State of Play and Outlook of the Syrian Crisis

Half a Country Displaced: the Syrian Refugee and IDP Crisis

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The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) announced in June 2014 that the global population of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (IDPs) has, for the first time since the Second World War, topped 50 million people. The conflict in Syria, now in its fourth year and with no sign of resolution on the horizon, has been a primary driver of this truly awful accomplishment.[1] Since the start of the conflict in March 2011, violence and warfare there – apart from claiming more than 100,000 lives (some estimates are more than twice that number) – have displaced an estimated 6.5 million people within Syria and sent nearly 3 million people fleeing across borders into neighbouring countries. The fighting has spilled over as well into Lebanon and Iraq, and in doing so it has displaced local populations, created new refugees, and further threatened Syrians already taking refuge there.

This ever-expanding tragedy is one of the biggest humanitarian issues facing the world today. It is also an increasingly pressing issue for EU Member States. The cost of the humanitarian operation is mounting and the regional security of the EU neighbourhood is being undermined. Furthermore, while the vast majority of Syrian refugees will remain in neighbouring countries for a long time to come, a small but growing portion of these individuals are attempting to cross European borders by land, sea, and air in order to claim asylum in an EU Member State.

Internally Displaced Persons in Syria

The UN estimates that around 6.5 million people are currently displaced within Syria and approximately 9.3 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, figures which respectively amount to 30% and 42% of Syria's pre-crisis population of some 22 million. The actual figures are likely much higher, but as the UN and other humanitarian actors are only afforded limited and sporadic access to many parts of Syria, their ability to provide accurate statistics on the crisis is limited at best. As a case in point, the UN stopped updating its tally of casualties in January 2014 due to its lack of first-hand access and its inability to verify second-hand accounts. Lack of access, as well as large variations in local circumstances, make summary comment on the plight of Syrian IDPs difficult.

IDP is an umbrella term that refers to anybody who has been forced to leave their home but who has not crossed a national border. This could mean that they have moved within the same neighbourhood or town, or that they have left to a different part of the country. Many of Syria's IDPs reside with friends and family or rent private accommodation, others squat in vacant structures or pitch tents informally in rural areas, while still others move into dedicated camps for IDPs. They live in extremely vulnerable, precarious situations. Many lost assets when they left or lost their homes, and, as they have not exited the country, remain at extreme risk of being repeatedly displaced

[1] See Álvarez-Ossorio, "Evolution and Outlook of the Syrian Crisis" in the *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2013,* Barcelona: IEMed, for a background of the crisis.

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as shifts in fighting occur. Indeed, more IDPs are displaced or re-displaced every month, and the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) estimates that a further 1.5 million people became IDPs in the first half of 2014 alone.[2] The extremely limited, and at times deliberately obstructed, access of humanitarian aid has caused much of this population to sink into dire conditions. Repeated UN Security Council resolutions demanding unfettered humanitarian access have met with little success to date, and relief convoys/personnel have been repeatedly attacked.

Syrian Refugees in Neighbouring Countries

The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees have escaped to one of five neighbouring countries (see Chart 2). With a combined total of nearly 2.9 million refugees at the end of July 2014, these countries are: Lebanon (ca. 1.1 million Syrian refugees); Turkey (809,000); Jordan (607,000); Iraq (217,000); and Egypt (138,000). Lebanon, the smallest and hardest hit of any country, has absorbed more than 47,000 people each month for the past 12 months and has experienced an approximately 25% increase in population since the crisis began. It must be born in mind that these numbers, which capture only those registered by UNHCR in the Arab countries and the department of disaster and emergency management in Turkey (AFAD), underrepresent the scale of the flight. Many refugees, for a variety of reasons, remain unregistered. The Turkish authorities, for example, estimated that by 1 August more than 1.1 million Syrian refugees were residing on Turkish soil.[3] These overwhelming numbers have stretched the absorptive capacities of host communities to their limits, prompting the governments of all neighbouring countries save Lebanon to increasingly restrict access throughout 2013. Many border crossings are now permanently or sporadically closed, one result of which has been the rise of camps on the Syrian side of the Turkish and Iraqi borders in which people wait for an opportunity to cross.

Most of the refugees who have made it across the border currently reside in host communities and informal settlements. Lebanon has consistently refused to allow the construction of formal camps for Syrian refugees, and today only around one quarter of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey live in the formal camps administered by UNHCR and AFAD, respectively. This is a marked change from a year ago. Refugee populations were more or less evenly split in Turkey back in July 2013, according to UNHCR's daily situation reports, with 201,000 Syrians living in camps and 208,000 living outside of them. Today, total camp populations have only slightly increased (ca. 219,000), whereas the non-camp population has nearly tripled. A similar shift has happened in Jordan. A year ago, 40% of the nearly 500,000 Syrian refugees registered in Jordan lived in camps. The biggest of these camps is Za'atari, which became Jordan's 5th largest city last April when its population hit 202,000 people. Za'atari has steadily shrunk since then to less than 90,000, and now approximately 84% of Jordan's 607,000 registered Syrian refugees live in local communities. In Lebanon, refugees have spread out across some 1,600 localities, where they rent apartments, garages, office space, or squat in construction sites and abandoned buildings, among other places. They have also established around 1,200 tented settlements in rural areas, often on private land for which the owners extract rent or labour as compensation.

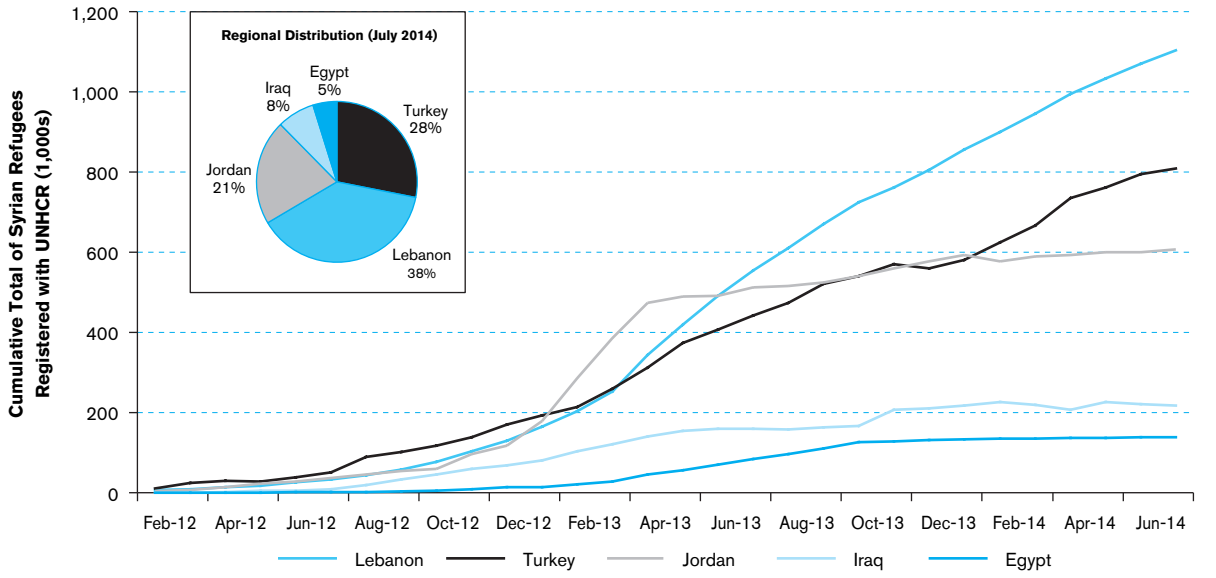
Host Communities

Efforts to cope with the extremely high numbers of Syrian refugees appearing in local communities has overwhelmed municipal labour markets, services, and infrastructures, and many places have reported rising resentment and increased social tensions be-

[2] "Regional Analysis Syria," *ACAPS*, 3 July 2014.

[3] "Turkish deputy PM concerned over growing Syrian refugee population," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1 August 2014, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-deputy-pm-concerned-over-growing-syrian-refugee-population.aspx?pageID=238&nID=69872&NewsCatID=341.

CHART 2 **Syrian Refugee Populations in Neighbouring Countries**



Source: UNHCR.

tween refugee and local populations. It is an unfortunate fact that many of the areas with high concentrations of refugees are also places with high levels of local poverty. Thus, the population most vulnerable to any shock is being asked to give the most.

For example, Lebanon is a small country of approximately 4.45 million people, more than a quarter of whom lived under the national poverty line of €2.89 per day (US$4/day) in 2007 according to the International Poverty Centre (the most recent data available). The World Bank estimated in 2013 that, because of the refugee influx, "by end–2014, some 170,000 additional Lebanese will be pushed into poverty. An additional 220,000–324,000 Lebanese are expected to become unemployed… most of them unskilled youth which would about double the unemployment rate, to over 20%."[4] Refugees and the local residents of many rural communities both tend to work in the agricultural and construction sectors, and thus are often in direct competition for scarce jobs, which can depress wages. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN reported last year that some areas of Lebanon had seen up to a 60% decrease in the wage rate for day labour.

The strain on these communities is obvious regardless of the metric used. Employment, education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, physical infrastructure, or living costs: all have experienced spikes that have severely reduced already insufficient capacity. Costs for rent and provisions have also risen substantially in areas of high refugee density. Refugee families are often more willing than local Lebanese to pool resources and live together under one roof. In such cases a group of refugees is often able to pay more rent in absolute terms than a single Lebanese or refugee family. According to UNHCR situation reports, evictions have become increasingly common as rent inflation has priced many of the poorest out of the market.

These dynamics have led to an increase in tensions between refugees and the inhabitants of host communities in some areas. Such instances of animosity are often attributed to the perception of some local residents – many of whom face some of the same structural constraints as refugees – that Syrian refugees unfairly benefit from humanitarian aid while dragging down the living conditions and employment prospects of local residents. It is important to stress that – to an extent – this is only perception. The International Labour Organisation reported that Lebanese workers in the Bekaa still earn around double their Syrian counterparts, albeit still below the official minimum wage.[5] Nevertheless, such per-

[4] "Lebanon - Economic and social impact assessment of the Syrian conflict," *World Bank*, 29 September 2013, p.128.
[5] "Assessment of the impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile," *ILO*, 1 April 2014, p. 28.

ceptions are widely reported to have negatively impacted refugee-community relations.

Expansion of the Conflict

The 'Syrian conflict' is not neatly contained within the national borders of Syria, and over the past year its neighbours to the east and west have been drawn into the turmoil.

Lebanon – a Secondary Theatre of War

Lebanon's central state is weak and dysfunctional, and in the current context it is noteworthy only for its near-total absence in the crisis response. It operates in parallel with myriad private, quasi-state and extra-state actors, most notably Hezbollah. The country's politics is further fractured by its deeply sectarian system, with power distributed in state institutions on a confessional [religious affiliation] basis and most (formally) non-state political actors are organised along confessional lines.

The influx of Syrian refugees has the potential to greatly destabilise Lebanon's politics, primarily because it alters the relative populations of Lebanon's confessional groups. The vast majority of refugees are Sunni Muslims and they have migrated to communities that share that religious/communal identity. This increases the demographic weight of Sunnis, unofficially the third largest confessional group in Lebanon today, and directly threatens the clout wielded by the political actors of other confessional groups. The group most threatened is Shi'ite Hezbollah, which is further motivated by the rise of a particular type of Sunni extremism in the region, specifically groups that view Shi'ites as infidels (takfiri groups), and the challenge to Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad, Hezbollah's patron in Damascus.[6]

The violence destabilising Lebanon today has escalated in parallel with Hezbollah's increasingly open support for the Syrian regime. After Hezbollah announced its direct, cross-border cooperation with the Syrian military in April 2013, Sunni extremist and Syrian rebel groups promised reprisals against Hezbollah, its patrons, and Shi'ite civilians. Syrian refugees have the potential to further destabilise the situation by joining this fight against Hezbollah on Lebanese soil. Not only are most refugees Sunni, but many have links with the Syrian opposition forces, and at times militants who have faced off against Hezbollah in Syria are directly mixed in with refugee flows.

Today the northeast border regions remain extremely unstable, with occurrences of cross-border shelling of Lebanese villages by the Syrian regime, inter-factional fighting, and a near complete lack of Lebanese state presence. Lebanon has suffered 21 car and suicide bombings since Hezbollah openly declared its support for the Syrian regime in April 2013, 17 of which targeted Hezbollah or Shi'ite neighbourhoods.[7] Most recently, Lebanese territory has been threatened – and parts of it captured – by the militant group Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS).

Iraq – Erased Borders and the Creation of New Refugees

The rise of ISIS over the past year has deeply impacted the region's stability and IDP/refugee flows. Born from the Iraq-based Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), ISIS was formed in mid-April 2013 with the express purpose of involving the group in the Syrian Civil War. It is widely considered to be one of the most extreme and brutal factions fighting today, to the extent that al-Qaeda disavowed it in February 2014. Since the beginning of the year, the Western-backed Free Syrian Army and the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front (Jabhat an-Nusra) have fought against ISIS as a common enemy. They succeeded in expelling ISIS from most of Syria's northwest provinces by mid-March, but it continues to maintain a strong presence in the eastern provinces of ar-Raqqa, al-Hasakah, and Deir az-Zor.

Following these defeats, ISIS launched a blitz eastward and quickly captured wide swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory, effectively erasing much of Iraq's western border with Syria. This campaign culminated on 9 June 2014 with the capture of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and the declaration of a caliphate spanning the Iraq-Syria border shortly thereafter. As of this writing ISIS continues to make territo-

[6] International Crisis Group. 2013. "Too close for comfort: Syrians in Lebanon," 13 May, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon.aspx [Accessed: 31 May 2014], p. 21, 27.

[7] Compiled by the author from news reports.

rial gains. It is increasingly challenging Kurdish peshmerga forces on the borders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), which is where more than 90% of Syrian refugees in Iraq currently reside. It has also captured several key border crossings on the Iraq-Syria border including the Al-Qaim crossing and, with it, the Al-Qaim Syrian refugee camp.

The United Nations estimates that ISIS's campaign has displaced 1.2 million people in Iraq. The vast majority of these are now IDPs, and while most are able to rent accommodation or stay with a host family, many are now living in public buildings as well as two IDP camps recently established by the KR-I government. Some Iraqis, however, have reportedly escaped to Jordan to join the already sizeable Iraqi refugee population there – some 30,000, according to UNHCR – that are part of the fallout of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Others have chosen to escape the violence in Iraq by crossing into Syria's al-Hasakeh province, even while many in al-Hasakeh are attempting to cross into Iraq to escape the violence in Syria.[8] Thus the turmoil is spreading, and fighting in both countries has created cross flows of refugees and is generating hundreds of thousands of new IDPs with few good options.

The Syrian Crisis in Europe

Crises such as this one demand that rich world countries not only open their pocketbooks but also their doors to the refugee population. It takes both aspects of international solidarity to not only alleviate individual human suffering, but also to relieve stress on national infrastructures and mitigate the social tensions inevitably arising from such dramatic and sudden influxes of population. The response to date of European Member States has, with few exceptions, concentrated on financial assistance to the neglect of its human responsibilities.

Financially speaking, Europe has been generous. The 28 Member States had, by mid-July 2014, donated ca. €1.06 billion to the relief effort since the start of the crisis. In addition to these individual contributions the European Commission had contributed €1.3 billion from communal funds, according to the EU Humanitarian Affairs Office (ECHO), which

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brings the total EU effort up to approximately €2.36 billion. EU Member States have so far contributed around 20% of all donations received by the UN in conjunction with their 2014 SHARP (Syria domestic) and RRP (regional) appeals. That said, those appeals, which total €4.43 billion, remain 68% unfunded. Thus, while the generosity of the EU is laudable – especially Germany and the United Kingdom, which combined have given 65% of all Member State donations – the scale of the crisis ultimately demands much more than has so far been given.

Asylum Seekers

In contrast to this financial largess, Member States' willingness to relieve the human pressure on neighbouring countries remains limited. This is partially attributable to the current European climate of increasing xenophobia and prolonged economic crisis, in which most politicians are loath to appear 'soft' on immigration and are quick to invoke images of the EU being overwhelmed by a flood of refugees. This is especially obvious in the rhetoric of the self-described 'front-line' countries of the Mediterranean, despite the fact that they are not actually the primary destination countries for Syrian refugees, the majority of whom (63%) have applied for asylum in Germany and Sweden. The simple fact is that Europe has NOT suffered a deluge of destitute Syrians, either in terms of absolute numbers or, certainly, in comparison to the actual front-line countries bordering Syria.

[8] "Iraq Displacement Profile," *ACAPS*, 4 July 2014.

The EU28 received 109,070 new asylum applications from Syrians between the start of 2011 and June 2014. Once lodged, the vast majority of asylum applications from Syrian nationals are accepted. Of the 83,820 decisions reached by mid-2014, 90% of them (75,560) were positive, according to Eurostat data. To apply for asylum, however, one must be physically present on EU territory and EU Member States have thrown up many obstacles to disrupt this flow, such as the new border fences that have been erected in both Greece and Bulgaria since the start of the crisis.

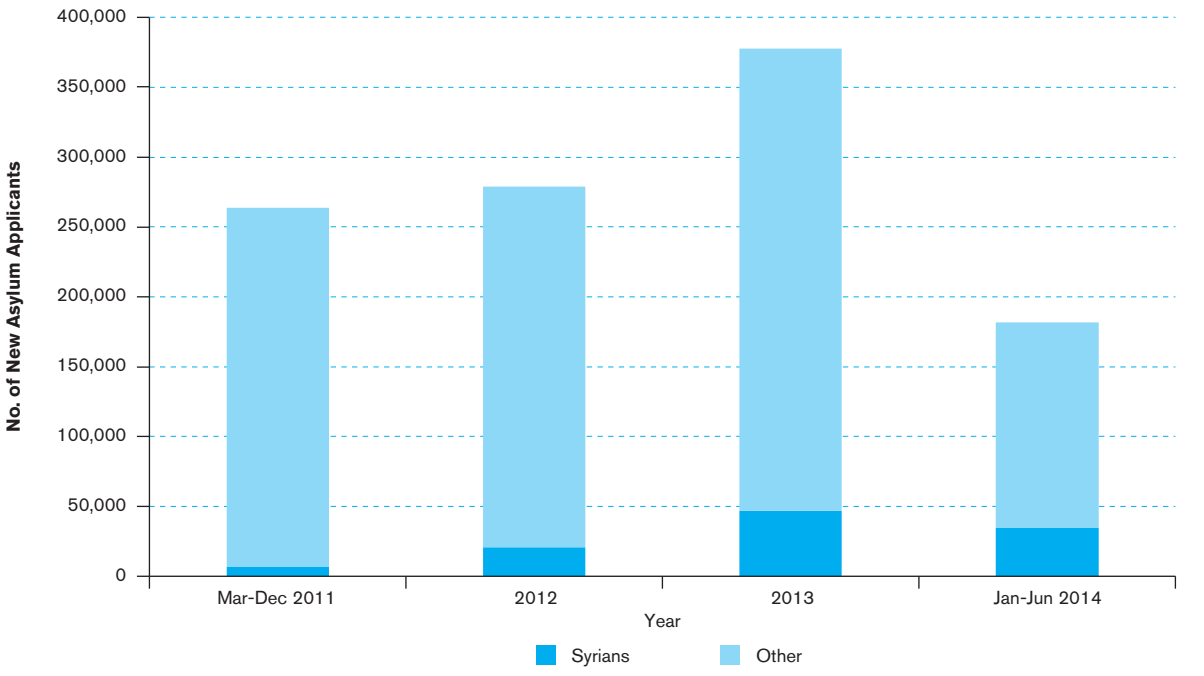
Nevertheless, as the duration of the conflict has increased so has the flow of Syrians to Europe, and Syrians are now the top nationality applying for asylum in Europe today. That said, their number remains surprisingly modest in comparison with Europe's total annual number of asylum seekers. As shown in Chart 3, some 5,415 Syrians requested asylum in 2011, accounting for merely 2% of the total number of applications lodged that year. By 2013, that proportion was up to 12%, and during the first six months of 2014 Syrians lodged nearly 20% of all new asylum applications received. This is due, in part, to the increased use of Libya as a staging ground for human smugglers who are capitalising on the current political instability there.

In conjunction with this, the increase in Syrian asylum applications is also due to the success of Italy's Mare Nostrum programme, which rescued more than 50,000 people from the Mediterranean Sea in eight months between its inception in October 2013 and July 2014. This life-saving programme has cost the Italian government approximately €9 million per month, for which Italian politicians have come under fire. Without financial help from Brussels it is unlikely that the effort will be sustained.

Concluding Remarks

The Syrian crisis is currently stalemating in some areas and worsening in others, but it is not getting better. Half of the population of Syria has become an IDP or a refugee, and humanitarian actors continuously struggle to acquire both the funds and the access necessary to deliver services to them. ISIS, founded little more than a year ago, has erased much of Syria's border with Iraq and helped to displace 1.2 million people in the latter country alone. It has further challenged Lebanon's sovereignty

CHART 3 **Syrian and Total New Asylum Applicants to EU28 Countries**



Source: EUROSTAT.

KEY STATISTICS

SYRIA

IDPs in Syria: ca. 6.5 million

Syrians Requiring Humanitarian Assistance: ca. 9.3 million

Palestinian Refugees in Syria Requiring Humanitarian Assistance: ca. 420,000 of 525,000 (80%)

OCHA 2014 Funding Request for Humanitarian Aid to Syria (SHARP): €504M of €1.69B (30%)

NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Registered Syrian Refugees in Neighbouring Countries: 2.9 million

Lebanon: 1.1 million
Turkey: 809,000
Jordan: 609,000
Iraq: 217,000
Egypt: 138,000

UNHCR 2014 Funding Request for Syrian Refugees (RRP6): €918m of €2.74b (33%)

EUROPEAN UNION

Total EU funding for the Syrian Crisis (2011-2014): €2.36b

European Commission: €1.3b
Member States: €1.06b

Top 5 Donor Countries

United Kingdom: €372m
Germany: €315m
Denmark: €66m
Netherlands: €66m
Sweden: €54m

New Syrian Asylum Applications in the EU28 (2011-June 2014): 109,000

Top 5 Countries of Asylum for Syrian Refugees

Germany: 33,000
Sweden: 37,000
Bulgaria: 7,000
Netherlands: 7,000
Denmark: 4,000

Positive Decision Rate for Asylum Claims from Syrian Nationals in EU28: 90%

Resettlement Spots Pledged to UNHCR by EU28 MS for Syrian Refugees: 30,000

Notes: All data rounded to the nearest thousand, accessed 4 August 2014. OCHA (Syrian IDPs); OCHA-FTS (SHARP funding, converted from USD to EUR at a rate of 0.74466); UNHCR (neighbouring countries, RRP6 funding totals as of 30 June, converted from USD to EUR at a rate of 0.73286); ECHO (EU funding totals as of 14 July); EUROSTAT (asylum seekers to Europe); Italian MOI (*Mare Nostrum*, Syrians arriving by sea to Italy).

and directly engaged Lebanese forces for control of Lebanese territory. Through all this, Syria's civilians suffer. EU and humanitarian actors must understand that this is the beginning of a protracted refugee crisis, and in no scenario will the fighting end quickly and the bulk of Syria's refugees and IDPs return home. Its actions must be proportionate to the scale of the problem at hand, and it must open not only its wallet but also its doors to receive more Syrian refugees. Money can only go so far, and it is the human pressure upon neighbouring countries, their communities, and their economies that threatens to further destabilise the region, as much as a lack of humanitarian aid. Europe, while it cannot fix the problem outright, must show greater solidarity with the region or it will only continue to watch it burn.