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SYRIA: A REGIONAL CRISIS

THE IRC COMMISSION ON SYRIAN REFUGEES





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4 INTRODUCTION

5 STORIES FROM INSIDE SYRIA

Struggling to survive

Women and girls under attack

A health system destroyed

Children in harm's way

8 THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Context of displacement

Camp life

Urgent needs of urban refugees

Impact on host countries

Importance of open borders

15 CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Preparing for a protracted emergency

Twice displaced: Palestinian and Iraqi refugees

17 RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Increase humanitarian aid

2 Maintain open borders

3 Prepare for a protracted humanitarian emergency

4 Expand international assistance inside Syria

5 Scale up programs for urban refugees

6 Address violence against Syrian women and girls

7 Invest in children's safety and healing

22 MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION

23 APPENDIX

PRM Principles for Refugee Protection in Urban Areas

Front and back covers: Drawings by a Syrian child at a local municipal building in Gaziantep, Turkey. Syrian refugees use the building as a school for 270 children, grades 1-4, and Turkish language classes for adults.

Left: A refugee boy sits in the muddy streets of Domiz camp, northern Iraq.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly two years of civil war in Syria has produced a regional humanitarian disaster. More than two and a half million Syrians have been uprooted from their homes, including more than 600,000 who have fled to neighboring countries, and an estimated four million Syrians are in dire need of assistance.

In November 2012, an International Rescue Committee delegation of board members and senior staff traveled to Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq to evaluate conditions of displaced and conflict-affected Syrians and advocate for increased and more targeted humanitarian aid as the crisis evolves and intensifies.

The delegation met with many refugees, officials from host and donor governments, representatives of international humanitarian organizations and local nongovernmental agencies. The group was also briefed by IRC teams across the region who provide medical care for displaced Syrians, offer counseling and targeted health services, distribute relief items and cash assistance to vulnerable refugee families, and work with Syrian partners who provide emergency services in Syria, including the delivery of medical and winterization supplies.

Key findings

Refugees provided harrowing accounts of life and conditions inside Syria: brutal killings and targeted attacks, arbitrary arrests and torture, abductions and disappearances of loved ones, horrific sexual violence, unrelenting bombings, destruction of infrastructure, the evisceration of medical services, dwindling supplies of food, water and electricity, the inability to go to school or work in violence-ravaged neighborhoods and recurring displacement.

While the majority of those uprooted by the turmoil remain in Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrians managed to flee over the past two years—undertaking an often treacherous journey to find safe haven in neighboring countries. Once there, they continue to face new and overwhelming problems.

While many live in camps, the vast majority have become so-called “urban refugees”—scattered

through villages, towns and cities seeking shelter anywhere it is available. The more fortunate live with host families, but most live in wretched conditions, packed into small rented rooms and apartments in disrepair. Others squat in schools and unused spaces, or shelter in public buildings provided by host countries. Almost all fled with next to nothing, are in dire circumstances and increasingly depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Unfortunately, assistance to host communities is meager as the international community provides the bulk of the limited available resources to refugees in camps.

The situation for refugee women and girls is grim. Syrian refugees surveyed by the IRC cited rape as a primary reason their families fled the conflict, yet there is an alarming lack of medical and counseling services to help them recover in the countries to which they have fled. They face unsafe conditions in camps and elevated levels of domestic violence, while reports of early and/or forced marriage of women and girls are increasing.

Countless Syrian children and youth are traumatized by the violence they have experienced and witnessed and are gravely affected by their families’ upheaval. Many children have already missed up to two years of their education because of fighting, and often the schools in host communities are full and unable to absorb more refugee students. Children continue to be at risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation in their environments of refuge.

Should the flow of refugees continue at its current pace, the U.N. estimates that the Syrian refugee population could grow to one million in the next six months. The refugee influx is straining the already limited resources of the neighboring countries. In particular, the health, water, education and sanitation systems of host communities are increasingly

struggling to cope and the cost of rent and commodities is rising. As tensions grow, the welcome mat is beginning to wear thin.

The Syrian crisis will very likely be a protracted and worsening humanitarian emergency. Inside Syria, the human and physical destruction is immense, the country's civic and social fabric is in shreds and its economic foundation and infrastructure are devastated. Recovery and reconciliation efforts are certain to be extensive, particularly if forming a stable government proves challenging and sectarian violence increases. While most Syrian refugees tell the IRC they would like to return home as soon as they can, it could be months if not years before the uprooted are able to do so. Countries hosting refugees are under enormous strain, and the crisis threatens to increase political, ethnic and sectarian tension throughout the region. Jordan and Lebanon are particularly vulnerable.

The breadth and scope of the Syrian crisis far outstrip the financial support provided by the international community. Given the gravity of the crisis and growing needs, the U.N. increased its appeal in mid-December to \$1.5 billion. Current assistance levels are drastically insufficient to address existing needs, let alone the barest requirements to respond to a lengthy humanitarian emergency and post-conflict recovery.

“Syria is tearing itself apart. Doctors are targeted specifically because they treat the injured. Women and girls are raped and brutalized, inflicting maximum damage on their families. Homes, schools, and hospitals are destroyed. The entire international community will need to dig deep to help put back together what is being shredded into pieces.”

—**GEORGE RUPP**, IRC President & CEO

Key recommendations

- ▶ **Increase humanitarian aid.** Donors must meet urgent funding appeals to address the critical needs of uprooted Syrian civilians and assist overburdened host countries struggling to cope with the influx. Failure to do so could endanger the willingness and capacity of host countries to accept more refugees or shelter existing ones. Periodic ministerial-level meetings should be held to address funding needs throughout the region.
- ▶ **Keep borders open.** Borders must remain open to enable Syrians to safely flee and find refuge in neighboring countries.
- ▶ **Prepare for a protracted humanitarian emergency.** The international community must quickly plan for a displacement crisis that could last well beyond the end of the Assad government and persist regardless of the political outcome of the conflict. Intensive diplomatic and financial support will be critical to mitigate tensions that could lead to further instability across the Middle East.
- ▶ **Expand assistance inside Syria.** The international community must step up efforts to provide lifesaving assistance to civilians inside Syria through Syrian partners who can reach hard-hit areas. It is also essential that international aid organizations gain better access to Syria in order to address immediate and long-term humanitarian needs.
- ▶ **Prioritize urban refugees.** Sufficient attention and resources must be committed to meeting the needs of the refugees who are living outside camps—about 70 percent of the total—including health care, cash assistance for food and rent, and protection and education services; and to bolstering the infrastructure of communities inundated by refugees.
- ▶ **Protect women and girls.** Inside camps and out, funding should be scaled up for programs that prevent and respond to violence against Syrian refugee women and girls. This includes providing clinical care and emotional support for sexual assault survivors, improving safety for women and girls in camps, working to minimize forced marriage, survival sex, domestic violence and exploitative labor, and ensuring case management for separated and other vulnerable children. ■

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian uprising that began in March 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring has evolved into a brutal and bloody civil war between the Assad regime and opposition forces. A humanitarian catastrophe is deepening by the day and is likely to continue long after the civil war ends.

By early 2013, more than 600,000 refugees were registered or waiting to register in neighboring countries and an estimated 200,000 more were unregistered and uncounted, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The U.N. anticipates that number could soon exceed one million if the exodus continues at its current pace. Inside Syria, upwards of two million people are displaced by the chaos and violence and an estimated four million require urgent humanitarian aid.

The Middle East is once again facing a human displacement tragedy. Many of the same countries that hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees over the past decade are facing increasing political and economic strains as they struggle to absorb and care for the latest wave of refugees.

To date, the U.S. government has contributed almost \$210 million to international aid groups, the U.N. and others to respond to the humanitarian emergency and provided \$100 million in direct support to Jordan to offset the impact of refugee arrivals. Britain has contributed £68.5 million, while the European Commission has provided more than €165 million to address the needs of Syrians inside the country and in neighboring states.

On December 19, 2012, the U.N. increased its international funding appeal to \$1.5 billion to fund relief efforts for conflict-affected Syrians through the first half of 2013—up from \$835 million that it had previously requested. The magnitude of this crisis demands a

decisive response from the international community to meet critical needs, mitigate sectarian and other tensions, and minimize the risk of regional instability.

As the humanitarian crisis swiftly intensifies, this report looks at conditions faced by uprooted families inside Syria, with a focus on devastated medical services and sexual and other types of violence against women and girls. The report examines the situation for Syrians who have fled to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, spotlighting the plight of urban refugees and the worrisome and growing gaps in needed services for this grossly underserved and rapidly growing population. It describes a range of scenarios, including a protracted humanitarian emergency, and the need for extensive contingency planning in the event the civil war rages on and the humanitarian crisis continues, as well as the inevitability of a massive reconstruction, reconciliation and recovery effort when the war ends. Finally, the report offers a series of policy and funding recommendations to ensure that the needs of millions of vulnerable Syrian civilians are addressed, regional countries are supported and the destabilizing effects of refugee flows are minimized.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on conversations during the IRC's delegation visit to the Middle East, observations drawn from IRC programs that assist Syrians throughout the region, and IRC assessments in Lebanon and Jordan on the economic conditions of refugees and protection concerns for women and girls. ■

STORIES FROM INSIDE SYRIA

“The war was outside my door. My children looked out the window every day and watched dead bodies thrown in the garbage pile across the street. One day, they saw their uncle shot to death outside our home. I told them not to look out the window anymore. It didn't help. When they raided the house next door, we could hear the rape of my neighbor, my friend. And then they arrested my brother and tortured him for days. He survived but they scarred his body and destroyed his genitals. We stayed at home, even when we were running out of food. We were too afraid to go out. But then they forced their way in, beat my husband and threatened to arrest him. From under a table, my children watched and screamed. We had to flee.”

—A 28-YEAR-OLD WOMAN FROM DARA'A, NOW A REFUGEE IN IRBID, JORDAN.



Aleppo, Syria, November 20, 2012

STORIES FROM INSIDE SYRIA (continued)

Struggling to survive

Millions of Syrian civilians are struggling to survive in communities besieged by violence and destruction. The extent of the bloodshed, devastation, displacement and suffering inside Syria cannot be easily or precisely measured, but it is certainly extraordinary in its magnitude, and it is steadily worsening. Millions of Syrians are in desperate need and have little if any access to humanitarian relief.

Homes across the country have been shelled or burned while in some areas whole neighborhoods have been reduced to rubble. Fleeing families find refuge anywhere they can, some sleeping in the homes of relatives and friends and others outdoors or in abandoned buildings. The displaced move from village to village to avoid the shifting frontline and worsening destruction, sometimes returning to their homes during periods of calm. But there are virtually no safe zones inside Syria anymore.

Refugees speak of infrastructure in shambles and severe shortages of food, clean water and electricity and lack of sanitation services. The conflict has had a grave impact on the country's economy. Many Syrians are unable to navigate dangerous streets to get to work. Factories and businesses have been damaged or shuttered, leading to a collapse in the production of goods and loss of vital income.

Every Syrian who spoke with the IRC had a tragic story to share and expressed a profound sense of loss. While reliable figures are hard to come by, it is estimated that over 60,000 people have been killed and tens of thousands wounded. There are widespread reports of kidnappings and prolonged detentions. Thousands of others are said to have gone missing.

But refugees also expressed deep distress over the loss of everything else—their homes and personal belongings, their cars, jobs and education—the things that made their previous lives normal. They fear the war has fomented ethnic and religious hatred, particularly between the Alawite and Sunni communities, that will have long-term repercussions. They worry that the violence is not just obliterating Syria's economy and infrastructure, but also its

cultural heritage. “The war is not just destroying our past and present, but also our future,” said a Syrian man who sought refuge in Gaziantep, Turkey.

“The stories we've heard talking to Syrian women in Lebanon are truly horrific. Many of these women have experienced rape and torture in Syria, but as refugees can't find the support they need to heal their physical and emotional scars—let alone provide food and shelter for their families.”

—SANJ SRIKANTHAN
IRC Emergency Field Director

Women and girls under attack

After decades of working in war and disaster zones, the IRC knows that women and girls suffer physical and sexual violence in every conflict. Syria is no exception. Rape is a significant and disturbing feature of the Syrian civil war. In the course of three IRC assessments in Lebanon and Jordan, sexual violence was consistently identified by Syrian women, men and community leaders as a primary reason their families fled the country. “We surrendered to the reality of rape,” said a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, remarking on the severity of rape in this crisis.

Many women and girls relayed accounts of being attacked in public or in their homes, primarily by armed men. These rapes, sometimes by multiple perpetrators, often occur in front of family members. The IRC was told of attacks in which women and young girls were kidnapped, raped, tortured and killed. Roadblocks, prolific throughout Syria, have become especially perilous for women and girls. The IRC's women's protection team in Lebanon was told of a young girl who was gang-raped and forced to stagger home naked—heightening her shame in a society where modesty is so valued.

Because of the stigma and social norms around the “dishonor” that rape brings to women and girls and their families, Syrian survivors rarely report sexual violence. Many of those interviewed by the IRC said women and girl survivors also fear retribution by assailants. Others are afraid of being killed by family members if they report incidents, since a raped woman or girl is thought to bring shame to a family.

The fear of rape is so significant that many families are marrying off their daughters to “protect” them from rape. Others revert to early marriage if their daughters have been sexually assaulted “to safeguard their honor.” In one extreme case, the IRC was told of a father who shot his daughter when an armed group approached to prevent the “disgrace” of her being raped.

A health system destroyed

Syrian partner organizations providing emergency services inside Syria say medical institutions and health care facilities across the country have been deliberately targeted and eviscerated. Doctors described to the IRC a systematic campaign to restrict access to lifesaving health care through the strategic bombing and forced closure of hospitals and health care facilities. They spoke of intimidation, torture and the targeted killing of doctors and other medical staff in retribution for treating the wounded, including civilians.

“If you’re found at a roadblock to have medicines or a supply of blood, it’s considered the equivalent of transporting weapons. As a doctor, you could be jailed or killed,” said one Syrian physician who fled to Jordan from Hama. He went on to tell the IRC that days earlier, a colleague was delivering medical supplies to a midwife when he was caught, tortured and killed.

Another Syrian doctor, now a refugee in Turkey, described the decimation of the medical community in his home city of Aleppo. He estimated that about 5,000 physicians had been practicing in and around the city before the war. By his count, killings and displacement had reduced that number to 36.

It is abhorrent that a medical doctor would be targeted and killed for carrying medicine to help the sick or wounded, but it is a pattern that has become a reality in the Syrian conflict.

At great risk, physicians are still managing to set up field clinics in homes, shops and other spaces, but face extreme challenges in providing care and are constantly running out of supplies. “We can’t keep up with the wounded,” said one physician from Homs. “One day, we may have the drugs and equipment to save a boy’s life,” said another doctor from Dara’a. “The next day, we feel the misery of the situation, because when there is no blood, antibiotics or oxygen, we know he will die.”

The collapse of sanitation services is also cause for alarm. In the city of Aleppo, garbage collection has ceased and large parts of the city are infested by rats. A group of civil engineers has organized a garbage collection service in the midst of the unrest, to prevent the spread of disease. According to accounts shared with the IRC, the engineers are also using their own tools and spare parts in a desperate effort to keep the water supply running each day. Several have been shot and killed in the process.

Children in harm’s way

Syrian children have been living nightmares that they could not dream up. They have been exposed to unthinkable violence, and nearly every child will speak about having seen family members attacked or killed. Thousands of children have been caught in the crossfire, and there are widespread accounts of children being directly targeted. An IRC-supported doctor said he recently treated a one-year-old boy stabbed in the neck and a nine-year-old girl who had been brutally raped.

The war prevents many children from attending school, because their schools have been destroyed, are occupied by displaced people or are too dangerous to reach. Some children have already missed two years of classes. This long period out of the classroom not only disrupts their learning but destroys the stability and normalcy that children require. Others are sent to work in the dangerous streets by desperate families. The upheaval that many Syrian families are experiencing also causes intense anxiety and trauma for children, particularly those who have become separated from their families, yet there are few services to help them. ■

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

“Our city was under attack and we were afraid our children would be injured or killed, so all my family and relatives fled—48 people. We took cars, buses and vans. It took 23 days to travel the 200 miles to Jordan’s border. We were very careful to avoid the fighting. Now I live with ten others in these two cement-block rooms. The space was abandoned so we moved in. Our very kind neighbor lets us string a wire to their house so that we can power these two light bulbs. We use a hole in the ground outside as a toilet and there’s no refrigerator. But we don’t have any money to buy fresh food anyway. It is better here than in Syria because we’re safe, at least. But we lost everything, including our dignity and our privacy. All we have now is charity.”

—A 59-YEAR-OLD MAN FROM HOMS, NOW A REFUGEE IN MAFRAQ, JORDAN.



These women and children are among 48 family members who fled violence in Syria and now live in this cement-block structure in Mafraq, Jordan, without plumbing or electricity.

Syrian crisis displacement

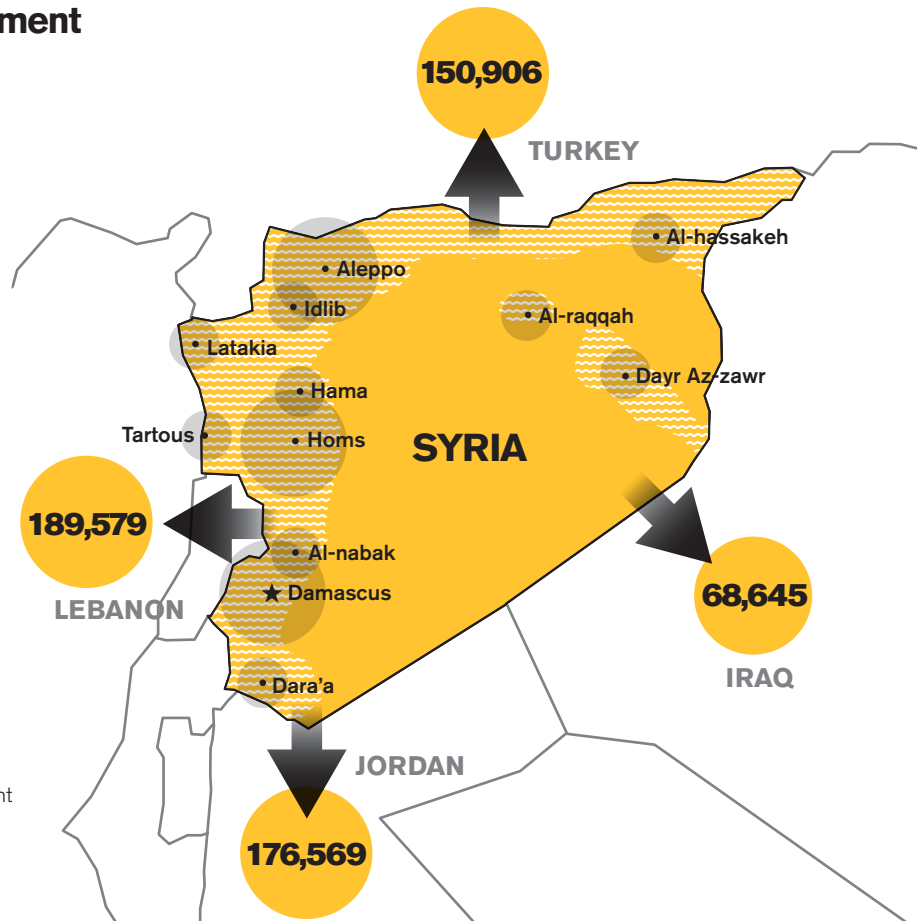
2,000,000+
INTERNALLY
DISPLACED

603,867+
REFUGEES*

*Map does not include 18,168 Syrian refugees who have fled to Egypt and north Africa.

CITIES WITH THE MOST DISPLACED

- 20,000–100,000 IDPs
- 100,000+ IDPs
- Size of Syrian refugee population, registered and awaiting registration
- ▨ Areas of conflict & displacement



Sources: Displaced, IDMC; Refugee Numbers, UNHCR; Conflict areas, HIU. As of January 7, 2013.

Context of displacement

Every day thousands more Syrians pour into neighboring countries to escape the terrifying violence and unbearable hardship at home. Many risk their lives to do so—taking precarious multi-day treks through combat zones, often at night, to avoid detection. Refugees describe being shot at on the way and, in a number of cases, being robbed, sexually assaulted or forcibly separated from family members at checkpoints. They are threatened by aerial bombardments, which do not discriminate between military and civilian vehicles. Those caught fleeing also run the risk of being arrested. And once arrested in Syria, they may not be seen again.

In spite of the punishing journey, a fluctuating but constant flow of refugees has streamed into Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey for more than a year. However, the last four months of 2012 saw a dramatic spike, with some 3,000 Syrians fleeing daily into these countries—already stretched beyond capacity. By the beginning of January, the U.N. put the total number of

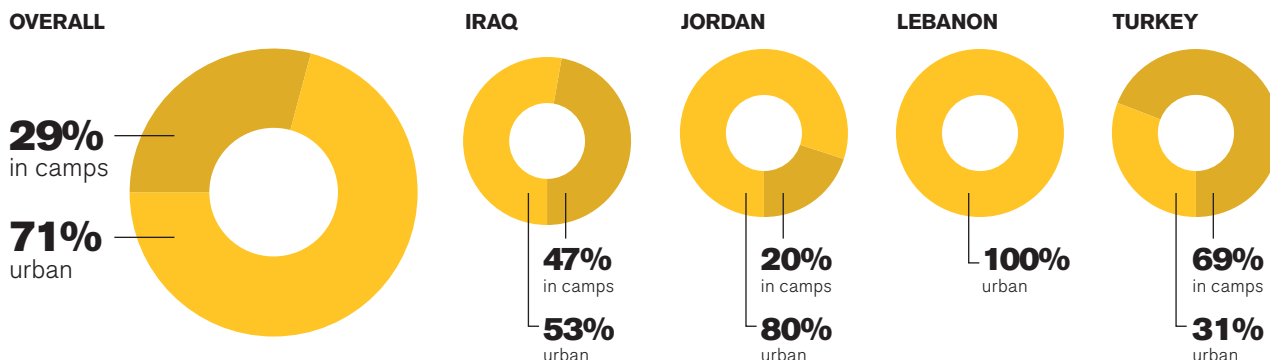
Syrian refugees at over 600,000, noting the true number is likely higher since many refugees do not register.

A grim irony which few would have anticipated is that Iraq and Syria have reversed their prior roles as states of refuge. A half-decade ago, the flood of refugees was heading west from Iraq to Syria, as well as to Lebanon and Jordan. Today, the flow is in the other direction, with Iraq now hosting more than 60,000 Syrian refugees and counting. In addition, over the past six months nearly 60,000 war-weary Iraqi refugees who sought refuge in Syria have returned to an uncertain fate inside Iraq. Many are from central Iraq and cannot go back to their communities of origin because of ongoing strife or occupation of their homes.

The Syrian refugee population is also expanding beyond the primary host countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq to North Africa—as Egypt and Morocco become the latest countries to take in Syrian refugees.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS (continued)

Percentages of refugees inside and outside of camps



Camp life

Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Iraq have ended up in camps, most of which are overcrowded, at capacity and unprepared for winter.

By far the largest camp-based population of Syrian refugees is in Turkey, which has generously used more than \$450 million of its own resources to shelter some 140,000 refugees in 14 camps.

In the desolate border town of Al Qaim in Iraq's Anbar Province, some 7,200 Syrian refugees are sheltering in two small camps that were built for 5,000. Basic services are available but overstretched. IRC teams there are registering and monitoring refugees and are identifying vulnerable individuals, including survivors of violence and separated children, in need of additional assistance.

Conditions at the Domiz refugee camp in Northern Iraq, home to 23,500 refugees at the last count, are bleak, though the Kurdistan Regional Government has given the mostly Kurdish Syrian refugee population a warm welcome. But because of overcrowding and lack of funding, aid groups and UNHCR are overwhelmed and scrambling to set up winterized tents, build more schools (there's currently space for just 1,200 pupils or one-fifth of the refugee children) and expand other programs. Here and at most camps, services for women, children and youth are also under-resourced.

As temperatures drop to freezing levels there is concern about how refugees will fare this winter. "Many arrived in warmer months wearing flip-flops and T-shirts and now the evenings are bitterly cold," said an IRC

child protection coordinator. "They need more suitable clothes, shoes, blankets, heating and medical services. Many children in Domiz are already sick from poor water and sanitation and their health is likely to worsen with the weather."

Many of the same concerns plague refugees at Za'atari, a tent-camp in the middle of the wind-blown northern Jordanian desert that has faced unending criticism from its occupants since it opened in August 2012, in spite of steadily improving conditions. Hundreds of refugee arrivals are escorted there daily. Nevertheless, the camp population hovers around 25,000 because so few of them stay. Faced with the choice of living in a camp with modest services or in urban centers with more freedom and little aid, most choose the latter.

Urgent needs of urban refugees

While camps sheltering Syrian refugees capture most of the media attention and international funding, they do not attract the majority of Syrian refugees. Many more, 100 percent in Lebanon and approximately 80 percent in Jordan, 50 percent in Iraq and 30 percent in Turkey, currently reside in urban or rural areas, not in camps. Like most urban refugee populations globally, they are often hidden from view, spread out over large areas, harder to reach and chronically underserved. In the case of urban refugees from Syria, they are also increasingly destitute and desperate. Most refugees move to poor neighborhoods that lack the capacity to absorb or assist them. While some Syrians are housed



Top: Domiz camp for Syrian refugees, northern Iraq. **Bottom left:** This family escaped fierce fighting in the Syrian capital Damascus. They now live in a tent in the crowded Domiz camp. **Bottom right:** Syrian refugees in Domiz are ill-equipped to deal with the near-freezing temperatures on the vast desert plain of the region. This girl has wrapped up her brother in a blanket.

by host families in cramped quarters, most are renting small, dilapidated unfurnished apartments that they increasingly cannot afford. Others find shelter in sheds, barns, basements and abandoned buildings unfit for habitation. Some are offered shelter by local authorities in unused public spaces. Multiple families tend to share rooms to reduce expenses. IRC staff has heard accounts of up to 20 people crowding into spaces that have no running water or functioning toilets. "Every time it rains, we live in a pool of mud," said a 60-year-old woman from Dara'a who now shares a room with a dirt floor and leaky roof with seven others in Irbid, Jordan.

Gaining access to medical care is a major problem for urban refugees. Many arrive with serious and life-threatening war wounds, chronic illnesses and other

medical needs. They have flooded the few hospitals and clinics where they can receive free services. Staff at one facility serving refugees in Jordan said they will have to turn patients away unless they get resources to expand their emergency center and pharmacy. Those without access to free care struggle to cover basic medical costs at clinics in their neighborhoods. The IRC met a group of doctors that rented two floors of a private hospital in Amman and are averaging 1,500 Syrian outpatients and 150 operations monthly. The IRC itself opened two primary care clinics in Jordan's refugee-inundated towns of Ramtha and Mafraq to relieve overburdened local health facilities. The centers provide free treatment, counseling and subsidized prescriptions for 100 patients a day and the caseload continues to grow.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS (continued)

Refugees also struggle to buy food, water, fuel, clothing and other essentials. Most fled Syria with few belongings and little money. Even those who came with resources have seen their finances rapidly dwindle. Many are selling everything of value they took with them, like jewelry. In Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Syrian refugees are not able to work legally in all professions. Many take loans from shop keepers and landlords and are in serious debt. Others find under-the-table jobs as day laborers and farmers, but work long hours and get paid well under market rate. A number of refugees work for their landlords to avoid eviction. Some refugees told the IRC that they are eating less to save money. The IRC heard accounts of women trading sex for food and desperate families selling their girls into early marriage to reduce household numbers or pay rent. Children and adolescents are being forced to work in often exploitative jobs; some boys are being sent into the stone quarries of northern Lebanon.

“I don't have a job here and I don't have a future. I am just waiting to go home and start rebuilding Syria.”

— FORMER SYRIAN SURGEON, GAZIANTEP, TURKEY

With meager funding allocated to urban refugee programs, local and international aid groups are struggling to aid vulnerable families. The IRC is providing cash assistance in Lebanon and Jordan to help pay for daily expenses and distributing items like mattresses, blankets, toiletries, stoves and fuel. But the needs are immense and there is a dearth of funding.

In particular, specialized services for survivors of physical and sexual violence are scarce in host countries and have not been funded by international donors to the level required to meet the vast needs of women and girls. Domestic violence in refugee communities is exacerbated by the economic stress and poor living

conditions. Syrian women say they feel unsafe in crowded shelters where they have minimal privacy, yet they are scared to report violence, because of shame or fear of reprisal from family members. Others just don't know where to turn for help. The IRC is filling in some of these gaps in Jordan and Lebanon—opening more safe spaces and expanding targeted medical care and counseling—and will be launching similar programs in northern and central Iraq. Such care is and must be provided in a way that does not draw attention to the women as victims of sexual violence.

For thousands of refugee children in urban areas, education remains interrupted. Host country governments have graciously opened classes to refugees free of charge, but in the case of Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, schools have run out of space for new students. Even schools that now operate in shifts cannot absorb more children and lack teachers. Other schools may have space, but refugees live far away and don't have the money for school supplies or transportation. In Lebanon, there's the added barrier of language, as classes are taught in French and English. The same holds true for Arabic speaking students whose families fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, where children are taught in Kurdish.

Many teachers in host schools are ill-equipped to assist traumatized children—as are their parents. Many children exhibit violent and aggressive behavior. Others have stopped eating, talking and sleeping, according to an IRC counselor in Jordan. During a visit to the border town of Gaziantep, Turkey, IRC delegation members saw drawings made by eight-year-old students depicting scenes of violence that illustrated the bombs, bloodshed, and terror the children had seen in Syria. Specialized services are not available to most Syrian refugee children but should be.

Refugee registration is a means of securing additional U.N. assistance and access to local services. Many refugees remain reluctant to register because they fear retribution should the Syrian government become aware they fled. Others cannot register even if they want to because there are few registration teams in some urban refugee areas.



Top: Assaa Abdallah and his five-year-old son Abdallah, fled the Syrian war with their family. They now live in a small room behind a corner store in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. "I work in the shop and in return they give me the room and some food," he said.

Bottom left: An IRC physician treats patients at clinic in Mafraq, Jordan. **Bottom right:** Clothes hang to dry in an old school in Qubayat, Lebanon, where several Syrian families are living.

Impact on host countries

Generosity has its limits. Countries that opened their borders to Syrian refugees express concern about how much longer they can cope as the influx takes an economic and social toll on their communities. These countries feel neglected by the international community and saddled with an immense burden that has no end in sight. They also fear the potential destabilizing effect of such massive refugee flows.

Urban refugees are straining the education, health, water, sanitation and other systems of host countries. They have saturated housing markets in border areas

and beyond, leading to steep rent increases for both refugees and locals. Commodity prices are up and wages are down. These impacts are increasing tension between host and refugee communities.

A 2012 joint report by the IRC and Save the Children examined the economic impact of the crisis in Lebanon and found that rents had increased by as much as 100 percent (to \$250 per month) in the past year and that few are able to pay. With competition for unskilled labor increasing, work days and wages in some areas where refugees have settled have decreased by more than 50

THE REFUGEE CRISIS (continued)

percent. The Lebanese government is calling for help—and issued its own appeal for \$178 million in bilateral assistance to deal with the growing crisis. Many of the Lebanon assessment findings also hold true for Jordan and Turkey. There, too, the majority of refugees are settling in economically depressed areas, where many locals depended on trade with Syria for their livelihoods. The unrest in some border areas and border closures in others have curbed trade with Syrian businesses, leading to far fewer Syrian imports and increased prices for available products.

Small businesses are concerned that Syrian refugees won't be able to pay back their debts, but they reconcile decreased purchasing power among local and refugee populations with increased business and higher prices.

Turkey, which has supported refugees using its own resources, is now asking for international financial assistance to help absorb the thousands of Syrian refugees arriving each day. In meetings with delegation members, Turkish government officials reiterated their commitment to hosting Syrians, but underscored the need for bilateral aid to maintain and expand refugee camps and assist urban refugees along the Syria-Turkey border.

The Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government are also spending their own money to respond to the influx of Syrian refugees. At the same time, they are grappling with the return of Iraqi refugees from Syria, who join some 1.5 million Iraqis who remain internally displaced by that country's ongoing violence. Iraq is receiving less attention and far fewer resources than other host countries in the region.

Based on meetings with representatives from donor countries and international institutions, there is growing recognition that Syria's urban refugees have been largely forsaken and that an investment in aid programs outside of camps is necessary. In Jordan, UNHCR has rolled out a cash assistance program for refugees living outside of Za'atari camp. The World Food Program, which distributes vouchers to refugees in camps in

Turkey and northern Iraq, says it intends to expand the program to those outside the camps. Such programs are welcome and desperately needed but hardly scratch the surface.

Importance of open borders

On any given day, an escalation of fighting in Syria sends new waves of people to its borders. Many Syrians told the IRC that they never wanted to leave Syria but had no alternative after their families were displaced multiple times. It is critical that neighboring countries keep their borders open to endangered civilians and continue to offer them safe haven.

Lebanon's border has remained open throughout the conflict as has Turkey's, although access is now more limited. Thousands of Syrians have settled in a rebel-held zone in Syria, along the Turkish border, where some assistance is being provided.

Jordan has also welcomed Syrian refugees, but has reportedly turned away some Palestinian residents of Syria. There are two million Palestinians in Jordan, and it has concerns about the impact of hosting many more.

Syrian Kurds are finding safe haven inside Iraqi Kurdistan, where the border remains open. However, Iraq's border further south has effectively been closed since October to all but "emergency" cases. Prior to that, access was sporadic and largely restricted to families, most of whom have settled at Al Qaim camp. On the Syrian side of the border, the city of Albo Kamal is now home to thousands of displaced Syrians, including many waiting to cross into Iraq if and when the border re-opens. In anticipation, the U.N. is building a third site for refugees at Al Qaim to prepare for new arrivals.

Ongoing refugee influxes will clearly strain the ability of neighboring countries to keep borders open, but the IRC believes it is a mistake to encourage the creation of "buffer zones" or "safe zones," which have a poor record of effectiveness. They are difficult to protect and monitor, and they create and maintain a false sense of security for civilians who live in them. ■

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The IRC believes that the Syria crisis will be a protracted humanitarian emergency that requires immediate planning and robust funding to meet critical needs and mitigate sectarian tension. Failure to do so risks exacerbating instability.

Preparing for a protracted emergency

An end to the civil war will not necessarily end sectarian violence immediately; indeed the violence could well increase. Recovery, reconciliation and political transition are processes that will be fraught with challenges and could take many years.

Meanwhile, every country in the region is unsettled by the prospect of hostilities spilling over their borders, in addition to refugees. They fear that continuing refugee influxes could create internal instability or exacerbate simmering or historical tensions—as we have already seen in Lebanon.

Given the U.N.'s alarming forecast of one million refugees in the first half of 2013 if current trends continue, neighboring countries will require a massive increase in humanitarian assistance. Some may also reach their saturation point and be tempted to shut their borders, leading to a mass buildup of fleeing and endangered civilians in border areas inside Syria.

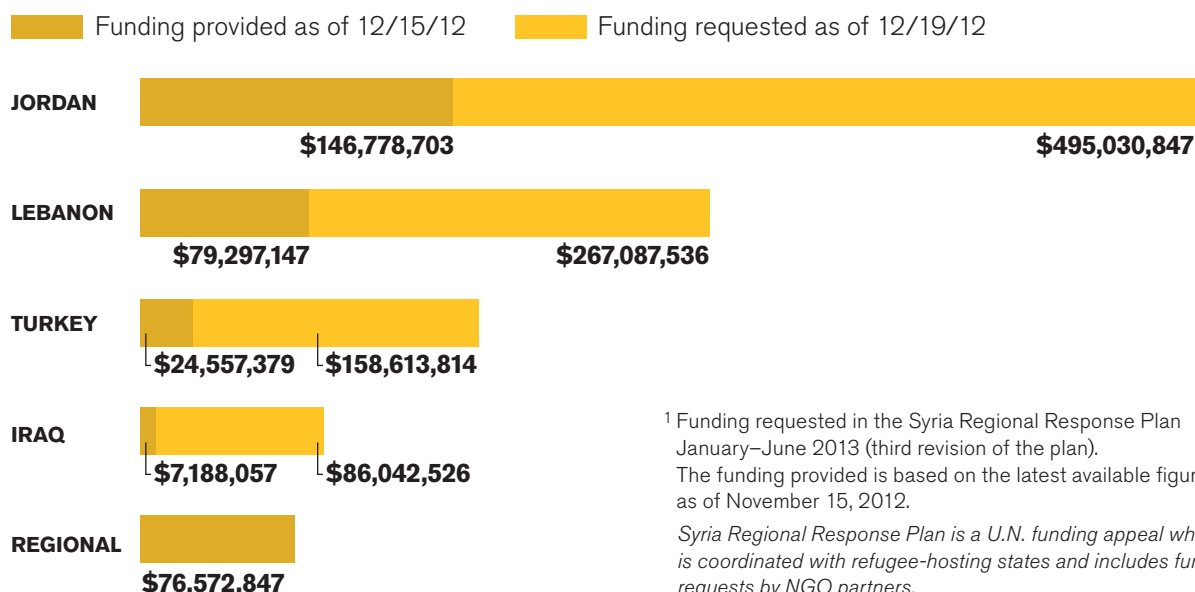
Even if the conflict comes to a swift end, Syria will emerge in ruins—its social and civic fabric in shreds, its economy and infrastructure devastated and its population scattered throughout the country and region, potentially unable for months if not years to return to their shattered communities and resume normal life. For some extremely vulnerable refugees, returning home may never be an option.

Twice displaced: Palestinian and Iraqi refugees

Syria itself is home to two large refugee populations, Palestinians and Iraqis, and both groups are currently at risk and once again fleeing strife.

An estimated half-million Palestinians reside in Syria. They live in “camps” that are indistinguishable from most urban neighborhoods, and they are assisted by the U.N. Relief and Works Agency. Thousands were uprooted when clashes escalated near their

Funding requirements per Syria Regional Response Plan¹



¹ Funding requested in the Syria Regional Response Plan January–June 2013 (third revision of the plan). The funding provided is based on the latest available figures, as of November 15, 2012. *Syria Regional Response Plan is a U.N. funding appeal which is coordinated with refugee-hosting states and includes funding requests by NGO partners.*

CONTINGENCY PLANNING (continued)

settlements last July, and thousands more were displaced in December when the area was hit by heavy shelling. Palestinians have since been heading to Lebanon in large numbers, joining other longtime Palestinian refugees in established refugee camps. Lebanon says it is bracing for an even larger influx of Palestinians from Syria, and is concerned about overstretched resources and an exacerbation of existing sectarian tensions.

Experts in the region are also warning that if the Assad regime loses its grip on power, it could try to use the Palestinians as a tool to destabilize the region by pushing them into Jordan or the Golan Heights.

Tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees who escaped a brutal war less than 10 years ago and were offered sanctuary in Syria by the Assad government remain in Syria and find themselves on the frontlines again. Many of them fled targeted attacks and persecution and are afraid to return to Iraq, yet they also fear being caught in the middle of similar sectarian violence in Syria. Many say they have already been targeted, as they are perceived to be supportive of the Assad regime. Also of concern are Iraqi refugees in the pipeline for third country resettlement. They worry that fleeing Syria will disrupt the processing of their claims. Contingency planning must address the fate of these two populations of concern. ■



Women line up for a blanket distribution in the Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The International Rescue Committee and members of the IRC delegation to the Syria region make the following recommendations:

1 Increase humanitarian aid

Assistance levels are woefully insufficient to address current needs. International aid organizations are prepared to deliver more assistance to displaced Syrians and host communities, but need funding to do so.

- **International appeals.** Donor governments must step up, recognize the urgency and severity of the crisis, and meet requested U.N. funding appeals for aid inside Syria and throughout the region. Given the immense and growing needs in and outside Syria, aid must be fast-tracked and diversified. It also should be provided through multiple channels, from the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, to international and local nongovernmental organizations. This effort will require sustained engagement by high-level government officials.
- **Bilateral aid.** Host governments must also continue investing their own resources to help Syrian refugees. However, none of the host countries should be shouldering the burden of this crisis to the extent they currently are. International donors and institutions must significantly ramp up bilateral assistance to countries absorbing refugees to help offset the strain on their infrastructure and mitigate growing tension. There has been some bilateral assistance to date, including a \$100 million contribution from the United States to Jordan and contributions from Italy and China as well, but there must be more for Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey from all donor nations. Donor nations should do their utmost to meet the individual appeals of host countries.

2 Maintain open borders

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians are trapped by the violence inside Syria, yet some 3,000 manage to pour across borders each day.

- Host countries should keep their borders open to civilians in harm's way and continue to offer them safe haven.
- The international community should discourage "buffer zones" and "safe zones," which create a false sense of security for civilians. They have rarely been effective in the midst of violent conflict and are difficult to monitor and maintain, as was the case in 1995 in Srebrenica, when a U.N. protection force was unable to prevent the capture and massacre of 8,000 Bosnian men and boys, even though they were in a "safe zone" under U.N. protection. Populations can be pulled in by a promise of greater safety only to get bottled up and become even more vulnerable.
- The international community should use sustained diplomacy to encourage neighboring countries to keep their borders open and provide urgent and proportionate assistance to refugees and countries hosting them as the alternative to closed borders and safe zones.

“ We fled death,
and now we face
humiliation. ”

— SYRIAN REFUGEE, BEKAA VALLEY, LEBANON

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

3 Prepare for a protracted humanitarian emergency

Syria and surrounding countries are clearly facing a deepening humanitarian disaster that threatens the security of the region. While key governments have been engaged in contingency planning for some time, they have centered on political and security planning for a post-Assad Syria. There must be more robust and coordinated strategies for addressing a protracted humanitarian emergency, including some of the following scenarios:

- › **Mass exodus.** The international community must focus on the likelihood that a major escalation of the crisis—spurred by an event such as the use of chemical weapons, the fall of Damascus or the fall of the regime—could create a sudden mass exodus that has the potential to paralyze and destabilize neighboring countries and engulf the region in conflict. Donor governments and institutions must be prepared to urgently ramp up support and assistance in every sector in countries hosting refugees.
- › **Long-term displacement.** Even if the conflict ends in the near future, many displaced Syrians may not return home quickly. Destruction to infrastructure in cities like Aleppo is at 50 percent—putting the devastation on par with Port au Prince, Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake. In all likelihood, many Syrians from devastated communities will have no homes or communities to return to, perhaps for years. The international community must prepare now for the inevitability of a large-scale, multiyear displacement crisis and humanitarian response.
- › **Resettlement.** Syrian refugees tell the IRC that they plan to go home when possible. Some may never feel it is safe to do so. Syrian refugees must not be forced to return until it is safe, voluntary and dignified. UNHCR and the international community should discuss contingency plans for identifying extremely vulnerable refugees in urgent need of protection and possible resettlement.

4 Expand international assistance inside Syria

Some 4 million Syrians are struggling to survive in violence-wracked areas of Syria and have little if any access to humanitarian assistance.

- › **Syrian partnerships.** There are dozens of respected Syrian organizations working on the frontlines—delivering lifesaving assistance to civilians in Syria. They are doing so at great risk and with a dearth of resources and support. Donor governments, the U.N. and international aid groups must fund and expand partnerships with Syrian organizations working to provide critical medical care and shelter, keep schools open, provide clean water, and deliver food, winterization items and other supplies. Channeling assistance to such groups is essential now, will remain vital, and must be maintained in a post-conflict phase.
- › **Access for international aid groups.** A small number of international aid organizations are operating inside Syria but have limited access to conflict-impacted populations. The international community should continue efforts to increase access for these and other humanitarian organizations to provide emergency and recovery assistance for affected populations.

“Donors need to step up, recognize the severity of the humanitarian crisis in and around Syria and face the virtual inevitability that this is going to get much worse and last much longer than initially anticipated.”

— SIR JOHN HOLMES

Co-Chair of the IRC-U.K. Board of Trustees,
Director of the Ditchley Foundation

5 Scale up programs for urban refugees

The international community continues to allocate the bulk of its meager resources to refugee camps, even though about 70 percent of Syrian refugees live outside of camps in urban centers and rural areas where assistance is scarce and needs are immense. In its December 19 appeal, the U.N. acknowledged refugees living outside of camps as a priority. While camp-based Syrian refugees need continued support, it is vital that international donors vastly increase resources for programs aiding urban refugees and the communities where they live.

- **Host communities.** Support for over-extended host communities should be premised on strengthening infrastructure, building the capacity of local service providers, partnering with local authorities and businesses and procuring local supplies. Humanitarian assistance programs should also be made available for vulnerable local families impacted by the influx of refugees as a means of meeting their needs and preventing or reducing tension.
- **Cash assistance.** A major investment is needed in cash assistance programs so that urban refugees can routinely afford to feed their families, pay rent, repair or winterize shelters, purchase clothing and basic

household supplies and buy extra blankets, stoves, heating fuel and other items to help them get through the winter.

- **Health care.** International donors must help hospitals and clinics in host communities meet the cost of treating thousands of extra patients daily, while funding additional health facilities as the sick and wounded continue to arrive. The IRC has identified reproductive health care as a concerning gap that needs additional resources.
- **Registration and information.** Registration provides refugees, in particular those living outside camps, with a greater degree of protection as well as a package of services and supplies. It also helps the aid community to better assess and address their needs. UNHCR and local and international aid groups should step up information campaigns about the advantages of registration as well as services that are available to them whether or not they are registered. UNHCR should take further steps to expand registration sites and mobile registration teams to ensure that all refugees who want to register can, and that those who are afraid to register for protection reasons can still access available assistance.



Medicines and supplies in an IRC storage facility await distribution to displaced Syrians.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

6 Address violence against Syrian women and girls

Emergency response funding must adequately address the sexual violence that accompanies virtually every conflict today and is a particularly cruel aspect of the Syrian crisis. While attention to gender-based violence, prevention and response has recently increased, it continues to sharply lag behind what is needed, even though Syrian refugees cite rape of women and girls as a primary reason for fleeing.

› **Prioritize the gender-based violence crisis.**

International donors, including the U.N., must recognize sexual violence as a feature of the conflict in Syria, the threats Syrian women and girls face as refugees, and the shortage of quality services available to them, and develop an appropriate strategy to address the crisis.

› **Funding.** U.N. and other international donors should vastly increase funding for lifesaving programs for survivors inside and outside camps, including specialized medical care, emotional support, safe spaces and safety and prevention information.

› **Protection.** Programs for refugees must focus on reducing risks and meeting minimum standards for preventing gender-based violence and abuse. Shelter, water, sanitation and other services must address the safety needs of vulnerable women and girls in and outside camps.

› **Social and economic resources.** Programs that provide women and girls with relevant and needed material goods and economic support are necessary to reduce exploitative jobs and survival sex and strengthen families.

› **Leadership and coordination.** UNHCR should prioritize gender-based violence as a key protection concern, designate senior-level coordinators, and staff and resource gender-based violence working groups in each host country. UNHCR should urgently lead a profiling exercise to identify existing services and local service providers in host countries to determine capacity and gaps, and work with donors to increase the quality and quantity of services.

› **Supporting local providers.** The IRC found few GBV-specific services in place in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Nevertheless, it is important that U.N. and international agencies work with host country authorities and community organizations and health care services to address gender-based violence and provide support and technical training as the number of clients grows.

7 Invest in children's safety and healing

Families affected by this crisis emphasize the fears they have for their children's safety and future well-being, yet specialized services for children who have experienced or witnessed violence or are being subjected to exploitative work are few and woefully underfunded.

› **Increase funding for protection and psychosocial support.** It is critical that children harmed or at risk are identified and receive tailored support to address their specific needs, including psychosocial support, assistance for unaccompanied and separated children, and the prevention of abuse and exploitative labor, such as the recruitment of children into armed groups and sex work. Social workers, health care workers, child-protection and other sectors' staff need to be trained in caring for children severely affected by this crisis.

› **Expand access to quality education.** Programs must meet the minimum standards for education in emergencies, since ensuring consistent and safe schooling is one of the most effective ways to protect children from further harm and exploitation, provide a sense of stability and security, and mitigate the effects of violence. It is critical that programs for Syrian children meet minimum standards for education in emergencies. Teachers must be equipped to provide children who have experienced or been exposed to violence with needed care and support.

› **Adhere to the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.** U.N. and international agencies must ensure that programs in all sectors—not just protection programs—have adequate resources and capacity to meet the minimum standards for protecting children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. ■



Top: Families living in an old school in Qubayat, Lebanon. **Bottom Left:** An IRC psychologist counsels a traumatized Syrian woman at an IRC clinic in Mafraq, Jordan. **Bottom Right:** Syrian children in a makeshift school in Berkayel, Lebanon.

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APPENDIX



U.S. Department of State
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)

PRM Principles for Refugee Protection in Urban Areas

Today's refugee population is increasingly urban. While it is difficult to gather reliable data, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 58 percent of refugees now reside in cities, compared to one third living in camps. This trend creates new kinds of vulnerabilities and poses new protection challenges for the humanitarian community. It also presents new opportunities to help refugees find ways to become self-reliant.

Refugee protection should be provided irrespective of location and the international community should address needs where they exist, rather than where it is easiest to address them. The U.S. government has a clear role – and responsibility – to respond to refugees in urban areas, particularly through diplomatic engagement aimed at expanding protection space.

The United States, other donor governments, UNHCR, and other key partners all have roots in camp-based responses to large-scale displacement, but have increasingly engaged in urban areas. In fact, much of the work of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) now takes place in urban or semi-urban contexts, in countries where no formal camps exist. However, the Bureau's efforts to address the needs of urban refugees have not fully benefitted from the systematic sharing of best practices across populations and regions. To address these gaps, PRM recently established a Bureau-wide initiative to strengthen its efforts on behalf of urban refugees by drawing on best practices.

Core Principles for Engagement in Urban Areas

PRM has adopted the following core principles to guide its response to the needs of refugees in urban areas. These principles are informed by and consistent with those enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. As interventions in urban environments will vary by context and be population-specific, the following principles are meant to provide general guidance that can be adapted to a particular context to ensure flexibility in response:

March 2012

APPENDIX (continued)

1. *PRM will expand its engagement in urban areas, both in terms of humanitarian diplomacy and, with modest, targeted programming.* Through sustained and vigorous diplomacy, PRM will seek to ensure that the status and legal rights of refugees in urban areas, as outlined under international refugee law, are recognized and protected by host governments.
2. *When new displacements arise, the establishment of camps should not always be the first recourse.* At the outset of crises, PRM will work with other members of the international humanitarian community and with host governments to determine whether a non camp-based response might be most appropriate to achieve protection and assistance goals. PRM will work closely with UNHCR to develop and strengthen models of assistance as alternatives to camps.
3. *PRM recognizes that urban settlement is often part of a long-term and even durable solution.* Many urban refugees are achieving *de facto* local integration, and PRM can build on this opportunity by advocating for further progress toward this durable solution, particularly in cases of protracted displacement.
4. *PRM's response to the needs of urban refugees will focus on legal protection and access to services, with material assistance targeted to the most vulnerable.* In many cases direct assistance to the most vulnerable refugees will be required, particularly where access to existing services is unavailable or insufficient to meet basic needs. Assistance in urban areas requires sophisticated identification of the most vulnerable and better targeting of interventions to match their particular needs.
5. *An effective approach need not be resource-intensive.* With its focus on increased humanitarian diplomacy and access to existing services, a sound approach is not necessarily about more money, but about more targeted effort.
6. *Interventions should promote self-reliance.* A key objective of urban response is to promote protection through self-reliance. Access to livelihoods is essential for refugees to be able to cover the cost of meeting basic needs -- including food, shelter, health care, and education -- and to mitigate against turning to risky activities to survive.
7. *Existing local structures should be identified and built upon.* Infrastructure and services already exist in urban environments; humanitarian actors should capitalize upon local resources, advocate against discrimination in public services, and avoid the creation of parallel, refugee-specific structures.
8. *Humanitarian actors should establish new partnerships.* Humanitarian actors will need to partner with non-traditional actors, such as municipal authorities, local health officials, school boards, civil society organizations (including refugee groups), private businesses and financial institutions, and development actors.
9. *Assistance provided to urban refugees should pursue a community-based approach that benefits local communities.* Refugees are not always the most vulnerable residents of urban areas, and therefore the needs of the urban poor among whom refugees live must be taken into account.

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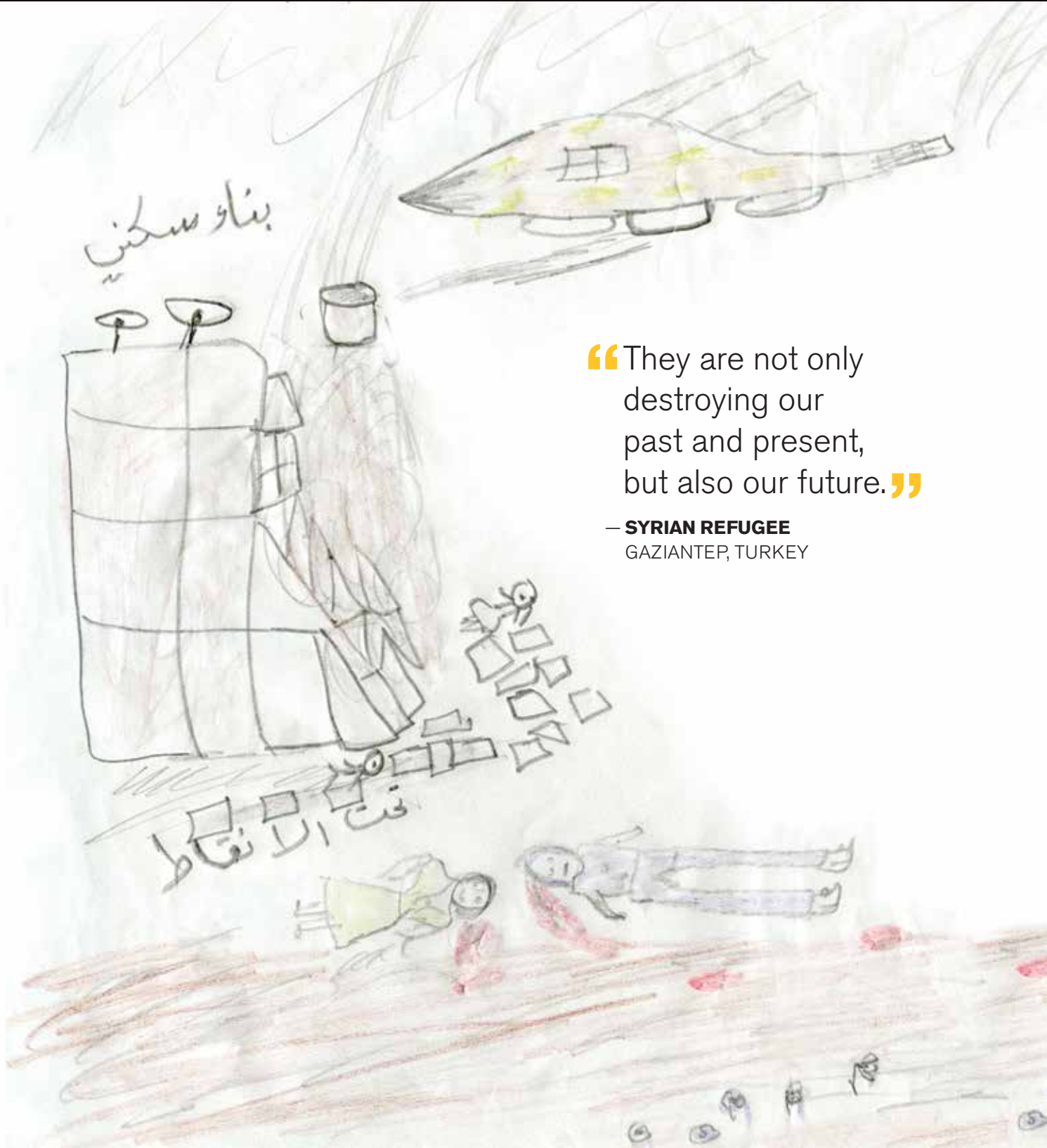
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The International Rescue Committee (IRC)

responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers lifesaving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 22 U.S. cities, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

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From Harm to Home | [Rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org)



“They are not only destroying our past and present, but also our future.”

— SYRIAN REFUGEE
GAZIANTEP, TURKEY