

More than a decade on: the unwavering need for protection in Syria

This position paper by Stichting Vluchteling / Netherlands Refugee Foundation serves as a foundation for discussions at the upcoming roundtable of members of parliament on the humanitarian situation in Syria, in light of discussions to declare parts of Syria safe for return and highlights the necessity for continued protection increased humanitarian funding.

Introduction

Over a decade of war has shattered Syria, leaving it effectively divided into four distinct zones of control. The Syrian Arab Republic Government (GoS) controls most of the territory, while de facto Kurdish authorities govern the northeast (SDF), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) holds parts of the northwest, and Turkish-backed armed groups control areas in the north (SNA). While frontlines remained largely static in recent years, fighting continues along multiple fronts. Recent advances by HTS and escalation of violence in northern Syria underscore the persistent volatility of the security situation. Sectarian violence and the lack of an effective transitional justice mechanism further deepen divisions and instability. Under these conditions, declaring Syria safe for return is premature and dangerous.

Humanitarian situation

Syria's civilian infrastructure and services have been decimated in all zones, limiting the access to basic services, infrastructures and livelihood opportunities to meet the needs of the population and ensure minimum standards of living. Due a number of factors such as inflation, the cost of living has been surging and Syrians have increasingly been unable to afford basic necessities. Over 90% of the population lives below the poverty line¹. Syrians living across every sub-district in Syria are experiencing some degree of humanitarian stress². Out of nearly 24 million people, 16,7 million people are expected to need humanitarian assistance in 2024, which is the largest number since the beginning of the crisis in 2011³.

In addition, Syria is facing the world's second-largest displacement crisis, with 7.2 million Internally Displaced People (IDP's)⁴. Since September 2024, an additional estimated 562,000 individuals, of whom 63% were Syrians, arrived from Lebanon in an attempt to flee Israel's relentless bombing campaign. Syrian refugees already faced vulnerabilities in Lebanon and the current conflict has exacerbated these challenges, making their situation even more precarious⁵. Once in Syria, Syrians arriving from Lebanon again face critical protection risks, such as arbitrary detention and abuse by Syrian authorities⁶.

Despite the growing needs, the humanitarian funding gap has never been this big. The Syria Humanitarian Response Plan for 2024 is only 28% funded⁷. A new Inter-Agency Emergency Appeal for the Influx from Lebanon to Syria was launched but is merely 5.8% funded⁸. The funding gap has significantly impacted the provision of services, such as health, nutrition and protection.

Health

The funding gap has forced the closure of critical healthcare centers, leaving vast areas of the country without access to essential medical services. Nearly a quarter of all hospitals and one third of all primary health care centers remain non-functional and unable to respond to the growing health needs, with at least 12.2 million people in dire need of health assistance⁹. Northeast Syria is faced with the lack of adequate health infrastructure, compounded by donor and funding restrictions that hinder efforts to rehabilitate or rebuild

¹ Human Rights Watch. (2024). *Syria*. In *World Report 2024*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/syria>.

² ReliefWeb. (2022, December). *Syrian Arab Republic: 2023 humanitarian needs overview*. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2023-humanitarian-needs-overview-december-2022-enar>.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, February 2024, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic>.

⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, February 2024, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic>.

⁵ UNHCR (July 2024) Protection Monitoring 2nd Quarter 2024, available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111045>

⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2024, October 30). *Syrians fleeing Lebanon risk repression upon return*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/30/syrians-fleeing-lebanon-risk-repression-upon-return>.

⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Syria Humanitarian Funding Overview 2024*, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2024>.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ World Health Organization. (July 2024). *Syria crisis*. Retrieved from: [Syria crisis](#)

long-term healthcare facilities. The health system in northwest Syria is almost entirely dependent on humanitarian organizations and funding to operate. With recent cuts to humanitarian aid, half of the region's health facilities are closing by the end of the year. This already fragile system is unable to adequately serve the current population, let alone accommodate individuals forced or coerced to return.

Nutrition

The ongoing conflict has had a disastrous impact on food security and future prospects are grim. Syria ranks among the top ten countries hosting the highest number of people facing hunger, with over 12.9 million Syrians struggling with inadequate food supplies¹⁰. Over half a million children are chronically malnourished¹¹. Because Syria relies heavily on food imports, depreciation of the Syrian pound by 85 % has corresponded with significant increases in the cost of food. In July, prices were 80% higher compared to the same time period in 2023. Despite these alarming figures, WFP has had to scale down its food assistance by 80% in Syria in 2024 due to lack of funding¹². The forced or coerced return of additional individuals to Syria would leave them struggling to access the already scarce food resources.

Protection

Protection concerns are pervasive across all regions, demonstrating that there are no safe spaces in Syria. In a case brought to the International Court of Justice, the Netherlands and Canada presented the court with detailed allegations over the government of Syria's violation of the international Convention Against Torture, citing unlawful treatment of detainees, inhumane detention conditions, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, violence against children, and the use of chemical weapons¹³. Syrians who have lived abroad are particularly vulnerable, often viewed with suspicion and targeted for forced conscription, arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture, as well as being exposed to criminal practices such as kidnapping and extortion.

Protection concerns extend far beyond government-controlled areas. Violations of international humanitarian and human rights law remain pervasive, exposing people to shelling and armed violence, while freedom of movement is often restricted due to insecurity or lack of documentation¹⁴. Housing, land, and property issues are widespread, particularly in areas like Aleppo, where displacement and property damage are severe. Explosive ordnance contamination continues to endanger lives and impede access to livelihoods. Vulnerable populations, including women, children, and people with disabilities, face increased risks of exploitation, gender-based violence, and harmful coping mechanisms like child labor and early marriage.

In the absence of an independent monitoring mechanism in reception centers and shelters, forcing returns under such conditions exposes Syrians to life-threatening dangers and prolonged suffering.

Conclusion

Drawing on the observations of our partners active across all regions of Syria, we assert that forced or coerced returns to Syria exposes individuals to grave risks that could cost lives. Under current conditions, Syrians forced or coerced to Syria will likely face continued displacement and serious protection risks. We urge international actors to respect individual rights to seek protection under international law and respect the principle of non-refoulement¹⁵.

¹⁰ World Food Programme. *Syrian Arab Republic*. Retrieved from <https://www.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>.

¹¹ World Health Organization. *Syria crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/syria-crisis#:~:text=Nearly%20a%20quarter%20of%20all%20hospitals%20and%20one,unable%20to%20respond%20to%20the%20growing%20health%20needs>.

¹² World Food Programme. *Syrian Arab Republic*. Retrieved from <https://www.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>.

¹³ Human Rights Watch. (2024, November 20). *Syria survivors of torture and their families press for justice: Abuse continues on one side of the border*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/feature/2024/11/20/syria-survivors-torture-and-their-families-press-justice/abuse-continues-one>.

¹⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview*, February 2024, accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic>.

¹⁵ The core principle of the 1951 Convention is non-refoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. The document outlines the basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, including the right to housing, work and education while displaced so they can lead a dignified and independent life.