

Foreword: the inheritance of loss

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As the civil war in Syria drags on, the scale of displacement continues to increase. While the crisis may be prolonged, refugees and IDPs need support now for their protection, their recovery, and both their immediate and their long-term prospects.

The civil war in Syria has displaced vast numbers of Syrians from their homes and communities. By August 2014, some 6.45 million were estimated to be displaced within Syria and more than 2.9 million exiled as refugees beyond Syria's borders, the great majority of them hosted by neighbouring countries. In effect, half of Syria's population is uprooted, impoverished, many trapped in 'hard-to-reach' areas – and these numbers are most likely under-estimates. Is there an international outcry? Are there expressions of anger or of solidarity? Well, yes, by human rights organisations, by UNRWA, by UN Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos before the Security Council, and in the media of neighbouring countries. But in general? If anything, Syria is slipping off the front pages – not only dislodged by Gaza and Iraq but pushed aside by indifference.

'Displaced'. Such an innocuous word. But with its now-commonplace usage, accompanied by mind-numbing and ever-increasing numbers, have we become inured to the human drama behind the devastating facts of displacement in Syria today? Tucked away behind that rather bland term are, for millions, repeated stories of family separation; the loss of children, parents, friends, homes, entire neighbourhoods; and the terror of raining barrel bombs, of extremist deprivations, of reprisals against family members imprisoned, tortured, raped, disappeared or killed. Displacement not once, twice or three times but multiple uprootings – to the homes of neighbours or into shells of buildings in their own neighbourhoods, displacement within their own districts and governorates or, ultimately, fleeing across borders to an unknown future. Few responses today are taking into account the trauma that the displaced have

suffered and continue to suffer, through recurring flash-backs, through current rejection or continued family separation. Counselling is required, on a massive scale; but the road to recovery is also one of attempting to restore some kind of normalcy.

What is normalcy? For many who have undergone conflict-induced trauma, it is – beyond the grieving – the chance to help others, to focus on the needs of others, rather than on one's own dark thoughts; it is the opportunity to earn a living and be able to make decisions about the future. Over many decades of working with and for displaced people on several continents, I have found consistency in their hopes. When asked what they want, they do not ask for physical comforts, for shelter, food or medical care (of course, these basics are all essential and should in no way be discounted) – they usually ask for two things: a job, and education for their children.

A job, which brings with it the dignity of earning one's own money and the dignity of being able to choose how to spend that money; an education for their children because an education brings hope for the future. So many parents have said: "Maybe my life is finished but my children should have a future and that means going to school." Plus, for a child, going to school – even in the shell of a bombed-out building or in a refugee camp – means system, routine, friends and, hopefully, a caring teacher or caregiver. That is an important road to normalcy, to recovering from trauma, to managing those nightmares. So do not let anyone tell you that education is not a priority intervention for the internally displaced or for refugees.

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In addition, let us also not forget that displacement is the manifestation of the ugly fact of impunity that rides rampant in Syria. If ever an armed conflict were characterised by the absence of proportionality and distinction, Syria's civil war must be so characterised. All sides are guilty and all wreak havoc with impunity but with the preponderance of force goes the preponderance of responsibility. It is a supreme irony that a regime that so blatantly disregards the obligations of sovereignty and its obligations under international humanitarian law so stridently insists on respect of its sovereign rights.

Across Syria's borders, neighbouring countries struggle to respond to the needs of the countless refugees that they host today; Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in the main but also Egypt and even Iraq have been generous beyond all reasonable expectations. Yet after three and a half years, they are feeling the strain: increasing social tensions in host communities, the competition between citizens and Syrian refugees for health care, shelter, water, jobs, and places in school. These challenges demand a focus beyond refugees alone, to assess and respond to the strains on communities and on national treasuries.

This year, host governments and the international community have come together to attempt to define a comprehensive regional response strategy that deals with the multi-layered complexities of the Syria crisis, looking at long-term as well as short-term solutions for both refugees and host communities. Host countries are having to review policies instituted during the first few months of the crisis, when few thought that it would last more than a few months. Should Syrian refugees be allowed to work in neighbouring countries, have separate schools, have separate health facilities? Each question represents a



A Syrian refugee family in Erbil, Iraq. The girls' parents paid US\$100 per person to be smuggled safely out of Syria after their neighbourhood came under prolonged heavy attack. "More than anything, what I want for my girls is that they are able to attend school in safety," their mother said.

dilemma for host countries who hope that one day their Syrian guests will return to Syria. But to what Syria? How to prepare Syrians to return to a radically changed landscape? How to help Syrians still living in their own country to protect their communities, maintain water and sewerage systems, keep schools and hospitals going under continuous threat, or contain further displacement? These are all questions that are being raised and for which creative solutions are being sought. In a context of limited resources, hard choices have to be made, innovative solutions found.

The civil war drags on, in the context of growing regional instability. The numbers of internally displaced people will increase, as will the numbers of refugees. The contributors to this issue bring a wide range of thought-provoking perspectives to the Syrian displacement crisis: insights, reflections, questions, solutions – all food for thought and for action. So, read on.

Nigel Fisher is former United Nations Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis. With acknowledgements to Kiran Desai's 2006 novel for the title of this Foreword.