

# Current Crisis in Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## A senior fellow testifies on the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria, with an emphasis on its effect on children.

**G**ood evening, Chairperson Jaffer and ranking members. It is a pleasure to testify as an individual before the Canadian Senate Committee on Human Rights on the worsening crisis in Syria.

In more than twenty years of dealing with that country, I've had the opportunity to share perspectives and policy prescriptions with a host of Canadian officials -- in Damascus, Ottawa, and Washington DC -- on Syria and the Middle East in general. I have just returned from a trip to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, where I received briefings from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Amman and visited Jordan's recently opened Azraq refugee camp.

Though it came as no surprise that your committee would be focusing on the plight of children, in fact only when one visits a UNHCR operation does one understand how large a percentage of children are represented among Syria's displaced and refugee population.

Some have lamented that these children represent a lost generation of Syrians in terms of human development, with deep implications for regional and world security in the decades to come. Whatever their future, the response of the international community to the war in Syria is now more vital than ever before. I know the committee has been probing the response of UN agencies to the crisis with a special focus on UNHCR and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). My brief remarks, informed by my recent trip to Jordan and other border areas of Syria, aim to provide some context to your discussions and deliberations.

With that in mind, I would urge you to consider the following points for a much more detailed description and discussion on the role of children in the Syria crisis.

The first point is that the Syria crisis is not going away any time soon. More than 160,000 Syrians have been killed, close to 700,000 injured, and, depending on the estimate, up to half of Syria's population has been displaced. I realize those numbers sound high, and numbers on Syria have never been good, even before the current crisis, but the conflict that's generating the death toll continues apace. At its core, a minority based Assad regime continues to

attempt to pound Syria's majority Sunni population into submission. Despite the regime's use of the full lethality of its arsenal, resistance continues. Conventionally, the Assad regime does not have the forces to retake and hold all Syrian territory, a fact that is only cemented by polarization in the region between the Islamic Republic of Iran, which backs Assad, and the Arab countries that back the Sunni rebels in particular.

Now, as if this regional situation weren't bad enough, no international consensus exists on addressing the crisis. The United States and the Western countries, which back the opposition, and Russia and China, which support the regime, remain at loggerheads as to how to address the crisis in terms of humanitarian relief and a political solution - the one everyone says is the solution and the outcome in Syria but that has remained elusive until now.

Even in areas where common positions exist, most notably on chemical weapons, the Assad regime's recent refusal to fully implement the agreement struck, and UN Security Council Resolution 2118 has thus far failed to bring the West and Russia closer on implementing the agreement fully. This is something to watch in the days ahead, and as we approach the June 30 deadline of that implementation.

Next, death and displacement of Syrians have dramatically increased, not decreased, during recent peace talks. During the talks in Geneva earlier this year, the Assad regime began a campaign of barrel bombing that led to the highest death tolls during any period in the Syrian crisis, and many of those killed were children. This has led, of course, to a huge spike in Syrians being displaced, with many forced to run to regime areas to receive food, as well as into neighboring countries.

Next, governmental policy response has been remarkably slow and far short of the mark in dealing with the Syrian crisis. As noted recently by former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, Washington's policy response remains behind the curve, both in terms of humanitarian assistance and mitigating the security threats emanating out of Syria, particularly extremists fighting on behalf of the regime and the opposition.

Also falling short is actual funding or relief dealing with the Syria crisis, either inside or surrounding the country. In particular, in the case of Jordan, only around a quarter of the funds requested had been received as of the end of April, which is particularly worrisome given that the crisis seems set to worsen in the year ahead.

The UNHCR response in Jordan, for its part, should be commended. I had the opportunity to tour the recently opened Azraq refugee camp, which is located out in the desert but is probably one of the best-planned refugee camps I've visited in all Syria's border regions until now, and that will help deal with the influx of refugees that is expected if the Assad regime pushes into the south in particular to retake territory, although an increasing number of those entering Jordan are coming from other areas of Syria besides the south and areas adjacent to Jordan.

Until now, about 600,000 refugees have registered with the UNHCR in the Hashemite Kingdom, but it's believed that up to a million or more Syrians exist outside that formal structure without relief, and those known unknown Syrians are cause for particular worry, both regarding the children now inside Jordan and possible security threats that might come from those communities, including as members slip outside the net of Jordan and the international community.

One of the biggest obstacles that the UN has had to overcome is that the international system set up to deal with these affairs -- not only the UN but other organizations as well -- still must deal through Assad regime channels; and in these particular cases, assistance that is provided from UN channels via the sovereign power in Damascus is used to reward certain Syrians among the opposition for coming over to regime controlled areas and surrendering to forces there. The attempt to reach all those inside Syria who are in need has thereby been harmed.

However, UNHCR and UNICEF and the organizations they work with have done a laudable job in trying to reach these populations. One such way, frankly, is that many Syrians have had to run for their lives into neighboring areas or other areas inside Syria where this assistance has been distributed to them free of charge and in a very organized

manner.

The problem lying ahead -- and I think this comes out of the more recent London 11, or Friends of Syria, meeting -- is that getting more cross border assistance will be necessary in dealing with the Syria crisis now and in the months and years to come.

I would be happy to go into these points in more detail. Thank you very much.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖

*Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights*

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