

21 October 2014

## SYRIA

# Forsaken IDPs adrift inside a fragmenting state

In 2013, 9,500 Syrians were displaced per day on average. By July 2014, the total number of internally displaced people (IDPs) reached 6.4 million, a third of the entire population of the country. An additional three million Syrians have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. A stable middle-income country that hosted refugees from all over the region and beyond just four years ago, Syria is now experiencing a displacement and protection crisis of a magnitude the world has not seen for many years.

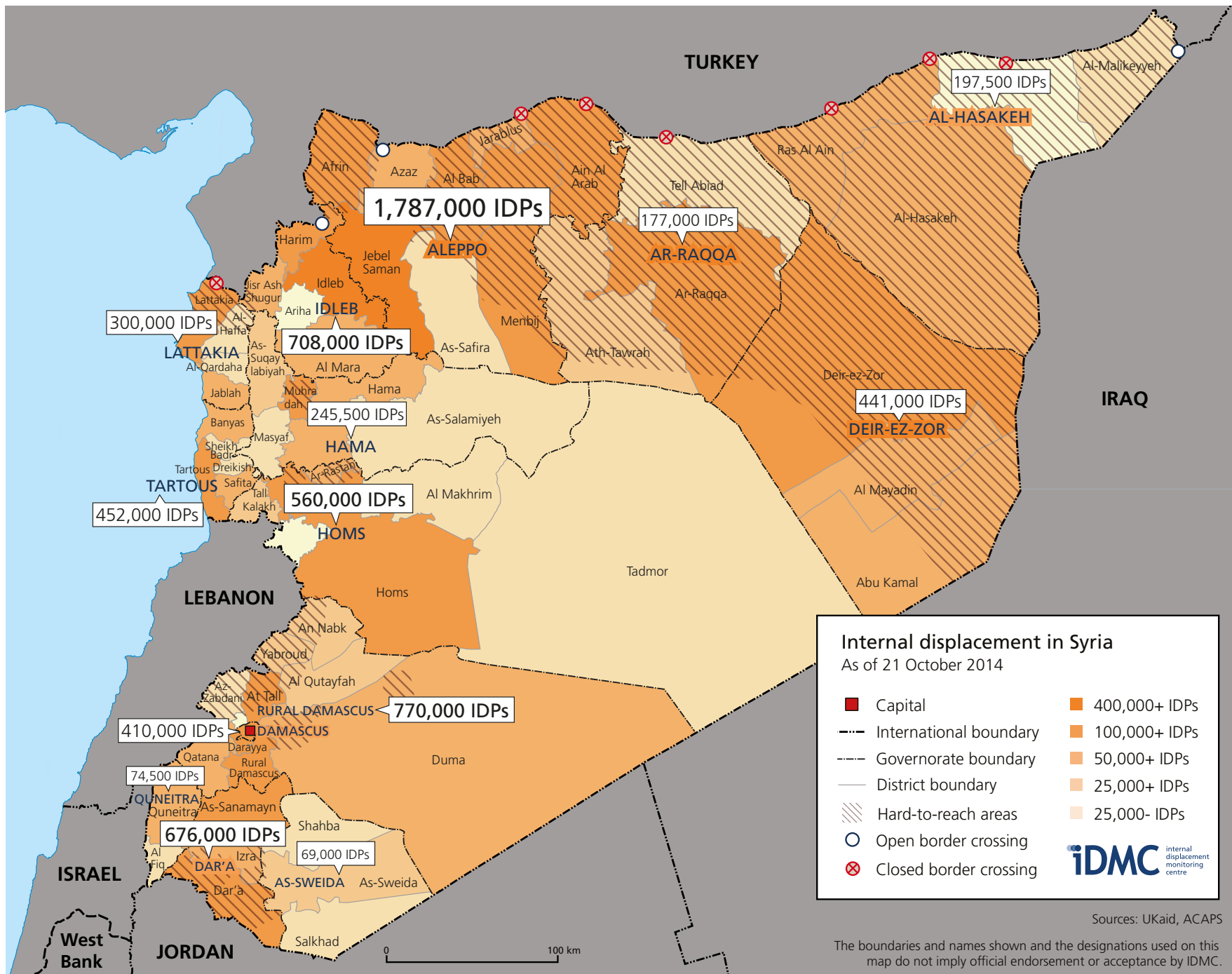
The Syrian authorities have not only failed to protect civilians from or during displacement, but their deliberate targeting of non-combatants has also been the main cause for their massive displacement. Sieges, checkpoints and international border restrictions have prevented civilians in need of protection from fleeing to safer areas, either within or outside the country. For their part, several fundamentalist Islamist groups have also forced civilians to flee and carried out human rights violations that have led to their displacement.

Aid agencies have done their best to respond to the overwhelming humanitarian impact of the conflict, both in the country and from neighbouring states. However, the politicisation of aid by international and regional actors has prevented them from fulfilling their basic functions. It has prevented them from being able to respond to the needs of all IDPs, irrespective of their locations or political allegiances, in conformity with the humanitarian principle of the neutrality of humanitarian assistance. The Syrian authorities have severely restricted the work of international humanitarian agencies and, except for a few cases, have prevented them from delivering aid to rebel-held areas across front lines and international borders.

Access restrictions and cumbersome procedures imposed by the Syrian authorities on humanitarian agencies have hampered their monitoring of IDPs figures and movements. This has led to inconsistent, unreliable and patchy data and contributed to an underestimation of IDPs' needs. Tensions between international agencies over their relations with the Syrian authorities, perceived by NGOs active in rebel-held areas as compromising, have created mistrust among the different actors. This has, in turn exacerbated coordination constraints. All these factors, compounded by severe funding shortcomings, have gravely hampered the humanitarian response.



An IDP family shares a meal at Newroz refugee camp, situated next to the town of al-Malikiyah in Rojava, Syria. Photo © Mackenzie Knowles-Coursin/IRIN



Map by: IDMC

More maps are available at [www.internal-displacement.org/search?Type=Map](http://www.internal-displacement.org/search?Type=Map)

Given the repeated failure of UN initiatives to facilitate a political solution to the initial crisis and to prevent it from spiralling into a full civil war, the prospects for durable solutions for IDPs are very remote. They are further reduced by economic collapse and fragmentation of the country along sectarian lines, making the prospect of significant return of IDPs hypothetical.

## Background

### *Uprising and repression, the beginning of displacement*

In Syria, drought, economic liberalisation, nepotism and cutbacks in state subsidies had led to an inexorable rise in poverty, while state institutions, commandeered by the Assad family since 1969, continued to marginalise the population through a corrupt political system ([Alan George, 2003](#); [de Chatel, 2014](#)). Displacement in Syria started after peaceful protests in March 2011, sparked by the authorities' arrest and ill-treatment of children who had called for the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad, in the southern city of Dara'a ([HRW, April 2011](#); [BBC, March 2011](#); [Al Jazeera, March 2011](#)).

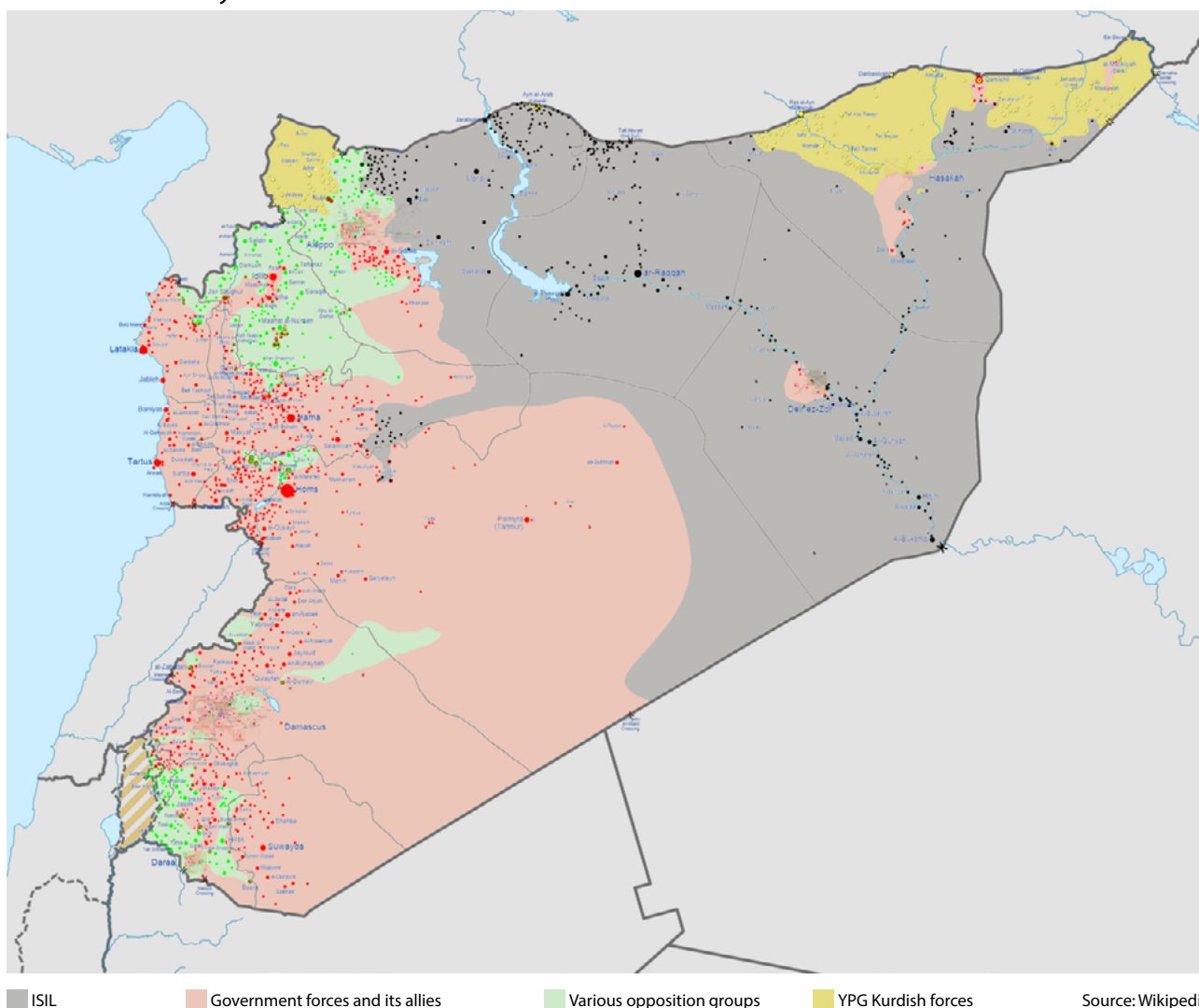
The Syrian military laid siege to Dara'a and violently repressed increasingly bigger demonstrations that eventually called for the removal of President Assad and his government. After lifting emergency laws and promising to reinstate Syrian nationality for stateless Kurds, the Syrian authorities criminalised public protests and allowed security forces to use lethal force against demonstrators ([Asharq al-Awsat, April 2011](#); [Al Eqtisadiyah, April 2011](#)). In May 2011, the Syrian army and paramilitary forces started besieging the cities of Baniyas, Tafas, Talkalakh, Rastan, Talbiseh and Homs, using artillery and machine guns against protesters. The UN Security Council (UNSC) condemned the Syrian authorities' use of force against civilians and "widespread violations of human rights" ([UNSC, August 2011](#)).

After several army officers defected and formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, the civilian uprising turned into an armed rebellion and displacement started to last longer and to affect an increasingly larger number of people. ([Asharq al-Awsat, August 2011](#); [Asharq al-Awsat, March 2012](#); [CNN, August 2011](#)). Neither diplomatic efforts nor field missions by UN envoys were able to prevent the escalation of hostilities. Arab League monitors left the country after one month in January 2012 and the UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan resigned in August 2012 after three months. His successor, Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned in May 2013 and there was no initiative to replace him for over a year until Staffan de Mistura took up the post in July 2014. The UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) also made no progress. These UN initiatives failed to stop the country's descent into civil war and protect civilians caught up in the conflict

## Repression-related displacement not a new phenomenon

For decades prior to the current civil war, the Syrian authorities had used arbitrary detention, torture, repression of all forms of dissent and discrimination, in particular against Kurds. Unrest was suppressed through disproportionate and indiscriminate military force against civilians. In 1982, thousands of people became internally displaced and between 10,000 and 20,000 civilians were killed when the authorities besieged and bombed Hama for weeks after the Muslim Brotherhood had rebelled against the government and attacked several officials. ([Fisk, 1990](#); [HRW 1993](#); [Friedman, 1995](#)). In 2004, the Syrian authorities killed dozens of Kurds demanding an end to discrimination in place since the 1960s. Up to 60,000 Kurds were displaced following an "Arabisation campaign" around Qamishli, near the border with Turkey ([MERIP, August 2011](#); [Minority Rights Group, 2009](#); [Vanly 1992](#)).

### Areas of control in Syria



([Carnegie](#), July 2012; [Daily Mail](#), February 2012; [The Guardian](#), July 2011).

#### *The civil war and massive displacement*

The second phase of the crisis started in July 2012, when armed opposition groups went on the offensive against the Syrian army, leading to an intensification of fighting that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) qualified as a “non-international armed conflict” or civil war ([ICRC](#), July 2012). By October 2012, opposition groups supported by regional actors, mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, had established control over large swathes of territory around Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest, around Deir-Ez-Zor in the east and Dara’a in the south ([RT](#), June 2012:

[NYT](#), October 2012: [WP](#), May 2012). When most of the north-east fell into the hands of the People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish armed group ([Al Arabiya News](#), July 2012), people fled government reprisals and sought protection in rebel-controlled areas along the Turkish border, or in areas beyond Damascus’ control.

In July 2012, the violence spread to the capital, Damascus and to Aleppo, the economic heart of the country. As peaceful protests were gradually replaced by fighting that extended to urban areas, the number of IDPs increased exponentially, reaching over 1.5 million ([IRIN](#), July 2012; [Brookings](#), October 2012).

While opposition forces were gaining ground, divisions between Islamist fundamentalist groups – such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also referred to as ISIS), the al-Nusra Front or al-Tawhid, – and the secular opposition – such as the FSA and the YPG – emerged. Armed clashes led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people, particularly in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates in the north and Raqqah and Deir-Ez-Zor in the east. Islamist fundamentalist opposition groups were reported to have perpetrated numerous acts of violence against minorities ([Carter Centre](#), February 2013; [Al Jazeera](#), January 2014; [Al Monitor](#), September 2013).

The third phase of the conflict started around March and April 2013, when the Syrian army, with the support of the armed wing of the Lebanese party Hezbollah, re-established government control over all areas bordering Lebanon. The involvement of Hezbollah reinforced perceptions of an Iranian-led Shiite alliance fighting hundreds of radical Sunni groups, most notably Al Nusra Front and ISIL, backed by influential individuals from the Gulf ([Independent](#), July 2014; [The Guardian](#), January 2014; [Al Jazeera](#), February 2014; [Huffington Post](#), June 2013). This sectarian dimension of the conflict has had an increasing impact on displacement patterns as the civil war rages on.

The fighting and violations of international humanitarian law perpetrated against civilians by all parties to the conflict drove millions into internal displacement. The continuing fragmentation of the country, which has resulted from a divided opposition and the stand-off between belligerents, led to a dramatic increase in the number of IDPs. The government reinforced its hold on the centre and coastal regions, as the north and south fell under the grip of a variety of rival opposition groups and the northeast under Kurdish control. The fluidity of the multiple frontlines led to an average of 9,500 new IDPs each day in 2013. By June 2014, close to half of the entire population

had fled their homes, with close to a third of the population displaced within Syria, the remainder having crossed into neighbouring countries ([ICG](#), June 2013; [Christian Science Monitor](#), June 2013; The [Guardian](#), June 2013; [RRP6](#), July 2014).

## Displacement figures

Monitoring internal displacement in Syria has been seriously hampered by the volatility of the frontlines and the intensity of the armed conflict. The scale and nature of displacement have been additional challenges: displacement has not only taken place in all governorates of the country, but many Syrians have also been multiply displaced over the last three years. Data gathering has also been consistently complicated by the authorities' denial of access to certain areas, including to besieged cities, and by the fact that areas under the control of armed opposition groups have often been hard to reach. For those reasons, and despite the severity of the IDP crisis, data on displacement has remained partial and often unverifiable. The impact of conflict on affected people has been hard to assess ([Amnesty](#), October 2013; [Reuters](#), March 2014; [WP](#), October, 2013).

### *Paucity and inconsistency of IDP figures*

During the first phase of the conflict, when restrictions prevented a significant and rapid response by humanitarian agencies inside the country, data on IDPs relied principally on news reports and information posted on social media by Syrian activists who provided information about locations where assistance was available, and on the numbers of recipients. At the time, the information available was limited, sporadic and difficult to verify ([VDC](#); [Homs IDPs FB page](#); [Palestinian IDP FB page](#); [Aleppo IDP FB page](#); [Syrian Expatriates Organization](#)).

Initially, the media provided inconsistent figures ranging from 300,000 to 500,000 IDPs, attributing them to the UN despite the fact the latter

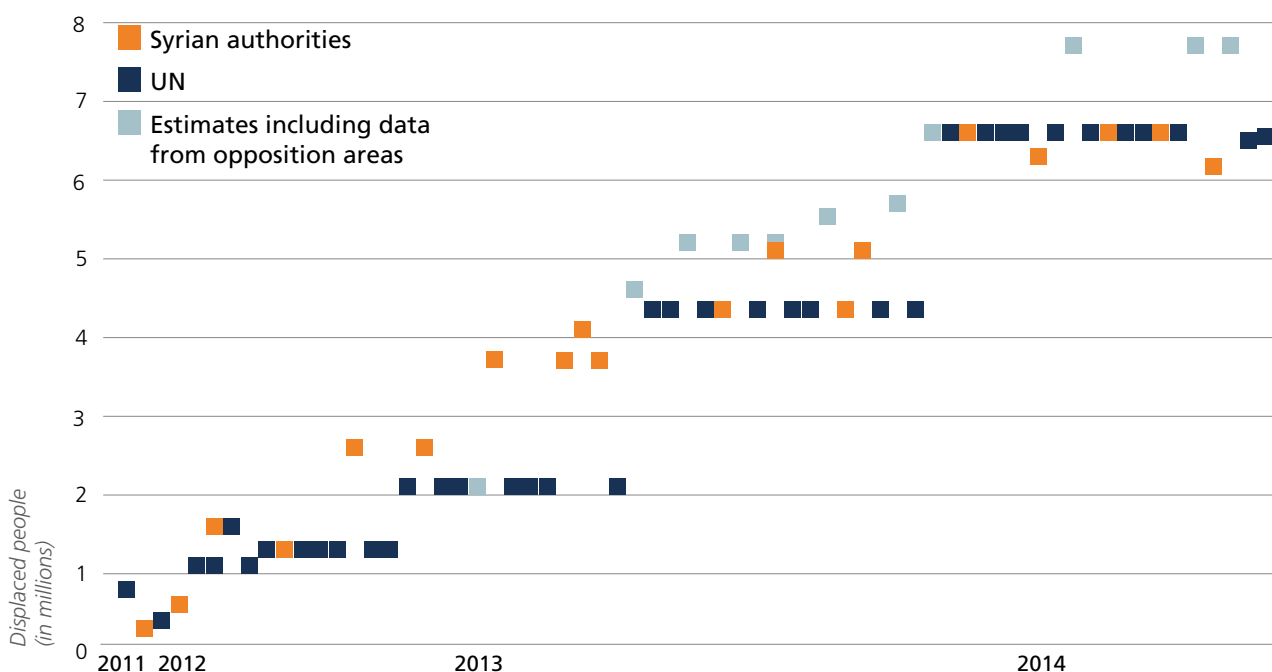
had not released any estimates ([Relief Web](#), May 2012; [Reuters](#), May 2012). In July 2012, Al Jazeera reported 500,000 IDPs, referring to an estimate of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) ([Al Jazeera](#), July 2012). The same month, SARC's estimate stood at 1.5 million IDPs ([IRIN](#), July 2012), a figure quoted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs in August 2012 ([OHCHR](#), August 2012). In September 2012, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported 1.2 million IDPs, while the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that "nearly 1 million ha[d] fled their homes" ([UNHCR](#), September 2012; [UNOCHA](#), September 2012). These figures indicated a noticeable increase in the number of IDPs between the first and second phases of the conflict, but discrepancies in the numbers underlined the need for a more coordinated approach to data gathering.

The June 2013 Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP), designed to plan for the humanitarian response including funding allocations, estimated that 4.25 million people were displaced. The figure increased to 6.5 million IDPs

in the following SHARP in December 2013, underpinning the scale of displacement in the third phase of the conflict. The SHARP estimates were based on information gathered from SARC's registration, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and the Ministry of Local Administration, together with information available to UN offices in the country, including the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The latter estimated that 270,000 of its beneficiaries were displaced by the Syrian conflict as of mid-2013 (HARP, [September 2012](#); SHARP, [June 2013](#) and [December 2013](#); [UNRWA](#) March 2014).

*The challenges of addressing the information gap* IDP figures produced by the UN for each SHARP were not projections, but a snapshot of the situation in the months leading up to their release. Consequently, by the time the SHARPs were published in December 2012, June 2013 and December 2013 respectively, their IDP figures were already outdated. The process of gathering IDP figures has been challenging due to lack of

### Numbers of internally displaced people in Syria



access to certain areas, security concerns and political sensitivities. Since data produced by the UN relied heavily on validations by the Syrian authorities, it did not include figures collected in areas under the control of armed opposition groups, such as data provided by international NGOs that worked across the border from neighbouring countries (HARP, [September 2012](#); SHARP, [June 2013](#) and [December 2013](#)).

Data gathering was not possible in opposition area, as access was hampered by insecurity, in particular in zones under the control of ISIL. The Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (HARP) or SHARP figures on the number of IDPs were thus not substantiated by country-wide assessments. In order to address this information gap, donors – in particular the European Commission Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) – supported a range of humanitarian actors and the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) of the Syrian opposition to specifically assess the situation in rebel-held areas. The resulting Joint Rapid Assessment in Northern Syria (J-RANS) conducted between January and May 2013 highlighted the severity of both the scale of internal displacement and the needs of the civilian population ([J-RANS](#), May 2013).

In December 2013, the Syrian Needs Assessment (SINA) carried out another assessment, which was the first attempt to integrate research on IDPs figures in rebel-held areas with the UN data ([SINA](#), December 2013). However, the latter did not endorse SINA's findings. Concerns over information sharing across the front-lines were not overcome. While ACU issued its own report ([ACU](#), March 2014), Western donors commissioned private consultants to conduct research and assessments inside Syria ([Interaction](#), March 2013; [ECHO](#), August 2014; [BBC](#), July 2014).

Despite the fact that these assessments shed light on the dire humanitarian situation in the areas

under the control of armed opposition groups, the discrepancies underlined the need to better coordinate data collection exercises. For instance, J-RANS identified 3.2 million IDPs in just the seven northern governorates, when OCHA's estimates for the whole country stood at 4.25 million. SINA estimated the IDP population to be 4.1 million in 111 out of 272 sub-districts, when the UN estimates for the whole country reached 6.5 million.

SHARPs also provided examples of discrepancies in figures. In December 2013, the SHARP cited the UN figure of 6.5 million IDPs, and this estimate remained unchanged for eight months, before dropping by 100,000 people in July 2014 ([SHARP](#), December 2013; [RRP 6](#), July 2014). However, the Regional Response Plan (RRP) 6, issued in July 2014, did not provide any explanation for this decrease ([WFP](#), March 2014; [RRP5](#), December 2013; [RRP 6](#), July 2014; [CIRCA](#), May 2014; [The Independent](#), August 2014; [EA](#), April 2014). A number of ceasefires, such as in Homs and Damascus, had indeed allowed an undetermined number of IDPs to return home. However, during the same period, fighting, notably around Aleppo, had displaced an additional 1.481 million people ([SNAP](#), July 2014). The number of IDPs mentioned in the December 2013 SHARP stood thus in contrast to reports of new displacement events.

Despite – but possibly because of – the immense scale of internal displacement, the task of confirming IDP figures in the midst of a civil war continues to be a serious challenge. Four years into the conflict, the picture of displacement remains patchy, limited by access restrictions. The data collection process remains politically tainted by reliance on authorities who themselves played the central role in causing displacement. With sketchy data on IDPs – both qualitative and quantitative – the pattern of displacement remains confused and the number of needy IDPs uncertain. Their vulnerabilities can only be approximately assessed.

## Patterns of displacement

### *From rural to urban displacement*

During the first phase of the Syrian crisis, most displacements were directly linked to the Syrian authorities' repression of demonstrations. People mainly fled to rural areas around towns at the forefront of the protests, such as Dara'a in the south and Jisr al-Shoghour and Maarat al Nu'man in the northwest. Displacements were short-term and restricted to the governorates where the security forces carried out operations, with people often going back home as soon as they were over ([The Guardian](#), June 2011).

When protests later extended to major cities, primarily affecting impoverished districts and suburbs, displacement started to last longer and affected an increasingly larger number of people. By early February 2012, as the security operations shifted to Homs, the country's third largest city and self-proclaimed capital of the uprising, violence escalated in the underprivileged district of Bab Amro where armed opposition had been particularly active and deeply entrenched.

In July 2012, when security operations targeted the town of Zabadani and the large suburb of Duma on the outskirts of Damascus, IDPs started to flee to the quieter neighbourhoods of the capital that were of a similar socio-economic profile and that had been equally neglected by the authorities. Areas such as Jaramaneh, Babila and Sayeda Zeinab witnessed a doubling, if not a tripling, of their residents. This massive influx exacerbated tensions and fuelled more protests, eventually turning those areas into hotbeds of resistance that were again targeted, leading to further displacement ([Le Monde](#), August 2012; [Al Monitor](#) November 2012; [Flaten](#), Spring 2012).

### *IDP flight to camps*

During the second phase of the conflict, as the opposition started to control and hold territory, tens of thousands of people fled government re-

prisals and sought protection in rebel-controlled areas along the Turkish border, or in areas beyond Damascus' control in the YPG areas. Those waves of displacement also led to the emergence of half a dozen spontaneous IDP camps ([IRIN](#), 19 December 2012). In March 2013, J-RANS identified eight camps along the Turkish border in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. The number of camps, mostly makeshift, unmanaged structures, grew rapidly. By November 2013, there were about 85 camps in Idlib alone. By May 2014, they accommodated a total population of about 155,000. In 2014, two camps were operational in Dara'a in the south, and a third was being set up ([ACU](#) May 2014; [SNAP](#) July 2014; [Brookings](#), January 2014).

### *Emerging sectarian pattern of displacement as Syria fragments*

In the third phase of the conflict, when fighting intensified and started to affect the whole country, Syrians fled beyond their original governorates and moved wherever they had relatives in safer areas. Minorities sought safety from combat among their kinfolk. Kurds fled from Sheikh Maqsood to Hasakeh under Kurdish control and Christians and Alawis fled central regions, mainly for the coastal cities of Tartous and Latakia. Such patterns of displacement raised concerns that IDPs were possibly contributing to the creation of sectarian enclaves or consolidating ethnically homogenous communities.

Members of minorities such as Christians, Turkmen and Alawis also fled human rights violations perpetrated by Islamist fundamentalist groups such as Al Nusra, Islamic Front, Tawhid Brigade and ISIL. These groups have not only forcibly evacuated civilians belonging to such minorities from areas now under their control, but their strict fundamentalist policies and behaviour have further prompted thousands to leave places such as Aleppo, Deir-Ez-Zor, Kassab and Baqqa ([Amnesty International](#), January 2013; [Guardian](#), April 2013; [RT](#), December 2013; [HRW](#), January 2013; [ThinkProgress](#), July 2014).



During the most recent phase of the conflict, Syrians have also been increasingly fleeing as frontlines between the government and opposition forces, and between the hundreds of radical jihadist groups and the secular opposition, have continued to shift. Radical groups' attacks on Kurdish areas in Ras-al-Ayn in 2012 and 2013 displaced thousands into Kurdish-controlled areas, while fighting in the rest of Aleppo governorate continued well into 2014.

By 2013, the city of Raqqah, which had first hosted hundreds of thousands of IDPs in 2012, had become a theatre of repeated opposition infighting, leaving the city in ruins and driving most who had sought safety there to flee again. A similar pattern emerged in Deir-Ez-Zor in the east (AI [Monitor](#), November 2013; AI [Monitor](#), May 2013; [BusinessInsider](#), May 2014; The [Independent](#), February 2014; [Brookings](#), May 2014). Those areas became particularly inaccessible, the UN describing them, as well as other besieged cities, as "hard-to-reach areas". By July 2014, 4.7 million people were estimated to be trapped in those areas ([RRP6](#)).

## Protection concerns

### *Displacement as a result from direct targeting of civilians*

From the onset, the Syrian conflict sparked grave concerns for the protection and physical safety of civilians, including IDPs, and those prevented by the belligerents from fleeing besieged areas. The extent of displacement and the widespread destructions of homes and infrastructure were not collateral damage from the fighting, but resulted instead from the protagonists' deliberate actions.

During the second and third phases of the conflict, civilians sought safety not only from the fighting, but also from widespread arbitrary executions, kidnappings, torture, detention and forced recruitment, including of children ([COI](#), June 2014). The violence morphed from a civil-

ian uprising, characterised by state repression targeted at some sectors of society, into an all-out civil war in which all belligerents deliberately targeted civilians who had often no safe space to flee to (AI [Ahram](#), October 2013; [Atlantic Council](#), February 2014; [The Independent](#), March 2014; AI [Monitor](#), April 2014).

In July 2013, the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs concluded that over the two previous years, both the government and dissident armed groups had carried out "indiscriminate attacks on civilians and (...) mass human rights violations" that violated international humanitarian law and breached principles 5 to 8 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. He noted in particular that both parties to the conflict had failed in their "duty to refrain from creating conditions that can lead to displacement" ([SR on the Human Rights of IDPs](#), July 2013).

Those concerns were further heightened when in December 2013, the Syrian government started to use barrel bombs filled with explosives and shrapnel in urban areas, indiscriminately killing a high number of civilians, including IDPs ([HRW](#), July 2014).

In opposition areas, the rise of hundreds of extremist groups left very little space for minorities such as Christians, Shiites, Druze and Yazidis who have been targeted simply on the basis of their identity. Sunni civilians who did not submit to the socio-political vision of those groups were similarly not spared ([ODI](#) April 2014). Human rights violations against civilians perpetrated by ISIL and Al Nusra Front were condemned by the UNSC in August 2014 ([UNSC](#), August 2014).

In June 2014, the Commission of Inquiry mandated to investigate human rights violations (COI) reported that since spring 2014, the government attacks had "targeted areas populated by civilians, including those with high concentrations of internally displaced" ([COI](#), June 2014). Women, children

and minorities have been specifically targeted and have been among the most vulnerable. Protection from discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence, and specific risks faced by children, has also been critical issues. ([UNHCR](#), 2014). The COI highlighted the impunity with which the Syrian authorities, as well as ISIL in particular, have committed massacres and targeted women, children and minorities ([COI](#), 16 September 2014).

The targeting of civilians in opposition-controlled areas followed a deliberate strategy to make such areas unliveable ([SR on human rights of IDPs](#), July 2013), in what the COI called “a strategy of terrorising civilians”. During the first half of 2014, the number of civilians that sought refuge in government-controlled areas of Aleppo rose as a consequence of such attacks ([COI](#), June 2014).

By targeting civilians with the deliberate aim of forcing them to evacuate from certain areas, the parties to the conflict have not only failed to protect them from displacement, but have also denied them adequate protection during displacement, in violation of the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (Principle 10(2)) ([Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs](#), July 2013). All parties to the conflict have deliberately disabled and destroyed civilian infrastructure, including health facilities, causing mass displacement. All have denied or obstructed even the most basic assistance ([COI](#), June 2014), including to civilians requiring secondary and tertiary level care for such conditions, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, asthma and cancer ([FMR](#), September 2013).

Given the widespread violations of human rights committed by all parties to the conflict, IDPs’ most crucial needs are protection and safety, in particular from threats to their lives. Other basic needs include food, clothing, fuel and medical services.

#### *Checkpoints, sieges and borders: the challenges of finding safety in displacement*

Civilians have also been prevented from seeking

safety through displacement in violation of their right to freedom of movement as guaranteed by the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (Principle 14 and 15). Among other restrictions, civilians have been prevented from crossing checkpoints and turned back to unsafe areas where their lives continue to be at risk.

For fear of being targeted at checkpoints for their alleged support for rival armed factions, thousands of people have also refrained from leaving their homes when the conflict spread to their neighbourhood.

Both the government forces and, to a lesser extent, armed opposition groups, have resorted to siege tactics that trapped civilians in unsafe areas and led to dramatic humanitarian situations. For instance, the siege of Homs, from which 50,000 to 60,000 people fled in May 2011, lasted three years, ([UN Press Conference](#), March 2012). By February 2014, some 240,000 people were trapped in areas such as Homs, Muadhmiya, Yarmouk, Nubul and Zahra “facing life threatening shortages of food, water, electricity, fuel and medical care and supplies”. Most of them have remained unable to leave those areas ([OHCHR](#), February 2014; [SNAP](#), October 2013; [Brookings](#), November 2013). The UN stated that those sieges, as well as indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas and forcible displacement, constituted a “tactic of war” ([SR on human rights of IDPs](#), July 2013).

Freedom of movement of civilians wishing to flee the conflict has not only been restricted by checkpoints and sieges, but also by border constraints. A number of Syrian nationals have been prevented from crossing international borders to find safety in neighbouring countries, and have become IDPs. Palestinian refugees have been among those most affected by these border restrictions, since both Lebanon and Jordan have adopted policies and enforced regulations that forbid their entry. ([The Guardian](#), May 2014; [CS Monitor](#), May 2014; [Amnesty](#), July 2014).

### *Palestinians: the displaced refugees*

Palestinian refugees in Syria have been under frequent pressures from the warring parties to take sides in the conflict ([UNHCR](#), October 2013) and all their camps have been affected by the fighting ([UNRWA](#), July 2014). More than half of the 517,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria have fled as a result of the conflict, 55 per cent of their homes have been damaged and 14 per cent have been completely destroyed. Most Palestinian refugees have been displaced several times and very little information is available regarding their whereabouts.

Among all the camps set up in the Middle East to accommodate Palestinian refugees who had fled following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Yarmouk in Damascus was the largest, with more than 148,000 registered refugees. The Yarmouk Camp witnessed particularly heavy fighting and has been under a prolonged siege by the Syrian military, trapping almost twenty thousand refugees who have struggled to survive. According to UNRWA, fighting led to the displacement of over 89 per cent of the refugee population and at least 128 residents reportedly died of starvation in 2014 ([Amnesty](#), March 2014). By late 2013, frequent armed clashes, malnutrition and acute deprivation had come to define civilian life in Yarmouk ([UNRWA](#), 2012-14; [Amnesty](#), March 2014).

## **Durable solutions**

Amidst an on-going civil war in which all parties have deliberately targeted civilians, killing tens of thousands and driving millions in exile, durable solutions such as voluntary return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country in safety and dignity are currently not realistic options (*Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Principle 28*). Durable solutions cannot be envisaged for several reasons. These particularly include widespread lack of security, on-going high levels of violence and human rights violations of civilians in many parts of the country and

massive destruction of housing and infrastructure. The compounded effects of a collapsing economy and the lack of prospects for political reconciliation make durable solutions even more remote.

### *Widespread lack of security*

Widespread on-going fighting in many areas of the country between government forces and opposition groups, as well as infighting between such groups, is preventing IDPs from returning home, integrating locally or settling elsewhere in the country. The disintegration of the country into sectarian enclaves excludes the return of IDPs to previously mixed areas where their security would be at risk.

In addition, since January 2013, mines and unexploded ordnance have endangered access to large parts of Syrian's cities, thus preventing returns ([UNMAS](#), January 2013; [SNAP](#), August 2014).

### *Housing and infrastructure*

The use of heavy weapons and indiscriminate attacks, including barrel bombs, shelling, aerial bombardments and sieges, have resulted in extensive damage to infrastructure and housing, making returns or local integration unrealistic or unsustainable for the foreseeable future for hundreds of thousands of IDPs.

In August 2012, the UNSC stated that, "many internally displaced Syrians were being supported by family and friends. More than 1.2 million others had sought refuge in public buildings" ([UNSC](#), August 2012).

In government-controlled areas, where the authorities under-estimated the scale of displacement, the number of shelters was not increased commensurate to the needs. The number of public shelters rose from 626 collective centres accommodating 150,000 IDPs in January 2013 to 938 facilities housing a little over 188,000 in December 2013. Given that the total number of IDPs doubled over that period, the num-

ber of shelters was acutely insufficient ([SHARP](#), December 2013; [OCHA](#), January 2013; [SNAP](#) January 2013; [Syrian RTV](#), July 2014).

Assessments carried in May 2013 revealed that 30 per cent of houses and infrastructure in the north of Syria had been damaged or demolished ([J-RANS II](#), May 2013). These findings confirmed those of a report from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) which estimated 1.2 million houses had been damaged or destroyed, amounting to approximately 30 per cent of the number of houses registered during the most recent census in 2004 ([ESCWA](#), 2012; [USAID](#), April 2013).

In addition to the damage and destruction directly caused by fighting, reports indicated that between July 2012 and January 2014, the Syrian military deliberately razed thousands of residential buildings in Damascus and Hama, often in areas where protest and fighting had taken place. Such destructions were not justified by military purposes and appeared to constitute collective punishment ([HRW](#), January 2014). Analysis of satellite imagery of Damascus and Hama led to estimations that 145 hectares of residential buildings had been demolished in the two cities alone ([HRW](#), January 2014).

Such high levels of destruction raises serious concerns about tenure security, which is further complicated by the destruction of archives and cadastral records and by the IDP's lack of post-displacement documentation. The situation is particularly grave for residents of poorer neighbourhoods who already had little tenure security even prior to the conflict, due to the authorities' neglect. These neighbourhoods, considered by the authorities as hotbeds of armed resistance, have been particularly targeted by the army, causing massive damage ([HRW](#), January 2014).

#### *Collapsing economy*

Once considered a middle-income country, by mid-2013 more than half the Syrian population

was living in poverty ([UNDP & UNRWA](#), June 2013). UNRWA and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) have noted that "the primary productive engines of the Syrian economy are in a state of ruin, tantamount to wholesale de-industrialisation that has precipitated a destructive restructuring of the economy" ([UNDP & UNRWA](#), June 2013). The human development index has fallen back to the level where it stood 37 years ago or as The European Centre of Foreign Relations (ECFR) has estimated "even with an average annual growth rate of 5 percent, it would take nearly 30 years to recover Syria's 2010 GDP value" ([ECFR](#), April 2014).

The dire economic situation has increased the dependency of millions of Syrians – including IDPs – upon government subsidies. Public services decreased by 16.5 per cent in 2012 and by 41.2 per cent in 2013, making Syrians ever more dependent on UN agencies and NGOs ([UNDP & UNRWA](#), June 2013).

With the conflict now in its fourth year and inflation rampant, fuel and staple foods have become unaffordable. IDPs' resilience has been exhausted and the number of people in need has now surpassed ten million ([ODI](#) April 2014; RRP6; [VDC](#), July 2014).

#### *Remote prospects for reconciliation*

Prospects for political reconciliation between the Syrian government and armed opposition groups are extremely remote. They have become further complicated by serious divisions and armed rivalries between hundreds of rebel outfits. The increasing role of ISIL has introduced a transnational element to the original conflict that defies the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states in the region and questions the very foundations of the Syrian state, rendering any hope for national reconciliation unrealistic.

As the civil war is increasingly following sectarian lines, the country seems to be fragmenting into areas controlled by the government, the Kurds

and those under the grip of various opposition groups. The prospect for IDPs to find durable solutions with full respect for their human rights is extremely remote, and it is highly unlikely that in the near future IDPs from different ethnic and religious affiliations will have the confidence to go back to mixed neighbourhoods and resume their previous lives (MEPC, 2014; Brookings, February 2014; Rudaw, June 2014; Washington Institute, October 2012; The Arabist, April 2012).

## Response to internal displacement

The authorities later referred to IDP locations, but depicted them as hotbeds for “terrorists”. Internal displacement was presented as a result of “terrorism”, as illustrated by a number of statements by President Bashar al-Assad (Al Thawra, February 2012; Syrian RTV, July 2013; Syrian RTV, July 2014).

The September 2012 HARP, coordinated by OCHA, indicated a scaling-up of humanitarian aid in Syria and a more UN-led coordinated response. However, the HARP’s shortcomings underscored the critical need for consolidated information on IDP data and the scope of humanitarian needs. After the revised HARP was issued in December 2013 the UN led a Joint Humanitarian Needs Assessment which informed the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan (SHARP) of June 2013 (JHNA, June 2013).

As of December 2013, the World Food Programme (WFP) was distributing almost 3.4 million food rations per month. Health personnel conducted 3.6 million consultations.

UNRWA provided regular cash grants, healthcare, non-food items, shelter support and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services to 460,000 Palestinian refugees, including emergency education for over 40,000 school children (SHARP, 2014).

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis the humanitarian response has been severely under-

## Syria’s political sensitivities on internal displacement

The issue of IDPs has been a sensitive topic for the Syrian authorities. Before the current civil war, they only considered as IDPs Syrians who had been displaced by Israel’s invasion and occupation of the Golan in 196, and their descendants. At the beginning of the current civil war in 2011 and 2012, the Syrian state media made almost no references to IDPs, with the exception of a visit to a distribution centre for IDPs by the president and his wife, at a time when the issue of displacement, particularly in Homs, had become unavoidable (Reuters, April 2012; The Guardian, April 2012). Similarly, Syria’s Humanitarian and Assistance Relief Plans (HARP), drafted by the Syrian government, did not refer to “IDPs” but, instead, to “affected populations who have moved to other areas” or “moved from their homes” (HARP, September 2012; HARP, December 2012).

funded, which has gravely curtailed its ability to respond to crucial needs. By January 2014, only 33 per cent of the budgetary requirement of \$5 billion outlined in the SHARP appeal had been. By the end of March 2014, funding constraints forced WFP to reduce food aid to the most vulnerable by 20 per cent, a decrease in the average calorie intake of every family (ACAPS, July 2014). Requirements increased to \$ 6.5 billion in July 2014 (SHARP, December 2013; UN Common Planning Framework, July 2014).

In areas under the control of the opposition, an international NGO was able to reach 1.7 million civilians (Mercy Corp, March 2014). Yet, despite the best intentions, assistance remains far below the targets. As of August 2014, ten million people were still in need (RRP6).

The delivery of humanitarian aid has been severely hampered by widespread insecurity, active hostilities, interference by armed groups and

lack of local capacity. Despite those constraints, humanitarian workers in Syria have been doing an impressive job, including by negotiating precarious truces in besieged cities. They have delivered vital assistance under fire, paying a heavy human price for their dedication. By September 2014, 59 humanitarian workers had been killed since March 2011 ([BBC](#), February 2012; [Al Monitor](#), May 2014; [The Guardian](#), May 2014; [ECHO factsheet](#), September 2014).

#### *Obstruction and politicisation of aid*

Since the beginning of the conflict, the international humanitarian response has been seriously hampered by the Syrian authorities' strict restrictions on the provision of assistance to people in need. The authorities have only allowed relief operations carried out by aid agencies registered with the authorities and have limited the number of visas granted to international staff and curtailed their movements. These restrictions have "actively obstruct[ed]" international relief efforts that were already seriously constrained ([OCHA](#), April 2013).

Against the background of intervention in Libya by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that coincided with the start of the Syrian crisis, the Syrian authorities justified restrictions imposed on humanitarian aid workers by arguing broad access could open the door to more foreign interference and military intervention ([IRIN](#), June 2012; [Swissinfo](#), June 2006; [BBC](#), December 2005; [RT](#), June 2011; [CBS News](#), February 2012; [Al Jazeera](#), February 2012). Syrian state media claimed conspiracies by Western and Gulf States were responsible for the scale of the displacement crisis ([Syrian RTV](#), February 2014; [Syrian RTV](#), March 2014; [Al Thawra](#), February 2012).

In 2013, UNHCR reported that the Syrian government had simplified the procedures to "facilitate passage through checkpoints, [and] to issue visas for international staff (...) in order to improve outreach to beneficiaries" ([UNHCR](#), 2013). However, despite these reports, the government has

continued to restrict visas and impeded access, as the UN Secretary-General later reported detailed in two reports of ([SG report](#), May 2014; [SG report](#) June 2014).

In October 2013, a UNSC presidential statement "urge[d] all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, to take all appropriate steps (...) to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to the affected people in Syria, including by promptly facilitating safe and unhindered humanitarian access to populations in need of assistance in all areas under their control and across conflict lines" ([UNSC](#), October 2013).

While the government committed itself to expand "humanitarian space including to hard-to-reach areas" and even cross-border ([UNHCR](#), 2013), it continued to refuse access to such areas to humanitarian agencies. The lack of implementation of this commitment led the UNSC to adopt a resolution in February 2014 demanding "unhindered humanitarian access [...] including [...] across borders" ([UNSC](#), February 2014, [UN News Centre](#), March 2014).

The Syrian authorities have also skewed humanitarian operations in favour of areas under their control, and have effectively limited access to opposition areas. Material assistance has been entrusted primarily to the SARC for delivery. As international agencies have had little or no oversight it has not been possible to ascertain if it has reached the beneficiaries it was intended for ([Time](#), January 2014; [UN News Centre](#), December 2013; [ECFR](#), April 2014; [SNAP](#), December 2013; [HRW](#), June 2013).

The Syrian authorities have instrumentalised humanitarian aid "for military gain [and their] bureaucratic hurdles imposed (...) are a calculated obstruction of aid to civilians living in areas under non-State armed group control", as the COI noted in a report in June 2014 ([COI](#), June 2014).

The first HARP appeal in 2012, and the subsequent SHARP appeals in 2013, contained no reference to the situation of civilians in opposition-held areas where most of the NGOs carrying out assistance programme in the country were active. (HARP, [September 2012](#) and SHARP, [June 2013](#) and [December 2013](#)). This omission highlighted the authorities' disregard for the right of all civilians to receive assistance. The ability of international humanitarian agencies to deliver cross border relief to rebel-held areas into Syria has been an on-going issue.

It was not until March 2014 that the first humanitarian aid convoy from Turkey entered Syria ([OCHA](#), March 2014). It had been approved by the Syrian authorities and had used the Qamishli crossing point, the only passage between Turkey and Syria still controlled by the Syrian government. The Syrian government's failure to respect the provisions of the UNSC resolution adopted in February 2014 led to the adoption of another resolution in July 2014 that listed the border crossings through which humanitarian actors were authorised to bring assistance into Syria without approval of the authorities ([UNSC](#), July 2014). It was only on 24 July 2014, when a convoy of nine trucks crossed at Bab Al-Salam into Syria from Turkey carrying food, shelter, water and sanitation supplies, that the UN first delivered relief to rebel-held areas ([ReliefWeb](#), July 2014).

The Syrian authorities not only prevented UN humanitarian agencies from distributing relief in opposition-held zones from neighbouring countries, but they also did not allow SARC to conduct cross-line assistance, invoking the principle of national sovereignty ([HRW](#), June 2013; [Al Jazeera](#), July 2014, [ODI](#) April 2014).

In areas under the effective control of ISIL and Al Nusra Front their attacks on international humanitarian workers have prevented the delivery of humanitarian access ([RT](#), September 2014; [Syria Deeply](#), September 2014).

As a result of both the Syrian government's partial relief policies and a number of opposition groups' violence targeted at aid personnel, most assistance to IDPs has been provided by the Syrians themselves. This situation has put a heavy burden on host communities, local community-based organisations and the Syrian diaspora ([JRFSNA](#), June 2012; [IOM](#), September 2013; [ODIHPN](#)).

#### *Challenges to humanitarian access and response*

In violation of basic principles of international humanitarian law, the parties to the conflict have also restricted the delivery of aid and access to IDPs to humanitarian actors who, they alleged, publish information or advocacy materials they consider as "controversial" ([SNAP](#), February 2014).

As an indirect consequence of these reprisals, public information on the humanitarian needs of civilians has not always reflected the full situation on the ground. Because they were considered to be 'politically sensitive', protection concerns, for instance, were not included in assessments or public reports ([SNAP](#), February 2014). The only exception has been advocacy for child protection, which has "seem[ed] less threatening and much harder to argue against" ([ODI](#) April 2014; [UNICEF](#), March 2013; [Mercy Corps](#), March 2014). Humanitarian responders have, thus, primarily focused on delivering aid and material assistance at the expense of documenting needs, reporting on the situation and advocacy.

#### *Mistrust and lack of coordination among respondents*

Humanitarian organisations operating in Syria have faced immense challenges and have been unable to respond to the massive needs of the civilian population in general, and IDPs in particular. Given the already challenging environment, consultation and coordination between UN humanitarian organisations and NGOs would have enhanced the effectiveness of their respective assistance programmes. Instead, tensions rose when international NGOs criticised UN aid agencies for regarding the Syrian government as a "genuine

partner” when it was actually obstructing aid to rebel-held areas and carrying out massive human rights violations.

UN agencies were blamed by a number of international NGOs for collaborating and coordinating with the Syrian authorities on the drafting of both the HARP and SHARP that failed to address the needs of IDPs in rebel-held areas in which most of those NGOs were operational (SHARP, [June 2013](#) and SHARP [December 2013](#)).

UN agencies were blamed by a number of NGOs that had been providing the bulk of assistance in opposition-held areas for “giving up efforts to negotiate cross-border access to populations in opposition areas” (...) invoking the risk of government reprisals against their activities in Damascus” ([MSF](#), December 2013). Those tensions have over time, turned into mistrust.

#### *International response at the UN level*

Between October 2011 and July 2012, none of the three resolutions tabled before the UNSC which sought to hold the government accountable for grave crimes was adopted due to Russian and Chinese vetoes. Resolutions passed by the UNSC and the UN Human Rights Council – which has held a record four special sessions on Syria – have expressed concerns, called on the parties to the conflict to recognise the civilian nature of IDP camps and welcomed aid pledges to support IDPs. However, these resolutions have had no impact on the belligerents and the rights violations driving displacement ([The Guardian](#), March 2013; [The Independent](#), May 2013; [Call for R2P](#), July 2014; [UNSC res. 2139](#), February 2014; [UNSC res. 2665](#), July 2014; [A/HRC/S-18/2](#)).

The parties to the conflict have not only violated international humanitarian law and blatantly disregarded the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, but traditionally powerful states, the UNSC, and the patrons of the various warring parties have also failed to ensure any accountabil-

ity for the perpetrators of acts targeting civilians or those who deny humanitarian access and support for protection activities of humanitarian agencies ([ODI](#) April 2014).

#### *Conclusion*

The humanitarian response to the civil war in Syria and the plight of IDPs in particular is marred by a lack of information on the scope and nature of their needs. The response faces fundamental structural shortcomings. These include the authorities’ lack of political will to respect the right of all civilians to receive assistance; rebel groups’ attacks on humanitarian workers; limitations on the freedom of movement of civilians to flee to safer areas, including through the imposition of sieges and checkpoints while international borders have become impassable by Palestinians as well as a number of Syrian nationals.

These problems are also compounded by severe underfunding of the aid response, a lack of prospect for a political solution and the fragmentation of the country into sectarian zones, often out of reach for humanitarian agencies. The aid response has been further weakened by a lack of transparency due to the unwillingness of humanitarian agencies to share information with NGOs.

Despite being the largest humanitarian crisis in the region for four years and the fact Syria is engulfed by the deadliest civil war the world has witnessed in recent years, information, particularly on IDP figures and displacement patterns, remains, at best, sketchy and unreliable. Coordination of assistance remains limited, with both potential duplication and unfilled gaps ([ODI](#), November 2013; [Reuters](#), April 2014; [Brookings](#), April 2014; [FAS](#), May 2014). IDPs continue to pay a dramatic price for these failures.



## About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement. For the millions of people worldwide displaced within their own country, IDMC plays a unique role as a global monitor and evidence-based advocate to influence policy and action by governments, UN agencies, donors, international organisations and NGOs.

IDMC was established in 1998 at the request of the Interagency Standing Committee on humanitarian assistance. Since then, IDMC's unique global function has been recognised and reiterated in annual UN General Assembly resolutions.

IDMC is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organisation.

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