OVERCROWDED AND OVERLOOKED

Life for Syrian refugees outside official camps
Acknowledgements and credits

Christian relief and development agency Tearfund works through local partners, including churches, in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. This report is based on the first-hand experiences of Syrian people in Lebanon and Jordan, and Tearfund’s local partners providing humanitarian assistance.

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The names of Syrian people have been changed at their request.
Introduction

The conflict in Syria has been described as the worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the cold war. The scale of the response and the needs are hugely challenging, as more than 2 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, and this is placing unprecedented strain on communities, infrastructure and services.

But behind the statistics is a story. Many stories, in fact. This report is based on the first-hand experiences of the Syrian people caught in the crisis: sharing their hurts, hopes and dreams for Syria.

An estimated 70 per cent of Syrian refugees are moving into villages and cities rather than formal camps, with little or no opportunity to earn a living. These refugees can often feel neglected and overlooked as they find refuge in overcrowded cities and towns. We asked them how the conflict has changed their lives, what problems they now face and, crucially, what they hope for the future. These are their stories.

‘Everything is hard here.’

Umair, 31, father living in a makeshift campsite near Amman, Jordan

The generosity and hospitality of Jordanians and Lebanese people has helped many Syrians. But host families are finding that people they offered to help for a few weeks are still there a year later, because they had all thought the crisis would have ended by now and they could go home. This, of course, brings its own pressures.

Although most Syrians who have fled hope to return, their hope is fading as the conflict becomes even more protracted and they face the reality of long-term displacement. With no clear indication of when the fighting will end, many Syrians do not know how long they will remain destitute.

Tearfund is calling for:

- more aid from the international community to meet the scale of the crisis, with specific attention to refugees who are not living in formal camps
- safe and full humanitarian access inside Syria. Many people who have fled shared their concerns for friends and relatives trapped in Syria
- progress on a political resolution to end the conflict. A great hope of those who fled is to return to Syria. Above all, they want the international community to invest in a peace plan for Syria.

Key facts

- More than 100,000 people have been killed in the conflict in Syria.
- As the conflict worsens, it is expected that more than 3 million Syrians will have left their country by the end of 2013.
- The UN estimates that 10 million people – half of Syria’s population – will need help by the end of the year.
- According to the UN, there are now more than 700,000 Syrian registered refugees in Lebanon and 525,000 in Jordan.
- Approximately 9.3 million people are in need inside Syria, and 4.25 million people are internally displaced.

1 António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), interviewed by The Guardian, 19 April 2013 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/19/half-syrian-population-aid-year
3 UNHCR estimates that urban and rural host communities, rather than camps, house 77 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey
4 The stories in this report feature a mixture of refugees who have either been registered by the UNHCR, national or local authorities or are not registered
5 BBC News, Syria death toll now above 100,000, says UN chief Ban, 25 July 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23455760
7 Valerie Amos, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, briefings on Syria http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/category/contributing-agency/ocha-un-office-for-the-coordination-of-humanitarian-affairs/
Overcrowded conditions: life outside camps

‘The humanitarian situation is desperate. Food supplies are dangerously low in some places. We lack access to many people in need. People are living under siege. Families face intolerable choices between the risk of remaining in place and the risk of taking flight. Communities that once lived in relative harmony are now torn with sectarian tension.’

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN

Some Syrians who have fled are living with host communities, including friends and relatives. However, as space is finite within homes this can mean up to 30 people living in a one-bedroom apartment. Other Syrians either rent makeshift tents or set up their own using whatever materials for shelter are available.

‘I visited a family where 20 or 30 people were living in just one room. I asked one of the women how they could all sleep in there. She told me, “We sleep standing up.”’

Pastor Musa, Lebanon

Although there are formal camps in Jordan, an increasing number of Syrians are living outside these official camp settings. The UN estimates that around two-thirds of the refugee population reside in cities and towns.

Many refugees go to the camps at first, and then leave to try to find shelter in a town, where they look for an apartment so they can have a proper roof over their heads.

Some said they left because they couldn’t find enough food to feed their children, or because of poor-quality water and sanitation. Mothers told us their children found it difficult to sleep because the thin tent walls didn’t keep out the noise of people passing by in the evening, and the tents would flood when it rained. No one wants to live in a temporary camp for long, and many Syrians have been in exile for a year or even two, so they want to move on.

‘I saw a lady cutting grass by the road, and I went to ask her what she was doing. She said that she was taking the grass to give to her children. She had nothing else to give them to eat.’

Pastor Musa, Lebanon

10 Za’atri, which opened in July 2012, is the largest camp. Mezbil Al Fhood (MAF) opened in April 2013 and Azraq is the most recent camp, opening in September 2013.
Unlike Syria’s other neighbours there are currently no official camps in Lebanon for Syrians. While the UN has made great efforts to improve refugee registration, given the continued unprecedented increase of refugees in both Lebanon and Jordan the hosting countries still need practical and financial support. The burden on them is immense and unsustainable.

Our visits to the official camps showed a very organised, structured community with good services, including hospitals and schools. But many people with severe health needs and complex disabilities told us that they can’t get the specialist help they need, because there are more people needing help than there are people to help them.

‘It’s too difficult to live here [formal camp]. My husband has a spinal injury and can’t work, and our children have to share clothes because we don’t have enough. I have two more girls who were left in Damascus and I don’t know anything about them. We are not used to this life. We are used to living in a proper home. I didn’t ask for this. I have done nothing wrong.’

Rasha, 28-year-old mum living in Jordan

Rising living costs:
the struggle to survive

While host-country governments, local communities and aid agencies are doing all they can to help, many Syrians are struggling to afford the rising rent prices. A vicious cycle soon forms: overcrowded living conditions; pressure on local services; limited access to education, healthcare or income; rising rent and food prices. As men and women struggle to find work, families resort to selling what possessions they have – of both financial and sentimental value – to pay for rent. Children and young people who cannot go to school will look for menial jobs to contribute towards living costs.

Aadila (35) lives with her husband and five children (four daughters aged from six to 16 and one son aged 12) in one room of a rented ‘apartment’ in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Her sister-in-law, Haajar (28), lives with her husband and two children in the other room they rent. They share a small bathroom with another family. Their kitchen is a curtained-off area at the back of their room and they eat in the main room. Their clothes hang on a row of pegs on the wall. They come from al-Qusayr, which in their words has now been ‘annihilated’. None of the children go to school.

The food packages they get from the church thanks to Tearfund partner LSESD provide the only food they have. Even with these packages, they only manage to get half the amount of food they need for a nutritious diet.

Aadila’s son is out working in the potato fields, and can sometimes bring some potatoes home with him. The rent for their two rooms is US$200 (£128) per month. They have sold what little jewellery they brought with them from Syria to pay for the rent, but it is not enough. They are able to get water, but electricity costs an extra $12–14 (£8–12) per month. Aadila’s husband works when he can, usually doing tough manual labour for $6–7 (£3–4) a day. Aadila worries for her children and feels upset that they don’t even have a fridge.

Unstable and insecure livelihoods

‘The crisis has intensified and spread into most parts of Syria. The crisis, coupled with the impact of economic decline, has caused a steep economic decline, loss of jobs and livelihoods, and increasing vulnerability among large segments of society.’

Valerie Amos, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

Most of the Syrian people interviewed by Tearfund explained that they had conventional lives before the uprising began in 2011, with homes, jobs and a stable family life, but they are now living in a state of constant fear. Many of them had to move many times within Syria because they feared for their lives, only to find that the next place wasn’t safe and they had to keep moving. Many felt they had no choice but to cross the border into a neighbouring country, with limited prospects for a better way of life.

Families that once had an income and their own homes are now reduced to living off the generosity of neighbours and strangers, which has a huge impact on their sense of independence, empowerment and dignity. These emotional and mental strains can cause as much heartache as their physical needs for food, clean water and shelter.
A small face peers from his father’s comforting arms. Dirar
(3) is scared of crowds and strangers, among other things. Having fled from Syria, Dirar now lives with his parents and seven brothers and sisters in a tent in Jordan. His youngest brother is just one month old. The family has two tents: one for sleeping in and one for cooking in.

Their tents are part of a small makeshift camp in Amman. A few families, mostly relatives from Hama, are allowed to stay on the land as long as some of them work in the fruit- and vegetable-packing factory across the road. As well as hourly pay, the factory owner gives them access to electricity and water.

When they left their home in Syria they had to wait for ten
days in the snow at the border crossing, without food or blankets. Without any money to pay rent for an apartment, the family has little choice but to stay in tents.

What needs to be done:
three calls to action

‘An unprecedented disaster requires an unprecedented response... this is the biggest humanitarian crisis of our generation and the international community must act together. A political solution remains key, but a long-term, co-ordinated international response is now absolutely critical to stabilise the region as it copes with huge refugee flows and to help those in need, whoever and wherever they may be.’

Justine Greening, Secretary of State for International Development

1. Funding: more aid and resources to meet the scale of the crisis

"More aid from the international community to meet the scale of the crisis, with specific attention to refugees who are not living in camps"

In June 2013, the UN launched its largest-ever emergency appeal for $5 billion (£3 billion) to help Syrian refugees and people in need within Syria.11 This replaces an earlier appeal, in the first half of 2013, for $1.5 billion for aid operations. However, the updated appeal is significantly underfunded, particularly as less than half of the UN’s funding appeal has been met thus far.

The UK government has set a new precedent, committing the largest sum to a single humanitarian response of £0.5 billion,12 which is an excellent example to the rest of the world. The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) has also worked hard in mobilising the generosity of the British public. Six months after the DEC Syria Crisis Appeal was opened on 20 March 2013, the total raised has now reached £20 million.13 Yet it is clear that the scale of the crisis requires more funding.

While aid must be targeted to meeting basic needs such as food, water and shelter, the response must also cover longer-term needs. Not only are new refugees arriving every day, but even those who have been there for some time remain dependent on assistance, such as support in paying rent, while children need education and many families struggle to access healthcare.

2. Humanitarian access: providing essential assistance inside Syria

"Safe and full humanitarian access inside Syria. Many people who have fled shared their concerns for friends and relatives trapped in Syria"

3 Three-year-old Dirar clings to his father. Hannah Maule-ffinch/Tearfund.


\[2\] Nick Clegg pledges £100 million aid for Syria, which brings the UK total to £500 million https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deputy-prime-minister-pledges-100-million-aid-for-syria 25 September 2013

Although this report shares the stories of Syrians who have left their country, an estimated 9.3 million people are in need inside Syria.14 That’s the equivalent of the whole population of New Zealand. There are still critical issues of protection and assistance that remain inside Syria itself. This requires full, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to all areas and populations in need inside Syria by the most efficient routes.

Parties to the conflict have the obligation, under international humanitarian law, to facilitate the effective and safe passage of relief convoys and humanitarian personnel in areas under their control.

These obligations are currently not being fulfilled, with many thousands of civilians cut off from food, water, medicine and essential services as a result. Bureaucratic restrictions on assistance are being employed as a tactic in the conflict: visas are routinely denied for humanitarian personnel, registration for NGOs is interminably delayed, and authorisation for many cross-line convoys into opposition-held areas is arbitrarily withheld.

The UN Security Council’s statement calling on all parties to the conflict in Syria to facilitate safe and unhindered humanitarian access to all civilians in need throughout the country15 is a much-needed breakthrough. The next step is to ensure the implementation of the statement so that Syria’s civilian population are able to receive the food, medical assistance and other forms of humanitarian aid they so desperately need.

Tazeem is a man used to supporting his family. Back in his hometown of Deraa in Syria, he owned a beauty salon which also rented out wedding dresses. The 32-year-old built a house for himself and his wife three years ago. The couple have young children and successfully ran their business together. The crisis in Syria has not claimed their lives, but has destroyed everything they owned. ‘The joy I used to have, I’ve lost it now,’ Tazeem says. ‘We lost almost everything.’

When Tazeem and his family fled to Jordan, they had to leave everything behind. Their house and shop were totally destroyed. The family home and business – which had been used to shelter refugees from other parts of Syria – were burnt down. During the trip to Jordan, Tazeem’s family were shot at: ‘The only thing I managed to carry was a suitcase for my wife and kids’ clothing, and some cash.’

Tazeem’s family followed him to Jordan: his father, mother, sisters and their families. Rent is expensive, and eight people live in their small home. His children are traumatised from their experiences in Syria: ‘They are still suffering from shock. If they hear a siren, or a firework from a wedding party, they are afraid, especially at night.’

The UK Parliament’s vote not to entertain military intervention in Syria16 does not mean that we have turned our backs on the people of Syria. The relief response of the UN, INGOs and local NGOs, supported by the UK, continues to play a significant role in alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people.

The UK needs to commit urgently to reaching a negotiated settlement that will end the violence, through an inclusive and transparent political process. Without a clear, coherent or robust plan for peaceful resolution, the international community must prioritise the Geneva II talks17 to kick-start such a process. The UN’s announcement proposing these peace talks to take place in January 201418 is a step closer to a much-needed resolution to the conflict in Syria. These diplomatic talks must recognise the complexities of the conflict and the impact that not only regime-controlled but also rebel-controlled areas are having on civilians, especially those from vulnerable minorities. The UK should use its diplomatic muscle to bring different parties together to discuss, agree and implement an inclusive and transparent political process.

Given the scale and magnitude of the crisis, protecting Syrian people is a key concern, including protecting them from labour exploitation and early marriage, as well as domestic, sexual and gender-based violence against women and children.19 We must all work together to make it easier for people to access specialised trauma and abuse care services, especially children.
Conclusions

‘Two-thirds of them [refugees] have fled Syria since the beginning of this year, an average of over 6,000 people a day. We have not seen a refugee outflow escalate at such a frightening rate since the Rwandan genocide almost 20 years ago.’ António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

The stories told in this report reveal that Syrians living in host communities and outside camps should not be forgotten, as their needs are pressing and support for them is underfunded. The reasons for settling in overcrowded urban areas are varied and complex. Life outside camps, although unstable and chaotic, has become a reality, and some Syrians perceive it as the ‘better’ or only choice they have.

Without a political resolution the crisis looks set to enter into its third year, and we must not allow this to happen. Both inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries hosting those who have fled, the lives and livelihoods of the people of Syria are being destroyed.

As the crisis continues, it is clear that while humanitarian assistance is vital, particularly for the refugees and host communities who are hidden, there needs to be a political resolution to end the bloodshed and suffering. The international community must act now.

‘We left Syria a year ago. Me, my husband our seven children: all of us. We got to the checkpoint to leave the country and they would only allow women and children through, not men. That was the last time I saw my husband. For a whole year, I haven’t known where he is. Since then, we have stayed in different places, and now we have arrived in this makeshift camp. I have brought my seven children here. We don’t have clothes or food. Nothing. We arrived here with nothing.

‘Please hurry up and help us.’

Misha, 28, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

Children grow up in inadequate tents in Jordan. Hannah Maule-ffinch/Tearfund.