Syria: Hope in the darkness
The war in Syria
Human and Humanitarian Impact

Much has been written about the 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, the 7.6 million people internally displaced within its borders, as well as the more than 4.2m refugees seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

Less is known about the violence inflicted on civilian populations in Syria by various parties to the conflict on a daily basis in clear and systematic breach of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Of these, the forces of the Syrian government, including the various militia groups fighting at their behest, must bear the heaviest burden of responsibility.

The catalogue of human rights abuses being perpetrated are endless. They include between 400,000 and 1 million people currently living under siege conditions where access to food, medical and other supports are either completely cut off for long periods or severely restricted. Access to civilian populations is being used as a negotiating tool by varies parties to the conflict.
The more the war economy takes hold and parties to the conflict benefit economically from its continuation, the more pervasive the human rights abuses will become.

Since the beginning of the conflict civilians have been detained by government forces often without legal representation, without family visitation or family knowledge of where they are or, whether they are alive or dead. It is estimated that more than 58,000 civilians have been forcibly disappeared since the beginning of the conflict. This number is considered conservative with many family or community members being afraid to pursue these disappearances for fear they themselves will be directly targeted. The impact of forced disappearances on the family members are many and result in fear, trauma as well as social stigma and alienation.

A light in the Darkness: Syrian Civil Society

Too little is known about the work of Syrians working with Syrian civil society organisations to reach populations in need, be it across borders or across lines of fire, at great risk to their own lives. No humanitarian response would be possible across large parts of Syria without the presence and co-operation of Syrian civil society.

This civil society space, much oppressed and controlled in the pre-war climate is expanding to fill the needs of the civilian population in the best way they can. They provide hope where there is little hope. With the necessary support, they will be the building blocks of more inclusive Syria, one built on principles of democracy, not imported but cultivated from within.
How is Trócaire helping in Syria?

In Syria, Trócaire works with Church and local civil society groups to support people in need with a focus on food and shelter support to people in Aleppo city, Damascus (city and rural) and most recently Daraa city and surrounding villages. Through these partners we are able to access people in government and non-government controlled areas, including people living under siege conditions.

Staff care and support as well as staff training and a range of institutional strengthening supports are also a core part of our work with local partners whose staff and volunteer base are almost all Syrian. Many of the local staff have suffered immensely from the death, injury and disappearance of family members or friends, as well as the disintegration of their community and other support structures. Living this reality, and faced daily with the stories of other Syrians, working in perpetually insecure and increasingly fragmented environments, these local staff are also in need of sustained care and support.
Trócaire’s work with Syrian refugees

In the Middle East (Lebanon & Syria)

- Trócaire works with local partners to provide group and individual counselling to refugees.

- Medical, educational, psycho-social and legal support is provided to female Syrians who experienced Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

- In a refugee camp where 22,000 people are living in 0.4km sq, Trócaire works to support shelter renovation, income generation, psycho-social and education initiatives for vulnerable Syrians and Palestinians newly displaced from Syria.

In Europe

- Trócaire works with Caritas Macedonia, Serbia and Greece to distribute hygiene kits, sleeping bags, rain gear, also to establish washing facilities at border crossings, distribute food, provide basic medical services, and psychological support.

- Trócaire has also been consistent in calling for increased diplomatic engagement by the Irish Government, EU and UN system to work out a pathway toward a political solution to this crisis, as well as calling for pledges to cover the cost of sufficient humanitarian aid to be honoured. Trócaire has also contributed to calls for Ireland and the EU to do our part to share the burden of the refugee population being carried by countries neighbouring Syria.
**Lara’s story**

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria more than 4 years ago, Yarmouk refugee camp, near the centre of Damascus has been besieged for long periods by Syrian armed forces, so that many people had little or no sustained access to food. Some of the worst affected resorted to eating domesticated animals and grass. Lara and her husband were involved in trying to bring food supplies into the camp and one day her husband was shot by sniper while driving with the family in their car. Lara’s husband died and she decided to flee to Lebanon for the sake of her children. Lara was forced to rely on the courage of a stranger, who agreed to smuggle her out of the camp in the boot of his car, at great risk to both of them. She then walked toward and border and crossed the anti-Lebanon mountain range to the Lebanese border in the freezing cold. In Lebanon despite having no family or personal connections, she found shelter amongst the large Palestinian community there and set about finding somewhere reasonably safe and affordable to live. She also had to seek help in dealing with the multiple traumas suffered by her children. Lara is currently working with a local Syrian organisation seeking to provide support to the most vulnerable Syrians, and Palestinian communities amongst the 22,000 living in a camp less than .4km square in Beirut, Lebanon.

*Names have been changed to protect individuals.

**Fadi’s story**

Fadi, an engineer from Damascus, came to Lebanon to avoid forced conscription 2 years ago. He did not want to have any part in killing his fellow Syrians. He left behind his father and mother, two sisters and younger brother. As Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, he cannot work legally in Lebanon. To be free from harassment by the police he needs to be able to show a residence permit, renewable every few months. For that, he needs an income, and that means working illegally. He is poorly paid and badly treated in his job but he needs it, and also tries to send some remittances to his family.
Though only 2 hours separate them by road, he cannot go back to visit them. He sees no hope and feels he must follow those who have managed to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. It is the only option as he needs a visa before he can book a flight to any European country, and he has not been successful with any visa application. He is a young man with ambition. Disconnected from his family and natural support network, he says he is dying a little every day in Lebanon. He feels if there is even a 50% chance he would make it to Europe alive by boat, it is a risk worth taking.
**Key Messages: The importance of Giving Hope:**

- Pursuing military solutions, to the exclusion of other economic, political and social solutions does nothing but add fuel to the fire of war while suffocating communities efforts to support themselves extinguishing hope that an alternative to war is near.

- Without hope, Syrians struggle to survive day to day, struggle to draw on their own natural resilience in the face of adversity. Part of that hope comes from knowing that ordinary people in the world outside Syria care about their plight, that they are not forgotten or abandoned.

- It is important to support initiatives, that provide significant humanitarian assistance appropriate to local needs, and can be a catalyst for change in the coming years.

- The vast majority of refugees are Syria’s neighbouring countries and many people are displaced from their homes inside Syria. However, international agencies have struggled for funding. Humanitarian assistance must be continued

- Nobody wants to be a refugee. While Europe is responding to refugees, more is needed to address the conflict and its root causes.