# The Context, Causes, and Consequences of Syrian Displacement

The displacement of almost 13 million Syrians—half the country's population—is the most daunting humanitarian crisis of our time. In the absence of viable political solutions to the conflict, governments in the region and the broader international community are all struggling to respond to the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). Political actors, unable to agree on how to end the violence, agree that humanitarian assistance is needed, but the funds are neither sufficient now nor likely to be sustainable in the years ahead. The conflict that is driving the displacement has become more complex over the past few years, particularly with the proliferation of actors involved, and solutions appear more elusive than ever. As starkly illustrated by the November 2015 Beirut and Paris attacks, Syria's humanitarian crisis has implications not only for Syrian civilians but also for the course of the conflict, governments in the region, governments beyond

the region, the international humanitarian system, and indeed for global peace and security.

While dozens of articles and studies have looked at the scale of the Syrian displacement crisis, this book takes a step back to look at the larger issues raised by the Syrian crisis and in particular its implications for global governance.

## THE GLOBAL CONTEXT: IT'S NOT JUST SYRIA

At the present time, humanitarian actors are struggling to respond to multiple mega-crises. The number of displaced persons has reached levels not seen since the end of World War II. Worldwide, almost 60 million people have been forced from their homes by conflict, violence, and persecution (figure 1-1). While Syrian displacement is the most visible manifestation of this trend, it is far from the only case. And the rarely acknowledged fact behind these numbers is that most of the world's 60 million refugees and internally displaced people have been uprooted for a long time. The global displacement crisis is as much about the failure to resolve long-term displacement as about new conflicts displacing millions of people. Some 60 percent of the 60 million uprooted have been displaced for more than five years, and refugees, on average, have been uprooted for seventeen years.[1] Finding solutions for long-term displacement has long been on the global humanitarian agenda, but the international community is failing in this task. In 2015 the fewest number of refugees returned to their countries than at any time since 1983.[2]

Right now, there simply are too many simultaneous mega-crises: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya in the Middle East; Ukraine; South Sudan, Burundi, and Central African Republic; Afghanistan, Nepal, and the Rohingya in

FIGURE 1-1. *Number of People Displaced by Conflict, 2005–14*
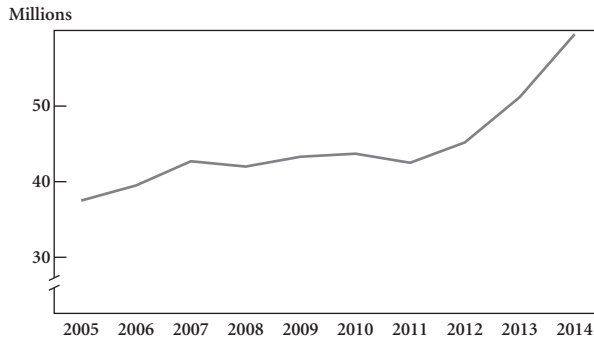


Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Myanmar. There are also displacement crises in Colom-
bia, Central America, and Mexico; still-fragile situations
in Mali, Somalia, Eritrea, and the Sahel; lingering effects
of the Ebola crisis in West Africa; and the continuing saga
of deaths in the Mediterranean. Humanitarian actors are
scrambling to respond to all of these crises. Not only is hu-
manitarian funding under pressure, but there is a shortage
of experienced humanitarian staff and a lack of creative and
critical thinking about the larger issues beyond the imme-
diate crises. International attention is fickle and gravitates
to the crisis of the day, moving away from protracted crises
even though people remain displaced and in need.

Today's humanitarian crises are a reflection of chang-
ing patterns of violence and conflict. Overall trends indi-
cate that the world is much less violent than during the Cold
War and its immediate aftermath. In fact, most regions of
the world have seen reductions in levels of violence over the
past twenty years. While data from the Uppsala Conflict
Data Program show that over 100,000 people were killed

in organized violence in 2014—the highest rate of fatalities in twenty years—this is still much lower than the previous peak in 1994.[3] However, the last five years have seen an upsurge in organized violence, particularly in the Middle East, where a combination of weak national states, corrupt economies, and Western passivity has led to what Peter Harling and Alex Simon have called the "chaotic devolution of power" and the "militiarization" of societies.[4] While the roots of the Syria conflict are clearly in the political and economic failures in the region, the international system has been unable to prevent the escalation of the conflict, in spite of the endorsement by the UN World Summit of the concept of Responsibility to Protect in 2005.[5]

If the international community cannot develop the means to prevent and resolve the conflicts that displace large numbers of people, as in Syria, then it needs to invest more in supporting solutions for refugees and IDPs and others suffering the effects of those conflicts, including host communities. If successful, such efforts could also serve as models for other seemingly intractable conflicts that have displaced millions, as in Iraq and Yemen. Such initiatives, as discussed in the concluding chapter of this study, could include more support and different kinds of support for refugees in neighboring countries and for resettlement in more distant lands as well as using development assistance to support solutions for refugees and IDPs. Rather than paying large (though insufficient) sums of money to support care and maintenance programs for Syrian refugees, perhaps greater incentives should be offered to host governments to support long-term integration of refugees into their countries.

There also may be ways to do much more to recognize the agency of refugees and IDPs themselves and support their efforts to find their own solutions to displacement. As dis-

cussed below, most of the Iraqi refugees who fled their country in the mid-2000s have likely found their own solutions, without international support. Oxford University researchers have deemed this "accommodation" rather than integration.[6] Host communities need to be reassured that the presence of refugees can contribute to economic growth if they are given a chance to help themselves. Furthermore, their "accommodation" need not mean discouraging them from returning home. If anything, recent research suggests that economically better integrated refugees are more likely to more successfully manage the return process when the time comes.[7]

Ideas and recommendations are spelled out more fully in the concluding chapter, but the authors want to signal from the beginning that the Syrian displacement crisis compels the international community to look beyond short-term humanitarian solutions. The Syrian crisis—coming as it does on top of too many other mega-crises—is a clear sign that the international humanitarian system can no longer cope. The only answer is not simply for Western governments to pony up more money for more relief aid for Syrians displaced for decades to come. Nor is it to bring more donors—such as China and the Gulf states—into the existing system (though that is certainly needed to address current shortfalls). The magnitude of the crisis and the scale of human suffering compel the search for bold and even radical solutions for the failures of our present global system.

## THIS BOOK

This study begins by placing the Syrian displacement crisis in the context of the Middle East—a context shaped by poor governance, violence, and resulting waves of displacement that have influenced the region's response to Syrian refugees

and IDPs. This is followed by a short overview of the now-familiar ground of the descent of Syria into civil war with an emphasis on the conflict's effect on displacing people. The particular impact of the refugee flows on Syria's neighbors—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—is then considered with analysis of how these three countries have tried to cope with the situation in the face of inadequate burden sharing by the international community. Discussion then turns to the more recent phenomenon of Syrian refugees making their way to Europe and the impact of this flow of refugees not only on Europe and the global humanitarian architecture but indeed on international peace and security too. Chapter 3 addresses some of the challenges posed by those displaced—and trapped—inside Syrian borders. While protecting and assisting Syrian refugees in host countries is a mammoth task, the challenge of doing so for those displaced within Syrian borders is even more daunting. Finally, the book concludes with a chapter analyzing the identified trends and suggesting possible ways forward. Solutions for resolving Syria's civil war are not presented, except in passing to note their possible humanitarian consequences. However, it goes without saying that ultimately finding solutions for those displaced will require addressing the very root cause of the crisis: the war in Syria.

This study is based on field researches carried out since 2013 in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and on dozens of interviews with humanitarian actors, including those working inside Syria and in Iraq.[8] Most of those writing about Syrian displacement focus on the numbers. Numbers are important, but they are constantly changing. The figures presented here are current as of the end of 2015, and it is likely that these figures will be out-of-date before this book is even published. But the issues around Syrian displacement are

much broader than the number of people displaced on a given date, and this study seeks to look beyond the numbers to the larger trends and political implications of Syrian refugee and IDP flows.

*A word on definitions*: A refugee is a person who has crossed an internationally recognized border because of conflict or persecution. Protection of refugees is guaranteed under the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.[9] Neither Lebanon nor Jordan has signed this treaty. Although Turkey has ratified the Convention, it maintains a geographical limitation, restricting formal refugee status to Europeans. In this paper, the term "refugee" is used to refer to Syrians who have fled to other countries since the conflict broke out in 2011, whether or not recognized as such by the host governments.

The definition of an internally displaced person is much broader and carries less legal weight. Unlike refugees whose rights are upheld in a long-established, legally binding convention, the normative framework for IDPs is much more recent and much less formal. *The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,* although affirmed as an important framework by the 2005 World Summit, are not a legally binding international treaty.[10] While the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated to protect and assist refugees, there is no corresponding international organization responsible for IDPs; rather, that responsibility lies with national authorities, supported at times by a looser system of international agency involvement. Globally there are around three times as many IDPs as refugees.

### THE MIDDLE EAST CONTEXT

While unusual in its intensity and its direct impact beyond the region, the Syrian refugee crisis is just the latest of a long series of large-scale displacements of people in the Middle East over many centuries. Two of the most recent displacements—of Palestinians after the founding of Israel and of Iraqis during and after the rule of Saddam Hussein—provide particular context for understanding the plight of Syrians today, including the treatment of them by neighboring countries.

#### *The Ongoing Palestinian Legacy*

In 1948 some 700,000 Palestinians (95 percent of the total Arab population in the area) fled or were forced from their communities and have largely lived as refugees ever since.[11] This displacement not only shaped Palestinian identity, but it has dominated Arab-Israeli relations for sixty-plus years and has influenced the region's response to later waves of displacement, including both Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. In 1948 the assumption was that the influx of Palestinian refugees would be a temporary phenomenon. The UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine was established in 1948 to mediate the conflict; it failed to do so (a long and fascinating story) and ceased its protection functions in the mid-1950s. A successor agency, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), was created in 1950 with a three-year mandate but is still with us today, caring for almost 5 million Palestinian refugees, including 2 million in Jordan and about half a million each in Lebanon and Syria (before the outbreak of the Syria conflict in 2011).[12]

In light of the present Syrian crisis, it is interesting and sad to look back at the early history of the international response to the plight of Palestinians. Sometimes there is an assumption that certain bits of history are all preordained, but other outcomes were in fact possible back then. The fact that a separate UN agency was created to deal with Palestinian refugees (rather than including them in UNHCR, which was also established in 1950), that the UN Conciliation Commission was disbanded, that more than fifty camps were set up for Palestinians, that the right of return was enshrined in UN resolutions, and that Arab governments found it useful to maintain the visibility of the refugees as a bargaining chip with Israel—together meant that solutions to Palestinian displacement would remain elusive. At least some of these factors are also at play in the current Syrian refugee crisis.

The long-term presence of the Palestinian refugees has shaped host governments' response to both the Iraqi and Syrian refugees in several ways. Lebanon and Jordan welcomed the Palestinian refugees in 1948, expecting that their presence would be a temporary phenomenon. Nearly seven decades later, the Palestinian population in the region has increased more than fivefold. Lebanon and Jordan took different paths in their treatment of the Palestinians. While Jordan gave Palestinians the right to become citizens (and most UNRWA-registered refugees in Jordan have done so), Lebanon kept citizenship off the table out of concern for its own fragile sectarian balance (although Lebanon did grant citizenship to about 50,000, mainly Christian, Palestinians in the 1950s. It was not until 2010 that Palestinians in Lebanon were allowed to work on the same basis as other foreigners (although the process is onerous and they are still prohibited from working in some 20 professions).[13] Syria, in

fact, was one of the host countries most accepting of Palestinian refugees.

Several lessons from the experience of Palestinians are relevant to our story of Syrian refugees today. Governments of host countries recognized that allowing refugees to stay temporarily was no guarantee that they would soon leave. Today, Lebanese and Jordanians constantly draw parallels between the Syrian and Palestinian situations. "We thought our Palestinian brothers and sisters would only stay for a short time," one Lebanese official noted. "They've been here 67 years. We won't make that mistake again." Another official said: "If we make life too easy for them, they'll never find solutions elsewhere."[14]

Local integration of Syrians—the second so-called durable solution for refugees—is off the table for discussions in Jordan and Lebanon.[15] Giving refugees the right to work or to become more self-reliant is seen as opening the door to allowing them to stay indefinitely, which after the Palestinian experience is simply not acceptable. The long-standing Palestinian presence was also a factor in the refusal by governments in the region to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention (or, in the case of Turkey, maintaining the geographical limitation). Why take on more legal obligations when they were already hosting large numbers of Palestinians?

Other impacts of the Palestinian situation have been a reluctance to establish camps that might turn into permanent settlements along with a tendency to view Palestinian refugees themselves with suspicion. When Iraqi refugees began fleeing in the mid-2000s (more on this below), Jordan and Syria generously allowed them to enter—except for the Iraqi Palestinians who were confined to no-man's land areas between the borders until they were eventually resettled

elsewhere. Again when the Syrian refugees began to pour across the border of neighboring countries, Jordan imposed restrictions on the entry of Palestinians, followed in May 2014 by Lebanon. Difficulties for Palestinian refugees entering Turkey were also reported.

### And Then There's Iraqi Displacement

Iraqi refugee movements have a long and volatile history, with multiple displacements (both internal and cross-border) during the Saddam Hussein regime (1979–2003), both returning refugees and newly displaced in 2003–06, a dramatic spike in 2006–09, and another wave in 2014–15 as a result of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) activity and increasing sectarian violence.[16] From 2006 on, when it was recognized that Iraqi refugees constituted a crisis, it has been difficult to get a handle on the number of refugees, their needs, and even assistance provided by UNHCR or others. Registering refugees was problematic from the beginning, with many refugees reluctant to register for fear it would lead to involuntary repatriation.[17] Host governments of Syria and Jordan had a vested interest in inflating the number of refugees, and UNHCR was reluctant to challenge those claims (a phenomenon seen today in Jordanian and Turkish estimates of Syrian refugee numbers). Camps for Iraqi refugees were not established in any of the host countries, but rather the refugees rented accommodations, moved in with relatives, or eked out an existence on the margins of large cities—and became largely invisible. Moreover, given the lack of refugee status in host countries in the region, the legal status of Iraqi refugees was uncertain as most were considered guests, tourists, visitors, or undocumented migrants.

The Iraqi exodus of well over a million refugees in the mid-2000s challenged the host governments, but once the Syrian exodus began in 2011, Iraqi refugees in the region became even more invisible.[18] For example, a November 2015 review of UNHCR's Iraq webpage found that the latest maps of Iraqi refugees dated back to 2008 and that most of the analysis of Iraqi refugees ended by 2010.[19]

Statistics on Iraqi refugees reveal a number of inconsistencies. Most strikingly, the number of Iraqi refugees declined from a high of 2,336,938 in 2007 to 444,471 in 2013 (the latest year for which comparable data are available.) Where did almost 2 million Iraqi refugees go? According to UNHCR figures, there were 316,075 returnees between 2006 and 2013.[20] Another 85,000 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States.[21] But that still leaves 1.4 million Iraqi refugees from 2006 who were neither registered in host countries in 2013 nor counted in the return or resettlement statistics. This may indicate that the 2006 figures were wildly overestimated and that the registration systems were terribly flawed. Or it may also indicate that Iraqi refugees have been able to find other solutions. It may be, for example, that some Iraqis included in the statistics for earlier years as living in the region made their way to European countries to seek asylum or join the ranks of irregular migrants.

Dawn Chatty and Nisrine Mansour argue that Iraqi refugees don't fit the Western understanding of the refugee regime because their migration is circular—Iraqi refugees return to Iraq to check on family members, pick up pension checks, etc. They characterize this mobility as the "result of a strategy to manage life risks by dispersal of family members along pre-established social networks whenever possible."[22] Many, perhaps most, of the Iraqi refugees arrived in Jordan,

Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt with some resources. But as their savings diminished and their circular movements became more precarious, their situations became more difficult.

Local integration of Iraqi refugees is rejected by all the host governments—already burned by the Palestinians—which have created various restrictions on residency, registration, and work authorization. The governments of both Jordan and Syria have claimed that the economic burden of Iraqi refugees has been very high (Syria—$1.5 billion, Jordan—$1 billion in 2008) and around 2010 began to restrict the entrance of Iraqi refugees. And yet, while integration is not possible, local "accommodation" is taking place where Iraqis are blending in with their host communities (including through intermarriage with locals) and few are deported. Interestingly, there have been virtually no cases of political violence by Iraqi refugees in any of the host countries in the region.[23]

The case of Iraqi displacement offers some clues as to what might happen in the case of the far larger outflows of Syrian refugees and some insights into the policies and attitudes of host governments. While host governments seem determined not to take any measures that will result in the permanent settlement of Syrians on their territories, positive lessons can be drawn from the experiences of both Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in the region.

Refugees who are not living in camps often find their own solutions through local accommodation when local integration is not an option, when return is impossible, or when resettlement can benefit only a small percentage of the total caseload.

## THE ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

While the roots of the Syrian conflict are complex and long term (and have been analyzed extensively elsewhere), the present round of violence dates back to March 2011 when Syrian protesters in the southern city of Deraa took to the streets to protest the arrest and torture of children who had painted antigovernment graffiti in public spaces. The protests did not call for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad but rather reflected a range of grievances.[24] Security forces responded brutally, killing some civilian protesters, and as a result, the protests spread to other cities. By June 2011 over 500 people had been killed and thousands of Syrian residents had fled into Turkey, marking the beginning of large-scale refugee movements.[25]

Former UN secretary general Kofi Annan was appointed as a Joint UN-Arab League Special Representative for Syria to negotiate an end to the conflict, but left after six months as negotiations appeared more elusive than ever. He was followed by veteran diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who also left in 2014 after the failure of two rounds of peace talks in Geneva between the Syrian government and opposition. The current special envoy is Steffan da Mistura, although few expect that he will be able to bring the parties to the table. At the time of this writing, the military situation on the ground continues to displace more people. The latest round of negotiations held in Vienna by the International Syrian Support Group in November 2015 and the adoption of the UN

Note that this section draws on earlier analysis by Elizabeth Ferris, Kemal Kirişci, and Salman Shaikh, "Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs and a Shortage of Solutions," Foreign Policy at Brookings, September 18, 2013.

Security Council Resolution 2254 in December, supporting efforts to seek a political solution to the conflict in Syria, are welcome developments. However, expectations of concrete progress are still not high. As International Crisis Group reported in 2013, the opposition is nearly impossible to eliminate and "the large underclass that is its core constituency has suffered such extreme regime violence that it can be expected to fight till the end."[26] This analysis is even more valid today. Discussions about a continued role for Assad in any negotiated settlement are enormously divisive. On the one hand there are fears that if Assad were to go, ISIS would fill the vacuum. On the other hand, the sheer level of violence perpetrated by the regime against the civilian population makes it difficult to see either the reintegration of refugees or long-term stability with continued rule by the regime.

A UN commission of inquiry has found that both the regime and rebels are guilty of war crimes.[27] Deadly military assaults by the government have included dropping barrel bombs on cities such as Aleppo, laying siege to rebel-held areas, and almost certainly carrying out chemical weapons attacks. A wide array of rebel groups is fighting both the regime and each other, ranging from the Western-backed Free Syrian Army to Islamist groups such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS. At the time of writing, the Syrian government still controlled much of the country, including Damascus and the coast, but was believed to be losing its grip on the cities of Aleppo and Deraa. The Kurds control several areas of the north and north-east, while ISIS controls a large part of eastern Syria and has declared a "caliphate," which also takes in a large part of Iraq. Other opposition forces hold substantial territory around Aleppo and in the south near the Golan Heights.

Adding to the complexity of the conflict, Syria has become a key battleground for regional proxy wars. As the International Crisis Group wrote in 2013:

> The war is metastasizing in ways that draw in regional and other international actors, erase boundaries and give rise to a single, transnational arc of crisis. The opposition increasingly resembles a Sunni coalition in which a radicalized Sunni street, Islamist networks, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Gulf states and Turkey take leading roles. The pro-regime camp encompassing Iran, Hezbollah, Iraq and Iraqi Shiite militants, likewise appears to be a quasi-confessional alliance.[28]

Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah have long provided military assistance to the regime, with Russia deploying military force in direct support of the government since September 2015. On the other side, opposition forces have benefited from military and political support from countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, in addition to "non-lethal" assistance from the United States, Britain, and other Western powers. These divisions have also played out in the diplomatic arena, with Russia and China blocking UN Security Council resolutions to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime. A round of peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups in Geneva collapsed in January 2014 with no agreement. There have been a handful of diplomatic breakthroughs with the Russia-backed deal for Syria to relinquish its chemical weapons arsenal, UN Security Council resolutions on cross-border aid, and more recently discussions in Vienna. However, the total lack of diplomatic consensus on

how to end the conflict means that the proxy war is grinding on into its sixth year—with weapons continuing to flow to both sides from their respective backers.

The conflict has been transformed from a rebellion against an oppressive regime into a sectarian civil war. The opposition has fragmented into various Islamist networks and radical groups, such as al-Nusra and ISIS. Foreign governments and other interests are funding the war and sending fighters into Syria. An estimated 27,000 to 31,000 foreign fighters are now in Syria, and the conflict bears the hallmarks of a full-on proxy war.[29] For some, the conflict seems increasingly intended to destroy Syria as a nation-state and as a country that, while ruled by an authoritarian regime, once enjoyed reasonable prosperity, decent public services, and respect for minorities.

The following section provides a short overview of how religious minorities—Alawites, Christians, and Druze—have fared in the conflict. This theme will be picked up again in the analysis of both cross-border and internal displacement, in chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

### Minorities in Syria

Arab Sunni Muslims comprise about 65 percent of the Syrian population.[30] The rest are primarily Christians, Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis, although estimates vary as the Syrian government deliberately does not keep official statistics on religious groups.[31] The (Sunni Muslim) Kurds are the largest ethnic minority. Syria has been one of the most religiously diverse countries in the Middle East, and the increasingly sectarian tone of the civil war, combined with military gains by ISIS and al-Nusra, sparked growing fears for the fate of Syria's minorities. Indeed, some in the region

suggest that the sectarian nature of displacement and the particular effects on minorities are reshaping the demography of the Middle East and may end up marking the end of the nation-state in the region.[32] As will be seen in the next two chapters, displacement is both the manifestation and perhaps the cause of these changes. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic noted: "All of the Syrian Arab Republic's religious and ethnic communities are suffering as a result of the conflict. Some communities have been specifically targeted . . . in other instances, the motivations for attacks are more complex, resulting from perpetrators conflating a community's ethnic and/or religious backgrounds and its perceived political loyalties. Where ethnic or religious groups are believed to be supporters of an opposing warring faction, the entire community has been the subject of discrimination and, in some instances, violent attack."[33]

Alawites, adherents of a branch of Shia Islam, are estimated to make up 10–12 percent of Syria's population. They are considered by some to be among the most socially liberal and secular segments of Syrian society and are central to support of the Assad regime. About 75 percent of all Syrian Alawites live in the coastal Latakia region. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad hails from the Alawite minority, and his regime has traditionally commanded support from the Christian, Druze, and Ismaili minorities. While many individuals in those communities may have been critical of the regime, they tended to regard the secular Alawite government as a better alternative to possible Islamist rule. The regime also maintained power by forming an alliance with Sunni business elites and portraying itself as a bulwark against extremism to moderate Sunnis, some of whom continued to support the regime well into the uprising. While

many Sunnis, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, prized stability or benefited economically from the regime, the up-rising was largely driven by lower- and middle-class Sunnis from peripheral areas, who were neglected by the regime's economic liberalization policies amid a major drought.[34] While Assad's brutal response to the uprising has caused him to lose favor with Sunnis and minorities alike, the regime would not have lasted this long without a wide sup-port base. The regime's efforts to paint the opposition as Islamic extremists (even before such groups did actually emerge) have helped to maintain the support of minority communities. At the same time, the Syrian opposition has been criticized for failing to offer an inclusive vision that guarantees the safety of minorities.[35]

While much of the Syrian army was Sunni, Alawites occupied key positions and played a major role in the vio-lent crackdown on peaceful protesters and armed rebels. They have also made up the majority of the *shabbiha*—pro-government armed gangs accused of beating and kill-ing protesters and carrying out atrocities such as the 2012 Houla massacre.[36] With army casualties mounting in Ala-wite heartlands such as Tartus, there are reports that some are no longer willing to fight for the regime in far-flung areas of Syria.[37] There is also speculation that the regime and the Alawite community will eventually withdraw to their coastal enclave and set up their own mini-state, as happened under the French mandate following World War I.

Analysts have observed mounting sectarian rhetoric against Alawites—which, combined with news of military gains by ISIS and other extremist rebel groups, have sparked fears of a genocide. While there is also serious concern about the fate of Christians and Druze, Alawites will clearly be the most vulnerable in the event of a regime collapse. In

an interview with Al Jazeera, the leader of al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, inferred that Alawites must not only abandon Assad but convert if they don't wish to be killed.[38] (Christians would pay a special tax.) One analyst has warned of the potential for mass flight of Alawites, as well as other minorities, if the regime loses its hold on its coastal heartland.[39] As they would likely flee to unstable, over-strained Lebanon, there is dangerous potential for revenge attacks against them by other refugees as well as local communities.

Christians made up about 10 percent of Syria's population, with the largest denominations being the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic church.[40] Before the conflict, Syrian Christians, including Armenians, were spread throughout the country, with sizeable populations in Damascus, Homs (including surrounding areas), and Latakia. The Christian-majority villages of Saydnaya and Maaloula and the monastery of Mar Musa are outside Damascus and were popular tourist sites. Christians were perceived as supporting the regime and enjoyed a relatively high level of religious freedom. Christians have also figured among Syria's business and cultural elite and held high positions in the government and security forces. One of the leading figures of the Damascus Spring opposition movement in the early 2000s was a Christian intellectual, Michel Kilo. Ironically, one of the founders of Ba'athism, the political ideology on which the current regime rests, Michel Aflaq, was also Christian.

With violent sectarianism expected to worsen in Syria, Christians along with Alawites are considered the most vulnerable minorities.[41] Initially, some Christians in Homs and other parts of Syria had taken part in peaceful demonstrations calling for reforms, but they became increasingly alarmed due to the growing radicalization of the opposition and reports of sectarian revenge.[42] Those who were able made

plans to leave Syria for Lebanon and beyond. While some Christians have tried to avoid being drawn into the conflict, others signed up with pro-government militias.[43] By 2012 sectarian slogans such as "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave" were shouted at antigovernment protests although some questioned the motivation of such demonstrators.[44]

Fears of sectarian violence at the hands of rebels, if originally exaggerated by the regime, soon turned to reality. In 2014 Melkite Greek Catholic patriarch Gregorios III Laham said that more than 1, 000 Christians had been killed, entire villages emptied, and dozens of churches damaged or destroyed.[45] In September 2013 the ancient Christian town of Maaloula came under attack by rebel forces led by the al-Nusra Front.[46] A number of senior Christian clerics have been kidnapped, including the heads of the Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox churches in Aleppo.[47] Human Rights Watch has documented deadly indiscriminate rocket, mortar, and car bomb attacks by rebels on civilians in government-held areas, including the Christian areas of Qassa, Bab Touma, and Bab Sharqi.[48] Schools and hospitals were among the buildings hit.[49]

The fortunes of Christians worsened with the expansion of ISIS control in eastern Syria, where they have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, or face death. As Islamic State militants advanced on Hassakeh province in February 2015, some 1,000 families fled their homes and up to 285 people were kidnapped.[50] Mounting fears over the fate of Syrian Christians in rebel-held areas have led to high-profile efforts to evacuate them.

The Druze follow a monotheistic, secretive religion drawn on Ismailism, the second largest branch of Shia Islam.[51] Their faith also incorporates elements of Christianity and Judaism and is denounced as heretical by al-Qaeda

and ISIS. Druze minorities also exist in neighboring Lebanon and Israel.[52] In Syria, they are mainly concentrated in Sweida province, in Syria's south, where they make up almost 90 percent of the population.[53] They are perceived to be supportive of the regime and traditionally have high participation rates in the Ba'ath Party.[54] Druze have also fought in the Syrian army and pro-government militias, but the Druze-dominated Sweida province had remained relatively calm until recently. During summer 2015, there were fears of a massacre of Syria's Druze as rebels made gains south of Damascus.[55] The Druze were facing their most serious existential threat since the start of the conflict, with the southern Druze-dominated Sweida province under threat from ISIS and al-Nusra fighters, and the Druze forming their own security forces to protect themselves.[56]

By June 2015 Israel was preparing for the possibility of Syrian Druze refugees trying to cross into the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, and the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces warned that Israel will act to prevent a massacre on its border.[57] With the situation of Syrian Druze looking far more precarious as the conflict entered its sixth year, some regional Druze leaders—including Lebanon's Walid Jumblatt—urged their co-religionists to throw their lot in with the opposition.[58] According to a report in the *Washington Post*, Druze leaders inside Syria called for neutrality, and one local spiritual leader, Wahid al-Balous, raised a militia of thousands of men (which is apparently independent from the regime) to defend the Druze.[59] There were also other reports of Druze men refusing to fight in the Syrian army so they could stay home and protect their communities.[60]

### THE ESCALATING CONFLICT

Options for resolving the conflict are painfully scarce and seem to becoming more limited as the number of parties to the conflict proliferate. The UN Security Council has been paralyzed on the conflict, given the likelihood of Russian and Chinese vetoes on any meaningful action to put an end to the violence. As the conflict drags on, the possibilities for more sectarian violence increase. Many regime supporters—including Alawites, Christians and Druze—are terrified about their future, convinced that their fate is either to kill or be killed. Large-scale retribution if either side "wins" is likely.[61] Russian military intervention in support of the Assad regime is yet another complicating factor that makes it likely the war will continue. It also makes it even more unlikely that Western powers will seek to impose a no-fly zone or other form of intervention. The intensification of Russian, U.S., and coalition airstrikes in the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks in Paris add still more uncertainty to an already chaotic situation.

### CONSEQUENCES OF CHAOS: MASS DISPLACEMENT

The escalation of the conflict over the past five years has had serious humanitarian consequences. As rebel forces seized control of towns in several parts of the country and as front lines shifted, sometimes on a daily or hourly basis, the challenge of accessing Syrian civilians in need of assistance became more difficult. Also, not only do front lines keep moving, but so do large numbers of Syrians seeking to escape the violence.

While millions of Syrians have fled their homes due to violence from the regime or the opposition, the military gains

by ISIS have triggered further waves of massive displacement. Tens of thousands of civilians fled Kobane in late 2014 as Syrian Kurdish fighters and ISIS battled for control of the strategic town on the Turkish border. Media reports also suggest that many civilians fled ISIS-controlled cities such as Raqqa, the capital of the group's self-declared caliphate. In addition to living under ISIS's brutal rule, civilians in these areas also fear U.S., Russian, and Syrian government airstrikes.

Across the border in Iraq, the ISIS advance has had an even more devastating impact on the humanitarian situation. At least 3.2 million people have fled from areas that fell under ISIS's control between January 2014 and October 2015.[62] Almost half a million fled in June and July 2014 alone, as ISIS captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and surrounding areas.[63] In August 2014 the world watched in horror the plight of tens of thousands of fleeing Yazidis facing starvation and dehydration on a mountain as ISIS took over the Sinjar area of northern Iraq.[64] While Iraqis of all faiths and ethnicities have been fleeing ISIS violence and extremist interpretation of Islamic law, minorities have been particularly vulnerable. Christians have been subjected to abuses such as the confiscation of their homes and forced conversion, while thousands of Yazidi women and girls were kidnapped and reportedly were subjected to domestic and sexual slavery.[65] Matters got worse, with ISIS in mid-2015 taking over Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, causing more than a quarter of a million people to flee the area.[66] Overwhelmed with the scale of displacement and facing funding shortfalls, the United Nations warned in August 2015 that aid operations in Iraq were "hanging by a thread."[67]

While much of the media's attention has focused on the atrocities of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, continuing violence by the Assad regime—particularly the 33,000 aerial bom-

bardments carried out since the conflict began up through the summer of 2015—has been the main driver of displacement of Syrians.[68] Persistent Russian aerial bombardments made matters even worse, aggravating the displacement and accompanying humanitarian crisis.[69]

Displacement within and from Syria has been massive, dynamic, and rapid. As in other conflicts, displacement occurs for a number of reasons. Indiscriminate attacks against civilians have led many to flee the dangers of being caught in the crossfire or being deliberately targeted by armed forces. Many refugees in neighboring countries report that they fled their homes because of attacks, bombardments, or fear of being the target of military action. But there are also indications of targeted human rights violations and particularly fears about the growing sectarian nature of the conflict. The UN Commission of Inquiry found that fear of sexual violence has been a trigger for displacement, stating that "fear of rape is a driving motivation for families fleeing the violence."[70] The commission concluded that these instances of forced displacement, together with indiscriminate bombardment of civilian locations, constituted a crime against humanity and a war crime.[71]

There are also fears that displacement is being used as a tool of sectarian cleansing. Writing in November 2011, the International Crisis Group reported that "communal instincts and, in certain instances, genuine threats, are inducing citizens to resettle in like-minded areas, producing a worrying pattern of sectarian segregation."[72] As in Bosnia and Iraq, displacement is not only an unintended byproduct of conflict but also a deliberate strategy.

People are displaced not only because of direct attacks and violence but also because they can no longer survive in their communities because of the effects of the war. When people lose their jobs and cannot access basic services, they

move to areas where they hope they will be able to survive, often first within the country and then later across a border into a neighboring country.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the war on normal life in Syria. The destruction of utilities and essential infrastructure, and the unraveling of public services such as waste disposal, electricity, fuel, education, and medical care have disrupted the functioning of life on all levels. In March 2015 the United Nations Development Program reported that 80 percent of Syrians inside the country were living in poverty, life expectancy has plunged by 20 years, and the economy had lost $200 billion since the conflict began. It estimated that 3 million Syrians had lost their jobs during the conflict, with unemployment surging from 14.9 percent in 2011 to 57.7 percent at the end of 2014. Over 50 percent of children were not attending school in 2014.[73] Indeed, the lack of opportunities for children to continue their education seems to be a driving force of displacement.

## GENDER AND SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT

Civilian men make up the largest group of victims, the UN Commission of Inquiry said in its August 2015 report. "Civilian men perceived to be of fighting age have been targeted by warring parties during ground attacks. They are also the primary civilian victims of enforced disappearance, torture and unlawful killing."[74] Men are arbitrarily arrested by the government and detained because of their own actions or to pressure family members wanted by the authorities. There is a countrywide pattern in which mainly adult male civilians have been seized by government forces and then disappeared. The government's expanding conscription policies

have become a major cause of displacement, both internally and cross-border.[75] The UN Commission added that "multiple accounts have been documented of women leaving their husbands behind in opposition-held areas to accompany their pre-adolescent sons through the checkpoints and out of the area before they reach an age where they are likely to be stopped by Government forces."[76] ISIS also has forcibly recruited men and boys and imposed restrictions on those living in areas under their control, including dress codes and prohibitions against being in the company of women to whom they are not related.[77]

Women and girls have been targeted on the basis of their gender by both government and opposition forces. "For the belligerents, the very act of detaining a woman, with all the risks to her person that this implies, appears designed to humiliate not only the woman, but also—and arguably, primarily—her male relatives," the UN Commission reported. "Women have suffered rape and other forms of sexual violence by government personnel while held in detention facilities." Because women can move more freely than men in government-controlled areas, they are at increased risk of physical and sexual assault. When their male family members are detained or disappear, women are often left with no means of supporting themselves. Without confirmation of deaths of husbands or fathers, they are in legal limbo, unable to inherit or sell property or to remarry. As mentioned above, violence against women has increased dramatically as a result of ISIS's growing control of territory and population. In ISIS areas, women and girls over the age of ten may not appear publicly without being entirely covered and may not travel without a close male relative. For women whose husbands have died, have fled, or are at the

battlefront, this means that they cannot leave their homes for any reason without risking punishment.[78]

Given the escalating levels of violence inside Syria, it is perhaps not surprising that so many Syrians have fled their communities. The number of registered refugees in neighboring countries increased from 8,000 in 2011 to almost 500,000 only a year later, and was well over four million in late 2015 (see figure 1-2). Close to 500,000 Syrians entered Europe in 2015 by sea, making up the largest segment of the more than 1 million who sought safety in Europe during the year. Meanwhile the number of people displaced inside Syria has continued to rise, with estimates in late 2015 reaching 6.5 million.[79]

### STAGGERING AMOUNTS—BUT STILL NOT ENOUGH FUNDING

As the Syrian crisis is in its fifth year, it is getting harder to mobilize the necessary minimum humanitarian assistance. If there is a silver lining to the movement of Syrians to Europe in August–September 2015, it is that donor countries are stepping up their contributions—perhaps recognizing the link between inadequate support to refugees in the region and the hundreds of thousands of Syrians now traveling to European borders. The European Union has already made promises to increase substantially its financial support for neighboring host countries.

Table 1-1 summarizes the international response to UN appeals for Syria and the region. These figures show

- Steadily increasing appeals for international assistance, with the request in 2015 almost ten times the amount requested in 2012;

FIGURE 1-2. *Number of Syrian Refugees, 2011–15*
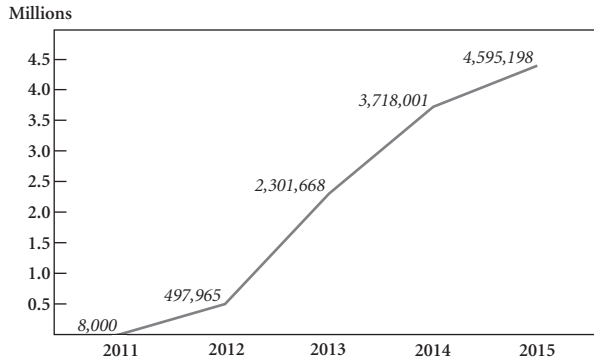


Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Regional Refugee Response."

■ More funds requested for supporting refugees than affected civilians inside Syria although the numbers of the latter are far higher. This is at least partly the consequence of difficulties in accessing populations in need in Syria; and

■ A disproportionate (although still seriously insufficient) amount of appeals for the Syrian crisis rather than for other crises in the world.

Almost half of the worldwide appeal for humanitarian funding was requested for Syria. At the end of 2014 the UN appealed for $16.4 billion to assist 57 million people in 22 countries.[80] To put it another way, the $4.5 billion appeal for 4 million Syrian refugees works out to about $1,125 per refugee. In comparison, the appeal for $16.4 billion for the global total of 57 million people (which includes the Syrian refugees) comes to about $290 per person.

These funding disparities raise questions, not just for

**TABLE 1-1.** *Syria and Regional Response Funding, 2012–15*

| Year | Appeal[a] | Amount of appeal (USD)[b] | Funds received | % of appeal received |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2012 | Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) | 488 million | 374 million | 77 |
| 2012 | Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) | 348 million—71% of refugee appeal | 216 million | 62 |
| 2013 | Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) | 3 billion | 2.2 billion | 73 |
| 2013 | Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) | 1.4 billion—47% of refugee appeal | 956 million | 68 |
| 2014 | Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) | 3.7 billion | 2.4 billion | 63 |
| 2014 | Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) | 2.3 billion—62% of refugee appeal | 1.1 billion | 49 |
| 2015 | Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) | 4.5 billion | 2.68 billion | 59 |
| 2015 | Syria Strategic Response Plan (SRP) | 2.9 billion—65% of refugee appeal | 1.25 billion | 43 |

*Source*: United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Financial Tracking Service, "Syrian Arab Republic—Funding Received," November 9, 2015 (https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-emergencyCountryDetails&cc=syr).

*a.* SHARP (followed by the SRP in 2015) refers to assistance inside Syria, while the Regional Refugee Response Plan (3RP in 2015) targets refugees in neighboring countries.

*b.* Percentage shows the difference between appeals for refugees and for assistance inside Syria, including for IDPs.

Syrian refugees in the region and for those displaced by the conflict inside Syria, but for the future of the international humanitarian system—a theme to which we will return in the final chapter of this study.

What does this mean for the regional response to Syrian refugees? In comparison with other major crises, the Syrian response has been well-funded, although the UN appeals have never been fully funded. If international assistance decreases, this will increase the pressure on host governments—which are already doing everything they can to reduce the number of Syrian arrivals, discourage them from living lives of dignity and self-reliance, and encourage them to return to Syria. One of the rarely discussed realities is that international aid supports protection of the human rights of refugees and the internally displaced. Host governments allow refugees to stay partly in exchange for international financial support. The borders of all of Syria's neighbors are now effectively closed, with the exception of Turkey, although specific border crossings also open and close depending on the conflict.

We turn now to an examination of the Syrian refugee phenomenon—and the impact of the refugees on the governments and societies which host them.