

The Problems of Internally Displaced Persons in the Arab World: A Case Study of Syria

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Abstract: The ongoing violent conflict in Arab world has created massive influx of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The majority of refugees and IDPs emerged from countries such as Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen. The Syrian armed conflict is almost near to complete 15 years. The ongoing armed conflict has been responsible to displace thousands of persons from their original places. A large number of people have sought refuge in the neighboring countries and some have also taken shelter in different European countries. The remaining persons have been living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in different locations of Syria in pathetic condition since the commencement of this crisis in 2011. A lot many persons have been displaced more than one time from one place to another place. At the global level Syria became number one in context with the IDPs with more than six million at the end of 2021. The harsh reality is that the Syrian IDPs are coping with the problems of unsafe shelter, scarcity of drinking water, shortage of food, lack of education, improper health facilities and more specially women concerning gender related issues. The worst economic condition has elevated the dependency of millions of Syrians, particularly IDPs on humanitarian aid. However, in several places, humanitarian aids are halted by pro-regime forces especially in the areas where IDPs are found in ISIS controlled areas and other fighter groups against Syrian regime. Using both primary and secondary sources of data, this paper will explore the problems of Arab World IDPs mainly Syrian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The paper finally concludes, inter alia, with some valuable recommendations that all armed groups, particularly state armed groups must follow humanitarian law and their duties to protect IDPs.

Keywords: Arab World, Armed conflict, Syrian crisis, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), humanitarian aid

Introduction

Internal Displacement in the Arab World

In past few decades, the Arab world observed armed conflicts, civil wars, revolt and natural catastrophes forcing millions of people to displace from their original places to their own countries, at the same time they are facing lack of proper protection and support.ⁱ However, in December 2010, a protest that began in Tunisia following the death of a young fruit vendor named Sidi Bouazizi, later, this transformed into a major revolution

known as the Arab Spring; generally led by young people. Following this revolution, large-scale displacement of people took place in Arab countries-specifically in Yemen, Libya and Syria.ⁱⁱ Since 2018, the global population of internally displaced persons has effectively doubled; by the end of 2024, this figure has reached a peak of 83.7 million across the territories of 117 nations.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, the recent violent conflict of Gaza and Lebanon have also generated new influx of IDPs in this region.

A report of 2024 Internal Displacement of Monitoring Centre shows that due to recent Palestine-Israel and Israel-Lebanon conflict has resulted in Palestine, there were 3.2 million and in Lebanon 1.1 million IDPs were found.^{iv} Due to interference of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen has resulted large numbers of persons displaced from their original places. According to UNHCR 2026 data their numbers are 5.2 million.^v In the case of Sudan due to clash between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) And Rapid Support Forces (RSF), as of January, approximately 8.8 million persons were displaced and became IDPs.^{vi} In Iraq, as a result of sectarian and ethnic conflict, and the foreign intermeddling and the upsurge of terrorist group, large numbers of people uprooted from their places, in August 2026 the IDPs numbers nearly are 97,000 in 18 IDP camps.^{vii} After the fall of Gaddafi, major displacement occurred in Libya because of civil unrest and international military interventions. In December 2024, still there were 32.791 IDPs in Libya.^{viii}

Conceptual Framework and Definition of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Internally displaced persons are “individuals or groups who are forced or obliged to leave their homes to avoid the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or disasters, but who remain within their country’s borders.” This broadly accepted definition, derived from the guiding principles on internal displacement and reflected in regional instruments such as the great lakes, Protocol and the Kampala Convention highlights two main elements: The forced nature of movement and non-crossing of international borders.^{ix} In general, IDPs are divided into two groups: such as camp and urban IDPs, generally urban IDPs select to city and urban region to gain better opportunities and to keep away stigma of displacement.^x

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, regarding IDPs has provided different types of rights under the broader human rights framework. Namely these are:^{xi}

1. According to Guiding principles 11 (1), ‘Every human being the right to dignity and physical, mental and moral integrity.’^{xii}
2. According to Guiding principles 12 (1), ‘Every human being has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.’^{xiii}
3. According to Guiding principles 12 (3), ‘Internally displaced persons shall be protected from discriminatory arrest and detention as a result of their displacement.’^{xiv}

Regarding the aforementioned rights of IDPs, large-scale human rights violations were witnessed in the Arab countries, particularly in Syria. Many such instances were observed during the Bashar al-Assad's era.

Brief History of Syria and Condition of Syrian Internally Displaced Persons

Nearly 10,000 BC, Syria was a hub of Neolithic culture which included the occupations of agriculture, cattle rearing, and poetry records the chronicles of early world history. Syria is a culturally diversified country before the commencement of the present conflict. There were nearly 22 million people. Arabic is an official language of Syria. But there are different dialects that vary region to region such as Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian and Aramaic are also spoken frequently.^{xv}

The history is filled with the examples of human killings, hurting and torturing each other for their appetite of greed, mundane realities and myriad vested interests. All these appear true in the case of recent conflict in Syria. The ongoing conflict in Syria is a multi-layered struggle, involving several actors and interests.^{xvi} In March 2011, peaceful protests occurred in Syria, after that 15 boys were detained and tortured for writing graffiti in support of the Arab Spring. One of the boys, 13-year-old Hamza Al-Khateeb, was killed having been brutally tortured. The Syrian Government responded to the protests by firing on and killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning much more.^{xvii} The parties which were involved in this conflict have also violated International Humanitarian Law. They have intentionally targeted civilian populations. Barrel bombs, cluster munitions and toxic industrial chemicals including chlorine have been dropped by the Syrian and Russian forces on public places such as markets, schools, medical facilities and squares. In addition, US-led Coalition airstrikes have also killed civilians and non-combatants. Some non-state actors such as Al Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Hezbollah and ISIS have breached the IHL.^{xviii}

Since March 2011, the conflict in Syria has resulted in large scale displacement internally and across the region. There have been hundreds of thousands of fatalities and injuries, millions of internally displaced persons and many more asylum seekers and refugees in neighboring countries, largely Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq.^{xix} According to the United Nations latest report, more than 6 million Syrians have fled the country and 6.7 million are internally displaced. With more than 14 million people continuing to be in need of assistance, the conflict has caused untold suffering for Syrian men, women and children.^{xx}

Problems of Internally Displaced Persons

After fifteen years of conflict in Syria, more than half of the population is displaced, viz. 6.7 million people inside Syria (many of whom multiple times) and 5.7 million in neighboring countries. Syria has the largest displaced population in the world, and new displacements continue to substantially surpass returns. During the second half of 2021 hostilities re-intensified in the northern and southern Syria, creating new

displacement.^{xxi} According to new data in 2022, more than 6.9 million people were displaced inside the Syria.^{xxii}

Majority of Syrian IDPs, approximately 1.7 million, are currently living in the north-west region of Syria, 58% which are children, with no durable solution in sight. The vast majority of people have lived in tents for years with little or no access to water and sanitation, which increases the risk of waterborne diseases.^{xxiii}

Since losing control of the north-west part of the country, the Syrian government had cut off electricity and water supplies, obstructed aid, and attacked camps, medical facilities, and schools, putting the onus on humanitarian organizations to provide services.^{xxiv}

Amnesty International conducted research between February and May 2022 for its report, which examines how people were living in camps with no access to their rights to adequate housing, water and sanitation, and health, pre-dominantly in Idlib.^{xxv}

According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, IDPs have the same rights as any other person living in the same country, including the right to adequate standard of living. These rights must include, at a minimum access to “essential food and potable water, basic shelter and housing, appropriate clothing, and essential medical services and sanitation.”^{xxvi}

Inadequate Housing and not Enough Water

More than half of the internally displaced population in north-west Syria lives in 1,414 camps, usually in one-room tent that do not have solid doors or locks and do not offer insulation from extreme cold or heat common to the area, in violation of their right to habitable housing under international law. IDPs receive water mostly through communal tanks, but the amount they receive is less than half of their need. Just 40% of IDPs have access to functioning washrooms.^{xxvii}

One woman, who had been living with her husband and five children in a camp for the past three years said: “We always run out of water. Like today, we do not have water. The communal tanks are empty. I do not have the purchasing power to buy water. Other people do but I don’t. I take little from my neighbors just for my children and we drink. I more often than not wait for the organization to come and fill the tanks, which I think that ought to happen twice a week. Something better than nothing, I think.”^{xxviii}

People were living in the camps told the Amnesty International that they struggle almost every year to stay themselves warm, keep their tents and belongings dry, and carry out their daily chores, including fetching water and accessing washrooms, as their movements are hindered by heavy rains, flooding and muddy roads.^{xxix}

Gender based Violence

There are some instances regarding gender-based violence in IDPs camps. Due to overcrowding, lack of privacy and unfenced camps, the inability to lock tents and their exclusion from decision-making processes have exposed women and girls to a range of gender-based violence, including violence by family members (Girls are forced to marry in early age), camp management and residents, strangers and humanitarian workers.^{xxx}

One aid worker said: “Every type of gender-based violence exists in the north-west Syria, especially in camps. It includes verbal harassment, physical violence, rape and sexual exploitation by male family members.”^{xxxi}

Required Durable Solutions for Syrian IDPs

The framework identifies eight specific criteria to measure progress towards durable solutions, viz. safety and security; proper standard of living, access to livelihoods; the restoration of housing; land and property, access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs; and access to effective remedies and justice.^{xxxii}

After the fall of Asad Regime

In December 2024, a historic political transformation happened in Syria, marking the end of the Ba’athist rule, which had been in place since the days of Bashar al-Assad. This change has brought the hope that stability can now be achieved in the country. Although, current reality challenges this presumption in Syria. Millions of IDPs remain trapped in dire conditions; it appears that it is not necessary that political transformation translate into human security.^{xxxiii}

After December 2024, returns have quickened. Around 1.2 million Syrian refugees have reached Syria, and approximately more than 1.9 million IDPs have returned to their original places. These returnees pose a major challenge at a time when civilian infrastructure, essential services, and means of livelihood are scarce in some areas.^{xxxiv} Under such conditions, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and certain Gulf countries could play a role in its reconstruction.

Needful action is one of the effective measures for durable solutions for the IDPs problems. But due to ongoing conflict possible solutions seem to be difficult for IDPs in Syria. Many experts estimated that due to ongoing conflict and in the absence of opportunities for sustainable reintegration, displacement crisis will continue. The situation may be further complicated by demographic changes incurred by the crises that have potential to exacerbate post-conflict tensions and disrupt return, local integration and resettlement.^{xxxv}

Conclusion

More than a decade since the commencement of the Syrian conflict, humanitarian crises of the IDPs such as problems of unsafe shelter, scarcity of drinking water, shortage of food, lack of education, improper health facilities and more specially women concerning gender related issues remain to be unabated. The worst economic condition has elevated the dependency of millions of Syrians, particularly IDPs on humanitarian aid. In several places, humanitarian aids were halted by pro-regime forces especially in the areas where IDPs are found in opposition-controlled areas and other fighter groups against Syrian regime. The warring parties, viz. Syrian Government, Turkish backed opposition fighters, and American backed Kurdish fighters must care these IDPs for better protection and assistance of their rights. The International Community together with humanitarian agencies must come forward to assist the warring parties to address the issues of the IDPs.

It is now Ahmad Al-Sara's responsibility to bring all warring parties and ethnic groups to the table and ensure they are treated equally, thereby completely ending the 16-year long violent conflict. Now between Trump and Al-Sara relations are very cordial, in these conditions, United States should release the promised US\$237 Million aid to Syria for reconstruction purposes, which was halted earlier in 2025.^{xxxvi} These funds can be utilized to address the basic needs of the Syrian population and support the reconstruction and development of Syria's essential infrastructure. Ultimately, achieving a lasting resolution to the conflict requires a Syrian-led political process, facilitated by the United Nations and supported effectively by international community. Finally, to find out durable solutions to this conflict, there should be Syrian-led political process facilitated by the United Nations and the International community.

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