

# SYRIA AT WAR, EIGHT YEARS ON POLICY BRIEF ON SOCIAL ISSUES



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



University of  
St Andrews

FOUNDED  
1413



E/ESCWA/CL3.SEP/2020/POLICY BRIEF.3



## Introduction

Throughout the past decade, death, injury and displacement in the Syrian Arab Republic has been immense, but one of the conflict's most destructive legacies, in the long run, may be in the social division produced. Agitation along identity lines, deep societal mistrust of the motives of other parties, and exclusionary discourses that "cancel the other" may have long-lasting and irreversible effects. This must be acknowledged in the post-peace accord process if an equitable and sustainable social contract is to be forged. This policy brief quickly highlights the extent of the damage done to the country's social fabric and outlines policy options to remedy and reverse this damage post-conflict.



© iStock.com / mrtaytas

# Our Findings

The conflict continues to cause damage to social structures and the physical infrastructure, from disruptions in electricity and safe water, to a lack of access to health care, education and decent employment. Even though conditions overall are deemed to be improving in certain regions, shortages in funding and assistance, and stricter border and registration policies, are bound to result in a deteriorating humanitarian situation, especially if no resolution to the conflict is reached.

In 2019, more than 11.7 million people within the country were in need of at least one form of humanitarian assistance, with 5 million in acute need.

De-escalation of the conflict in the past few years has led to improvements in food security and market access, yet restrictions on delivering goods remain high. About 6.5 million people were food insecure in 2019.

The number of refugee migration has risen considerably since the onset of conflict, an indication the country

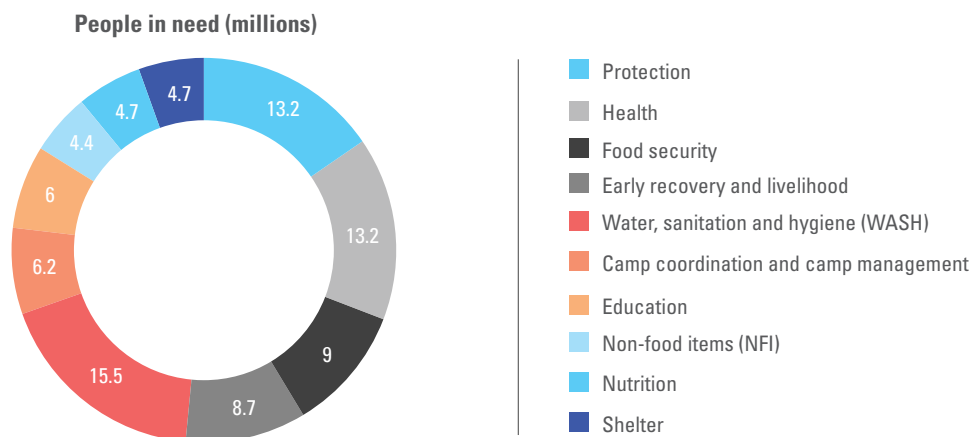
remains largely unsafe and insecure. In 2020, more than 5.5 million Syrians were registered as refugees, dispersed predominately in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

More than 40 per cent of school infrastructure is crippled, with one out of three schools either damaged or destroyed or used as a shelter. Some 5.9 million children need educational support. Nearly 2 million school-aged children inside the Syrian Arab Republic were out of school during the 2017-2018 academic year.

For millions of children, childhood and academic aspiration has been shattered as families resort to harmful coping strategies to relieve their financial burdens, such as child exploitation, early marriage, and child recruitment to fighting groups. The loss of an entire generation may be irreversible given many have been deprived of an education and have suffered traumatic experiences which ruined their formative childhoods.

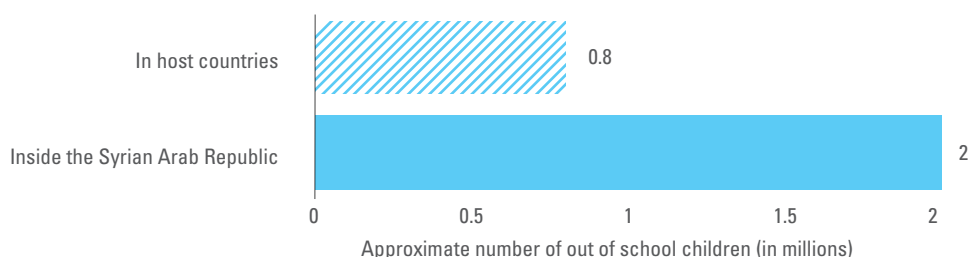
Among protection concerns, 59 per cent of assessed communities reported they had lost civil documentation,

**Figure 1.** Breakdown of people in need, 2019



Source: OCHA, 2019.

**Figure 2.** Children out of school, academic year 2017-2018



Source: No Lost Generation, "Investing in the Future: Protection and learning for all Syrian children and youth", Brussels III Conference pamphlet, March 2019.



for reasons such as confiscation, expiration and lack of legal services, and leaving papers behind when fleeing gunfire. A lack of identification documents poses a serious threat for civilians, entailing limited access to humanitarian aid and public services. More importantly, it puts a share of them, especially newborns and children, at grave risk of statelessness and long-lasting social marginalization.

Though the Syrian Arab Republic's culture has long been characterized as a multicultural mix of traditional and modern, inheriting traits from the civilizations that prospered throughout its history, the conflict has lessened tolerance and heightened the oppression of multiple identities, ideologies, religions and ethnicities. Oppressive forces have incited division and coerced individuals into picking sides. Intolerance of all kinds has become deeply enshrined in certain regions, with followers continuously propagating hate messages and using fear and subjugation in governance.

## Policy Options


Social and national reconciliation can only begin if hostilities end and all parties commit to finding a political solution. National reconciliation and negotiations to end the conflict must accompany and be informed by one another. The aspiration should be to benefit Syrian society rather than to achieve a minimal level of agreement or bargain between the opposing parties. It is important to recognize that a comprehensive reconciliation process is intimately connected to rebuilding national identity and social capital.

Syrian identity is pluralistic and expressive of Syrian cultural diversity, and it cannot be reduced to any one of its components. All Syrian sides need to recognize each other and accept that all Syrians, regardless of political or religious perspective, have the right to live and be part of society.


The efforts of war entrepreneurs to invest in sectarian politics, hate speech and polarizing repertoire need to be countered.

Developing an appropriate legal framework and code of conduct for print and broadcast media is necessary and should include clear guidelines defining rights and limits on provocative and hate speech, as well as the publication of material posing a serious threat to the life, safety or security of any person.

Humanitarian relief and livelihood revival are a minimum and should not be a bargaining position. As previous United Nations reports have demonstrated, the easing of restrictions on cross-border operations has significantly improved humanitarian access in various locations. For example, in June and July 2019, 1,160 trucks (30 consignments) delivered life-saving assistance to more than 1 million people through cross-border deliveries, including food assistance for some 827,000 people. In January 2020, however, as delivery from Jordan and Iraq was eliminated and authorization only renewed for a six-month



Within Syria, as of 2019, more than **11.7 million Syrians** remain in need of at least one form of **humanitarian assistance**



Syrian Arab Republic's human development index (HDI) fell sharply from **0.64 in 2010** to **0.549 in 2018**, downgrading its status from a **medium human development** country to a **low human development** country

period, cross-border aid delivery points were reduced. In principle, such issues should be addressed as part of a broader package, one that includes re-examination of sanctions. In reality, the practical necessity of cross-border aid means its politicization will lead to acute shortages for many dependent Syrians.

Overall reforms should also include a reappraisal of the blanket sanctions that harm Syrians and impose a huge barrier on all economic transactions, even those intended for daily needs.

Detainees should be released and the fate of tens of thousands of missing people should be clarified. This has been repeatedly emphasized by Syrian civil society and the United Nations, and recently by the tripartite letter to the United Nations from Iran, Russia and Turkey. Reforms should include an end to arbitrary arrests or detentions, or those based on political affiliation or suspected political affiliation, and revisit the sentences passed by the “Counter-Terrorism Court” established in 2012 following a series of decrees and laws which started in April 2011 by lifting the State of Emergency that had been in place since 1963.

Restoring social capital is not easy and is part of a wider healing and reconciliation process, but important work is being done by Syrian civil society, researchers and think tanks, which are using evidence-based research to address these issues head-on. Such work should be embraced and utilized. A wide range of Syrian experts have stressed the importance of local measures in bringing together Syrians from different political affiliations and uniting them through joint local economic and social initiatives. These revive economic interdependency, provide livelihood opportunities and serve to build positive social capital.

Syrians have been sidelined as agents of change in their own future. Inside and outside the country, they must be given the space to make informed decisions about their future, both in formal negotiations and the public arena. This includes paying special attention to women’s organizations, youth representation and refugees in neighboring countries. Now is the time to provide social initiatives with more platforms and forums to amplify their reach.



© iStock.com / serkansenturk



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



**VISION:** ESCWA, an innovative catalyst for a stable, just and flourishing Arab region

**MISSION:** Committed to the 2030 Agenda, ESCWA’s passionate team produces innovative knowledge, fosters regional consensus and delivers transformational policy advice. Together, we work for a sustainable future for all.

[www.unescwa.org](http://www.unescwa.org)