

A Life on the Edge: Syrian IDPs

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This article examines the challenges faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Syria, based on facts and personal observations, and provides recommendations for the international community. IDPs are one of the most vulnerable groups of people in the current global context. Escaping from armed conflicts, generalized violence or human rights violations, IDPs leave their demolished houses or besieged towns, only to find themselves trapped within the borders of their home countries, unlike refugees who manage to cross an international border in order to take shelter in another country. Some Syrian IDPs have eventually settled in makeshift camps in the border areas after fleeing civil war. There are reportedly hundreds of thousands people living alongside the Turkish-Syrian border under very harsh conditions. Underlying these conditions and their continuing deterioration, this article attempts to demonstrate the importance of the role of international NGOs in improving the situation for IDPs.



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The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement define internally displaced persons (IDPs) as ‘persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.’¹ According to the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there were 33.3 million internally displaced people in the world as of the end of 2013. The organization says the number of IDPs increased 16 percent compared with 2012, largely due to the ongoing crises in Syria and the Central African Republic (CAR), both of which the UN has accorded level-three status, the most serious.²

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Internally displaced persons trapped in an ongoing conflict often face greater challenges than refugees, whose rights (to protection from abuse, exploitation or forced return, and to food and shelter, for instance) are recognized and well-defined within international law and treaties such as the Geneva Conventions. There are no specific international legal instruments addressing the needs of IDPs, and general agreements are difficult to apply.³ On the other hand, international assistance remains limited and unsustainable for a host of reasons, including security concerns, and hesitation by foreign donors to intervene in internal conflicts.

Since they are located within the borders of their home country, responsibility for the protection of IDPs rests first and foremost with national governments. However, the government might also be the cause of the forced displacement and it may not intervene in order to relieve the suffering, viewing the IDPs as “enemies of the state”. As long as the conflict continues, the situation of IDPs will progressively deteriorate. In this regard, the role of the international community is significant both

1 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2004) *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (Original English version)*. United Nations.

2 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (May 2014) *Global Overview 2014: People internally displaced by conflict and violence*. Geneva: IDMC and Norwegian Refugee Council.

3 UNHCR (2007) *Internally Displaced People Q&A*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/basics/BA-SICS/405ef8c64.pdf> (Accessed: 25 December 2014).

for addressing the immediate necessities and generating longer term solutions.

Facts and observations about Syrian IDPs

Syria is seen as the largest internal displacement, crisis as well as one of the greatest refugee crises in the world. As of December 2014, nearly 300,000 people have been killed according to a report released by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, millions of people have been forced to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. They can be classified within three categories: (i) Refugees living in the camps; (ii) Those trying to survive outside the camps and (iii) IDPs within the country's borders.

Asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants who have been forced to leave their countries are entitled to protection in the countries where they have sought refuge. However, they encounter a host of challenges; internally displaced Syrians face serious hardship due to the lack of national and/or international protection. The current article focuses on the situation of the Syrian IDPs who have taken shelter along the Syrian side of the Turkish border.

According to November 2014 figures released by the IDMC, there are at least 7.6 million IDPs in Syria.⁴ Also, the UN has recorded more than 12 million displaced and conflict-affected people inside the country.⁵ Syrian IDPs, who fled their homes to avoid bombardments, raids and other types of assaults, have sought shelter in relatively safe places, mostly in the border regions. The majority of them are staying with relatives, while others are taking shelter in abandoned schools, mosques and factories in rural areas. While their initial escape was triggered by violence and insecurity, the challenges they now face are increasingly due to shortages. Consequently, IDPs end up in refugee camps in border regions, which are closer to distribution or access points for basic supplies. As the security situation continues to deteriorate, internal displacement is likely to rise.

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4 IDMC (2014) *Syria IDP Figures Analysis*. Available at: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/figures-analysis> (Accessed: 24 December 2014).

5 UNHCR (2014) *UN and partners launch major aid plans for Syria and region*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/54929c676.html> (Accessed: 24 December 2014).

Internal displacement implies temporary relocation for the purpose of reaching safety and/or getting access to basic needs. Thus, the preference for Syrian IDPs is to stay with relatives, and/or to settle in urban areas, often relocating several different times. In this pattern, the tented camps in border areas emerge as the final option as the armed attacks and violence encroaches on living spaces. Having fled their home unprepared, without any belongings or identity cards or passports, and suffering severe physical and psychological traumas, displaced people are in a deeply vulnerable position, and in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection.

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Their situation differs dramatically depending on whether people are living in regime or rebel-controlled areas. The most vulnerable IDPs are in opposition-held areas, which are not receiving the same degree of aid. The UN does not bring aid from across the Turkish border, insisting that it cannot do so without the regime's permission. Consequently, the IDPs are entirely dependent on aid from other International NGOs (INGOs), which are struggling due to the difficulties of conducting cross-border operations. These areas are also under threat of bombardment by the Syrian authorities. With no political solution in sight and due to the increasing lack of access to cross-border aid, many Syrians are at risk of a prolonged IDP situation.⁶

Turkey's border stretches out to northern Syria, which is currently under the control of opposition groups. The situation in the country's north determines refugee influxes into Turkey. The victims rush into Turkish borders when bombardments intensify in the north. Many of them want to cross the border, yet without any proper documentation or money and because of the circumstances, they end up stuck between the borders. Moreover, it is clear that hosting countries are not always prepared to receive such influxes.

In the wake of the ongoing security crisis, the reluctance and hesitation of the international community to work inside Syria means that the IDPs often lack even basic supplies. The images of muddy, ill-kept tented camps, of men and women struggling

⁶ Syria Deeply (2014) *Syria Is Now the World's Biggest IDP Crisis*. Available at: <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/05/5427/syria-worlds-biggest-idp-crisis/> (Accessed: 29 December 2014).

to take care of their families, of children waiting barefoot for a bowl of warm soup have become virtually commonplace – but we must not forget that these photographs depict one of the most tragic and chaotic humanitarian crises of our time.

Exemplary work of Turkish INGOs

As an NGO worker who has paid several visits to IDP camps along the Syrian side of the Turkish border, I can clearly state that their situation is the worst of all the other refugee groups. They are neither formally protected by the international community, nor recognized as IDPs by the Syrian regime. With the lack of a safe zone for civilians in the country, they are also under the threat of bombardment both by the regime and armed groups. IDP camps have been particularly targeted by artillery bombardments and airstrikes; some have experienced several attacks already. A UN commission of inquiry has reported grave violations of international humanitarian law in this regard.⁷

The role of international NGOs is of vital importance in terms of providing protection and care for the affected and vulnerable groups, especially when governments or international humanitarian bodies such as the UN have failed to intervene. There are a small number of international NGOs who work for victims inside the country. A number of international non-governmental relief organizations working in Syria are Turkish INGOs and they are among the most effective independent non-governmental organizations, with very large scale cross border relief operations towards Syrian IDPs and victims in several war-torn cities of the country. The one of them, IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, which is among largest Turkish INGOs capable of reaching out to 136 countries and regions in five continents within the context of humanitarian relief, has focused most of its attention on Syria since the beginning of the crisis.

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Delivering aid to Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan - shelter, nutrition, clothing and health care - IHH primarily targets victims inside Syria including IDPs and those living in besieged towns in coordination with Syrian non-governmental

⁷ UN High Commissioner For Human Rights (May 2012) *Periodic Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. UN Human Rights Council.

formations. Operating from the two coordination offices in Turkish border towns of Kilis and Reyhanlı, the foundation also cooperates with over 100 humanitarian aid organizations from 45 countries. Raising donations in cooperation with local and international NGOs, IHH has delivered 4800 aid trucks to date. These have been sent by IHH to various parts of Syria such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Humus, Idlib, where clashes are ongoing.

Turkish INGOs' humanitarian work to support Syrian IDPs is shaped around the provision of basic necessities, which include shelter, food, clean water, and clothing, as well as medical, psychological and educational assistance. Hundreds of tents have been provided to people inside Syria, who were forced to flee their homes as a result of the ongoing crisis. Dozens of schools have been established in the IDP camps, while many others receive financial support. The Foundations has established bread production centers and mobile bakeries at campsites, and are also providing tens of bakeries with flour and diesel in Syria.

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Along the Turkish-Syrian border, there are around 400,000 people living in more than a hundred makeshift camps, according to estimates. The population density in the camps varies depending on the level of bombardments. People rush in to the border area when attacks intensify, but then often choose to return once the violence is subsided, due to the hardships of life in the camps. Most of the camps are run by Syrians, with some established by INGOs such as IHH, which have set up eighteen tented and container villages along the border, accommodating 50000 people. The camps that are set up and managed by international NGOs provide better conditions; the others struggle to cover the basic needs of the IDPs due to a lack of funding. A visit to the area reveals that the Syrian people living in overcrowded camps in dire conditions, with the sounds of airplanes flying above them.

Due to a lack of funding, insecurity, and political hesitation among international organizations, the infrastructure of IDP camps remains poor and the aid that reaches the people is unsustainable. The most obvious problem with the tented camps is that the tents are inadequate for either winter or summer conditions. Without winter clothes, shoes or boots, Syrian children are

freezing to death. IHH estimates that currently 150,000 Syrian children are battling against the cold, and epidemics in more than 100 campsites near the Turkish border. Seasonal conditions also stir up problems even during the summer as a result of water shortages, lack of hygiene and poor sanitation. International NGOs involved in cross border aid operation in Syria have launched a number of projects aimed at setting up prefabricated villages for the IDPs, yet the unsuitability of the land and funding gaps remain challenges, due to the high costs of such projects.

The Syrian population is composed of multiple different groups of people from different backgrounds, attitudes, and social classes, just like any other community in the world. They once lived in their own neighborhoods surrounded by family, relatives and neighbors. Now they live in camps with strangers, obliged to share living spaces including bathrooms and kitchens. The psychological and sociological costs of this experience are significant. Furthermore, Syrian children and youth - who are expected to contribute to the future of their country - have irregular access to schooling and little sense of stability or security. Despite the efforts of NGOs, an access to education is one of the greatest challenges for Syrian youth and it needs to be addressed immediately.

Additionally, since 2012, there has been a rise of allegations of abuse amongst young Syrian women and children who have taken shelter in neighboring countries or public campsites along the borders inside Syria. Already suffering due to the circumstances mentioned above, women and children are likely to be re-victimized given their vulnerable and traumatized situations. Widows and orphans, especially those who have been left alone without any familial protection, face greater danger of abuse; they require additional support from humanitarian groups. IHH is already taking care of 2500 Syrian orphans by providing financial and psychological support, and is also establishing container villages to cover the needs of those families. These initiatives are valuable examples of what is required in terms of prioritizing the protection of vulnerable groups of people in a war-stricken society.

Conclusion and recommendations

As the conflict in Syria drags on and the chance for return seems increasingly distant, the suffering of IDPs will continue. The refugee or displacement crisis can be solved only when the civil war is over, and the people can return home in safety. However, the complete destruction and demolition of infrastructure as a result of severe armed attacks as well as the protracted civil war means that Syrians face prolonged displacement.

Despite the urgent need for long term initiatives, sustained leadership, and commitment from a broad range of organizations and institutions, IDPs do not attract sufficient attention or funding from the international community. In the absence of such interventions, they are often unable to resolve their displacement crises, and have no prospects of rebuilding their lives or achieving a durable solution. On the other hand, the authorities in Damascus have deliberately impeded the international response in Syria, given that a number of foreign aid workers have been kidnapped in the north of the country.⁸ It is clear that stronger will and collective pressure should be applied to the Syrian authorities in order to preserve basic human rights protection.

The Syrian conflict has spread beyond the regional borders and has become an international issue. In the wake of this mass immigration and humanitarian tragedy, the international community and national governments should take more responsibility to find an effective solution in order to ensure security and stability in the country. As an initial step to improve the current situation, a safe zone should be granted inside Syria for people to take shelter. Also, humanitarian corridors should be created for international NGOs to carry out relief operations, and for people to reach aid supplies. As stated, there are some international NGOs operating inside Syria who have already taken serious risks on the purpose of providing cross-border humanitarian assistance considering highly dangerous conditions. But their efforts are insufficient to address the large scale of needs in the country. Consequently, the international community must take a substantive action to provide funds for housing, food, healthcare, education and basic needs for IDPs in order to minimize their vulnerability, as well as to invest in the infrastructure of the campsites.

⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (May 2014) *Global Overview 2014: People internally displaced by conflict and violence*. Geneva: IDMC and Norwegian Refugee Council.

It is vital to generate permanent and sustainable funding as immediate as possible to cover the needs of Syrian IDPs and refugees, so they can have enough capabilities to rebuild their life.