



Protection Messages for Donors & Member States Syria Updated June 2022

The following messages reflect priority protection issues in Syria, based on recent analysis from the Whole of Syria Protection Sector, including hubs and partners operating in Government of Syria (GoS) controlled areas of the country as well as in the North West (NW) and North East (NE) regions of Syria.¹

Over a decade of sustained conflict, protracted and multiple displacements, severe human rights violations and endemic, gender-based violence, all exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shocks and unilateral coercive measures, are driving an acute protection crisis across the country. Amidst the truly dire situation for many communities in Syria, their message is resoundingly clear: access to adequate humanitarian and protection services are more urgent than ever as coping capacity further erodes, and catastrophe looms.²

Key Messages

1. Eleven years into the conflict, the protection crisis in Syria not only persists but is increasingly severe. Despite a relative decrease in the intensity of fighting and hostilities, attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and human rights violations continue to be a major contributor to ongoing protection risks and needs.
2. The ability of impacted populations to access life-saving humanitarian assistance and basic services continues to be severely compromised.
3. Gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse and intimate partner violence are reaching critic levels while being carried out with near total impunity and with disproportionate harm to women and girls.
4. Children and youth are being left without a future. Child labour, child recruitment, early and forced marriage, trafficking and an absence of formal education in many areas mean that the rights of an entire generation are at risk. Increasing rates of psychosocial distress and mental health needs are also evident, as are increasing rates of suicides and substance use/addiction.
5. As the economic situation further deteriorates and hunger levels are growing, the economic and social rights of people are increasingly violated and households are resorting to harmful coping mechanisms, themselves driving a range of protection risks.

Urgent Actions Needed

1. Sustained and increased access to the most affected populations, through all necessary modalities, including through cross border operations, to ensure access to life-saving assistance for civilians across Syria, is an urgent priority.
2. Given the severity of the protection concerns, a strengthened protection response (based on expanded coverage of integrated and specialized protection services and supports), more sustained funding for local partners and robust community engagement, is needed, along with the operationalization of human rights and protection across all humanitarian assistance interventions.
3. In partnership with Syrian civil society, it is crucial the pursue of joined up advocacy and accountability efforts aimed at addressing ongoing human rights violations and their humanitarian consequences.

¹ The latest Protection Analysis Updates (Jan-Apr 2022) for North-West Syria and Government Controlled Areas with NES Syria are available here: <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/2022/06/24/syria-protection-analysis-updates/>

² UNFPA and WoS AoR. [An overview of GBV In Syria. Advocacy Brief 2022](#)

Key Protection Issues

- 1. Eleven years into the conflict, the protection crisis in Syria not only persists but is increasingly severe. Despite a relative decrease in the intensity of fighting and hostilities, attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and human rights violations continue to be a major contributor to ongoing protection risks and needs.**
 - Violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law (IHRL) continue to drive humanitarian and protection needs across the country. Civilians in various parts of the country, including NW, NE and South Syria, remain exposed to active hostilities. In the NW region today, for instance, there are near daily breaches of the March 2020 ceasefire, with shelling, airstrikes and bombardments resulting in death and injury to civilians as well as damage to key civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and water points.
 - Despite the lessening of active conflict broadly across the country, violations of IHL and IHRL continue unabated. Some of the most severe protection risks identified in the Protection Analysis Update covering the January – April 2022 period³ included: abduction, kidnapping, forced disappearance, arbitrary or unlawful arrest and/or detention, torture or inhuman, cruel, degrading treatment. Arbitrary arrests and detention concerns were consistently reported as a main issue across Syria by 67% of communities. Insecurity, violence and criminality remain widespread, coupled with an absence of rule of law.
 - The UN Mine Action Service estimates that on average four explosive ordnance incidents were recorded per day in 2021 throughout Syria, resulting in the death of at least 805 people and nearly 3,000 injured by mines and unexploded ordnance. Approximately half the population in Syria is estimated to live in areas contaminated with explosive ordnance. In addition to endangering the lives of civilians, this contamination limits safe movements (including that of civilians trying to access services and that of humanitarian actors trying to deliver assistance), impacts economic opportunities (including when agricultural land is contaminated) and possibilities for safe return. Farmers and children are particularly vulnerable to the risk of explosive ordnance, with most casualties associated with herding and farming activities and children playing. Although some demining efforts have been undertaken by diverse actors, including local authorities, military forces, commercial companies and NGOs, clearance efforts remain geographically limited and challenged. Insecurity caused by hostilities in NE and NW in particular, as well as bureaucratic restrictions and operational delays in both government and non-government controlled areas makes it difficult to scale up clearance operations and ensure a continuous presence in affected communities. Obtaining permission to import mine clearance equipment is challenging and, while derogations exist, they require dedicated expertise and human resources which often are not available.
- 2. The ability of impacted populations to access life-saving humanitarian assistance and basic services continues to be severely compromised. Many of the 6.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) across the country are facing particularly acute needs, with extremely limited access to protection and other services such as health care and education.⁴**

³ Idem 1

⁴ As of December 2021, it is estimated that 6,6 mi people are displaced inside Syria, the majority in Idlib, Aleppo and rural Damascus governorates: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/figures-analysis-2021-syr.pdf>

- Current levels of access to assistance for communities impacted by the conflict and violence in Syria are not enabling people to secure the basic supports and services they need. This reflects a deadly mix of factors, including the collapse of public services in many areas, the inability of people to move safely and freely within their communities (including due to the presence of explosive ordnance) and severe restrictions on the ability of local and international humanitarian actors to deliver assistance.
- The ability for humanitarian, including protection, actors to deliver assistance is being undermined on a number of fronts. This includes security with humanitarian workers impacted by armed incidents⁵ and restrictions that reflect the highly regulated and selective procedures prolonging response time and restricting partners' access to areas of operation. The delay in getting approvals from authorities for activities and programmes has continued to affect the response to critical protection risks. Needs assessment and analysis are curbed by these constraints as well, particularly on protection issues. Insecurity remains an overriding issue, from contamination of explosive ordnance to the attacks on humanitarian personnel and civilian infrastructure.⁶
- Ultimately, the resulting lack of access to life-saving services along with the multiple, protracted displacements are quickly eroding whatever coping capacities displaced households may have had left. Evictions, relocations and a range of Housing Land and Property and Durable Solutions issues are increasing the precarity for displaced communities while particular barriers are further exacerbating protection risks for certain groups. For instance, the thousands of female-headed households in NW, composed by single and widowed women, struggling to make ends meet and provide for their children. Some have remained for years stranded in segregated camps with severe movement restrictions where isolation and despair are magnifying a series of mental health issues.⁷ It is estimated that 39% of displaced individuals at or over 12 years-old living with a disability in NWS struggle with limited access to services and supports. The need for sustained access to protection assistance that is adequate and dignified is resounding.

3. Gender-based violence, including sexual violence and exploitation, intimate partner violence, and early and forced marriage are carried out with near total impunity. The consequences for survivors, the vast majority of whom are women and girls, are pernicious.

- The impact of GBV on women and girls in Syria is tremendous and long-lasting, frequently aggravated by forms of victim blaming, social stigma, and isolation from the family and community. Despite seeking protection and health services, family and community support, women and girls are also increasingly engaging in harmful and life-threatening coping mechanisms such as self-harm and suicide. The sense of being unable to escape GBV, combined with the impact of 11 years of conflict and instability, is eroding women and girls' sense of hope and resilience.
- Early and forced marriage trends have worsened due to the protracted nature of the conflict: vulnerable families increasingly use early marriage as a coping mechanism to alleviate financial burdens and/or to protect the girls against pervasive sexual violence.

⁵ 2022 HNO Syria, February 2022: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2022-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-february-2022>

⁶ See, for example, the Syrian American Medical Society's report on documented attacks on health care facilities, covering the 2015-2021 period: https://www.sams-usa.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/202205-SAMS-A-heavy-price-to-pay_Final_Version_En-1.pdf

⁷ GBV Sub Cluster NW Syria, December 2021, *Briefing on Widow Camps*, p:2; and "Syria Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment" (MSNA) 2022. From January to June 2022, local partners in NW flagged 33 cases of suicide related to mental health issues, 5 of them in a short period of time of two weeks in June.

Early marriage has been documented in progressively more harmful forms over the years, including at younger ages.

- Following early marriage, adolescent girls are at heightened risk of secondary violence perpetrated by the intimate partners or in-laws, such as sexual, physical, economic, and emotional abuse. The consequences on their health, education and general wellbeing are devastating. In the NW Syria, early pregnancy is on the rise, with an average 15% of the assisted deliveries involving under-aged mothers.⁸

4. Children and youth are being left without a future. Child labour, early marriage and an absence of formal education in many areas mean the rights of an entire generation are at risk. Increasing rates of psychosocial distress and mental health needs, as well as increasing rates of suicide and substance use/addiction, are also evident.

- Detention of children remains a pressing concern. The ISIL/ISIS attack on a detention center in NES in January 2022⁹ brought to the forefront the issue of thousands of Syrian and non-Syrian detainees, including 700 boys as young as 12 years old held in detention due to their real or perceived association with extremist groups. Detainees have been held without access to adequate judicial review or are tried in irregularly constituted courts.
- Children across Syria have been exposed to violence and destruction. Many have witnessed the killing of family members or have experienced multiple displacements and/or family separation. School and normal daily childhood activities are unavailable to most children impacted by conflict and displacement. Children are also at increased risk of arrest, detention torture and sexual abuse. Preoccupation with the many dangers present in their lives, along with difficult and restrictive living environment in IDP sites, has become a major cause of psychosocial distress amongst children. For instance, child protection monitoring reports from NWS indicate a marked increase in psycho-social support needs among both children and their caregivers: 85% of interviewees reported that children need psychosocial assistance, and 70% reported that caregivers need specialized psychological services.¹⁰ The increase of psychosocial distress among children and caregivers negatively affects conditions for child development and safety and can lead to secondary protection concerns including physical violence and harmful coping mechanisms. Increasing rates of suicide and substance use/addiction are noted.

5. As the economic situation further deteriorates and hunger levels are growing, the economic and social rights of people are increasingly violated and households are resorting to harmful coping mechanisms, themselves driving a range of protection risks.

- Humanitarian conditions across nearly all key measures continued to degrade for the majority of Syrians throughout 2021 and into 2022. This reflects the consequences of an accelerating deterioration of the economy and civilian infrastructure, continued insecurity and unilateral coercive measures, and environmental shocks. Along with significant depreciation of the Syrian pound, food prices increased 200% last year. Approximately 90 per cent of the population in Syria is now live below the poverty line¹¹. A staggering 3.1 of the 4.4 million people in NWS are food insecure.¹² Unilateral coercive measures (i.e.

⁸ Sexual and Reproductive Health Technical Working Group, 2021.

⁹ "Syria: UN experts profoundly concerned for missing and injured children after January attack on ISIL prison", OHCHR, April 2022: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/syria-un-experts-profoundly-concerned-missing-and-injured-children-after>

¹⁰ Child Protection Situation Monitoring: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/child-protection-situation-monitoring-dashboard>

¹¹ WFP Syria Country Brief, January 2022; Independent International Commission of Inquiry, February 2022.

¹² *North-West Syria Situation Report*, last updated on 20 April 2022, OCHA.

attacks on farming lands and water points) have worsened matters for millions of Syrians, both directly and indirectly, by affecting the availability and quality of agricultural inputs and equipment, resulting in adverse effects on crop and livestock production.

- This worsening economic situation is further aggravating and driving protection risks as after a decade of conflict and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, recurring water crises and economic shocks, households have no remaining assets to draw on and no-good choices: there is an increasing prevalence of harmful coping mechanisms, including early and forced marriage and child labor, as a result. For already vulnerable populations especially households that include persons with disabilities and child- and female-headed households, their options are even more constrained as humanitarian needs spiral.

Urgent Actions Needed

1. **Sustained and increased access to the most affected populations, through all necessary modalities, including through cross-border operations, to ensure access to life-saving assistance for civilians across Syria, is an urgent priority.**
 - **Member states** must mobilize all possible diplomatic efforts with relevant authorities for unhindered humanitarian access across Syria through all necessary modalities, including through cross-border operations. In line with States' obligations under IHL and IHRL, and in line with the UN Charter's founding principles, unimpeded, regular and sustained humanitarian access in all parts of Syria is urgently needed to save lives and strengthen the protection of communities.
 - **Member states** must recognize and actively support continued UN cross-border operations as the most cost-effective, timely and pragmatic way to respond to urgent humanitarian needs in NWS at this moment. In parallel, support is also needed for a robust and independent monitoring and reporting mechanism with respect to crossline humanitarian aid across Syria, tracking effectiveness and timeliness as well as all attempts by parties to the conflict to delay, block or divert aid or limit the independence and impartiality of humanitarian actors. A strong focus on how the blockage of humanitarian aid is a serious violation of IHL and the right to life must be sustained.
 - **Member states** must commit to assess the impacts of unilateral coercive measures on humanitarian need and the enjoyment of human rights in Syria and put in place appropriate mitigation measures.
 - **Donors** must strategize and co-design with humanitarian actors, including Syrian-led NGOs at the forefront of the response, a wider range of funding mechanisms that ensure greater predictability, more equitable risk sharing and continuity of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations in Syria, with a strong focus on protection.
 - **Donors** to support increased capacity of a range of protection actors to advance country-level engagement (including on pressing issues related to Children and Armed Conflict¹³) with armed groups and local authorities in support of more consistent access, behavior change and strengthened protection outcomes.
2. **Given the severity of the protection concerns, a strengthened response (based on expanded coverage of protection supports), more sustained funding for local partners and robust community engagement is necessary. Longer-term programming that operationalizes human rights considerations and fosters communities' resilience must be adequately funded, while ensuring that humanitarian needs are met.**

¹³ Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, January 2022: https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/49/58&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

- **For donors and humanitarian leadership** to support a scaled-up protection response across Syria, recognizing protection programming as a key enabler in supporting the safety, rights and resilience of impacted communities. Such efforts should include the expansion of a range of protection programmes, including case management, comprehensive GBV prevention and response, cash for protection, protection monitoring, community-based protection, access to justice and legal aid support, including for documentation, detention cases and forced eviction cases.
 - **For donors** to contribute flexible multi-year funding for protection and humanitarian programming, in line with the two-year Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022-2023, prioritizing local NGO partners and enabling predictable programming, longer-term interventions and measurable impact.
3. **In partnership with Syrian civil society, to pursue joined up advocacy and accountability efforts aimed at addressing human rights violations and their humanitarian consequences.**
- **For member states, donors and humanitarian leadership** to consistently and forthrightly raise concerns about humanitarian access, respect for IHL and IHRL standards, adherence to humanitarian principles, and protection related considerations, with parties to the conflict, local authorities and camp management. Special attention should be given to women’s and children’s rights to freedom of movement as prescribed by the UN Child Rights Convention, with the purpose of facilitating access to protection services in segregated camps and hard-to-reach areas.
 - **For member states, donors and humanitarian leadership** to continue supporting impartial and credible monitoring and investigations into all indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as cases of torture and enforced disappearance. This should also include further support for human rights and civil society organizations to comprehensively monitor and report on violations (including grave child violations), including a clear commitment to regular risk assessment and capacity building to prevent reprisals related to their duty of care responsibilities.
 - **For member states, donors and humanitarian leadership** to ensure Syrian civil society organizations and advocates, including women’s rights and youth-led organizations, are represented and continue to play a leading role in all key decision-making processes with regards to Syria’s present and future, and can have a decisive role in fighting discrimination and stigma against marginalized children and women.

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