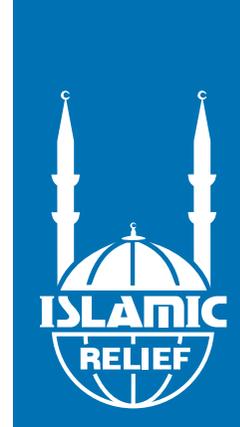


DELIVERING AID ON SYRIA'S FRONT LINE



This briefing includes

- ▶ Damage to health facilities in Aleppo bombardment
- ▶ Latest on growing displaced camps near Turkish border
- ▶ Humanitarian impact of February ceasefire
- ▶ Islamic Relief aid delivery in besieged areas
- ▶ Negative impact of bank 'derisking' on aid operations
- ▶ Recommendations for UK Government action



**ISLAMIC
RELIEF IN
ACTION**

**PARLIAMENTARY
BRIEFING
MARCH 2016**

This month sees the fifth anniversary of the devastating Syrian conflict (March 15). Few people could have predicted the scale of what would follow when civil society protests against the Assad regime began in 2011.

Official figures from the United Nations put the death toll since 2011 at over a quarter of a million people, with over 6.6 million internally displaced within Syria and 4.8 million Syrian refugees.

ISLAMIC RELIEF PROGRAMMES

Since the conflict began Islamic Relief has delivered more than £130 million worth of aid inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, assisting over 6.5 million Syrians.

We are distributing food packs, clothes and medical supplies to communities under siege within Syria and displaced people along the Turkish border. We are also running or supporting camps and providing livelihood programmes, education and psychosocial support for refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. In Europe our teams are assisting Syrian refugees in Greece, Italy, Macedonia and Germany.

With over two decades of experience in the Middle East, we work closely with local humanitarian organisations and community networks to provide immediate support and build long-term resilience. Our Islamic identity has helped us to establish trust and access on the ground and crucially to mobilise the generous support of Muslim communities and institutions in the UK and around the world.

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND THE CEASEFIRE

The UN estimates that nearly half a million people are currently living in 18 besieged locations inside Syria, without access to food or medical supplies. The prime objective of the two-week temporary ceasefire called on February 27 was to open up access for the delivery of life-saving humanitarian aid to these desperate communities.

Our staff on the ground say the ceasefire has modestly improved humanitarian access but the situation is still uncertain and unstable, not least because some parties to the conflict are not part of the agreement.

Islamic Relief staff in northern Syria, where we work through a network of brave Syrian nationals employed by us, reported an increase in violence in the week before the ceasefire as all parties attempted to strengthen their positions before the official laying down of arms.

Only one route to Aleppo has remained open along the Castelo road but travelling on this road carries a high risk, as trucks and cars continue to be targeted by looters from various armed groups.

Islamic Relief has continued to deliver containers of medical supplies to communities in the Aleppo governate. These supplies are vital, as the numbers of injuries needing treatment have drastically increased. We are also supporting the last dialysis centre left standing, which is operating at night so that kidney patients can get treatment with less risk of air strikes.

The strategic importance of Aleppo for the Assad regime and armed opposition groups means the whole province remains highly volatile, and there is a real danger of the main city being cut off from outside support if the Castelo road route is blocked. Islamic Relief is working closely with other humanitarian organisations and the local health directorate to implement contingency plans, including stockpiling medical supplies inside Aleppo.

We are also working with local partners based inside besieged areas – including Madaya, East and West Ghouta, Southern Damascus, Northern Homs, Darayya and Moadamiyeh – to provide food and other essential items. It is reported that there are a further 107 locations still out of reach of outside aid. A more comprehensive ceasefire is needed – one that involves all parties and offers greater protection for humanitarian agencies.

AIR STRIKES

Recent air strikes have had a devastating impact on civilian infrastructure. Over the past three months our staff on the ground have reported direct hits on 30 schools and 35 health facilities in opposition-held territory, including a hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières. In Aleppo governorate alone, four hospitals were hit by war planes in Azaz, Anadan and the countryside to the west of Aleppo city.

Although air strikes have decreased since the ceasefire, the Syrian Government and its allies are still able to continue bombardments under the guise of targeting Daesh and al-Nusra, who are not covered under the terms of the ceasefire.

“These are tough times for children, for women and for all civilians inside Syria. One of the hospitals for women and children in Azaz City where we operate was hit by an air strike, with a lot of casualties – including children, infants in incubators and pregnant women. Some people have been displaced three, four or even five times in five years. These people left their homes because of bombardments and moved to another location in camps. The camps were hit, so they moved to collective centres in schools. The schools were hit, so more people were injured and taken to hospital. The hospitals were hit, so where else would they go? We are trying our best to maintain our operations in this very difficult situation, because there is a desperate need that is increasing by the hour.”

Ahmed Mahmoud, Islamic Relief Syria

TURKISH BORDER

Over 100,000 people have fled their homes in Aleppo and the villages surrounding the city since the Russian bombing campaign began in February. Numbers in camps in Az'az city and border towns including Kilis and Bab Al-salam have almost doubled to 100,000.

These small border towns have been overwhelmed by the surge of people attempting to cross over into Turkey, and the makeshift camps that have been established are lacking basic sanitation and sufficient food rations.

Islamic Relief has provided winter coats, boots, clothing and emergency food rations for over 12,000 people near the Turkey border. Our teams have been working with the Turkish authorities and local humanitarian groups to deliver and install 175 latrines and wash basins in new camps being established in camps in Az'az city.

We are also working with local health authorities to supply essential medical items, although the local health infrastructure in these areas is at breaking point due to the numbers of patients increasing daily.

The lack of cooking facilities means ready-to-eat meals must be delivered to displaced families. In the last two months Islamic Relief has delivered almost 25,000 meals. Before the ceasefire this became increasingly difficult, as people were reluctant to congregate for mass food distributions for fear of air strikes. In response Islamic Relief opted to deliver food individually to families, placing a greater strain on already stretched resources.

SYRIA'S NEIGHBOURS

Islamic Relief is supporting hundreds of thousands of refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. The majority of refugees are living not in camps but within local municipalities, which has created additional challenges for aid delivery and protection. We are working closely with local humanitarian organisations and community networks to build long-term resilience through health, education and livelihoods programmes.

Syria's neighbours are buckling under the burden of providing long-term support to refugee populations, alongside their own impoverished communities. There are over a million Syrians in Lebanon, and Syrian refugees now account for a quarter of the population.

Inter-communal tensions are on the rise between refugee and host communities across the region. In Jordan Islamic Relief is working with the Lutheran World Federation to pilot an innovative approach to peace-building that uses positive messages from across Islam and Christianity.

COUNTER-TERRORISM AND FINANCIAL 'DERISKING'

Islamic Relief delivers humanitarian aid in hard-to-reach areas throughout much of Syria. Unfortunately current counter-terrorism regulation has caused some banks to withdraw or severely restrict financial services to organisations working in conflict zones, to avoid the risk of regulatory penalties.

This was one of the main grievances raised by Syrian civil society groups at the pledging conference for Syria held in London in February, with many unable to access any of the \$6 billion pledged in humanitarian aid by donor countries.

Islamic Relief has been prevented from transferring funds through some banks and foreign exchange providers directly to our field offices and suppliers in Syria. This has posed huge logistical problems for our teams on the ground, who need to purchase and transport large volumes of food and medical supplies in highly challenging and insecure environments. We have also experienced the withdrawal of financial services by certain banks, reflecting uncertainty about what is permissible under the regulations and an unwillingness to risk punitive action by regulators.

Islamic Relief believes that the risk that charities represent in terms of aid diversion has been grossly exaggerated, and that some banks are taking a disproportionately conservative view of the risks when considering the provision of banking services. The current lack of transparency from banks is very unhelpful as it has prevented many charities from understanding and directly addressing any concrete issues of concern that the banks may have.

The UK Government is well aware of this issue but up to now it has taken the view that banks should take responsibility for navigating counter-terrorism regulations, not government. The consequence of this laissez-faire approach is that banks have become more risk averse, and so financing aid delivery in conflict zones is now more challenging than ever.

Andrew Mitchell and Clare Short, two former Secretaries of State for International Development, recently visited Syrian refugee camps in Turkey with representatives of the Muslim Charities Forum, of which Islamic Relief is a founding member. They called for an investigation into bank derisking by the Commons International Development Committee, whose chair Stephen Twigg has since said he would be willing to examine this request “very sympathetically”.

Andrew Mitchell said:

“These are some of the few charities that can get into Syria and help the benighted people of that country, yet they are being held back due to misunderstandings and banking bureaucracy.”

Clare Short said:

“We have got this enormous capacity in the UK of these Muslim humanitarian charities, yet they are struggling with one hand behind their back. We need a proper scrutiny and examination bringing all this out.”

Islamic Relief believes it is time not just for the International Development Select Committee to investigate but also for the Government to build on its laudable contribution to the humanitarian response by bringing banks, charities and the British Bankers Association together to overcome these challenges. More concrete guidance and reassurances need to be provided to financial institutions, and they need to be held to account by government for their actions.

There are already good models to follow from Australia and New Zealand, where aid organisations have certain exemptions from terrorism legislation to ensure that aid is not denied to innocent people in conflict zones.

It is vital to ensure that bona fide humanitarian agencies are not penalised for and prevented from engaging in life-saving work, and we urge MPs of all parties to support the Early Day Motion on this issue that will be launched later this month.

GOVERNMENT ACTION NEEDED

Islamic Relief urges the UK Government to:

Exert pressure on all parties to build on the political will behind the ceasefire in order to protect and extend humanitarian corridors in besieged areas

Call on all parties to the conflict to end attacks on civilian targets in violation of humanitarian law, including homes, schools and medical facilities

Provide more support to aid agencies assisting newly displaced people along the Turkish border

Sustain long-term funding for Syria's neighbours to meet the needs of Syrian refugees and their own populations

Convene a summit to bring banks, charities and the British Bankers Association together to further clarify counter-terror regulations and encourage banks to re-engage with humanitarian organisations operating in conflict zones



CONTACT

Islamic Relief UK

16 Lower Marsh | London SE1 7RJ

020 7593 3232 | info@islamic-relief.org.uk
www.islamic-relief.org.uk

Public Affairs Coordinator: Helen Stawski

helen.stawski@islamic-relief.org.uk

Campaigns Coordinator: Maiya Rahman

maiya.rahman@islamic-relief.org.uk

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