, with over half of refugees reporting that they had to reduce the number of meals they had per day to make ends meet.¹¹⁵ This is exacerbated by a surge in the prices of food and other commodities and rise in employment rate¹¹⁶ to 9.6 per cent in 2020, compared to 7.5 per cent in 2019.¹¹⁷

Despite a desire among some refugees and IDPs to one-day return home, the majority will likely not return any time soon. Some may never return. They enter the next ten years with uncertain futures.

In a recent interagency report, uncertainty about the future was consistently raised by IDPs and refugees when asked about their plans and intentions.¹¹⁸ Though a majority in the study indicated they either wished to return or seek resettlement abroad, there was major discrepancy between the desire to return to areas of origin – if certain conditions are met – and realistic options they view as available to them, particularly in the next five to ten years.¹¹⁹ What was clear was that “almost no one considered these [return or resettlement outside the region] to be realistic options in the medium-term,” and instead saw themselves staying where they are for the coming period.¹²⁰ An end to the conflict, reforms and safety were conditions continuously cited to enable their return home.

This closely aligns with recent interviews conducted by NRC in which almost no one considered return a viable option anytime soon. Nasir, a Syrian refugee in Jordan in his 60s who defected from the Syrian military early on, said: “At the beginning of the crisis we thought that we will stay here for three to four months and then everything will be okay, and we will go back home. Now it has been almost 9 years and we are still waiting.” He said he will now never go back to Syria, “My wife and I are sentenced to death there because I defected from the Syrian Army. I know people in Syria, and they told me that I am charged in five different issues, one of them is high treason of the Syrian regime.” These challenges also exist in areas outside Syrian government control. For example, Ako, a 35-year-old Syrian refugee in northern Iraq, also told NRC: “It’s a dream to go back to Afrin, I don’t think I can ever go back. We used to own agricultural lands but now it’s all gone, our houses are gone, our predecessors worked hard to own those lands and houses but now it’s all gone.” Ako and his family had to live under multiple different non-state armed groups, including IS, and found safety in the KRI. He is now finalising his legal residency so he can find a job and has no plans to return to Syria.

Though movement is more fluid amongst Syrians who are internally displaced (as opposed to refugees), recent assessments show that only 11 per cent intend to return to their areas of origin in the next year, with 43 per cent intending on staying in their current location.¹²¹ Displaced women-headed households are even less likely to plan to return home, with only 5 per cent indicating they were planning on doing so in the



Mohammed, 49, shows his 9-year-old son Osama photos of their former house in Syria. They’ve been living in Zaatari camp, Jordan, since 2012, where Osama was born. Photo: Daniel Wheeler/NRC

“At the beginning of the crisis we thought that we will stay here for three to four months and then everything will be okay, and we will go back home. Now it has been almost 9 years and we are still waiting.”

Nasir, a Syrian refugee in Jordan in his 60s

next year.¹²² Those who plan to remain are largely doing so because either security has improved where they currently are, or they have concerns with security in their areas of origin. Returns in January 2021 were the lowest they have been in the last year, at 8,930 going home, 7,599 of them returning from within Syria.¹²³

Refugee returns to Syria have been significantly lower than IDPs. In an assessment conducted in 2019, only 5.9 per cent of refugees in the region reported any intention to return to Syria in the next year.¹²⁴ Since 2016, a total of 267,170 refugees have returned to Syria.¹²⁵ Given the economic deterioration inside Syria and a lack of any political settlement which would guarantee the rights and safety of refugee returnees, analysts are not expecting to see large scale returns anytime soon. Fears of forced conscription in the Syrian military, safety and security upon return, the availability of jobs, and lack of reforms are issues cited by Syrian refugees that impact their decision to return.¹²⁶

Furthermore, if refugees return to Syria and then need to seek refuge again abroad, the option is largely not available. With most countries having closed their borders, re-displacement would be limited to within Syria. In 2020, around 3 per cent, or 11,398, of one estimate of nearly 370,000 IDPs who returned to their areas of origin were displaced again that year.¹²⁷ This is a trend that must be monitored over the next several years. Failure to do so could mean that this population could fall through the cracks of humanitarian programming, contributing to their vulnerability.

Life in displacement – whether as IDPs or refugees – is filled with hardship. Assessments over the years have shown that the longer one is displaced the more likely they are to suffer socioeconomic consequences. There is little sign that after ten years their living conditions will improve. International donor funding appears to be drying up and provisional solutions that were meant to accommodate temporary displacement are becoming entrenched. Economic decline as a result of Covid-19, has put pressure on refugees to return to Syria. Still, there are little indications that the region will witness massive returns in the near future. Many, particularly those who sought refuge outside the country, believe they may never be able to return home. The fact that many refugees and IDPs do not plan or believe that return is a viable option anytime soon, even as conditions in areas of displacement deteriorate, shows how intractable they believe the current context is in Syria. This should propel donors and governments in the region to develop more sustainable policy solutions for those likely to remain where they are.

Challenges facing refugees considering return as a durable solution

Studies undertaken by NRC showed a myriad of challenges facing Syrian refugees who would voluntarily return to Syria. For example, in Jordan, a total of 75 per cent Syrian refugees reported not possessing Syrian valid passport key to cross the border. More than half of the Syrian refugees from Dara's living in Jordan do not possess their Syrian documentation proving land and property ownership required to reclaim homes back in Syria while in displacement or upon return – a challenge exacerbated by damage to land registries in Syria. One third reported their homes were strongly affected or destroyed during the crisis. Many do not



Sorya Ahmad, 55, fled from Ras Al Ayn to Iraq in the wake of Turkey's military operation in northern Syria. "There's nothing to go back to," she said. "Even if I had to eat soil here, I would not go back to Syria." Photo: Hakim Najm/NRC

possess legal and civil documentation to support their housing land and property claims, especially relevant in the case of inherited or shared property and for female headed households.

Challenges also exist for students who hope to get their academic achievements accredited upon return to Syria. In Jordan for example, provisions for students with academic transcripts unverified or partially verified by the Jordanian Education and Foreign Ministries and the Syrian Embassy in Jordan who wish to continue their studies in Syria, remain unclear. So too is the degree of equivalency in learning outcomes between the Jordanian and Syrian education systems (basic and secondary levels), and its impact on the readiness of returnees sitting placement tests. Lack of clarity also impacts those who have pursued vocational traineeships. Lagging education and training indicators for Syrian refugees in Jordan coupled with a depressed Syrian economy, limit livelihoods opportunities for returnees to a narrow set of low-skilled jobs in Syria.

Humanitarian appeals will likely continue to be underfunded while humanitarian needs continue to grow.

Humanitarian needs in Syria and the region have grown, not subsided, over the last ten years. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the needs of Syrians, both in and outside the country, across the board. As a result, the UN is requesting over US\$10 billion, between the 2021 Needs and Response Summary inside Syria and the 2021 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, the biggest combined appeal the Syria crisis has seen in the last ten years.¹²⁸ The number of people in need has also grown: In 2021, the humanitarian agencies estimate that a total of 13.4 million people are in need of assistance inside Syria¹²⁹ and another ten million are in need in refugee-neighbouring countries, consisting of Syrian refugees, but also vulnerable Jordanians, Lebanese, Turks, and Iraqis, who have also suffered from this protracted crisis.¹³⁰ This is one of the highest recorded numbers of people in need of assistance in the region in a decade of conflict.¹³¹ Mounting poverty and hunger rates will mean more people will be reliant on humanitarian aid for the foreseeable future.

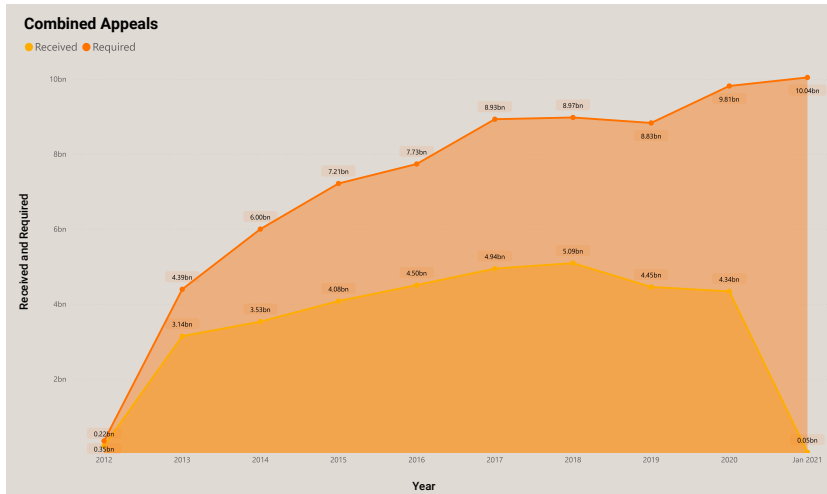
Throughout the interviews that NRC conducted, it was clear that monthly assistance received in the form of WFP food vouchers or cash assistance is a lifeline to the majority of vulnerable refugees who receive them, as availability of sufficient work opportunities is unreliable. Asmaa, a Syrian refugee woman in her 50s with three sons, told NRC: “Living conditions are difficult. I live on vouchers provided by the WFP and I work with cleaning homes sometimes. But two days ago, I injured my hand. I do not know if I will be able to work again. My priorities are to secure the rent of the house, and food. My biggest fear is not being able to pay rent.” These concerns resonated across Syrian refugees in the region.

But donor funding is not keeping up with the pace of needs. In fact, there are clear signs that donor fatigue is setting in and funds available are drying up. Last year, the United Kingdom – traditionally one of the



Children refugees from Ras Al Ayn playing in Bardarash Camp, Iraq. Photo: Alan Ayoubi/NRC

more generous donors to the Syria crisis – announced a 30 per cent cut in funding to aid projects,¹³² with Syria facing more than a 50 per cent cut in assistance.¹³³ Funding for appeals both inside Syria and the refugee response in the region have been consistently underfunded over the last ten years, with 2020 only being 55 per cent funded between the Humanitarian Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) combined.¹³⁴ With more and more donors indicating possible cuts in funding to the Syria response and region, the humanitarian response may face a funding crisis.



Combined funding appeals for the Syria and refugee response in the region

There are calls to reform the way aid is delivered, citing the need for a stronger ‘humanitarian and development nexus’.¹³⁵ Though there have been efforts to provide more predictable, multi-year funding the reality on the ground is very different. For the most part, despite lip service to the “humanitarian-development nexus” by donors, international funding has yet to translate into longer term aid or significant investment in early recovery funding in Syria. Beyond the type of funding being disbursed to Syria, policies in neighbouring countries have hindered, rather than enabled, any potential durable solutions for refugees.

In the absence of policy changes in host countries, displaced Syrians will likely continue to rely on temporary, piecemeal solutions, rather than sustainable solutions that promote resilience and self-reliance.

In refugee-hosting countries in the region, host government policies on the right to work, access to residency rights, and freedom of movement may be fuelling aid dependency and inhibiting the potential for self-reliance. For example, in Lebanon the ability to access lawful work opportunities has become more difficult over the years, which has had far-reaching consequences on Syrian refugees. In 2019, the Lebanese Ministry of Labour adopted a new regulation barring Lebanese employers from hiring Syrian refugees without work permits. With the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lacking legal residence or Lebanese “sponsors” to apply for residency, a work permit is far out of reach for most Syrians. The regulations also impacted Syrian refugee-



NRC staff offload relief kits from delivery trucks to distribute to families in Hazzeh, Eastern Ghouta. Photo: Tareq Mnadili/NRC

owned shops, with Syrians now only allowed to open businesses with Lebanese partners.¹³⁶ The lack of legal work opportunities puts Syrian refugees in Lebanon in a Catch-22 – not being able to afford legal residency and legal work permits because of lack income and being unable to find lawful opportunities because they lack legal residency and work permits. As a result, those who manage to find opportunities, such as construction work or other forms of casual labour, are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and low wages, making it difficult to afford basic life necessities even with some form of income.

Barriers to accessing formal work in all sectors of the economy have a similar effect in Jordan. Though the Jordanian government has made significant progress in this area, issuing work permits and waiving associated fees, these policies do not apply to all sectors. The situation became more difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the implementation of measures to curb the spread of the virus, including the reduction of government services. One Syrian man from Rural Damascus in his 60s, a father of eight older children now living in Amman, told NRC: “One of my sons got a work permit for a year but the permit was later cancelled due to the Covid-situation. My other son, who has a bachelor's degree in Mathematics, is the only one in the family who is currently working as a cashier in a vegetable shop without a contract. He works for 12 hours a day for one Jordanian Dinar per hour.”

All the refugees and IDPs interviewed by NRC expressed a desire to make a living on their own but face significant barriers, mostly due to government-imposed policies.



NRC winter kits to be distributed in Eastern Ghouta. Photo: Tareq Mnadili/NRC



Photo: Karl Schembr/NRC

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO AVERT TEN MORE YEARS OF CRISIS

All warring parties must institute a permanent, nationwide ceasefire, endorsed by the Security Council and enforced by key Member States supporting the Syrian government and armed groups. This must come with a political settlement agreed by all parties.

Even with nearly a year of no major changes along the frontlines, there has been no progress towards a political solution. With conflict lines now relatively stagnant, the international community, through the UN Security Council, have an opportunity to advance a political settlement.

Address barriers inhibiting displaced Syrians from choosing to return back to their homes in Syria. Ensure changes are long lasting, enabling returns to be safe, voluntary, informed, dignified and durable.

In order for the conditions to become conducive for the return of IDPs and refugees, there are still a multitude of legal, physical, and material barriers that must be addressed – largely policy reforms that the Syrian government, de facto authorities inside Syria, and donor governments must enact.

- *The Syrian government and de facto authorities should make guarantees of safety for refugees who may return to Syria and IDPs who may return to their area of origin. This means not discriminating against or targeting returnees on the basis of having been displaced, their area of displacement, or their individual or family profile.*

Though the Syrian government has made calls encouraging the return of refugees outside the country, many refugees fear the possibility of being interrogated, detained, arrested, or even forcibly conscripted into the Syrian military.¹³⁷ For example, Syria's conscription law mandates that all men between the ages of 18 and 42 are required to serve in the Syrian military.¹³⁸ In the northeast, similar concerns over forced conscription into armed groups has also driven young men to flee.¹³⁹ Failure to conscript or receive deferment or exemption of service makes it difficult, if not impossible, to move freely across the country without fear of arrest at a checkpoint or forced conscription. Many male Syrian youth have fled the country just to avoid military service during the conflict. This is a huge driver of displacement of male youth outside the country with many having ended up in Europe.

- *The Syrian government should enable access to civil documentation for all Syrians and not discriminate against those who lived under or have documents issued by non-governmental authorities.*

With the wide range of groups that have governed parts of Syria over the last decade, many IDPs, in addition to refugees outside the country, have been unable to obtain or renew Syrian government issued civil documentation. Some are scared of approaching government institutions to obtain these documents out of fear they would be punished for living under non-governmental control. Vulnerable groups, including women whose husbands are missing, or deceased may struggle to obtain civil documents for their children due to gender nationality laws. These policies must be amended to ensure all Syrians have access to these documents as they are



Children in Eastern Ghouta, flock to school to catch up on years of missed education. Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC

essential to accessing basic services and exercising basic rights as Syrian citizens, including reintegration upon return home.

- *The Syrian government should grant humanitarian agencies unimpeded, sustained, and timely humanitarian access across the country, but particularly for programming in areas witnessing high rates of returns.*

Across Syria, GoS-imposed restrictions in engaging with local partners and humanitarian access restrictions, makes delivering principled humanitarian assistance complicated.¹⁴⁰ Restoration of public services and livelihoods support has the potential to enable sustained returns for IDPs and refugees alike, however humanitarian agencies must be able to have a sustained presence in areas of return to ensure delivery of quality assistance and that aid is provided to the most vulnerable.

- *The Syrian government and other governing authorities inside Syria should respect housing land and property rights, including those of displaced Syrians.*

If left unaddressed, challenges related to housing, land and property rights of displaced Syrians – refugees and IDPs alike – may pose a major impediment to return. Many of them are at risk of being dispossessed of land they may have once owned but now have no legal proof of ownership for. For Syrians living outside of government control it is almost impossible to document property transfers in state registries. In many cases, so many different entities, from the state to non-state armed groups have controlled territory, real estate may be considered abandoned.¹⁴¹ Over the last several years, the Syrian government has passed several laws and issued several decrees that “provide for the demolition, expropriation, and redevelopment of areas with undocumented or illegal housing.”¹⁴² These policies disproportionately impact refugees and IDPs and impede their ability to return home to their areas of origin.

- *The Syrian government should recognise schooling certificates and other education programs obtained outside the government-controlled parts of Syria.*

Education has been a major concern of Syrian parents both inside and outside the country. Many young people in Syria, including those who have been displaced, lack the required documentation required to prove their educational achievements and to re-enrol at the appropriate level. A significant proportion have had to change curriculum during the conflict, and their previous studies are often not recognised in their new location. Even students who have stayed within the same governorate or city have had to endure changing curricula as lines of control shifted. For Syrian refugees who have managed to obtain an education abroad, whether through formal or non-formal programs, ensuring their certificates are recognised by Syrian authorities is a major concern as they plan for their future. In previous years, the Syrian government has facilitated opportunities for school children to cross conflict lines to take school exams.



With most of the neighbourhoods in ruins, tens of thousands of Syrians are still displaced with no home to return to. Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC

Initiatives like these should be scaled up and expanded upon in the future.

- *De facto authorities inside Syria should remove restrictions on freedom of movement in camps.*

In some cases, Syrian citizens are facing restrictions on their mobility in displacement camps in their own country. For example, Syrian IDPs in some of the Self-Administration-run camps are unable to leave the camps to work, attend school, or reunify with families except under exceptional circumstances. These families – most of whom fled the final enclave of the IS – are confined to densely populated camps where they are mostly reliant on humanitarian assistance. These restrictions are preventing them from locally integrating in their surrounding host communities and also inhibiting them from accessing the resources to one-day return home. Prolonging their confinement to camps may impede their reintegration later on.

- *Donor governments should enable access to sustainable livelihood opportunities and services inside Syria with a view to promoting self-reliance and dignity.*

One of the most effective way to support displaced Syrians to one-day return home is to support their access to livelihood opportunities. Fear of not being able to provide for their families upon return home may deter displaced families from leaving their current residence to return back to their area of origin. The restoration of basic services and public infrastructure in areas of origin is key to improving conditions for return.

Neighbouring countries should allow Syrians fleeing conflict to seek refuge in their territory. They should also refrain from measures that force, coerce, or push refugees to return to Syria before they are ready.

Though conflict in Syria shows signs of some stagnation in certain regions, displacement of people shows no signs of abating. Yet neighbouring countries in the region have all but shut their borders to those needing refuge. Deportations by governments in the region mean even those who have already sought refuge outside are not always safe. Though Syria's neighbours are not party to the UN refugee convention, they are still bound to respect the principle of non-refoulement, as customary international law.

Refugee hosting countries must recognise that should conditions in Syria change for the better, it will take a significant period of time before refugees can return in safety and dignity. In addition, many have indicated they may never be able to return due to concerns for their safety. In the meantime, host governments in the region should ensure that refugees in their countries can live their lives in dignity and safety. This must include respecting the principle of non-refoulement, including no refoulement of Syrians currently seeking protection at their borders. For this, it is important to allow temporary visits to Syria, with subsequent readmission to the country of asylum and where relevant,

intervene when national or local governments take actions which may contribute to forced and coerced returns, including evictions and raids.

Donors and governments in the region should work in partnership to immediately improve conditions in refugee hosting countries. Refugee-hosting governments must ensure refugees from Syria are able to exercise their basic rights. This should include policy reforms that increase self-reliance and allow them to safely remain where they are as a pre-cursor to finding longer term solutions.

Though neighbouring countries in the region have shouldered the majority of the responsibility of providing safe haven to Syria's refugees, there are some critical policy reforms that must be implemented to drastically improve living conditions in these countries. The London donors conference in 2016 and subsequent conferences in Brussels over the years have provided a platform for the international community and regional governments to articulate steps that need to be taken to make this happen, with financial and technical support from donor governments. Commitments include issuing work permits to Syrian refugees, changing domestic policies to make it easier for refugees to work lawfully, waive fees and impediments refugees face in obtaining legal residency, and allow school-age refugee children who are undocumented to attend school.

Though most refugees hope to one-day return to Syria, the majority recognise that this is not an option anytime soon. In the meantime, host governments must make good on promises to change policies that would improve conditions for refugees from Syria, including accessing services like education, healthcare, and assistance, and economic opportunities in their host country. The three durable solutions – return, local integration, and resettlement – must be made available to Syrian refugees.¹⁴³ Though for a range of historical and political reasons, neighbouring countries have not yet recognised local integration as a viable option, instead focusing on return as the sole durable solution that should be offered to Syrian refugees.¹⁴⁴ Donor funding has often been provided to humanitarian programming in neighbouring countries through this 'returns' lens. Alongside return and resettlement in a third country, local integration must be considered for those who are unable or unwilling to return home in the long run.

Donor governments should support sustainable funding models in Syria and across the region that promote self-reliance.

Ten years of conflict and a spiralling displacement crisis requires humanitarian agencies and donor governments to take a hard look at the modalities in which assistance is being delivered. This must include:

- *Donor governments should support humanitarian agencies across Syria to deliver 'early recovery' assistance, including restoration of rights and public services. This should be paired with support for humanitarians to negotiate for principled humanitarian access with relevant authorities, including the Government of Syria.*

Inside Syria, Western donor governments have made clear: they will not provide support for reconstruction in the absence of a political settlement and transition.¹⁴⁵ But humanitarians are concerned that these political stances are obstructing the delivery of early recovery



Informal tented settlement in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Photo: Nadine Malli/NRC

support, a critical phase in a humanitarian response,¹⁴⁶ particularly in areas that have witnessed stability over the last several years.¹⁴⁷ This will also be critical as humanitarian organisations plan to support refugees who do choose to return, as well as IDPs, who are projected to return in much larger numbers.¹⁴⁸ Ensuring the sustainable reintegration of displaced people will depend in large part on the availability of basic services and infrastructure, alongside a secure environment and viable livelihood opportunities. In addition to providing funding support to this type of assistance – a critical pillar of the 2020 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan – NGOs have called on donors to adopt a collective approach to directly engage with relevant technical line ministries in Syria to support the negotiation of access for principled humanitarian and recovery interventions, including community engagement, conflict sensitivity and inclusion criteria to ensure a ‘do no harm’ approach.

- *Donors should adopt a conflict sensitive approach for future recovery or reconstruction interventions inside Syria.*

Donors should adopt a conflict sensitive approach and robust housing land and property due diligence policy for future reconstruction interventions: In preparing for engagement on future reconstruction, donors should identify areas of priority concern and explore aid projects in Syria in a conflict-sensitive manner across the humanitarian-development nexus. Donors should start work on the development of a robust due diligence policy for future reconstruction interventions that strengthens how aid is provided, to ensure it reaches intended beneficiaries and safeguards are met.

- *Donors should capitalise and expand on empowering programming models that promote self-reliance – including cash-based assistance – in refugee hosting countries, while holding host governments accountable for longstanding policy commitments that will improve the lives of refugees.*

Over the past ten years, humanitarian organisations have developed innovative programming interventions that address vulnerabilities amongst affected populations while also promoting self-reliance and agency. Cash assistance has been found to improve physical security and safety amongst vulnerable households.¹⁴⁹ These models can be scaled up and replicated across the region.

At the same time, the nature of some interventions may be inadvertently prolonging poor displacement conditions. In Lebanon for example, informal settlements have expanded over the years, but their infrastructure is temporary in nature and reliant on humanitarian interventions such as water trucking. This neither provides consistent quality of service or any form of sustainability.

- *Donors should provide multi-year, flexible funding to humanitarians on the ground to enable medium to long-term thinking on resilience and recovery programming.*

Sustainable programming models which require consistent engagement with local authorities, engagement and feedback from communities and aim to deliver assistance beyond what is lifesaving requires more time and flexibility. It will require more detailed



Refugees in Aرسال, Lebanon, were forced to demolish their basic stone structures by the authorities. Photo: NRC

assessments, negotiations with local authorities, and in-depth power analyses to ensure aid is provided with conflict sensitivity and does not contribute to replicating pre-existing inequalities. Ten years into the crisis, a response which helps households and communities move from dependence on humanitarian relief to more dignified and sustainable solutions is essential now more than ever.

- *Donors should ensure that restrictive measures such as sanctions do not hinder aid responses across Syria.*

There are concerns that sanctions imposed on Syria will make an already bad economic situation worse, and further hinder the humanitarian response. Despite exemptions in sanctions regulations to allow humanitarian organisations to engage in aid activities, these sanctions regimes are difficult to navigate, with aid agencies often subject to both EU and US sanctions. Donors are urged to implement effective humanitarian exemptions and risk-sharing with implementing partners.

Donor governments should fully fund all pillars of the humanitarian response inside Syria and in the region. This should include the global pandemic response plans for the region and programming to mitigate the socioeconomic knock-on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Humanitarian needs continue to grow year after year. With hunger rates and food insecurity on the rise, unemployment rates at an all-time high, and evidence of Syrians reducing food intake to survive, this is not the time to reduce funding for humanitarian assistance and recovery efforts. The UN has issued global appeals to fund the humanitarian impact – including public health and socioeconomic knock-on effects – of the Covid-19 pandemic on countries in the region. Fully funding the humanitarian response plans in the region, including Covid-19 response plans, is the minimum high-income countries can do to share responsibility with countries in the region.

Refugees and displaced populations must also be included in plans to end the spread of the virus, including in vaccination plans.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the world that nobody is safe until everyone is safe. As such, it is crucial that displaced populations and refugees are included in vaccination plans and economic recovery plans. The World Bank and other international financial institutions are working with countries to provide funding to respond to this public health crisis, including purchasing of vaccines.¹⁵⁰ The World Bank and international financial institutions should provide loans and grants to countries which are hosting refugees and IDPs and should encourage the inclusion of displaced people in economic stimulus plans and national social protection plans, including extending working rights to refugees where these are limited. Examples such as Jordan, where the government has undertaken efforts to ensure refugees are vaccinated at the same level as the host community should be applauded and replicated across the region.¹⁵¹



NRC cash distribution as part of the Covid-19 response in northern Lebanon. Photo: NRC

High income countries abroad should immediately increase resettlement places to share the responsibility in hosting Syria's refugees.

High income countries should immediately set targets for a substantial increase in resettlement pledges and access to complementary pathways, like educational opportunities, humanitarian visas and family reunification. In addition to providing resettlement to those who fit traditional criteria such as urgent medical needs and survivors of gender-based violence or torture, this should also include those who have a “well-founded fear of persecution in Syria.”¹⁵² Recent announcements by the US government to scale up resettlement admissions, including for refugees from Syria, are a welcome development. Other countries should follow suit and immediately support in resettling the more than 500,000 refugees identified by UNHCR as immediately needing this type of assistance. With many countries closing their borders in 2020 in order to curb the spread of Covid-19,¹⁵³ it is all the more important that resettlement in 2021 significantly scales up.

Governments in the region, donors, policymakers, UN agencies, NGOs and other institutions providing assistance on the ground should ensure all interventions are informed by the experiences and perspectives of displaced populations.

Countless assessments, surveys, and research into the perspectives of refugees and displaced populations inside Syria have been undertaken over the last ten years. There have been some improvements in terms of the participation of Syrian civil society in donor conferences abroad. Still, significant strides must be made to ensure Syrian youth,¹⁵⁴ women, persons with disabilities, and other historically marginalised communities are effectively able to inform these solutions both inside and outside Syria.¹⁵⁵ Their perspectives must be front and centre when designing programming and policies that aim to deliver solutions to their displacement. Ensuring solutions are driven by the needs and priorities of displaced Syrians will be the only way to ensure solutions are connected to realities on the ground. Failing to integrate their collective experiences and ensure their participation in planning solutions that impact their future will almost certainly have adverse repercussions on the future of Syria.



NRC food distribution at Zaatari Camp, Jordan, during Covid-19. Photo: NRC

Endnotes

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