The Consequences of Chaos

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CHAPTER 3

Communities at Risk inside Syria

The Internally Displaced, Palestinians, Besieged, and Other Trapped Populations

While much of the world’s attention has focused, perhaps understandably, on the exodus of Syrian refugees fleeing their country, less attention has been paid to those displaced within the country and even less to those who are unable to leave their communities. This chapter looks at the dynamics of internal displacement within Syria and at the plight of those who for various reasons are unable to move. We then turn to the extremely complicated issue of how to assist and protect civilians within the borders of their own country. In particular, this chapter addresses issues of cross-border assistance to areas not under the control of the government and to the potential for safe areas, no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors, and other forms of humanitarian intervention to provide assistance to those affected by the Syrian conflict who remain within Syria’s borders.
INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

While the protection of those people who flee across international borders is the responsibility of the governments that host them, with the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the responsibility for protecting those displaced within their own countries falls to their national governments. In the UN’s legal jargon, these people are known as “internally displaced persons,” or IDPs.

The primary role of the state is clear in principle, recognized both in international law and regularly reaffirmed in international statements of principle. Most notably, United Nations Resolution 46/182 of 1991, on “Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance,” which remains the normative basis for international humanitarian action, states:

The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. In this context, humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country.

Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Hence, the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.¹

One of the great human rights achievements of the past two decades has been the recognition that the rights of
those displaced within their borders need to be protected; this recognition has been accompanied by the development of a normative framework to affirm those rights. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* affirm that the state has primary responsibility for protecting the rights of IDPs and that IDPs should expect their government to fulfil this responsibility toward them. The document then proceeds to spell out the rights of IDPs and consequent responsibilities of the authorities in all phases of displacement: protection from arbitrary displacement, protection and assistance during displacement, and securing solutions to displacement.\(^2\) The *Guiding Principles* specify that humanitarian organizations have a right to offer assistance, that consent to such offers should not be arbitrarily withheld, and that authorities should ensure “rapid and unimpeded” access to the displaced.

The *Guiding Principles* were affirmed in the World Summit Outcome Document of 2005, in which 186 heads of state unanimously reiterated the primary responsibility of states to address internal displacement and affirmed the *Guiding Principles* as “an important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons.”\(^3\) In the same World Summit Outcome Document the international community also endorsed the concept of the “responsibility to protect,” known as R2P, which described a collective international responsibility to protect people from genocide, war crimes, and other crimes against humanity. This was no mere coincidence: The idea of a responsibility to protect was inspired by and emerged from efforts throughout the 1990s to design an effective international response to protect IDPs based on the concept of “sovereignty as responsibility.”\(^4\) While it is beyond the scope of this study to trace the ups and (mostly) downs of the implementation of R2P,
suffice it to say that the concept has not been applied in Syria in spite of the fact that war crimes and widespread atrocities have been unambiguously documented. Nor has the Syrian government exercised its responsibilities to protect and assist IDPs and to facilitate the “rapid and unimpeded access to the displaced.”

Moreover, the fact that the Syrian government is carrying out widespread and increasingly lethal attacks on civilian areas highlights a fundamental contradiction in international law: The same authorities that cause displacement are also responsible for protecting and assisting those displaced by their actions. While Syria is certainly not the only government in this position, the sheer scale of both internal displacement and well-documented atrocities in Syria highlight the inherent contradictions in the way IDPs are treated in international law.\footnote{5}

\textbf{INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN SYRIA}

There have been examples of large-scale displacement in Syria’s recent history—most notably in Hama in 1982 when the government forced some 250,000 people from their homes and killed more than 25,000 in a campaign to suppress protests by the Muslim Brotherhood.\footnote{6} More displacements resulted since 2006 from a devastating drought. Historically, however, rates of rural-urban migration have been relatively low in Syria. Rather, in spite of authoritarian domestic and bellicose foreign policies, Syria was known as a generous and welcoming host for Palestinian and Iraqi refugees.

Since the eruption of violence in March 2011, an increasing number of people have been displaced from their homes, the vast majority of whom remain within Syrian borders. Much more is known about the 4-plus million refugees in
neighboring countries than about the almost 6.5 million IDPs. While governments or the UNHCR have established systems to register refugees in all the neighboring countries, the Syrian government has no such registration mechanism inside the country. Access by UN agencies to the internally displaced is both limited and sporadic. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is the UN body responsible for compiling data on the number of IDPs and in October 2015 estimated their number as 6.5 million IDPs—a figure that has declined since the high of 7.6 million in October 2014, perhaps reflecting the increase in people fleeing the country.\textsuperscript{7} OCHA began reporting on IDP estimates only in January 2013 and has only updated the figure four times since then.\textsuperscript{8} In contrast, UNHCR reports refugee numbers on a regular basis, usually weekly. While refugee estimates generally show a fairly direct linear trend, numbers of IDPs seem to lurch upward in stepwise fashion. As of late 2015, the governorates (provinces) with the most IDPs were Aleppo (1.2 million), Rural Damascus (1.269 million), and Idlib (705,000).\textsuperscript{9} These IDPs are part of a larger group of 13.5 million estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance (see figure 3-1).\textsuperscript{10}

The stepwise movements in IDP numbers reflects the difficulties in compiling such numbers as well as the inherently political nature of coming up with estimates of IDPs in a highly volatile context. When their situation worsens, people go to stay with relatives in another part of the country and then move back (or move somewhere else) in response to local security issues. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) in Switzerland, the world’s leading authority on IDP data, further notes that different methodologies are used by different actors and in different parts of Syria.\textsuperscript{11} The figures presented by OCHA are in fact triangulated
between statistics collected by the Syrian government, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, and OCHA. But none of these actors has access to some parts of Syria, and those are areas likely to have high rates of internal displacement. The Syrian government (like governments in other parts of the world) has an interest in minimizing the extent of internal displacement and argues that humanitarian agencies inflate their estimates for political reasons.

Even in using the figure of 6.5 million IDPs, it must be emphasized that this is a very rough estimate, particularly given the dynamic nature of displacement. For example, IDMC reported that the conflict newly displaced as many as 1.2 million Syrians in 2014. Even in the midst of the conflict, some people are able to return to their homes. Thus the United States Agency for International Development cited UN reports that as of mid-September 2015, more than 3,000 households, 80 percent of them Palestinian, had returned to the Husseinieh neighborhood in Damascus two years after they had been displaced by armed conflict.
Given both the direct and indirect effects of the conflict, millions of Syrians have left their communities in search of safety and survival. Displacement in Syria, as elsewhere, is a dynamic process. Many people have been displaced multiple times. People return to their homes to check on property and relatives, they go to stay with relatives in areas perceived as safer and then move on when conditions deteriorate. There is a clear relationship between internal displacement and refugee movements. As a Jordanian Foreign Ministry official stated, “Jordan is typically the fourth stop for Syrians; most of the refugees arriving have been previously displaced at least three times inside Syria.”

For those displaced within Syria, shelter is an immediate and serious concern. In 2014 analysts estimated that 30 percent of the country’s housing stock had been destroyed—and there have been widespread aerial bombardments since then. The overwhelming majority of IDPs (85 percent) stay with relatives or friends or rent accommodations in the communities where they arrive. But when resources run out or when IDPs have no relatives or friends to stay with, they seek alternative accommodations by living in abandoned property, in makeshift shelters, or even in caves. According to Syrian government reports in 2013, only 4 percent of IDPs in the country were living in collective shelters.

Compared to refugees who have made it out of the country, those displaced within Syria are probably more vulnerable because they are closer to the violence, less likely to be assessed and counted, and less likely to have access to international assistance. Older people, for example, are probably less able to travel far from home. While people over 65 made up some 6 percent of Syria’s pre-war population, they account for only 1.6 percent of registered refugees. Perhaps because women are able to move more freely through check-
points or because men have been killed or are fighting, most IDPs are women and girls. While IDPs have been taken in by host families and communities, in some places the sheer number of IDPs seeking safety has increased tensions. Even in official camps, sudden influxes of IDPs may overwhelm services. Health services and education for children are largely absent, and children are experiencing clear signs of trauma. In 2013 reports were that half of IDP children had dropped out of school—a figure that seems to have remained constant. In 2015 OCHA reported that in addition to those already out of school another 25 percent of children were at risk of dropping out.

IDPs face serious protection needs related to the ongoing conflict. Many people have lost identity and other documents, and without them crossing checkpoints is risky. One-half of the civil affairs departments in the country have been destroyed, hampering the replacement of documentation. Families have been separated, there is a heightened risk of sexual violence, and children are at risk. IDPs and refugee women report increased domestic violence and pressure to resort to negative coping methods such as early marriage and prostitution. IDPs living in makeshift camps near the Turkish border have been attacked. The proliferation of small arms and the widespread presence of mines, explosive remnants of war, and unexploded ordnance pose a particular threat for children. Children have been used as human shields and recruited into armed forces, in particular by armed opposition groups, while in Lebanon some reportedly have engaged in armed hostilities. IDPs also face risks because of the loss of social networks that can protect people in conflict situations by providing guidance on issues such as who can be trusted and what are the safe routes through the country or city.
There is no legal or policy framework for IDPs in Syria. In fact, the Syrian government does not acknowledge that there are IDPs in the country. Rather, according to the 2013 report of the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs, “the Government stated its position that the Syrian Arab Republic was not suffering from a phenomenon called ‘internally displaced persons’ but rather had been subject to a series of terrorist attacks undertaken by armed outlaws. As such, persons being assisted were referred to as ‘people who left their homes as a result of the current events.’”

While all IDPs in Syria are at risk, specific groups have experienced particularly high risk, including the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, religious minorities, and Kurds.

**Palestinian and Iraqi Refugees**

Palestinian and Iraqi refugees have been particularly vulnerable. The UN’s agency for the Palestinians—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—reports that all twelve Palestinian refugee camps and all 560,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Syria have been affected by the war. The majority of the 450,000 refugees remaining in Syria are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. One-third of UNRWA facilities in Syria have been damaged or destroyed, and UNRWA reports that the civilian character of the camps and neutrality is no longer respected. This is a breach of international law under which refugees are protected during armed conflict, in all circumstances and without adverse distinction.

The destruction of homes in Palestine refugee camps, the violence, the loss of livelihoods, and the exhaustion of savings and assets have forced many Palestinians living in Syria to leave their communities—but they have been turned back
at borders when they have tried to escape the country. Jordan has denied entry to most Palestinians since the beginning of the crisis, and in May 2014 Lebanon imposed restrictions on Palestinians’ entry. All together around 80,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have been displaced across international borders, including 42,500 in Lebanon and 16,000 in Jordan. Those who have sought protection in neighboring countries experience marginalization and acute vulnerability and are unable to access civil registration procedures and basic social services.30

Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp near Damascus, was established by the Syrian government in 1957 and by the time the present conflict broke out in 2011 was home to 150,000–200,000 Palestinians as well as some 650,000 Syrians. In 2012 intense fighting broke out in the camp between pro-regime and opposition forces, with the Free Syrian Army and the al-Nusra Front taking control of the camp by the end of the year. Those who could, left. The Syrians living in Yarmouk mainly went to stay with relatives and friends in central Damascus or other cities or moved to Lebanon or Jordan. But the Palestinians in the camp had fewer options. In mid-2013 the government imposed an almost total siege, prohibiting the entry or exit from the camp of all but a few emergency medical cases. All twenty-eight schools in the camp were closed, electricity was shut off, and food and medical supplies were in short supply. A news article in The Guardian cited a report by a Palestinian woman from Yarmouk that at the worst point of the siege a kilo of rice cost about 120 times more there than in central Damascus (prices later fell sharply in both places).31 The siege was “relaxed” in January 2014, and although there were some ad hoc aid deliveries during 2014, access remained extremely limited. ISIS attacked the camp in April 2015. Although its control was
short-lived, the camp remains under the control of opposition groups with the government controlling the entrance to the camp. In July 2015 the UN took Yarmouk off its list of besieged areas, but the conflict remains intense and access is extremely limited. For example, UNRWA has been unable to access the camp’s interior since March 28, 2015. An estimated 5,000–8,000 inhabitants remain in the Yarmouk camp, and, as of September 2015, typhoid had broken out.\textsuperscript{32}

Iraqi refugees in Syria also have been affected by the conflict. In 2012 UNHCR reported that there were over 400,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria (although only 62,000 were reported as receiving assistance from UNHCR).\textsuperscript{33} With the escalation of the conflict, at least 100,000 Iraqis are reported to have returned to Iraq from Syria, further complicating the situation in northern Iraq where they join large numbers of Iraqi IDPs and Syrian refugees in a part of the country facing serious political pressures.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Religious Minorities}

As noted in the introductory chapter, most of the victims of the Syrian war, including most of those displaced, are Sunni Muslims—and yet the impact of displacement on minorities is significant, given their relatively smaller percentage of the population. The increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict is reflected in patterns of displacement. In its August 2015 report, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic stated: “As communities and groups are, or feel, threatened, they have retreated into areas where they believe themselves to be more protected. This has further strengthened the dangerous perception of a link between some ethnicities and/or religions and political allegiances. Consequently, indiscriminate attacks on areas
held by an opposing warring party are increasingly likely to affect specific religious or ethnic communities.”

There is little reliable information about how many Alawites have been internally displaced, but anecdotal evidence suggests that those who did not already live in Alawite-majority areas have fled to what they believe to be safer areas within Syria. Regardless of sect, most Syrians with the means to do so have already left the country, and the Alawites are likely no exception. However, UNHCR reports that very few people from minorities have registered as refugees in Jordan, and even in Lebanon (which has its own Alawite community) minorities fear registering due to concerns about retribution from other refugees. A small number of Alawites have reportedly fled to Turkey to seek shelter with their co-religionists, Turkey’s Alawite community, and have gone to cities where the opposition party, the Republican People’s Party, runs municipalities. As the conflict has become more sectarian, Syrian Alawites have avoided the Sunni-dominated border camps and fled to areas such as Istanbul, where one local NGO estimated in late 2013 that there were approximately 3,000 Syrian Alawites, hundreds of them homeless. Spillover from the Syrian conflict has also reportedly increased tensions between Turkey’s Alawite minority and Turkish Sunnis in Hatay province, which borders Syria and was part of its territory until 1939.

There also is little reliable information about the number of Christians who have fled Syria. While most Syrian Christians are thought to have joined their co-religionists in Lebanon, media reports suggest that a small number have sought sanctuary in Jordan and Turkey. In mid-2013 Turkish officials announced they were building a tented camp with a capacity of 2,500 in Midyat, a town in Mardin province near
the Syrian border, to house Christian refugees.\textsuperscript{41} Turkey has a small Assyrian minority living in the same area. By the end of the year, about a hundred Syrian Christian families had reportedly fled to the Mardin area, but it is unclear how many were actually living in the camp.\textsuperscript{42} Some Syrian Christians have sought sanctuary with church communities in Istanbul.\textsuperscript{43} However, not all Syrian Christians are counting on Turkish hospitality. In February 2015 the Syrian Catholic archbishop of the conflict-torn region of Hassakeh accused Turkey of preventing Christians from fleeing Syria while allowing ISIS fighters to cross the border unchecked.\textsuperscript{44}

Small numbers of ethnic Armenians from Syria have also sought refuge in Turkey.\textsuperscript{45} Syria’s Christian minority includes about 100,000 people of Armenian descent, mostly centered in the Aleppo area. By mid-2015, it was estimated that around 40,000 Armenians remained in the city. More than 15,000 had left for Armenia, which offered them citizenship.\textsuperscript{46} However, many are struggling to make a living in their new home. Up to forty Syrian Armenian families reportedly settled in Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region that is part of Azerbaijan but has an ethnic Armenian minority. Armenia has also received Yazidi refugees from Iraq.\textsuperscript{47} In March 2013 Islamist rebels seized control of the Syrian-Armenian town of Kassab, which lies near the Turkish border, displacing most of the town’s population.\textsuperscript{48} Throughout Syria, Armenians have reportedly become targets for kidnapping, extortion, and murder.

One little-known minority group in Syria deeply affected by the civil war are the Dom. They form a distinct linguistic group with links to India and the Roma in Europe. The Dom have traditionally faced discrimination and have also been displaced by the current conflict. Field research
suggests that thousands have fled to Turkey and continue to face discrimination there, too.\textsuperscript{49}

**The Particular Case of Kurdish Displacement inside Syria**

The widespread internal displacement in Syria is affecting patterns of both sectarian and ethnic settlement in the country. When people are displaced, they tend to move to areas where their own ethnic group or sect is in a majority (as was the case in Iraq). The case of the Syrian Kurds is particularly interesting in this regard as it demonstrates the relationship between displacement, ethnic/sectarian divisions, the military conflict—and perhaps some of the future possibilities for the country.

Syria’s Kurdish population lives near the Turkish and Iraqi borders, although there are also substantial Kurdish populations in Syria’s large cities. But unlike northern Iraq, the territory of Kurdish settlement in Syria is not contiguous and does not have the mountainous territory from which an armed insurgency against central rule can be organized. Over the years, the Syrian Kurds were partly co-opted by the regime and their political activities vis à vis Turkey and their smuggling were tolerated. But they have also seethed under systematic discrimination and repression. Some 300,000 Kurds—15 percent of the estimated 2 million Kurds living in Syria—remain stateless. In April 2011 the regime gave citizenship to 150,000 stateless Kurds, but many were unable to benefit from these provisions. Kurds did not give Assad much credit for the grossly overdue measure, but neither did they flock to join the uprising against him.\textsuperscript{50}

Traditional Kurdish political parties feared reprisals if they actively joined the opposition even though many young Kurds did so. And the regime for the most part left the Kurds
alone.\textsuperscript{51} The largest and most influential of the Syrian Kurdish political parties, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), perceived as a Syrian-Kurdish offshoot of the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, has historically been reluctant to confront the regime, prompting charges of collusion, especially from the Turkish government.\textsuperscript{52}

With the conflict and the ensuing displacement, the situation changed as Kurds previously displaced from the region returned to Syria’s Kurdish regions in the north; as of October 2012 half of Syria’s Kurdish regions were controlled by local Kurdish leaders, including at border points with Iraq’s Kurdish autonomous region. By mid-2012 the PYD took advantage of the partial withdrawal of regime forces from Kurdish areas to establish its political and security presence and openly asserted itself as the authority in charge of state institutions in most predominantly Kurdish towns. The only Kurdish political rival to the PYD is a coalition of Kurdish parties aligned with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. But Kurdish factions compete not only with each other but also with non-Kurdish opposition groups, and most are alienated from the Islamist and Arab nationalist opposition groups (in part because of the dependence of these groups on Turkey and Gulf-based conservative sponsors). Sectarian and ethnic tensions flared up in 2013 between Kurds and Arabs, leading to clashes between the PYD’s People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Free Syrian Army.\textsuperscript{53} However, in June 2015 PYD and local groups associated with the Free Syrian Army fought together in dislodging ISIS from the border town of Tal Abyad. Since then, in coordination with the United States, Syrian Kurds have been pushing south toward ISIS’s stronghold of Raqqa, and there are reports of YPG efforts to displace non-Kurds from the region.\textsuperscript{54}
Syrian Kurds have emerged as a major—and probably the most effective—partner of the U.S.-led coalition in its fight against ISIS. The growing cooperation between the U.S. military and the YPG has reportedly angered Turkey, which views the PYD as an affiliate of the PKK and hence as a security threat. The YPG emerged victorious from the long battle over the border towns of Kobane (reportedly with the assistance of Kurdish fighters from Iraq and Turkey) and Tal Abyad. However, along with Kurdish battlefield successes there have been reports of tensions with Arab opposition groups and even accusations that Kurdish forces are involved in ethnic cleansing. In July 2015 the YPG announced that it was now in full control of the city of Hassakeh, with both ISIS and the regime withdrawing. Kurds are also in control of a corner of Syria in the northwest known as Afrin, in this way creating a “Kurdish corridor” along most of Turkey’s border with Syria with the exception of a stretch of land west of the Euphrates. The Turkish government considers the prospect of an uninterrupted Kurdish-controlled zone along its border a threat to national security and is vehemently opposed to YPG or PYD crossing the Euphrates to the west. In turn this complicates Turkey’s relationship with the United States, which maintains very close cooperation with the PYD in the fight against ISIS.

The fighting in Kurdish areas has also created large-scale displacement. Since July 2012 a steady influx of Syrian Kurds have crossed into Iraq, numbering close to 250,000. In mid-2012 Human Rights Watch reported that most Syrian Kurds in Iraq were fleeing the fighting with opposition groups, as well as conscription and the violence of the regime, although ISIS and other Islamist militant groups have since become the dominant threat rather than Free Syrian Army–affiliated militants.
The arrival of Syrian Kurds has placed considerable pressure on authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is also facing a massive influx of IDPs from elsewhere in Iraq. Despite a shared cultural heritage, tensions have emerged between Syrian Kurdish refugees and the host community. Syrian Kurds were originally given residency and work permits, but as competition increased with Iraqi Kurds for scarce livelihoods, authorities in Erbil and Sulaimaniya suspended the issuing of residency cards and encouraged refugees to move into camps.\(^6^0\)

As the battle was raging in mid-2015 in the border town of Kobane, UNHCR said that over 170,000 Syrian Kurds had crossed into Turkey.\(^6^1\) However, the agency said many preferred to continue their journey to the Kurdish region of Iraq or to other areas in Syria. As discussed in chapter 2, in early 2015 Turkish authorities opened a refugee camp in Suruç to accommodate the refugees from Kobane, while some remained housed in camps managed by the municipality.\(^6^2\)

On July 20, 2015, tensions flared over a suspected ISIS suicide bombing in Suruç, Turkey, which left 32 people dead.\(^6^3\) Most of those killed were young activists helping to rebuild Kobane, which lies just across the border. Kurdish leaders blamed the Turkish government for failing to take sufficient measures against ISIS. PKK militants have retaliated by killing two Turkish police officers, accusing them of collaborating with ISIS.\(^6^4\) Also in July 2015, Turkey launched airstrikes against both ISIS and Kurdish targets inside Syria.\(^6^5\)

The displacement of Kurds to their historical homeland and the establishment of Kurdish parties’ control of these areas offer the possibility for the creation of a Kurdish homeland; this is an outcome obviously feared by the Turkish government, which is concerned about the impact of
such an outcome on its own Kurdish population. But over the long haul there are likely to be differences among Iraqi Kurdistan—which wants to consolidate a broad, Kurdish-dominated area straddling the Iraqi-Syrian border—and the Syrian Kurdish opposition and Turkey.

Displacement inside Syria thus has direct implications for the future of Kurds in Syria and the region. Internal displacement inside Syria is also linked to the movement of refugees across all of Syria’s borders. This phenomenon also likely will have long-range consequences for the region.

**AID INSIDE SYRIA**

Syria is the most difficult operating environment in the world today for delivery of humanitarian assistance. While funding for humanitarian aid inside Syria is in short supply—and, as discussed in chapter 1, is funded at a lower rate than refugee operations—the main difficulties stem from the hostile policy of the Syrian government, the multitude of armed actors, and the conflict itself. The fact that the battle lines are constantly shifting and different groups exercise control of territories at different times means, for example, that roads that are open one day are closed the next. The limited availability of fuel, the lack of drivers and transportation companies willing to operate in certain areas of the country, and damaged infrastructure are further impediments to delivery of relief items. As a former UN official working in Syria summarized, “To work on humanitarian issues inside Syria is to walk an ethical tightrope.”

Even before the conflict, international agencies were viewed with suspicion by the Assad government and faced restrictions on their actions. For example, the few agencies working with Iraqi refugees were forbidden to meet
with each other. As the Syrian conflict has escalated, the
government has viewed international humanitarian actors
with increased suspicion, seeing them as allied with West-
ern interests and as potential “trojan horses” that can col-
lect information to be used for military purposes. After all,
military intervention in Libya was justified by the West as a
measure to protect civilians.

The regime has imposed numerous bureaucratic obstacles
on humanitarian actors working in government-controlled
areas and penalties for those working in cross-border opera-
tions. Permission to deliver aid to government-controlled
areas requires days, sometimes weeks, of advance notice
and sign-offs from multiple agencies. The government has
been very restrictive about which international organiza-
tions it will permit to operate inside its borders. It main-
tains strict limits on numbers of visas and approves very few
local Syrian partners for the international nongovernmen-
tal organizations, with the notable exception of the Syrian
Arab Red Crescent Society, an auxiliary to the government
that is the channel for the vast majority of aid deliveries.
Its approval is required for field offices, deployment of staff,
and mobilization of convoys, and it is largely responsible for
carrying out needs assessments in the country. Its network
of some 11,000 volunteers throughout the country is un-
paralleled. But the Red Crescent Society walks a tightrope.
Viewed as agents of the government by some, its staff have
also been accused by the government of aiding the rebels,
and over fifty of its staff and volunteers have been killed in
action. While the Syrian government has begun to allow
international agencies to work with other Syrian local part-
ners, many of these are newly formed and lack capacity.

International nongovernmental organizations that run
cross-border aid programs are not permitted to work in
government-controlled areas, thus forcing them to choose which side to work on. Deliveries of medical supplies have come under particular scrutiny as they are seen as helping the rebels. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has some 300 staff working inside Syria (its largest operation in the world), has not been able to get access to detention centers, a core component of its humanitarian work. The Red Cross, like the UN and other international nongovernmental organizations, has faced frustrating delays in delivering assistance to vulnerable groups.

From time to time agency convoys have been allowed to deliver aid from government-controlled areas to areas that previously had been inaccessible because they are controlled by non-state armed groups. In May 2015 the UN reported that it had requested forty-four such convoys since December 2014, only four of which had been completed. Security-related impediments to access include active fighting and military operations, closure of key access routes, and a proliferation of formal and informal checkpoints. In addition, an increasing number of humanitarian workers and UN staff members have been killed, injured, or kidnapped and attacks on goods and facilities and UN vehicles have multiplied. As of June 2015, seventy-seven humanitarian workers had been killed since the beginning of the conflict, including ten in the first half of 2015. Diversion of aid by both opposition and government forces reportedly is a frequent occurrence. OCHA reported in mid-2015 that access to affected populations decreased in the first half of the year due to a combination of factors, including “insecurity and shifting conflict lines, deliberate interference, restrictions on access and onerous administrative procedures that constrain the effective delivery of assistance.”

It is a testament to the commitment of staff and agencies
that aid, insufficient as it is, has been provided inside Syria. The World Food Program provides food aid to 4 million people inside Syria each month, and to another 1.5 million refugees in neighboring countries. But in September 2015 the agency had to cut aid to one-third of refugee beneficiaries due to funding shortfalls. Other UN agencies, such as UNHCR and the UN Population Fund, have provided relief items to Syrians affected by the conflict, but it is hard to assess the impact of this assistance, particularly given the fact that more than 13 million Syrians are estimated to be in need of humanitarian aid and that almost 4.8 million live in what are perhaps euphemistically called “hard-to-reach” areas.

Many of those interviewed for this study were critical of the United Nations’ role inside Syria, saying that UN agencies were treading a fine line between being co-opted by the government and maintaining the independence embodied in humanitarian principles. The fear of being expelled from the country was perhaps the driving force in their conciliatory actions vis-à-vis the government. The intense politicization of aid, along with the inability to use traditional monitoring mechanisms and tools in delivery of aid, put tremendous pressure on all agencies. As Ben Parker, former head of OCHA’s operations in Syria wrote: “The international system became warped under this onslaught, leading to turf battles and sharp practice, fundraising contradictions, donor interference, double-speak and poor risk management, all the while under intense pressure and micro-management from headquarters and capitals. Any divisions were exploited by government and security agencies.”

As discussed further below, UN Security Council resolutions have allowed some cross-border operations, but UN agencies and NGOs involved in cross-border operations were
not in contact with those agencies working inside Syria. At the end of 2014, humanitarian partners providing assistance inside Syria—whether operating from Damascus, Turkey, or Jordan—committed themselves to working together in a “Whole of Syria” approach. This initiative brought together more than 270 international and national actors under a comprehensive framework, common response plan, and supporting coordination structure. Interviews with UN staff in Turkey in June 2015 revealed some cautious optimism that this new mechanism might overcome some of the obstacles that have limited the effectiveness of UN actions.

This suggests a common paradox in humanitarian assistance: those most in need of aid tend to be found in the areas most difficult for international organizations to access. Nowhere is this more evident than in Syria’s “hard-to-reach” areas and “besieged communities.” According to OCHA, the UN was able to reach less than 1 percent of the 422,000 people living in besieged areas and only 5.2 percent of the 4.8 million people in need in hard-to-reach areas.

**Besieged Areas**

As of September 2015 an estimated 4.8 million Syrians lived in UN-designated hard-to-reach areas, most of which are in ISIS-held territories. Of 127 hard-to-reach areas, UN agencies and NGOs reached only 29 during July 2015. Throughout the crisis, sieges have been used by the Syrian government and to a lesser extent by opposition armed groups. Although the government denies that it conducts sieges of civilian areas in Syria, its first short-term siege was imposed on Deraa city in 2011, with longer-term sieges then used in rural Damascus in 2012 with an intensification of sieges in 2013. In August 2015 UN secretary-general
Ban Ki-moon estimated that 422,000 people lived in areas besieged by armed groups, including 163,500 besieged by government forces in Eastern Ghouta; 4,000 by government forces in Daarayya; 266,500 by non-state armed groups in Zahra and Nabul; and 228,000 by ISIS in the government-controlled western neighborhoods of Deir-ez-Zor city. The Syrian-American Medical Society argued that the numbers were far higher and, if partially besieged communities are taken into account, the figure as of early 2015 was probably over 1 million people.

As the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic observed, “Siege warfare is conducted in a ruthlessly coordinated and planned manner, aimed at forcing a population, collectively, to surrender or suffer starvation.” Government forces continue to besiege rebel-controlled districts in eastern and southern Damascus. “Civilian residents in these areas have died from starvation, from injuries sustained in aerial bombardments and, as a consequence, from a lack of medical care.” It is not only the government that has used sieges, but also other anti-government armed groups, particularly ISIS. “Wherever sieges are employed, a black market economy has been created for goods that are smuggled in or are ushered through checkpoints through payment of bribes.” Sieges are also a business. “In most instances, armed actors remain able to function. It is the civilian population who suffers.”

Areas under siege, such as Aleppo and Homs, have little or no access to aid. Indeed, both the government of Syria and opposition groups have cut off movement to and from certain areas for years. UN Security Council resolutions 2139 and 2165 demanded that all parties to the conflict, and in particular the Syrian authorities, end all attacks against civilians, lift all sieges, and provide unfettered cross-line
and cross-border humanitarian aid. According to Amnesty International, “well over a year after the resolutions were passed, the parties to the conflict continue to violate them, and international law, with impunity.”

Counting besieged areas is a tricky and difficult task, particularly in the absence of traditional human rights monitoring mechanisms. The Syrian-American Medical Society not only came up with a different estimate of the number of people living in besieged areas but questioned the methodology employed by OCHA to designate these areas, adding a classification of “partially-besieged,” which somewhat overlaps with OCHA’s classification of hard-to-reach areas. The author of that report noted that OCHA may underestimate the scale of the problem because of a reluctance to antagonize the government and its desire to be able to continue operating in Syria.

Amnesty International in August 2015 estimated that more than 400,000 civilians lived in areas under siege. It studied the situation for the 163,000 people living under siege in Eastern Ghouta, an industrial and agricultural area thirteen kilometers northeast of Damascus, where chemical weapons were used in 2013. Parts of the area have been under siege by the Syrian government since late 2012. The report found that “the Syrian government is systematically subjecting civilians in Eastern Ghouta to an unlawful siege which restricts civilians, the wounded and sick from being able to leave the area and restricts the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance and goods needed for survival, as well as striking medics, aid workers and facilities in indiscriminate attacks.”

Non-state armed groups, according to Amnesty International, are also responsible for inflating the price of food, arbitrarily restricting the movement of civilians wishing to
leave, and abducting and arbitrarily detaining people. “Acc-
ording to the Syrian American Medical Society, 208 civil-
ians died from the lack of food or access to medical care in Eastern Ghouta from 21 October 2012 to 31 January
2015,” the report said. This is an area where protests began in Douma in March 2011. By early 2013 much of Eastern
Ghouta had fallen under the de facto control of an array of
some sixteen armed groups opposed to the Syrian govern-
ment. In April 2013 the Syrian army mounted an offensive
against the armed groups and tightened restrictions on ci-
vilians. Amnesty estimated that 9,000 fighters were in East-
ern Ghouta and said fighting had seen each side take the
offensive at different times.90

As a forthcoming Mercy Corps report makes clear, the
impact of sieges varies, depending on whether they occur
in a rural or urban area. Sieges of urban areas typically in-
volve a more thorough blockade and greater hardship than
in rural areas because urban populations are unable to sup-
plement their food with agriculture. The research also finds
that prices of basic foodstuffs and other necessities are often
manipulated by different parties to the conflict. Internal
armed groups control market prices to raise profits while
armed groups sometimes deliberately manipulate internal
markets to reduce local farmers’ profits by allowing in con-
voys of certain goods at strategic points in time.

In July 2015 medical assistance reached just 1.8 percent of
the population considered by the UN to be besieged, and no
food or other types of humanitarian relief could be provided.
This figure was even lower than the previous month, when
5 percent of those in officially recognized besieged areas
were reached with medical aid, but no other assistance of
any kind.91 It may be, however, that local organizations and
international nongovernmental organizations operating co-
vertly were able to assist some people in these areas and their contributions are simply not registered by the UN system.

Conditions for those living in besieged areas are unbelievably difficult, with extreme levels of unemployment leading to desperation and poverty; limited food, water, and fuel supplies; and escalating food prices.\textsuperscript{92} The Syrian American Medical Society cited the cost of a kilo of sugar in Damascus city at $0.66, while in Eastern Ghouta during the 2013–14 siege it reached $19.00 (and dropped to $3.30 after March 2014).\textsuperscript{95}

How do civilians survive such conditions? Reports are that they use firewood for fuel, grow rooftop gardens, move field hospitals underground, scavenge, and resort to boiling weeds, extracting glue from shoes, and eating cats and dogs. Some civilians starve to death.

\textit{Cross-Border Operations}

Cross-border operations to provide aid to displaced and other vulnerable Syrians living in areas outside the control of the Syrian government have been going on almost since the beginning of the conflict. These operations have provided life-saving assistance to hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of vulnerable Syrians. And yet, because these operations are opposed by the Syrian government, aid organizations and other actors have largely operated under the radar in areas controlled by a wide range of armed groups, some of whom have seen the provision of relief assistance as a means of consolidating their positions.

In July 2014 the UN Security Council authorized cross-border aid delivery without the consent of the Syrian government at four border crossings in Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey.\textsuperscript{94} The final text of the council’s resolution was itself a compromise, as proponents of these operations had wanted permiss-
sion to use all available border crossings. In December 2014
the UN announced that the Security Council had renewed
until January 2016 the authorization for UN agencies and
partners to deliver cross-border aid via two border crossings
in Turkey (as well as one in Iraq and one in Jordan). The
UN announced in January 2015 that forty aid shipments
to Syria had been made via Turkey (and another fourteen
from Jordan) since the Security Council first authorized the
cross-border routes in July 2014. The UN reported that a
total of 600,000 Syrians had been assisted over the previous
six months with food, water, and medical supplies. However,
in March 2015 a coalition of NGOs, including the Norwe-
gian Refugee Council and Oxfam, said the resolutions on
cross-border aid had not been translated into action on the
ground. In fact, the agencies said, the number of Syrians in
need of assistance in hard-to-reach areas had almost dou-
bled to 4.8 million.

In spite of UN efforts and reports on aid shipments, UN
involvement in cross-border aid operations has been mini-
mal in comparison with aid operations by other interna-
tional actors, including donor governments, international
NGOs, Syrian diaspora groups, Turkish and Gulf NGOs,
and a number of other actors. The fact that such operations
are taking place outside of traditional coordination mech-
anisms means that there has been a lack of transparency
about the operations and especially about what happens to
the aid when it is delivered inside Syria. Virtually all inter-
national actors involved with these cross-border aid deliver-
ies rely on Syrian partners to distribute the aid, including
Syrian civil society organizations, local councils, and per-
haps armed groups.

There have been persistent reports of aid being used to
support military operations of opposition armed groups.
A December 2014 *New Yorker* article noted that ISIS was widely believed to have established a presence in Gaziantep, the main hub for cross-border aid operations in southern Turkey. Americans in Gaziantep were warned that ISIS operatives were tracking their activities. U.S. aid for local councils had been going to rebel-held areas of four northern Syrian provinces: Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Aleppo, and Idlib. But by summer 2014, ISIS had seized much of Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. According to the *New Yorker*’s sources, this sparked a debate in Washington about whether the cross-border aid was enabling ISIS, but the aid continued to flow in. There is also a debate about the accountability of aid administered from Gaziantep. Despite the U.S. use of remote monitoring techniques such as GPS devices, along with photos, signed receipts, and reports from third parties, one Syrian opposition spokesman overseeing cross-border aid estimated that 30–40 percent was lost to scams by warlords and others. By June 2015, shortly after its victory in Palmyra, ISIS had reportedly captured an area of Aleppo province that gave it access to the road to the Bab al-Salam border crossing, threatening a major aid supply route.

According to OCHA, as of July 2015 seven UN agencies and the International Organization for Migration had deployed 2,463 trucks worth of assistance in 104 consignments, reaching around 386,000 people with food, almost 50,000 with health supplies, 10,000 with water, and 12,700 with non-food items. The U.S. government reported in September 2015 that it was reaching 5 million people per month in Syria. It is difficult to interpret such figures since a person “reached” with assistance may have received a one-time food parcel sufficient for a month or a five-liter container of water or perhaps a bucket or tarp. The World Food
Program’s report that it provided food to 4 million Syrians every month is more reassuring.

Currently the bulk of cross-border aid by UN agencies and their partners—forty of fifty-four shipments in 2014—originates in Turkey and reaches only the northern region of Syria, while aid moving in from Jordan tends to be distributed near the shared border in Syria’s south.100

Local and Diaspora Groups

Almost all cross-border aid is distributed through local Syrian organizations, which are tasked with the risk of traveling inside Syria, organizing the distributions, and reporting back to donors. Using local agencies is good practice—they know the language, culture, and communities. Some of these civil society groups existed in Syria before the war, some emerged in response to the crisis, and other groups were formed in diaspora communities that wanted desperately to help. “In Syria, the local groups that are now doing so much of the lifesaving aid are in many places the only ones with real access to desperate Syrians who cannot survive without help,” two researchers for Refugees International reported in May 2015.101 But staff and volunteers in these organizations work in dangerous environments and their funding depends on subgrants where reporting processes can be onerous. There are tensions between donors and these local groups, with complaints that the methods being used may be appropriate for non-conflict areas but are impractical in the active conflict zones inside Syria. Some changes have been made in these procedures—such as documentation of aid delivery through photographs rather than signed forms, but given donors’ concerns about diversion
of aid and the lack of capacity by the Syrian organizations, these tensions are likely to continue. Training of Syrian organizations has taken place on specific issues—such as how to track and record financial transactions, on international humanitarian law, and on how to address the special needs of women and children in programming. But the Refugees International mission found that follow-up to these training activities had been inadequate, and the researchers called for more concerted work on capacity building.

The money trail is complicated. A donor government—say the United States or the United Kingdom—gives funds to UN agencies and to international nongovernmental organizations (who also receive other funds from the UN), which in turn pass the money on to Syrian diaspora groups, which in turn give the aid to local groups inside Syria, which then give actual aid to people in need. Some diaspora groups have been able to meet U.S. government eligibility requirements for humanitarian response funding and can directly apply for grants from the U.S. government. There are also indications that coordination mechanisms have improved their responsiveness to concerns of local agencies by including them in coordination mechanisms and providing interpretation.

SAFE HAVENS, NO-FLY ZONES, AND OTHER FORMS OF INTERVENTION

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Turkey has been at the forefront of calling for the establishment of a safe zone inside Syria. Although the issue has not gained widespread traction (and even less so in light of the recent Russian involvement in the conflict), it is a suggestion that continues to surface in different quarters—and perhaps for different reasons. Important questions arise about exactly what con-
stitutes a safe zone, although there seems to be a consensus that some degree of military force would be required to maintain it. Is a safe zone a weapons-free, neutral area administered by humanitarian actors to protect civilians? Or is it an area where opposition forces can move freely and where military personnel are responsible not only for protecting civilians seeking safety there but also for distributing humanitarian relief? Will creation of the safe zone be negotiated by humanitarian actors or imposed by force? If the latter, what level of military force will be required to guarantee the safety of the civilians taking refuge there, and who will provide that military force?

Some of the strongest calls for safe zones have come from actors with little or no operational humanitarian experience. In effect, these calls seem to represent a form of “intervention lite”—less costly and risky than outright military intervention to stop the carnage but seemingly more robust than merely providing aid.107

The historical record of safe zones as tools for protecting civilians is a decidedly mixed one, with the mass killings in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in 1995 standing out as the starkest example of their failure. Taylor Seyboldt, in his classic analysis of different forms of humanitarian intervention, found that those with specific and limited objectives tend to be most successful.108 Phil Orchard looked at the failed interventions in Somalia (1991–95) and Bosnia (1991–95) and found that safe areas in the 1990s all suffered from three problems. First, safe areas were intended to meet an incompatible combination of objectives, namely supporting civilian protection and humanitarian assistance while seeking to contain potential refugee flows in their home state. Second, the safe areas that failed were based on a flawed logic—either relying on, at best, grudging consent of the affected state or bellig-
different parties or on appeals to respect the legitimacy of the UN Security Council. Third, the creators of safe areas failed to take into account the response of belligerents, who often directly targeted civilians and had no stake in the intervention to protect them.¹⁰⁹

One fairly successful use of a safe haven occurred in 1991 in northern Iraq when some 500,000 Iraqi Kurds sought to escape the brutality of Saddam Hussein’s regime by fleeing into Turkey. The Turkish government refused to admit them and instead prevailed upon the international community to create and police a safe zone inside northern Iraq, called Operation Provide Comfort. With a “no-fly zone” enforced by U.S., British, and French aircraft, this safe area functioned more or less well, and the displaced Iraqi Kurds were able to return to their communities within months. This experience has undoubtedly influenced Turkey’s calls for a safe zone in Syria. But the Iraqi government was forced to acquiesce to the creation of the Kurdish zone, while the Assad regime remains steadfastly opposed to incursions of its sovereignty—and therein lies the rub.

Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, when the UN Security Council determines that there is a threat to international peace and security, it can take measures deemed necessary to restore peace and security. “Such measures may include the imposition of safe areas to secure an endangered population, even without the consent of the parties to a conflict. Subsequent UN resolutions have upheld these rules and created UN-facilitated safe areas, such as UNSC Resolution 819, which established “safe areas” in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war in the 1990s. As a practical matter, the creation of a safe zone—absent consent of the parties—will usually require some element of force to deter attacks and protect those inside the zone.”¹¹⁰
A recent workshop jointly organized by the International Committee for the Red Cross and InterAction articulated a number of concerns about safe zones. For example, they may act as a pull factor for refugees, as seems to be occurring at the present time in South Sudan. A report on the workshop said: “The establishment of a safe area near an international boundary could result in a tightening of borders by neighboring states. Such border restrictions may lead to *refoulement*, and undermine security for civilians that are unable to reach a safe area or flee to a safe refuge outside their country. Declaring a safe area could also create the illusion of security for civilians, and may result in their taking risks they would not otherwise take, including returning to their country of origin in adverse conditions.” Establishing such an area could blur the lines between military objectives and humanitarian goals and compromise the rights of people seeking asylum, the Red Cross/InterAction report said. A safe area or buffer zone established without the consent of the state could “be perceived as a target, posing new risks for civilians seeking safety and could also become a magnet for armed opposition groups.”

No-fly zones also were discussed in the context of NATO’s intervention in Libya in 2011—an intervention cited since by both proponents and opponents of no-fly zones. The Red Cross/InterAction report noted: “A no-fly zone imposed by one or more states on another state (without consent) may violate state sovereignty, and initiate an international armed conflict.” Establishing such a zone, the report added, could “entail significant offensive operations against the forces posing a threat to civilians, at least temporarily, leading to serious consequences for the civilian population concerned.” Establishing a buffer zone would require ground forces to secure arms caches and clear out belligerents with weapons. Air operations alone may not be
adequate to prevent or mitigate violence on the ground and instead could speed up violence on the ground. Finally, the report said, “military interventions that have the declared objective of protecting civilians run the risk of morphing into operations to defeat an enemy rather than intervening impartially on behalf of a civilian population at risk.”

While there are powerful arguments that safe zones may not provide protection to Syrian civilians (and could, in fact, put them in increased danger), the almost total lack of other options for protecting Syrians (and stemming the refugee flow) has led thoughtful observers to argue that such safe areas could be a “less bad” option than the current dismal situation. The result has been a robust public debate about whether, how, where, and in what form a safe zone could be established.

It is quite striking that humanitarians—who were at the forefront of calling for intervention in Rwanda and Somalia two decades ago—have been almost silent on the issue of safe zones for Syria. As one senior official of a humanitarian organization remarked: “We’ve been there. We’ve seen it doesn’t work.” Diane Paul is one of the few experienced humanitarian workers who has called for the establishment of a safe zone, albeit with a set of conditions that likely would be impossible to implement. The idea is also advocated by a former ISIS hostage. Writing from a different perspective, Michael O’Hanlon argues that such a zone could not only protect civilians but also support the moderate opposition, which is perhaps the best hope of bringing an end to the bloodbath—itself a humanitarian objective. Phil Gordon, James Dobbins, and Jeff Martini argue that establishing three safe zones, as part of a negotiated cease-fire, could set the stage for a longer-term transitional arrangement.
On the political front, Turkey has been one of the strongest and earliest champions of a safe zone in Syria, perhaps seeing it as a way of decreasing the number of refugees arriving on its borders—or perhaps recalling the largely positive experience of the 1991 safe zone established to protect Iraqi Kurds fleeing chemical and other attacks. So far, there has been strong opposition from both Russia and China, as well as Syria. This opposition stems in part from NATO’s operations in Libya in 2011, which were justified in terms of protecting civilians but which morphed into regime change. Syria rejects the notion of safe zones as violation of Syrian sovereignty or as a conspiratorial attempt to occupy and partition the country. Russia and China, which traditionally oppose UN and other interventions within national borders, maintain that safe areas would be a threat to Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. France and the United Kingdom have been hesitant to endorse safe areas in Syria, reportedly because of their concern with the complexity and long-term political implications of such actions.

Thus far, the U.S. government has opposed setting up safe areas in Syria, although it has indicated a willingness to at least consider the issue as part of the negotiations with Turkey to enable the United States to use the NATO air base in Incirlik for its air campaign against ISIS. Initially, the Turkish government was reluctant to cooperate unless Washington agreed to carve out a buffer zone in northern Syria. Members of the U.S. Congress have been much more vocal than the White House in calling for safe areas, in particular Senator John McCain, who stated in 2012 that safe areas could be platforms for increased humanitarian aid and also staging areas for armed moderate opposition groups. Since then former secretary of state
Hillary Rodham Clinton and some Republican presidential candidates have also advocated some type of no-fly zone in Syria.\(^1\)

Russian military intervention in support of the Syrian regime seems to have put a damper on discussions of safe zones in Syria, at least for the time being.\(^2\) Russian airstrikes, beginning in September 2015, disrupted aid operations, destroyed medical facilities, and caused hundreds of civilian deaths.\(^3\) In November 2015 Russian jets struck areas near IDP camps inside Syria near the Turkish border, killing at least fifty people, followed shortly afterwards by the Turkish downing of a Russian jet.\(^4\) The crisis that erupted in Russian-Turkish relations after this attack made the idea of a “no-fly zone,” let alone a safe zone, pretty much moot. Russia has not only imposed economic sanctions on Turkey but has also moved ballistic missiles into Syria to deter any Turkish planes from entering Syrian airspace.\(^5\) Furthermore, Russian president Vladimir Putin, in his address to the nation in December 2015, made it quite clear that Turkish jets or military entering Syria would be prime targets.\(^6\) This in effect created a de facto no-fly zone, albeit with an entirely different motivation than discussed in Western circles.\(^7\)

Although the current political situation precludes serious discussions of safe areas or a no-fly zone, it is likely that the political context will change again in the coming months, and considerations of such alternatives could once again be on the table.

While proposals for a safe area or a no-fly zone are problematic on many levels, the fact remains that there are no easy solutions for protecting Syria’s civilians from the ravages of an increasingly convoluted and brutal war. Displacement is, above all, a protection strategy for individuals and
families. Fleeing their communities in search of safety is sometimes the only way to survive. As long as the war continues, Syrians will continue to be displaced. And as long as the international community is unable to come up with a means of resolving this terrible conflict, outsiders will be forced to search for ways to mitigate the harm to those suffering the effects of war.

We turn now to exploring some of the challenges that Syria’s displacement poses to the international system.