

3. SYRIA

The deadliest place for humanitarians



KEY FACTS

Population: **17.5 million**

13 million people in need of humanitarian aid

6.6 million facing crisis or worse levels of food insecurity (IPC 3+) before COVID-19

6.7 million people internally displaced

5.6 million Syrian refugees, including almost **two-thirds** of the health workforce

90% of Syrians live below the poverty line

50% of health facilities are fully functional

188th (of 195 countries) for capability to prevent and mitigate epidemics

165th (of 167 countries) for women's equality

146th (of 181 countries) for resilience to climate change

5/5 score for severity of access constraints

55% of funding received for 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan

Above: A family in their tent in Areesha camp in northeast Syria, where the IRC runs a primary health, reproductive health and mental health program for camp residents.

PROBABILITY

10 HUMAN THREAT

6 NATURAL THREAT

IMPACT

6 CONSTRAINTS ON COUNTRY RESPONSE

7 EXISTING PRESSURES ON POPULATION

2021 marks a decade of conflict in Syria. Despite its protracted nature the crisis continues to reach new lows as conflict, displacement and needs grow, while humanitarians' cross-border access to people in need is increasingly constrained.

Conflict in Syria is fought all too often with disregard for International Humanitarian Law. Attacks on civilians, aid workers, and civilian infrastructure remain common as parties to the conflict act with impunity. Many civilians have been left living in perpetual conflict zones and displaced multiple times, while the health system has been decimated. Ten years of war has undermined Syrians' ability to cope with the latest challenges wrought by COVID-19 and a growing economic crisis. In the face of rising need, humanitarians are confronted with an increasingly challenging operating environment and severely and increasingly constrained humanitarian access.

"The pandemic is just one of many challenges that IRC's teams and the people we serve have had to contend with over the past ten years. Through everything, we keep going. If people need help, our team is there to provide it. Even when they themselves are facing the worst, our staff's motivation doesn't stop – and it is their unrelenting dedication and determination to help people that makes our response inside Syria possible."

- Taj-aldein Alkasi
Area Coordinator, IRC Syria



HUMANITARIAN RISKS IN 2021

- ▶ **Conflict in the northwest is the most likely trigger for major instability in 2021, as the security situation remains volatile even after a decade of conflict.** Fighting in late 2019 and early 2020 forced nearly one million people to flee their homes in the largest displacement in the war yet and many IDPs have been displaced multiple times, eroding their coping capacity ([UN](#)). The situation in the northwest remains volatile and it deteriorated once again in late 2020, raising the risk of major new offensives by the Government of Syria in 2021, particularly if the fragile Turkish-Russian ceasefire that reduced hostilities in 2020 breaks down. Meanwhile, Islamic State remains active in the northeast. Government-controlled areas in the south could also see an escalation in conflict if localized truces break down under the additional stress of COVID-19 and the economic crisis.
- ▶ **COVID-19 is compounding what was already the worst economic crisis to hit Syria since the conflict began.** The banking crisis in Lebanon since 2019 has worsened Syria's economic crisis. Fuel, water and food prices are all rising. Food prices have risen nearly 240% in a year, reaching record levels ([WFP](#)). 9.3 million Syrians - more than ever before - suffer from food insecurity and an additional 2.2 million are at risk of becoming food insecure ([WFP](#)). IRC teams already report a rise in child labor and people begging in the streets. The economic crisis is also affecting the humanitarian response; fuel shortages, inflation and banking restrictions in neighboring states will undermine humanitarians' ability to move at the scale and pace required over the next year.
- ▶ **Syrian women and children will be particularly affected by the continuing impact of COVID-19.** The pandemic has already led to increased child labour, gender-based violence, child marriage, and other forms of exploitation ([UNFPA](#)). Syria is also the third least equal country for women ([WPS index](#)) and ranks seventh lowest on [UNDP's Gender Development Index](#), indicating that women are lagging far behind men on human development measures. Women in Syria have higher levels of poverty than men ([UNFPA](#)) and so the economic impacts of COVID-19 and the banking crisis in neighboring Lebanon are likely to have a particular impact on women too.
- ▶ **Syria is the deadliest country in the world for humanitarians and both security threats and bureaucratic restrictions will diminish humanitarian action in 2021.** Syria had the world's highest number of attacks on aid workers and most aid worker deaths in 2019 ([Aid Worker Security Database](#)). ACAPS also gave Syria a maximum score of 5 for constraints on humanitarian access ([ACAPS](#)). Already, around 50% of health facilities have been damaged or closed ([WHO](#)) and now border closures are limiting the ability of Syrians to access treatment abroad. Humanitarians and civilian infrastructure continue to come under attack, with health facilities targeted even during the pandemic.
- ▶ **Humanitarians' ability to access people in need in Syria from neighboring countries is increasingly restricted.** In 2020 the UN Security Council failed to re-authorize UN agencies' continued usage of three out of the four border crossings they had relied on since the Council first authorized the cross-border response in 2014. This decision has already significantly constrained the humanitarian response given the lack of direct, efficient alternatives to cross border access. Over four million Syrians relied on cross-border operations to receive humanitarian aid. The COVID-19 and broader health response has been particularly affected by the closure of the Yaroubiya crossing, which was a vital lifeline for medical supplies from Iraq into the northeast. The authorization for the final crossing expires mid-2021. The current loss in access - and any further reduction - will prevent humanitarians from meeting all needs in 2021 and scaling up if the crisis worsens, as expected.

THE IRC IN SYRIA

The IRC has been working in Syria since 2012, responding to needs in northwest and northeast Syria. We support health facilities and mobile health teams with life-saving trauma, primary, reproductive and mental health services. We are now promoting COVID-19 awareness campaigns and training health workers in infection prevention and control. IRC teams also support the most vulnerable with food and cash distributions and help women and children through safe spaces, case management and psychosocial support. Through our early childhood development program, we support children's cognitive and socio-emotional skills. The IRC also supports Syrian refugees in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Learn more about the [IRC's Syria response](#).

