

# Syria:



Two years, too long



Key recommendations for easing  
the suffering of the Syrian people

“A breakthrough is desperately needed for aid agencies to establish a more significant presence inside Syria and help the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who desperately need humanitarian assistance”



## Inside Syria

by Samina Haq : Islamic Relief UK Programme Manager



I recently visited Syria with an Islamic Relief field team to assess the plight of the thousands of Syrian families who are being denied entry into neighbouring countries and - as a result - are now languishing in dozens of makeshift camps just inside Syria's borders.

As an aid worker, I've visited many camps of this kind, but what struck me the most about Syria was the lack of any international presence and limited camp management.

We were confronted with total chaos and immense human suffering. There were makeshift tents that were housing large numbers of people in overcrowded conditions.

I met one family that was sharing a tent with fifteen other people. Food was in very short supply and there was a lack of medical care and inadequate sanitation. Most of the people I met in the camp had not eaten that day. The freezing conditions meant that most of the children had racking coughs as they tried to withstand the coldest winter Syria has seen in ten years - with damp blankets and hardly any heating.

Families told me they had fled to the borders because of frequent bomb attacks and because their hometowns no longer had even basic supplies of food or water.

It was awful to see the stress these families were under - and sickening to see how little help was reaching them. I've seen for myself how vital it is for aid agencies to deliver more aid inside Syria.

Islamic Relief encounters difficulties getting aid into the country - a situation that urgently needs to be addressed by the international community.

This will only happen with the negotiation of 'humanitarian corridors' - specified distribution routes within specific time periods where a limited ceasefire will be guaranteed by both sides in the conflict.

A breakthrough is desperately needed for aid agencies to establish a more significant presence inside Syria and help the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who desperately need humanitarian assistance.

**We are failing the people of Syria. Let us take action now.**

# Introduction

This report highlights the harrowing realities of the escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries, where millions are suffering the consequences of a protracted conflict.

Our report draws on Islamic Relief's first-hand experience inside Syria and in the refugee camps of neighbouring Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as building upon research and consultation with various aid agencies.

The report illustrates how the intensifying conflict – which escalated from civilian demonstrations two years ago – increasingly exacerbates the humanitarian crisis and directly affects over four million Syrians today.<sup>i</sup>

The United Nations (UN) has recently declared Syria a 'Level 3 Emergency', categorising the crisis as a global priority.<sup>ii</sup> This underlines the need for concrete action to bring an end to the violence.

The situation in Syria is complex, challenging and constantly changing. As such, this report

does not presume that finding solutions will be easy, but it seeks to identify key initiatives that offer real potential to reduce civilian suffering alongside the enforcement of international humanitarian standards – both now, and for whatever post-conflict scenario emerges.

Islamic Relief firmly believes that the international community, under the collective umbrella of the United Nations, needs to redouble its efforts to do all it can to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

Accordingly, we appeal to everyone who shares our concerns to seriously consider our recommended actions so that we can act collectively to prevent more bloodshed in this devastating humanitarian disaster.



In response to the situation in Syria, Islamic Relief proposes the following key recommendations in order to alleviate the human suffering:

- > The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) should **redouble its efforts in tackling the crisis, ensuring greater protection for civilians**, with appropriate measures if parties fail to comply with resolutions.
- > We believe that the UNSC and leading UN members should commit themselves to the negotiation of **humanitarian corridors and cross-border operations for the unhindered delivery of aid inside Syria. This should be complemented by a mandate extension allowing cross-lines assistance for all Damascus based aid agencies** so that they are permitted to deliver aid to all areas inside Syria.
- > Aid agencies should prioritise the most pressing needs identified by those working on the ground, such as **medical aid, food and shelter** – for the people inside Syria as well as for those who have fled to neighbouring countries.
- > More funds and programmes should be made available to provide **counselling and psychosocial support for traumatised children and the elderly, with more research and resources allocated to validate and address the reported rise in incidences of sexual and gender-based violence.**
- > All parties in the conflict to **uphold international humanitarian standards.**
- > Internally displaced Syrian civilians and refugees in neighbouring countries must be **adequately supported by the international community.** Funding, resources and support for those affected by the conflict have been woefully inadequate.
- > All governments hosting Syrian refugees (principally Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt) should **guarantee international rights for refugees** and provide improved services for Syrian refugees fleeing the violence.
- > All the above actions must continue to be enforced in any **post-conflict scenario**, where still applicable.

## The international community has to do more

“The Security Council simply cannot continue to say: ‘We are in disagreement, therefore let’s wait for better times.’ I think they have to grapple with this problem now.”

- UN Arab League envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi <sup>iii</sup>

Syria’s transition towards democracy and peace remains an enormous challenge, given the current violence and stalemate of negotiations. The longer the conflict continues, the greater the risk of polarisation on both sides.

The absence of an international enforcement of humanitarian law and standards has given the initiative to extreme and irregular forces on all sides of the conflict.

Islamic Relief agrees with the sentiments expressed by the UN Arab League envoy, that the UNSC must become more engaged in tackling this crisis. We believe all parties should redouble their efforts to guarantee greater protection for civilians, with appropriate measures if parties fail to comply with resolutions.

We believe a degree of protection can only realistically be ensured by the UNSC committing themselves to the negotiation of humanitarian corridors and cross-border

operations for the unhindered delivery of aid inside Syria – which should be complemented by a mandate extension allowing cross-lines assistance for all Damascus based aid agencies so that they are permitted to deliver aid to all areas inside Syria.

All of these negotiations to include specified routes and/or times of day where ceasefires will be guaranteed by both sides for the protection for aid workers to facilitate safe access to the estimated four million civilians directly affected inside Syria – including those camped immediately inside border areas.

This protection for aid workers and aid convoys is urgently needed to enable NGOs to gain consistent and safe access to civilians. If the international community speaks through the UNSC with one voice, establishing such corridors on both sides of the conflict is not unrealistic. In practice, this means robust negotiations to ensure that safe times and locations for distributions are agreed and honoured.

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## Eyewitness account:

### One meal in

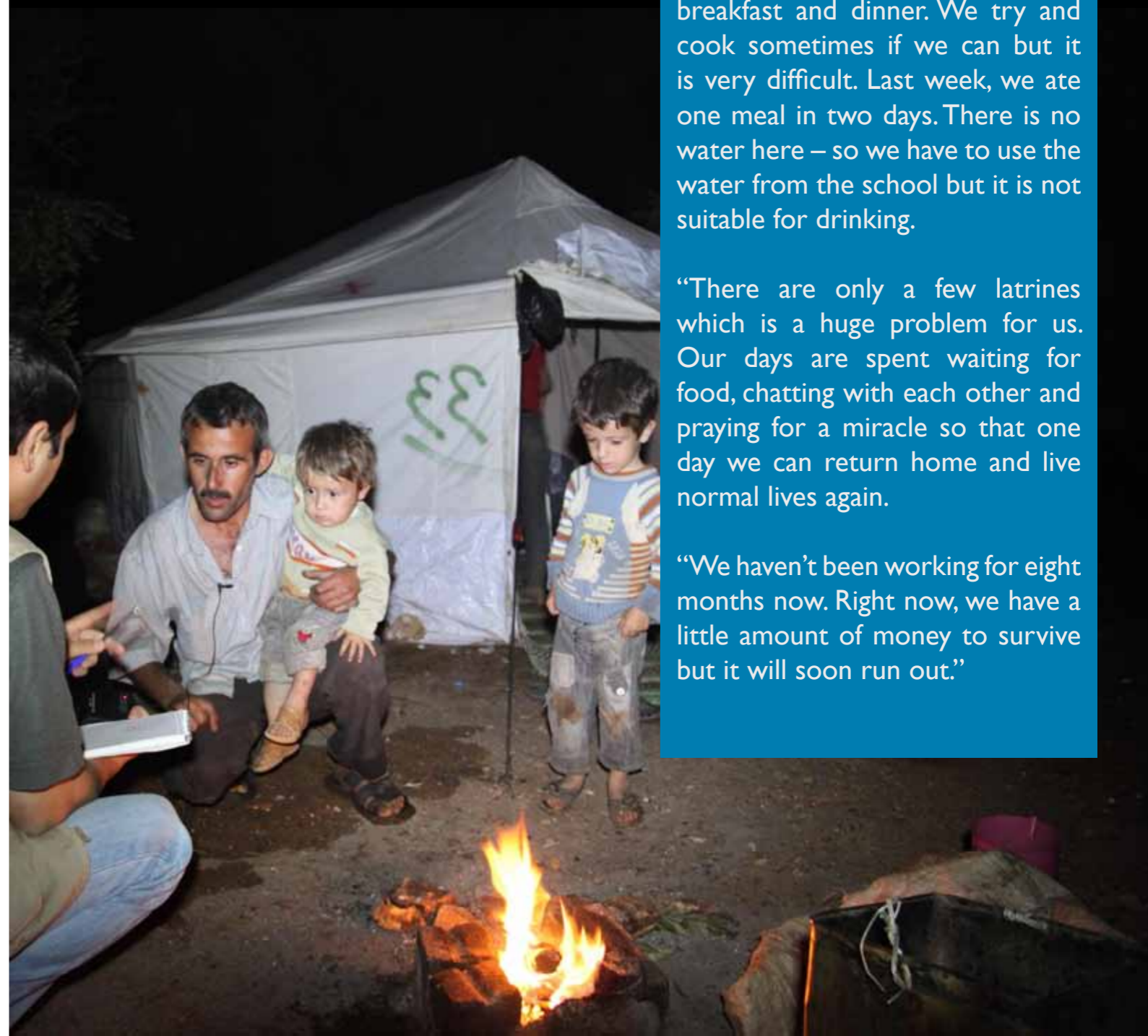
### two days

38-year-old Abu Ahmed lost five of his relatives due to shelling attacks inside Syria. He is now living in a camp for displaced people with his three children, his parents, his brothers and their families. Conditions in the camp are extremely difficult.

“We sleep in a school, which has become a shelter and hospital for Syrian refugees,” explains Abu Ahmed. “We are situated in an area near the Turkey-Syria border, where we receive food aid for breakfast and dinner. We try and cook sometimes if we can but it is very difficult. Last week, we ate one meal in two days. There is no water here – so we have to use the water from the school but it is not suitable for drinking.

“There are only a few latrines which is a huge problem for us. Our days are spent waiting for food, chatting with each other and praying for a miracle so that one day we can return home and live normal lives again.

“We haven’t been working for eight months now. Right now, we have a little amount of money to survive but it will soon run out.”



## The dangers of delivering aid inside Syria

“We visited homes and shelters where we heard many stories of the suffering of these families while they were still inside Syria, or on their way to the border. They are in need of almost everything – food, water, shelter and medicine.”

– Dr Hossam Said, Head of International Programmes, Islamic Relief Worldwide

An estimated 2.5 million people are displaced inside Syria<sup>iv</sup> and over one million people have fled to neighbouring countries.<sup>v</sup> As the conflict intensifies, host countries are struggling to deal with the influx of refugees – and access to civilians inside Syria is as hard and dangerous today as it has been since the start of the conflict.

As a result, not nearly enough aid is being delivered to those who need it most. While the UN is working through the Syrian government and its authorised agencies to deliver vital supplies, these are being distributed almost exclusively to government-controlled areas.<sup>vi</sup>

Only a tiny percentage of allocated aid is reaching areas not under government control<sup>vii</sup> In addition, there are huge sections of the country – between the strongholds of the opposing parties – that are stranded and completely cut off from any regular assistance. The UNHCR describes the conditions in these areas as appalling and fears that there

are many more areas that we may not know about facing the same situation.<sup>viii</sup>

Islamic Relief has seen, during recent aid distributions inside Syria, how basic the conditions are in makeshift camps for displaced people – and how critically important it is to have an international presence to coordinate distributions and manage the camps. Without better aid provision people have nowhere to go inside the country, and crossing the borders is becoming the only option for survival for millions of Syrians.

International humanitarian law allows for the establishment of different types of protected areas under conditions of consent from the opposing parties and/or demilitarisation of the area concerned.<sup>ix</sup> A safe alternative for gaining access within Syria is desperately needed, which is why Islamic Relief believes that humanitarian corridors are crucial to accessing the millions in need.

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## Eyewitness account:

### Life inside Syria



Fatima Ahmed is a mother-of-four who recently fled violence in northern Syria and sought shelter in a large shed near the border with Turkey. The structure was once a hangar for the border crossing, but now houses over a hundred families. Living conditions for the families are extremely difficult.

Fatima told Islamic Relief: “There are flies everywhere, the food we are eating is not clean and the toilets are filthy. There is just no cleanliness at all. We need support with medicine, water and hygiene as well as clothes, food and milk.

“We need tents before the children start freezing from the cold. They already suffer from diarrhoea and other dirt-related illnesses. All four of my children have had infections. Where am I supposed to get medicine? Who can we turn to?”

“Our kids have had to leave everything behind. They’ve abandoned their schools and education and they’ve even abandoned their homes. We don’t have proper roofs over our heads - we are just living on the streets.”

## Gender-based violence (GBV)

Women and girls are paying a high price in this conflict and can face the risk of violence, abduction and trafficking. <sup>x</sup>

There are increasing reports of a rise in the incidences of GBV and this may become an increasingly significant and disturbing feature in the Syrian conflict. <sup>xi</sup>

As a result, hundreds of women and children may be in need of urgent medical care and retributive justice.



- > Aid agencies, with the help of donors and governments, must address any incidents of gender-based violence with psychological and emotional support, documentation of each incident and legal support to hold perpetrators to account for their actions.
- > All governments hosting Syrian refugees must increase security and establish codes of conduct at refugee camps with the specific aim of protecting women and children from GBV. Local law must be enforced by the relevant authorities towards perpetrators. <sup>xii</sup>
- > Further research and resources should be allocated to ensure that women and children are protected from the need for 'temporary' and 'child' marriages.
- > Leading religious scholars should denounce any occurrence of 'temporary' and child marriages to Syrian refugees.

## Inside Syria

An eyewitness account by Habib Malik : Head of Islamic Relief Scotland

During my stay inside Syria, I made my way through one of the campsites, meeting people and listening to their stories, when I came across what was known as the community tent, which was in place as a praying area.

However, due to lack of space, the tent was sheltering families with children. It was in this tent that I met

and extremely traumatised. She was due to give birth in the next few weeks and both parents were feeling lost.

They had no idea what they were going to do; how the baby would be delivered; where they would get food, clothes and nappies. For them, having a new baby meant extreme hardship.



Hamza, his wife and their one-year old daughter, Ilaaf.

A couple of weeks ago, Hamza left home with his family, and moved to the border in order to find a safer place for them, and ended up in a camp. When I met his family, they had been living in the community tent for fifteen days, as there were no more tents available.

I looked around at the family; their faces were pale, full of stress and anxiety. Hamza's wife, who was eight months pregnant, was tired

When Hamza said to me, "The future is dead for us," I fell silent and tears filled my eyes. It is so difficult for us to imagine the pain, stress and trauma they have been going through, and will - inevitably - still face in the future.

**This is just one family's story.**

**There are four million more Syrians in need of assistance.**

## Addressing the needs of refugees

“Most of the children in the refugee camps have witnessed first-hand their houses destroyed, their families killed, their siblings kidnapped. Some have been orphaned or injured.”

- Islamic Relief field officer in Lebanon

In the last two years, over one million people have fled Syria.<sup>xiii</sup> For neighbouring countries, the cost of hosting the rising number of refugees is growing.

Resources and funding for refugees have been largely inadequate considering the scale, duration and destruction of this conflict. The UNHCR says the \$1.5 billion pledged at a donor conference in late January has not materialised.<sup>xiv</sup>

As a result, schools and hospitals in host countries are overcrowded and many fear that political instability may spread – with Lebanon under particular threat because of the country’s history of sectarian and inter-religious clashes.

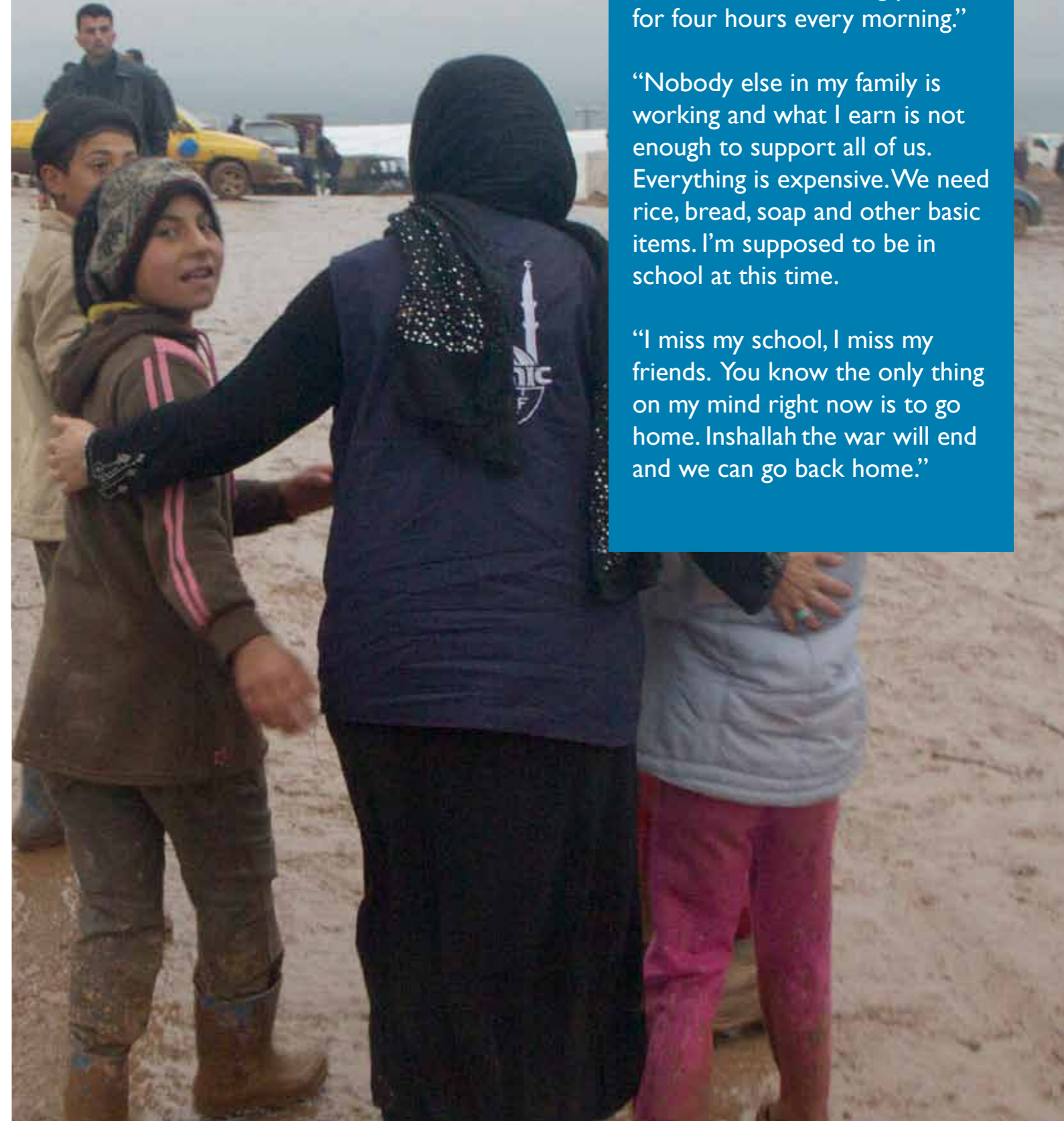
Jordanians have expressed concern that extremists will use their country as a base; Turkey is wary of sectarian violence between its various communities; and Iraq’s government fears the influx of Syria’s Sunni refugees could reignite sectarian tensions in an already fragile society.<sup>xv</sup>

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In order to meet the growing needs of refugees fleeing Syria, Islamic Relief calls on the UN and host countries to:

- > Guarantee international rights for refugees fleeing the violence in Syria.
- > Provide improved services in refugee camps including sanitation facilities, water, health-care, education and psychosocial services.
- > Establish official camps in Lebanon to host refugees crossing into the country. Currently, Syrian refugees are seeking shelter with friends, family, in factories and on the streets which are usually unsafe and unsanitary.
- > Provide access to schools, employment and basic services in host countries for all refugees fleeing Syria.

## Eyewitness account: Life inside Syria



Seventeen-year-old Zohour fled Syria, seeking safety in neighbouring Lebanon. She explained how she is missing out on school to support her family.

“When we arrived in Lebanon, we had nothing. I had to find a job to support my family. Now I work with farmers harvesting potatoes for four hours every morning.”

“Nobody else in my family is working and what I earn is not enough to support all of us. Everything is expensive. We need rice, bread, soap and other basic items. I’m supposed to be in school at this time.

“I miss my school, I miss my friends. You know the only thing on my mind right now is to go home. Inshallah the war will end and we can go back home.”

# Eyewitness account: Living in a leather factory



Abdel Rahim and his family left Syria with their five children after their home was destroyed. They have taken shelter in an old chemical-filled leather factory in Lebanon, sleeping in storage closets. The factory is next to a mountain of waste that pollutes the entire area with contaminated water and bacteria.

“You leave your country, and outside of it you have nothing to your name—no home, no work, nothing,” says Abdel Rahim.

“We Syrians are hardworking people. We are hospitable and welcoming. But this situation is so difficult. I have children who are sick; living amid the chemicals and pollution, they have chronic diarrhoea and they vomit daily.”

Two of Abdel Rahim’s children, 14-year-old Mustafa and 16-year-old Safaa, suffer from thalassemia, a blood disorder. They need regular blood transfusions and medicine to survive. Mustafa has already become frail and his skin is yellow. He’s very sick and needs help soon.

“I am tired,” Abdel Rahim said. “It’s hard; staying here is hard. My son’s pain is getting worse. This is not life; this is not living. What can we do? None of us is well; each one has a medical issue that needs attention. We can’t afford to pay for all the medical care here. We can’t even afford to pay the high rent for a place to live. What can I say?”

## Syrian children scarred for life

“War has become a normal pattern in life for most of them. Instead of hide and seek, children are playing ‘free army’ and ‘regime army’... There is constant chatter about revenge, killings and blood”

- Islamic Relief field worker



Humanitarian workers, human rights organisations and teachers in schools have all witnessed the impact that the conflict has had on the mental stability of Syrian children.

Officials at Öncüpınar refugee camp in Turkey were shocked when children who were asked to draw pictures all drew tanks or weapons. “They are extremely nervous,” said Ebru Tanriaski, who works as a teacher at the camp. “The other day, one of the kids popped a balloon. All the children in the school ran outside, screaming in panic.”<sup>xvi</sup>

“Some children have been so traumatised that they are unable to speak,” says an Islamic Relief Lebanon officer. “They look at us with blank, scared faces. Any loud noise terrifies them. The violence has become a normal pattern in life for most of them. Instead of hide and seek, children are playing ‘free army’ and ‘regime army’. There is constant chatter about revenge, killings and blood.”

Islamic Relief has spoken to scores of families, and each one lists the same ultimate fear - that this experience will be too damaging for their children to bear.

One mother told staff in Jordan, “Omar, my son, couldn’t sleep well for months because of the terrifying bombing sounds. Even now, if he hears any loud voices, he starts shivering and crying.”

Consultant psychiatrist Dr Khaled Sultan and his colleagues visited Turkey and Libya to assess the psychological impact of the conflict on Syrian refugees. He told Islamic Relief:<sup>xvii</sup>

“We assessed around 250 patients. Out of those patients, 40% were children who we diagnosed to have either full or partial symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”



Children are suffering from diverse problems due to the trauma of the Syria conflict. We found a number of issues facing Syrian children who have fled the violence in Syria:

- > Reoccurring nightmares and flashbacks
- > Behavioural problems resulting in violence, aggression and bullying
- > Depression
- > Personality change
- > Lack of feelings and emotions- some children cannot cry or laugh any more
- > Bed wetting - which can be particularly embarrassing and unhygienic when tents can be shared with relative strangers.

Many families have expressed despair when unable to help their children recover and lead stable lives again, according to Dr Khaled Sultan. He says more experts are needed in the refugee camps to provide Syrian children with psychological support.

Islamic Relief calls on aid agencies and institutional donors to prioritise funding for psychological support and psychosocial activities for children to help them deal with the trauma of conflict. Areas of focus should include:

- > Trained child psychologists based in refugee camps to provide support and services to children fleeing the violence in Syria
- > Family and faith-based counselling to help parents and children deal with the trauma of the violence
- > Access to schools in host countries as well as educational facilities in refugee camps
- > Provision of psychosocial activities for children such as fun days and play parks
- > A commitment by all parties in the conflict to prioritise the protection of children.

## Eyewitness account:

“My little boy says

he has a bomb

in his heart”

Raiwa left Syria and fled to Lebanon with her husband and two children after her home was destroyed. The family now lives in a tent, pitched in a school playground. The school is also housing a number of families in classrooms, corridors, lunchrooms and playgrounds.

“We had to leave in Ramadan due to the violence. We fled to my parents’ house in another town but the violence had spread there too, so we sought shelter in various mosques. When the mosques were shelled we had to run again. We spent nights in parks, on streets and pavements. People started dividing the pavements up with their blankets, to allocate space for their families.

“Every day at Iftaar time, the shelling would make it difficult for us to break our fast. My children were terrified. They couldn’t eat or sleep. They were seeing dead bodies in the streets in front of us.”

Raiwa and her family then fled to Idlib where they spent 25 days but the conditions there were also terrible for children.

“There was still no electricity or water,” Raiwa explains. “We would have to walk to fetch unclean water but I wouldn’t let my children drink it as fifty kids from that area were taken to hospital due to waterborne diseases. We couldn’t bear it anymore. My husband decided it was time to leave Syria and we came to Lebanon but my husband’s identification documents were stolen so he couldn’t cross the border with us. He is trying to get new ones and then he will join us.”

“Here in Lebanon, it is very difficult for us. We are sharing a tent with other people and sleeping on bricks on the floor. My little boy is suffering psychologically. He refuses to drink water, crying and screaming that he has a bomb in his heart and can’t drink. I have to stroke his heart to stop him from panicking.”

## Appendix I: Islamic Relief's Syria Appeal

Islamic Relief was one of the first humanitarian agencies to provide assistance inside Syria. Today we are supporting Syrians in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and eastern areas. We have helped tens of thousands of refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

### Inside Syria

- > Providing medical supplies to 30 field hospitals and 60 medical points in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, which are used for operations, first aid and the intensive care of patients.
- > Distributing food parcels and household items to families in Aleppo, including blankets, mattresses, electric heaters, hygiene kits and essential items for infants, such as nappies, baby food and milk solution.
- > Preparing to provide displaced people on the eastern Syrian coast with tents, showers, toilets, mattresses, water tanks, hygiene kits, baby kits and blankets.

### Lebanon

- > Medical care and operations for Syrian refugees.
- > Providing food packages as well as household and hygiene items. Most families receive mosquito nets, mattresses, blankets, bread, kitchen pans, drinking water and candles, as well as nappies and baby milk for families with infants.
- > Providing psychosocial activities to help Syrian children deal with the trauma of violence.

### Jordan

- > Supplying Syrian families in Ramtha and Mafraq, Jordan with rent money for three months, as well as providing them with hygiene kits and food. The most vulnerable families also received heaters, pillows, mattresses, and blankets for the winter.
- > Providing refugees in Mafraq with blankets, winter coats, gas heaters and canisters.
- > Supplying families in Jordan's Zaatari camp and Al Ramtha camp with blankets, gas heaters and canisters.

### Iraq

- > Managing the UNHCR Qaem camp in western Iraq which shelters thousands of Syrian refugees.
- > Building the infrastructure of Kasak camp in northern Iraq.
- > Responsible for regular food distribution to tens of thousands of people living in northern Iraq - organised through a voucher system.
- > Constructing Qaem Al-Obaidy camp. When complete, the camp will have sewers, water tanks, toilets, kitchens and septic tanks.

## Appendix II: END NOTES

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