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16 August 2012

SYRIA

No safe haven - A country on the move, a nation on the brink

IDMC's monitoring suggests that over one in every fifteen Syrians has been internally displaced following the 17 month conflict that has started as a popular uprising and has turned into a full blown civil war. The magnitude of this displacement means that it has now become intricately linked with the spreading of the conflict. The latest figure issued by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) of 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) was released as the battle of Aleppo was unfolding and just before the escalation of the conflict in Damascus. Given the nature of the conflict and the lack of access in Syria, the IDP figures have remained estimates derived from formal registrations and based on both the pattern of the conflict and the displacement trends. In terms of internal displacement, the battle of Homs in March 2012 marked a turning point in both the nature and the scale of displacement. Mapping of internal displacement in Syria captures this mutation and reveals that before this event, displacement was often regarded as collateral damage in a conflict between the government forces and the opposition. Following the battle of Homs the number of IDPs began to rise exponentially, creating its own socio-political dynamic that lead to the spreading of the conflict.



A resident of Homs, Syria, shows a building heavily damaged in the renewed rounds of shelling from early June 2012. (Photo: UN Photo/David Manyua)

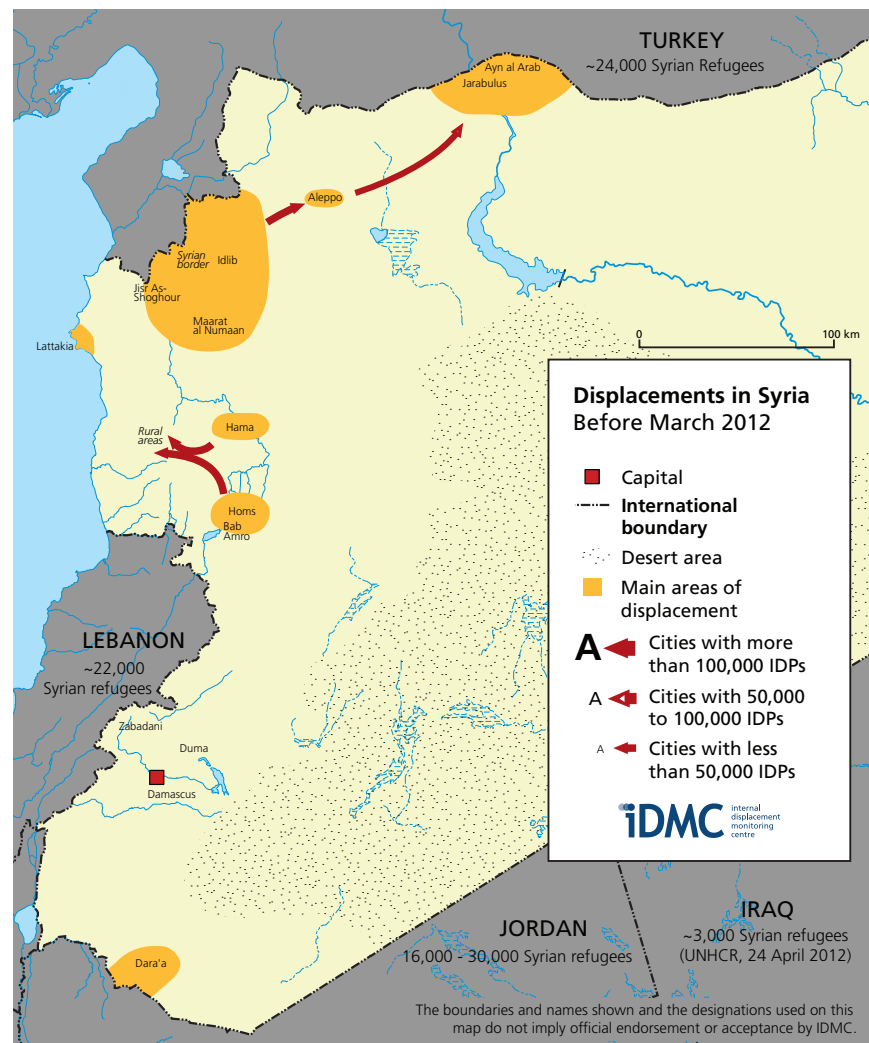
Although a significant amount of displacement has repeatedly gone unreported, IDMC monitoring has been able to identify two main periods of displacement that are particularly relevant to understanding the current crisis. From the onset of the uprising in March of 2011 until March 2012 displacement remained temporary and sparse. Although displacement was not reaching the scale reached in August 2012, whole villages had reportedly been abandoned following or preceding attacks. For instance the entire 41,000 population of Jisr Al-Shughur¹ fled in June 2011 in fear of military retaliation following the death of some 120 security personnel reportedly killed by armed groups. Displacement at this time involved large groups of people fleeing hot spots of conflict to seek shelter in surrounding areas or major cities as a result of targeted and localised violence. Displacement during the early stages of conflict was not viewed as permanent, and the population often returned to their homes following protests and violence.

¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=38785&Cr=syria&Cr1>

The change in the nature of displacement in Syria began in late January 2012, following a change in government strategy from a security to a military approach, as underlined in *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, the latest report by the International Crisis Group². At that moment the armed forces staged a series of operations in Damascus and its surrounding areas, notably in the nearby town of Zabadani and the large suburb of Duma. By early February 2012, the violence shifted to Homs, the country's third largest city and self-proclaimed capital of the revolution; more specifically, the fighting occurred in the impoverished and unruly district of Bab Amro, where armed opposition had been particularly active and deeply entrenched. The change in the Syrian army's strategy was accompanied by the use of increasingly heavy artillery resulting in the in-

discriminate shelling of entire neighbourhoods and leaving countless amounts of homes completely destroyed. Following these events, 50,000 to 60,000 people were displaced from Homs, causing great concern to the international community as was expressed by Valerie Amos, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, in a press conference on 12 March 2012³. This event corresponds to the beginning of the exponential rise in the numbers of displaced populations, as illustrated in the graph and to a new displacement dynamic that would lead to displacement shifting from being an effect of the expanding conflict, to increasingly being a cause.

Following the United Nation-Organisation of the Islamic Conference joint humanitarian assessment mission in March 2012, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) negotiated with the Syrian authorities the response framework indicating that the Syrian authorities had acknowledges some of the humanitarian needs of its population. However, none of the responses negotiated with the Syrian authorities mention displacement, highlighting a clear gap in the response⁴. These gaps in the govern-

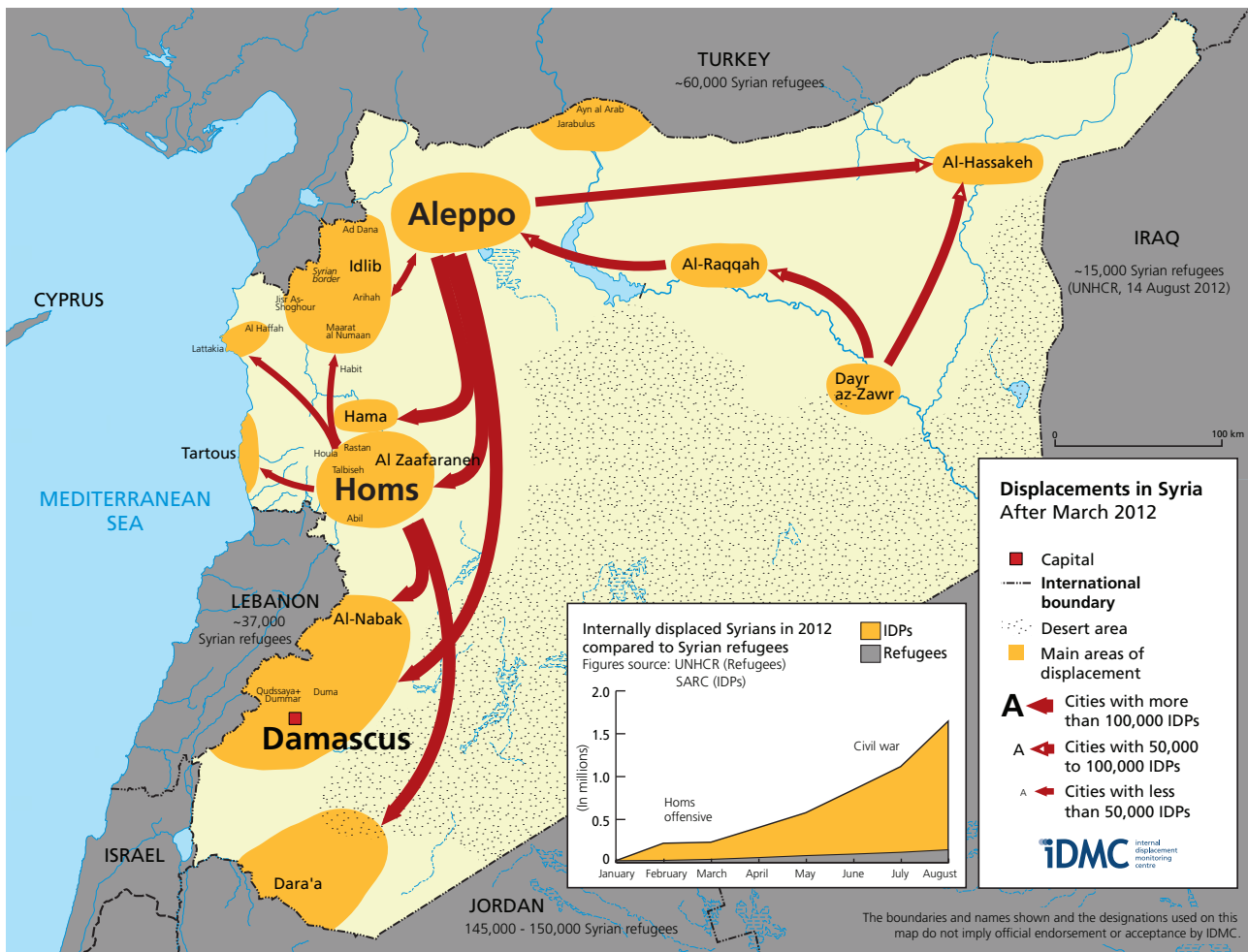


² <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict.pdf>

³ http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2012/120312_Amos.doc.htm

⁴ After the negotiations, the word "displaced" was removed from an original proposal by OCHA and replaced with "those who left their homes" <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/95606/Analysis-Principles-or-pragmatism-Negotiating-access-in-Syria>

ment strategy and the subsequent rapid increases in the intensity of the violence and conflict has exacerbated the displacement of people compelling humanitarian actors to increase their responses despite limited capacity to try and respond to the growing needs on the ground. Trucks also began to reach Aleppo on the same date to help civilians fleeing to Aleppo from Homs and Idlib. At this stage, Syria's two biggest cities Damascus and Aleppo were seen as safe havens from the violence and gradually saw a large influx of IDPs fleeing from the zones of conflict.

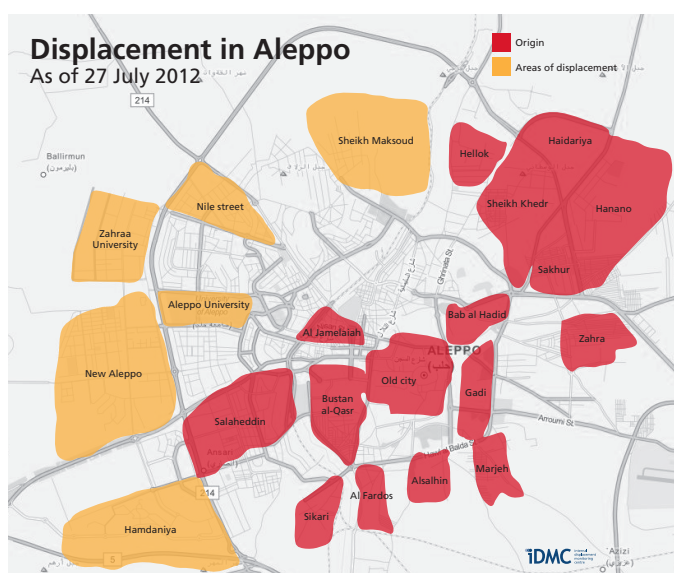
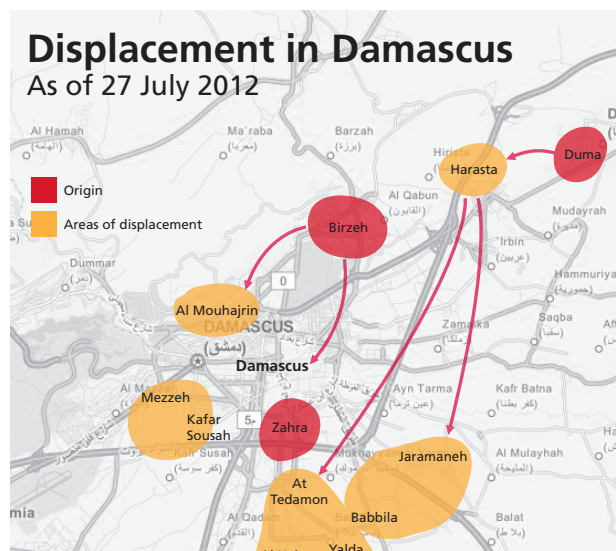


Since then, the situation in Syria has drastically deteriorated across the whole country, and particularly in Damascus, following the recent offensive by the armed opposition that has recently reached the centre of the city. By 14 July 2012, the ICRC had declared that the threshold for a non-international armed conflict in Syria had been met. During the last few weeks of July, the city of Aleppo also started experiencing intense fighting. More than 200,000 people have fled from Aleppo despite the risks of being killed in the cross fire. According to reports, the assets of many IDPs have been looted or destroyed. Several public buildings where IDPs had been temporarily sheltering have been damaged and now lack water and electricity. Coping mechanisms of IDPs have been stretched to their very limit after a year and half of conflict. This is compounded by an economic crisis that has seen the Syrian pound loose over 70 per cent of its value while prices have skyrocketed, eroding people's purchasing power and increasing their vulnerability. As Syria's economic capital, unrest in Aleppo has major repercussions for the rest of the country, particularly in view of a possible food crisis. Syria relies on products farmed in the Aleppo region, and its main factories operate out of the city that has now been facing major access blockages. This prompted

the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to jointly declare that 1.5 million Syrians were in urgent need of immediate food distribution and oversaw an increase up to three millions over the course of the next year⁵.

Recent events have evolved into a third phase of displacement characterised by its scale and its intricate links to the spreading conflict that is compounding the already severe humanitarian crisis. Syria's two biggest cities Damascus and Aleppo are no longer places of refuge as fighting over the past two weeks is forcing people who took refuge there to flee yet again. The issue of multiple displacements highlights the increasingly complex relationship between displacement and conflict. The conflict is increasingly following IDPs to the places that they flee to, leaving them trapped. When it reaches such dramatic scales, displacement disrupts the stable economic centres that people chooses to flee to, exacerbating existing tensions and fuelling more protests. The pattern of internal displacement shows that, there is a strong correlation between people fleeing conflict towards a calmer neighbourhood of a city and that neighbourhood gradually becoming a hotspot for further protests and repression. This is particularly visible in Damascus' neighbourhoods where all of Harasta fled south to Jaramaneh, Babila and Sayeda Zeinab after having hosted IDPs from Duma earlier on. Tellingly these neighbourhoods also became hotbeds of resistance. This has at times constrained the humanitarian response capacity due to security concerns, highlighting the need for neutral humanitarian spaces.

In areas where IDPs have sought refuge, this has put tremendous pressure on the local population by disrupting basic social services. Areas of refuge are unprepared and frequently unable to cope with such a large influx of people. As IDPs in large numbers occupy public buildings such as schools and universities, quieter neighbourhoods in the capital have seen their occupants double, if not triple in the last days of July. Meanwhile in Aleppo, thousands of people have found safety and shelter in at least 80 school-houses. Although schools provide emergency services, they cannot be considered adequate humanitarian spaces for IDPs to settle in on a longer term basis. Given the nature and scale of the displacement this is a prospect many are facing. What's more, with schools due to open again in September and no sign that the authorities are



5 http://www.fao.org/giews/english/otherpub/JRFSNA_Syrian2012.pdf

willing or able to create humanitarian spaces for the displaced it is not clear what will happen to children due to attend schools occupied by IDPs. IDPs fleeing Aleppo's North East or the Salaheddin district, sought refuge in the more affluent areas of the north west of the city, in particular Hamdaniya, Zahra, New Aleppo, Sheikh Maksoud, Nile street and Sirien neighbourhoods. Faced with this major influx of IDPs, inhabitants spontaneously tried to provide assistance to the best of their capacity. These neighbourhoods have not been involved in the conflict to date and provided temporary respite to the displaced.

Several humanitarian agencies operating in Syrian, including local and national organisations, have had to limit or suspend their activities due to the heavy fighting. Not only is it dangerous for their staff to operate under such conditions, but administrative restrictions and logistical constraints have made them unable to access certain areas and meet the needs of the displaced. Tellingly, on 20 July 2012, the SARC Head of Operations was insisting that out of the estimate 1.5 million displaced people throughout the country," SARC had only helped about 950,000 of them with some food or medicines.⁶ Mr Erksoussi claimed that the focus of the international community has been on supporting refugees in surrounding countries where the situation is not as dire and their number only a tenth of those that are internally displaced.

Some humanitarian actors are able to operate inside Syria. From the beginning of the crisis, the Syrian government has appointed SARC as the sole national coordinating body for the relief effort. It also appointed SARC as the only authorised implementing partner allowed to directly deliver the international organisations' humanitarian aid to the beneficiaries. This raises two questions, first given the scale of displacement channelling assistance exclusively through SARC has limited the capacity of the humanitarian response by creating a bottleneck and preventing direct implementation. Second it has prevented humanitarian assistance from reaching all those affected by the conflict particularly those associated with the opposition to the authorities. SARC works on the basis that in order to receive help, beneficiaries need to first register in order to be officially accounted for. This registration process is problematic; there are growing concerns that a large part of the population is apprehensive about SARC, not wanting to reveal their identity to the authorities for fear of being targeted. This underlines the need for neutral humanitarian space where international assistance can reach all beneficiaries in an impartial manner.

IDMC is extremely concerned about the fate of the 1.5 million people internally displaced in Syria, as a direct result of the conflict and violations of international humanitarian law. Besides revising the response plan to adapt it to the current situation, the international community must ensure that protection concerns of the displaced population are adequately monitored and addressed. It is urgent that parties to the conflict are reminded that they are under legal obligation to prevent displacement and, if they cannot, at minimum, to ensure protection of IDPs without discrimination as per international customary law. Furthermore, international customary law and the common article 3 of the Geneva Convention requires the government in power to accept international relief operations, and that the parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character. With the mandate of the UN supervision mission in Syria expiring on the 19th of August and given Kofi Annan's decision to step down at the end of the month, this is a critical time. It is more important than ever to shift the focus to inside the borders of Syria, and the disastrous consequences facing the country should this situation of restricted humanitarian access continue.

6 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18952706>

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.

IDMC aims to support better international and national responses to situations of internal displacement and respect for the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are often among the world's most vulnerable people. It also aims to promote durable solutions for IDPs, through return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country.

IDMC's main activities include:

- Monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalised violence and violations of human rights;
- Researching, analysing and advocating for the rights of IDPs;
- Training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs;
- Contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

Contact:

Frank Smith

Head of Middle East, Europe, Caucasus and Asia department
Tel: +41 22 799 07 10
Email: frank.smith@nrc.ch

Guillaume Charron

Country Analyst
Tel: +41 22 799 07 11
Email: guillaume.charron@nrc.ch

IDMC

Norwegian Refugee Council
Chemin de Balexert 7-9
1219 Geneva, Switzerland
www.internal-displacement.org
Tel: +41 (0)22 799 0700
Fax: +41 (0)22 799 0701