

Sanctuary in the city?

Urban displacement and vulnerability in Damascus

A desk study

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HPG Working Paper

December 2011



About the authors

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the people and organisations who contributed to this literature review, in particular Martine Zeuthen (independent), Géraldine Chatelard and Valérie Clerc (Institut français du Proche-Orient), Dawn Chatty (University of Oxford) and Sophia Hoffmann (School of Oriental and African Studies). Thanks also to Victoria Metcalfe (HPG) for valuable comments on the final draft. Many thanks to Matthew Foley for his expert editing of the report.

This study was funded primarily by DANIDA through HPG's Integrated Programme (IP). A full list of IP funders is available at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/integratedprogramme. ODI gratefully acknowledges this financial support.

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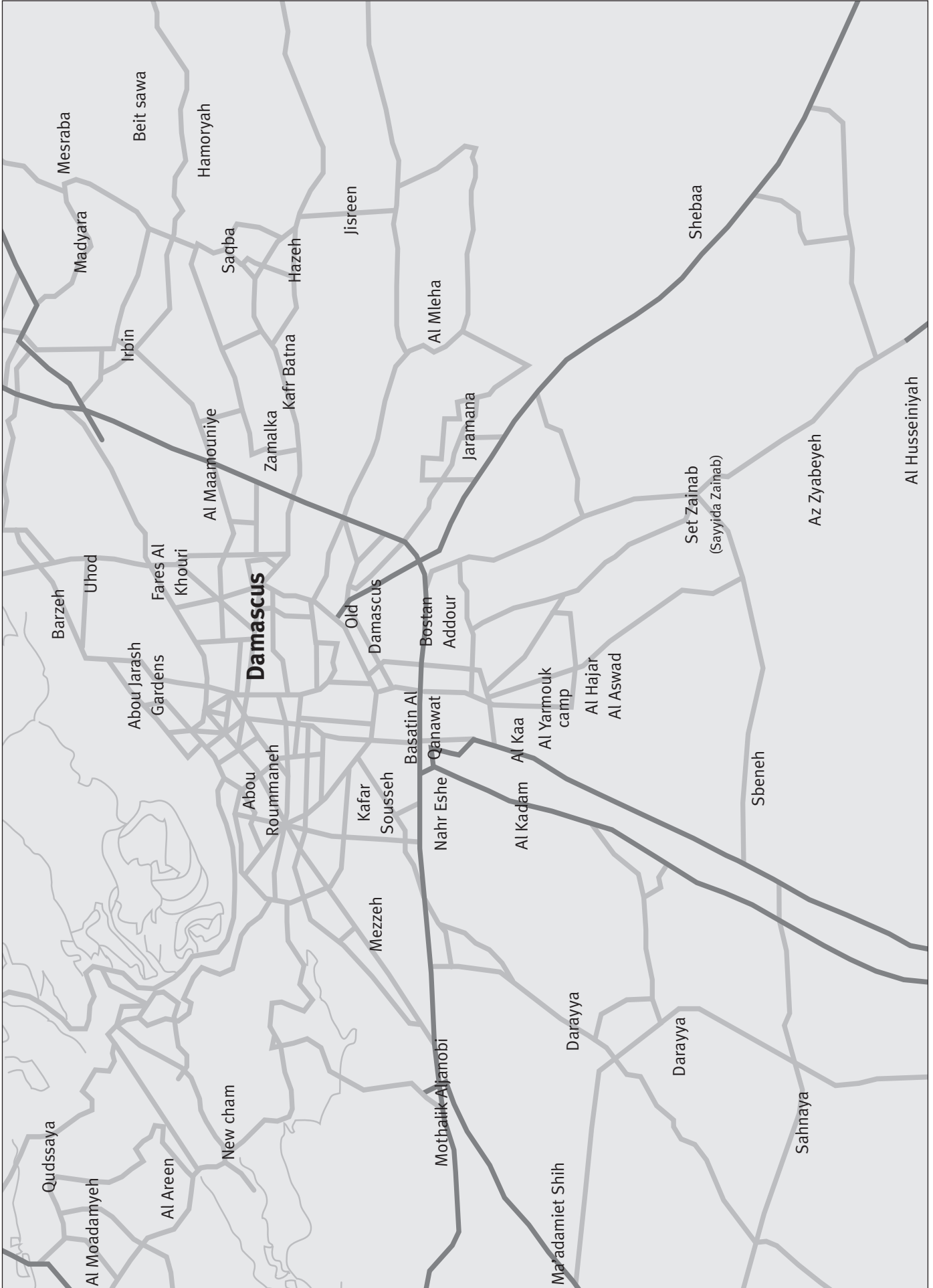
ISBN: 978 1 907288 52 4
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Map of Damascus



Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent decades, many cities and towns around the world have seen dramatic population growth, with significant inflows from rural areas. A prominent feature of this global trend of urbanisation is forced displacement triggered by armed conflict, violence and political instability and slow- and sudden-onset disasters – or a combination of these factors. Many of those forcibly displaced have moved to urban areas in search of greater security, including a degree of anonymity, better access to basic services and greater economic opportunities. Today, approximately half of the world's estimated 10.5 million refugees and at least four million internally displaced people (IDPs) are thought to live in urban areas (UNHCR, 2009; Fielden, 2008).

While a number of studies in recent years have sought to analyse urban livelihoods and urban governance, there remains little understanding of how the displaced negotiate their way in the urban environment, their relationships with the host community and governance institutions, and what their specific vulnerabilities are compared with other urban poor. In addition, the role of humanitarian and development actors in supporting these populations, and the strategies and approaches that are best suited to address the assistance and protection needs of urban IDPs, are still poorly understood.

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), in cooperation with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), is carrying out a series of studies between 2010 and 2012 on urban displacement. This multi-year research project, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, will explore the phenomenon of displacement in the urban environment and the implications and challenges that it poses for humanitarian action. Through field research in eight urban centres in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, the work aims to consider the reality of life for displaced populations in urban areas, investigate the policy and operational challenges that confront national and international stakeholders when responding to the needs of urban IDPs and refugees, and offer recommendations for strengthening support to these populations.

1.1 The study

This study focuses on urbanisation, displacement and vulnerability in the Syrian capital, Damascus. As in many countries worldwide, Syria is rapidly urbanising. Today 55% of the total population is living in urban areas; by 2050, that figure is expected to have risen to 75% (Syria Today, 2009). Between 1955 and 1980 the population of Damascus increased from 423,000 to 3 million, and today it is estimated

at between 4 and 5 million (Dorai, 2009; Wifstrand and Ria, 2009; Library of Congress, 2005).

The growth of Damascus has been driven both by voluntary and forced migration. For decades, low-skilled economic migrants and rural workers have been pulled to the city, attracted by its employment opportunities and hopes of better living standards, often facilitated by social and family networks. Damascus has also been a place of refuge for stateless Kurds, as well as large numbers of Palestinian refugees, drought-displaced IDPs and Iraqis, alongside economic migrants from other Arab states, including Egypt and Yemen.

At the time of writing Syria was undergoing intense upheaval, with waves of popular protests sweeping across the country calling for democratic reforms and the removal of President Bashar Al Assad. Protests have concentrated on Der'aa, Homs and Hama and other small and medium-sized towns, and Damascus has not been a focal point of unrest. The Syrian security forces have used extreme force, intimidation and mass arrests in an effort to suppress the uprising (Al Hendi, 2011); in September 2011 the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights indicated that at least 2,600 civilians had been killed since the start of the unrest in March (OHCHR, 2011c). Although the situation at the time of writing was highly unpredictable, how the unrest develops is likely to have significant implications for the number and characteristics of displaced people in Damascus, and how they are dealt with by the state. Political reform could create a space for dialogue on how to improve the legal frameworks governing displacement, while continued violence could see more IDPs flocking to the capital and encourage refugees in the city to relocate to safer locations.

1.2 Objectives and methodology

This desk review is part of a larger body of work undertaken by HPG on urbanisation, including a DFID-funded research study on urbanisation in Sudan ('City Limits: Urbanisation and Vulnerability in Sudan', published in January 2011) and a study of urban refugees in Nairobi undertaken jointly by HPG and the International Rescue Committee in partnership with the Refugee Consortium of Kenya (Pavanello et al., 2010).

As with the other case studies in this series, HPG intended to conduct field research in Damascus. However, despite several attempts to secure research permits in mid-2010, permits were ultimately denied by the Syrian authorities. As such we were forced to limit this study to a desk review. The objectives of the review are to:

- deepen understanding of the drivers and history of displacement, both for IDPs and refugees in Damascus;

- review policies and legal frameworks for refugees and IDPs, including housing and land policies;
- discuss the specific protection threats affecting displaced populations living in Damascus and how they compare with the threats facing other groups of urban poor;
- assess the specific vulnerabilities of the displaced particularly in relation to access to basic services, urban infrastructure and livelihood opportunities, and how they compare with other urban poor; and
- suggest potential entry points where the international aid community can best engage with displaced populations living in Damascus, and the implications for humanitarian and development programming in this regard.

The documents for this review were collected mostly from English sources, with a limited number in French. Secondary sources on displaced populations, economic migrants and other urban poor are very scarce. Published literature was identified through internet searches and a systematic search in the websites of organisations and international fora concerned with urban displacement and humanitarian action in Iraq, Syria, Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East, including the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), the Middle East Institute (MEI), the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS) Project on Forced Displacement in Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan, the Refugee Studies Centre, the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the Brookings Institution. The websites of UN agencies and NGOs working in Syria were also used. Government policy documents and other materials available online were consulted, including the Syrian Bureau of Statistics. Press sources such as the BBC, Al Jazeera and the *New York Times* were also examined. The large number of keywords used in the search of online documents included urban displacement, urban vulnerability, urban poverty, Damascus, Iraq refugee, IDPs, Syria, Palestinian refugee, humanitarian law, human rights, informal settlements, living conditions, security, services, livelihoods, drought and urban growth.

A number of organisations provided grey literature. The Basel Contemporary City Institute's Middle East Center gave us

permission to draw on observations and interviews with urban planners in Damascus gathered by students at the Institute and published online, and permission was also given by University College London (UCL) to draw on research undertaken by MSc students in European Property Development and Planning, who conducted extensive interviews with urban planners and architects in Damascus.

The findings from the review were triangulated and complemented with a small number of telephone interviews with representatives of international organisations, researchers and experts on displacement in Damascus and the Middle East more broadly.

1.3 Terminology

This study uses the definition of informal settlements articulated by UN-HABITAT (2006): '(i) residential areas where a group of housing units has been constructed on land to which the occupants have no legal claim, or which they occupy illegally; (ii) unplanned settlements and areas where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations (unauthorised housing)'. In this review the terms 'illegal settlements' and 'informal settlements' are used interchangeably.

The definition of 'internally displaced persons' used here comes from the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), namely:

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

The term 'displaced' is used to refer both to people who have been displaced within Syria (IDPs) and to refugees in the country.

Chapter 2

Internal displacement and urbanisation

2.1 History and drivers of displacement in Syria

Syria has hosted large IDP and refugee populations for decades. During the Six Day War with Israel in 1967 thousands fled to Damascus from the Golan Heights, a rocky plateau in the south-west of the country straddling the border between Syria and Israel. More recently, recurrent droughts in the north-east have pushed thousands of destitute agro-pastoralists and farmers out of their rural areas of origin; many have sought refuge on the fringes of urban centres, including Damascus.

Thousands of Iraqis and Palestinians forced from their countries of origin by conflict and political instability have sought refuge in Syria. The country is home to the largest population of Iraqi refugees in the Middle East; one informant put the number at 230,000 in April 2011, though the precise figure is disputed. In 2010 there were a total of 4,578 non-Iraqi refugees and 1,644 asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Damascus, most of whom are from Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran and Somalia, and a few from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Yemen, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNHCR, 2010a). Very little is known about the living conditions of these refugees, or their characteristics and specific needs and vulnerabilities.

2.1.1 Conflict-induced displacement

During the Six Day War between Israel and Syria, Egypt and Jordan, Israel seized control of East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in Palestine, the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt and the Golan Heights in Syria. According to UN estimates the occupation and subsequent annexation of the Golan displaced between 105,000 and 110,000 Syrians, the majority of them of Circassian¹ and Druze ethnicity, as well as around 16,000 Palestinians (ICG, 2011). From the Golan Heights displaced communities have scattered across Syria, including to the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs (IDMC, 2011a). In 2007 official estimates put their total number (including their descendants) at 433,000 (*ibid.*). While retaining a cohesive network and sharing a strong sense of solidarity, more than 40 years after their displacement these populations are well integrated into Damascus society (ICG, 2011).

2.1.2 Drought-induced displacement

In 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 severe droughts hit north-eastern Syria (UN, 2010; IRIN, 2009). Estimates of the total number of people affected range up to 1.5 million, with 800,000 thought to have lost their livelihoods altogether (Sohl, 2010). Small-scale farmers and herders have been most severely hit: on average, households have lost a staggering 90% of their income, and some herders have lost up to 80% of their flocks (UN, 2010). Historically, men moved temporarily from rural areas to the cities, including Damascus, in search of short-term employment to supplement household income from rural livelihoods. While this continues, over the past four years an increasing number of destitute farmers' and herders' families have also been forced out of their villages in the north-east of the country and into the fringes of Damascus, Aleppo and Der'a (UN, 2010). Many live in makeshift tented camps, lacking sanitation, running water and adequate access to food (UN, 2009; Sohl, 2010; Birke, 2010; BBC, 2010a). While the UN puts the total number of families who have left their rural areas of origin at 65,000, there are no exact figures on the total number of drought-displaced people living in Damascus and on its outskirts. In addition, as in other contexts, it is very difficult to differentiate between rural migrants and drought-displaced IDPs. According to one informant, the camps are also home to other urban poor and temporary agricultural labourers and their families.

Vulnerability to drought is also the result of government policies that have served to weaken rural livelihoods. Land reforms initiated in the 1960s aimed to achieve a more equal distribution of land by parcelling landholdings up into smaller plots; by 1975 over 90% of farms occupied less than 25 hectares, compared with only 30% in 1958 (New Agriculturalist, 2002). Large tracts of land in the most fertile areas of the country were confiscated and transferred to urban merchants, politicians and entrepreneurs for large-scale cotton and wheat cultivation (Chatty, 2001). Meanwhile, the tribal holdings of the *badia* – Syria's eastern steppe region – were nationalised and their ownership transferred to the state (*ibid.*). Although environmental degradation, desertification and overgrazing have repeatedly been cited in national policy documents as the key reasons for livelihood insecurity in the *badia*, these factors only mask the detrimental effects of land dispossession, sedentarisation and the conversion of traditional grazing reserves into agricultural schemes (Chatty, 2001).

2.1.3 Palestinian refugees

Syria hosts a large population of Palestinians originally displaced in 1948 when the State of Israel was established. That year Syria received around 70,000 refugees, mainly from the northern areas of Palestine (Morris, 1988 in Shafie, 2003; UNRWA, 2011a). A small number of Palestinians also fled to Syria during the Six Day War in 1967, and several thousand more quit war-torn Lebanon for Syria in 1982 (Shafie, 2003). Today the total number of Palestinian refugees living in Syria is estimated at over 467,000 (UNRWA, 2011a). Three-quarters live in Damascus.

Palestinians displaced in 1948 were originally accommodated in seven refugee camps across Damascus. Today, rather than distinct UN-managed spaces, these camps look very similar to informal settlements, and in some cases informal settlements have grown up around them. As in Jordan and Lebanon, the tents that originally made up these camps have been gradually replaced with permanent structures erected over the years by refugees themselves. Camps are located in central Damascus and on the city's outskirts. Jaramana, Yarmouk and Qabressit camps, for example, are close to central Damascus; Khan Danoun and Khan el Shieh are situated on the outskirts of the city, and Sbeineh is in what has become the industrial area of the city (UNRWA, 2011c).

Today the camps are no longer solely inhabited by Palestinian families. In 2002 UNRWA estimated that only 28% of registered UNRWA refugees in Syria were still residing in camps (Shafie, 2003). In recent decades more and more Palestinian families have moved out of the camps, and migrant workers, other refugees, IDPs and low- and middle-class Syrians have moved in (Dorai, 2009). The literature does not discuss the reasons for population movement in and out of the camps. One reason indicated by respondents relates to the lower rents that camps offer in comparison to other areas of the city. Having lived in Damascus for over 60 years, these refugees and their descendants have integrated into the urban fabric and urban economy, and are able to afford better housing outside the camps than newly arrived populations, whether voluntary or forced migrants. Similarly, while IDPs from the Golan Heights were settled in 1967 in government-sponsored housing projects near Damascus (IDMC, 2002), today these communities are scattered throughout the city, with particular concentrations in the suburbs of Hajar al-Aswad and Dumar (Barnes-Dacey, 2009).

2.1.4 Iraqi refugees

Since the late 1960s political instability, sectarian violence and conflict in Iraq have pushed repeated waves of refugees into neighbouring countries including Syria, with the great majority taking up residence in Damascus (UN, 2011a, 2009; Crisp et al., 2009; Al-Khalidi et al., 2007). Between the 1960s and the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s up to half a million Iraqis are thought to have fled to Iran, an unknown number of whom have since relocated to Syria. The Gulf War of 1991 and then the US-led invasion in 2003 and the bloody sectarian conflict that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime led to further outflows.

According to government estimates there are around 1.2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, though there was widespread agreement among our informants that this figure is inflated (see also SIDA, 2010). Some have suggested that the government may be particularly keen to provide high estimates in order to maintain the flow of donor assistance (ICG, 2008; Chatty and Marfleet, 2009; Seeley, 2010). Respondents felt that the significantly lower number of Iraqi

refugees registered with UNHCR may be more accurate than official estimates. In 2008 there were 219,690 Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2008a), but by January 2011 this number had fallen to 126,000 (UNHCR, 2011a). This decrease has been attributed to a number of factors including successful resettlement, permanent or temporary return to Iraq, cases being deactivated as refugees cease to seek assistance and a broader decline in the rate of registration, particularly since 2009 (*ibid.*). One informant noted that, for some, Syria represents a transition country en route to Lebanon, where better employment opportunities and more connections for illegal migration to Europe are on offer, as well as what are believed to be faster resettlement procedures than in Syria.

While the number of Iraqi refugees living in Syria as a whole is contested, there is general agreement that the Iraqi refugee population in Damascus is large in comparison to the total population of the city, and that Iraqis have considerably altered the demographic composition of the capital (Dorai, 2009; Al Khalidi et al., 2007; Chatty and Marfleet, 2009; Ali and Dorai, 2010, and others). The main centres of Iraqi settlement in Damascus are Sayyida Zainab, Jaramana, Yarmouk and Masakin Berzeh (Al Khalidi et al., 2007; Dorai, 2009 and 2007). Located in the south of Damascus, Sayyida Zainab is a run-down, densely populated neighbourhood and the site of a revered Shi'a shrine (Al Khalidi et al., 2007). In 2005 it was estimated that around 30,400 Iraqi refugees were living in this area (Dorai, 2010). Jaramana is home to Iraqis of low-to-middle class and poor backgrounds (Dorai, 2010). In the past it used to be a predominantly Druze and Christian suburb, but today it is mixed, hosting Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, communities displaced from the Golan Heights and Christians (Dorai, 2010; Al Khalidi et al., 2007; UNRWA, 2011c). The Yarmouk Palestinian camp has become the third largest centre for Iraqi refugees (Al Khalidi et al., 2007), and according to a key informant is also a first point of arrival for rural migrants.

There are a number of reasons why Damascus has exerted such a marked pull on Iraqi refugees in particular, including the long-standing role that the city has played as a transit area for Iraqis *en route* to other countries, job and housing opportunities, the urban background of the majority of Iraqi refugees, and the presence of national and international agencies offering assistance (Dorai, 2009 and 2010; Al Khalidi et al., 2007; Chatelard, 2009). Many Iraqis have been able to achieve a degree of integration in the local economy, while international funding has also opened up access for Iraqis to public services such as health and education.

Iraqi refugees in Damascus do not appear to have settled along sectarian lines, with most neighbourhoods hosting Iraqis of mixed origins. Leenders (2010a) attributes this phenomenon to the fact that most Iraqi refugees left their country precisely to flee the kind of sectarian politics and

violence which made life in Iraq so insecure. Instead, it appears that Iraqis have taken up residence in different neighbourhoods largely on the basis of their social background and financial means. One respondent explained that better-off Iraqis live in neighbourhoods inhabited by Syrians of similar socio-economic backgrounds, while for the middle and low classes there is a tendency to settle in low-income areas, often close to religious institutions.

Several respondents identified two broad groups of Iraqis in residence in Damascus since 2003. One group fled Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the toppling of Saddam's regime in 2003. This group largely comprised members of the Ba'ath Party, well-off and middle-class educated urban professionals and members of the military cadre. Most arrived in Syria with savings, opened shops, rented or bought houses in the better-off neighbourhoods, and were generally not in need of humanitarian assistance. After 2006, the deteriorating security situation in Iraq prompted another influx of refugees with more acute needs. A number of interviewees noted that this wave included urban poor from Baghdad, Mosul and Tikrit, as well as rural people from northern Iraq with limited education and few financial resources.

Conflict-induced forced migration is not the only driver of population movements in the region, and complex patterns of migration have long characterised the relationship between Iraq and Syria, with pilgrims and businessmen travelling from one country to the other (Chatelard, 2009; Crisp et al., 2009). Many Iraqis travel to Syria on short visits, for example to seek medical treatment, and many professionals and business owners shuttle back and forth. This ongoing phenomenon of 'circular migration' is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to estimate the number of refugees living in Damascus (Chatelard, 2011).

Box 1: Stateless Kurds in Syria

Following a census conducted in 1962 in the Hassakeh governorate, part of a broader political agenda to Arabise the area, approximately 120,000 Syrian-born Kurds lost their citizenship. Today their number, including their descendants, is thought to be around 300,000, of which approximately half are thought to be living in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities, and the other half in the north-east of the country, including in Hassakeh. Kurds are around 9% of the total population and are systematically discriminated against, and the expression of Kurdish identity is commonly suppressed. In particular, Kurds who have been stripped of Syrian nationality are denied a fundamental human right and consequently a range of other basic rights and freedoms. Some possess identity cards, which are extremely difficult to renew or replace, others do not even possess these, which makes them 'non-existent', invisible people. Their freedom of movement is significantly constrained since they cannot travel abroad, own property, register cars or businesses in their names, access public health services, secondary schools and universities, and can only find jobs in the informal sector. Socio-economic and cultural marginalisation, and poor job opportunities and prospects for the future push many stateless Kurds to leave Syria in search of a better life abroad. Lacking travel documents, families and individuals are often forced to leave the country illegally, taking huge risks at the hands of unscrupulous and extortionate human traffickers.

In response to protests against his regime in Hassakeh region, in April 2011 President Assad issued a decree granting Syrian nationality to Kurds in Hassakeh. However, it remains to be seen whether current developments will translate into full human and civil rights for stateless Kurds.

Sources: Lynch and Ali, 2006; HRW, 2010; OHCHR, 2011a.

Chapter 3

Legal and policy frameworks

Although Syria's Constitution enshrines many progressive values and civil liberties and rights, since 1963 the country has been under a state of emergency, which essentially nullifies many protections against state abuse. The security and judicial apparatus is ultimately used as a tool of repression (Leenders, 2010b). Corruption is rife. Everyone, displaced and non-displaced alike, is exposed to the protection threats arising from the arbitrary and oppressive nature of the regime and its security services. This has become particularly evident since March 2011 as popular uprisings and protests against the regime have swept across the country.

3.1 Legal frameworks for human rights protection

At the international level, Syria has acceded to most of the core international human rights treaties including the International Bill of Rights,² the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In November 2000 Syria signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, but has not yet ratified it (OHCHR, 2011a).

Domestically, the 1973 Constitution enshrines basic rights and freedoms in line with international standards and with the core tenets of the constitution of the ruling Ba'ath Party (Library of Congress, 1988; BASP, 2001; OHCHR, 2011a). However, since the 1960s Syria has been under a State of Emergency Law and most constitutional protections have been suspended (US DoS, 2011; OHCHR, 2011a). In this context therefore the Constitution has very little relevance. In a move to appease protesters against his regime, in April 2011 Assad lifted the State of Emergency Law and abolished the Supreme State Security Court, but the law itself remains in force (BBC, 2011b; OHCHR, 2011a).

Despite Syria's international obligations, the human rights situation is characterised by gross violations, including 'arbitrary arrests and illegal detentions, prolonged detention without trial or after unfair trials before exceptional or military courts, torture and ill-treatment resulting in deaths in custody, forced disappearances and summary executions' (*ibid.*: 4). The rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly have also been systematically curtailed. The situation has deteriorated further following the outbreak of the anti-government protests in March. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), rights violations constitute widespread or systematic attacks against the civilian population 'which may amount to crimes against humanity' (OHCHR, 2011a: 13).

² The International Bill of Rights includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

3.2 Legal and policy frameworks for refugees

Despite being a longstanding host of thousands of Palestinian refugees, Syria (like Jordan) is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and has not developed a domestic asylum regime. Similarly to other Arab migrants, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees have long been granted access and residence in Syria on the basis of principles of pan-Arab brotherhood and reciprocal support among Arab states (Chatty and Marfleet, 2009). While the climate under which refugees live is not hostile, in the absence of a legal framework the legal status of Iraqi refugees in particular remains unclear, and the policy environment is highly unpredictable. A newly drafted national asylum law was submitted in February 2010 to the Syrian National Asylum Law Committee for review (SIDA, 2010), but there is no indication in the literature as to the current status of the draft.

The attitude of the Syrian authorities towards Palestinian refugees has been largely positive from the outset. While they have not been granted Syrian nationality or legal refugee status (in Western terms), they have long been living as *de facto* citizens and granted protection. In 1957 Syria enacted Law no. 260, which regulated the legal status of Palestinians living in the country and stipulated that they had the same 'duties and responsibilities' as Syrian citizens (Shafie, 2003). As non-citizens Palestinians do not enjoy political rights, although in the current political context there is very little difference between the rights of Palestinians and Syrians in this regard. Palestinians are allowed to work, use public services, own businesses, move around freely within the country and access public sector jobs (*ibid.*). Since 1968, they have also been allowed to own property, and Law 1311/1963 granted Palestinians freedom to travel abroad (*ibid.*). Together with other members of the Arab League, Syria has signed the Protocol on the Treatment of Palestinian Refugees (the Casablanca Protocol) of 11 September 1965. The Protocol addressed the temporary protection of Palestinians and called upon Arab governments to grant them residence permits, the right to work and the right to travel; at the same time it also emphasised the importance of preserving Palestinian identity and maintaining the refugee status of Palestinians residing in host countries (El-Abed, 2004) to protect their right of return to their homeland.

Up until 2007 the government saw the issue of Iraqi refugees as a temporary phenomenon (ICG, 2008). However, as it became clear that the influx of refugee into the country was not going to stop, the authorities started to restrict the entry of Iraqi nationals and imposed a visa regime under

which Iraqis were asked to apply at the border for a one-month tourist visa, renewable for an additional two months (Olwan, 2009). While such restrictions are less stringent than those imposed by other countries in the neighbourhood (such as Jordan), they nonetheless represented a departure from Syria's long-standing policy of granting access to Arab nationals at the border without the need for a visa (ICG, 2008; Olwan, 2009). Iraqi holders of a tourist visa were required to leave the country before it expired and could not re-enter Syria without a new entry visa (Olwan, 2009). Additional visa restrictions limit entry to Iraqis for commercial, educational and health purposes only, for a maximum of three months, and visas can only be obtained at the Syrian embassy in Baghdad, not at the border as previously (*ibid.*).

The Syrian authorities also now require Iraqis residing in Syria for more than three months to obtain a residence permit or *iqama*. There are however no provisions to penalise overstayers and in practice those who overstay their visa and do not hold a residency permit are rarely sanctioned and very rarely deported (Olwan, 2009). According to key informants, in order to obtain a residency permit Iraqis need to meet one of a number of criteria, such as having a written lease and proof of payment of property tax, the ability to demonstrate that they have children enrolled in public schools or a medical condition which needs hospitalisation. Registration with UNHCR also opens access to a residency permit, and individuals who can prove that they are registered with the Iraqi Chamber of Business can also obtain a permit (UNHCR, 2010a and 2010b). A number of respondents mentioned other routes for obtaining such permits, including membership of professional unions. Ex-members of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party have reportedly been granted Syrian citizenship or long-term permanent residence (5–10 years). As with virtually everything else in Syria, residency permits can also be obtained through personal connections or the ubiquitous system of patronage, or *wasta*.

According to one interviewee, the great majority of Iraqis living in Damascus have entered the country legally; this means that they obtained a visa prior to entering and had their passport stamped at the border. However, not all have a valid residency permit and many seem to have overstayed their visa. There appeared to be mixed responses as to whether Iraqis living in Damascus were particularly keen to obtain residency permits or renew their visa. Some said that many do not bother since, in the event that they are stopped by the authorities, they can resolve the matter by paying a bribe and it is very unlikely that they will be harassed, arrested or threatened with deportation (see also Olwan, 2009). One key informant stressed that, under the current regime, mass deportation is unlikely as the principle of pan-Arab brotherhood is a core tenet of the Ba'ath Party, and reneging on it would be unpopular. Others noted that Iraqis make serious efforts to obtain residency permits since this is a way of ensuring that their position with the

Syrian authorities is regularised, and demonstrates their willingness to stay.

In the absence of a legal framework, the influx of Iraqis and others into Syria has taken place in a legal and policy vacuum, and their legal status remains unclear. Particularly for Iraqi refugees the policy environment is highly unpredictable, with policies being formulated and implemented on an *ad hoc* basis, often subject to change, which further exacerbates their already unclear position (Zaotti, 2006; SIDA, 2010). The volatile policy environment can also be seen in the attitudes of the Syrian authorities towards the few hundred Palestinian refugees originating from Iraq after 2005. These families were barred entry into the country and lived in the tent camp of al-Tanf in appalling conditions in the desert near the border with Iraq for four years until February 2010, when the camp was closed and the majority of its residents were resettled to third countries (UNHCR, 2010b). The remainder have been moved to al-Hol camp in northern Syria, where their freedom of movement is restricted and residence in the camp is mandatory. The government has stated that local integration for these Palestinian communities is not possible (UNHCR, 2010b).

Syria also lacks a domestic legal and policy framework to deal with internally displaced people. That said, the government has long recognised the existence of Golan IDPs, in part to advance its ongoing propaganda regarding Israel's occupation of the Golan. Syria has also regularly presented concerns regarding the Golan occupation and the return of the Golan's displaced people to the UN Security Council (IDMC, 2005 and 2007). Even so, except for government-sponsored housing projects (see below) virtually no practical support has been provided to these populations (ICG, 2011).

In contrast to Golan IDPs, drought-displaced people have been largely overlooked, presumably because of their lack of political appeal in the international arena. While the literature does not explicitly discuss this issue, it appears that, for both conflict and drought IDPs, there is a marked emphasis within the government on the temporary nature of displacement. Despite the fact that Golan communities have been displaced for over 40 years, and have over that time integrated into the urban fabric, the government continues to refer to the housing projects in the suburbs of Damascus, Dara'a and Homs as 'temporary' (IDMC, 2005). As discussed below, despite ongoing severe challenges to sustainable rural livelihoods in the north-east of the country, national (and also international, see Chapter 7) actors are also inclined to portray the situation of drought IDPs as temporary, with return to their rural areas of origin seen as the preferable solution to their plight.

3.3 The security apparatus and judicial system

The security apparatus is a central feature of Syrian society: its presence is pervasive and its powers are broad and

widely applied. The security services are also corrupt and incompetent (ICG, 2011). The security apparatus represents a more significant threat of abuse for Damascus' residents than criminals, and security officials are responsible for numerous and grave human rights abuses and arbitrary detentions (Library of Congress, 1988; HRW, 2007; OHCHR, 2011a; CAT, 2010). According to the UN Committee against Torture (CAT, 2010), torture is used routinely by the police and by security and intelligence officials, especially in jail, there is no systematic registration of detainees in places of detention and secret detention facilities are inaccessible to independent monitoring and inspection bodies. Preventative detention, disappearances, confessions extracted by torture and then invoked as a form of evidence in proceedings and extrajudicial practices such as lawyers not allowed to meet with their clients until the trial begins – all have been reported as part of the judicial process of Supreme State Security Court and military courts, where civilians are also tried (CAT, 2010). Security and intelligence personnel are granted immunity from prosecution (OHCHR, 2011a).

The Syrian judicial system is corrupt, inefficient and rife with political interference. Rather than protecting individual rights and the rule of law, judicial institutions in Syria are an integral part of the regime's apparatus and have played an important role in sustaining authoritarianism and repression (Leenders, 2010b). Respondents interviewed widely noted the entrenched culture of corruption in the country, with police forces and judicial bodies often demanding bribes. In 2010 the Transparency International Global Corruption Perception Index ranked Syria 127th out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2011). Likewise, the Heritage Foundation and *Wall Street Journal* 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (IEF) noted that '[p]olitical connections and bribery influence court decisions ... under-the-table payments are commonplace, as corruption is endemic in nearly all levels of government' (IEF, 2011).

3.4 Protection threats

Specific protection threats affect certain groups of displaced people in Damascus, notably in relation to the uptake of risky activities, resentment among host communities against Iraqi refugees in particular, and the absence of the protective networks that social and family ties provide.

There are indications that, to make ends meet, Iraqi refugees are resorting to child labour and commercial sex work (Al Khalidi et al, 2007; SIDA, 2010; UN, 2010a). While recognising the difficulty of measuring this phenomenon, the government reports that child labour is a growing issue among Iraqi refugees, with children reportedly working long hours for daily wages ranging from \$1–\$2.20 (UN, 2010a). Earlier estimates suggest that 10% of Iraqi children are

engaged in some form of labour (*ibid.*). Deteriorating living conditions appear to have pushed Iraqi women and girls as young as 12 into commercial sex work (*ibid.*), though it is worth noting that commercial sex appears to be a growing trend within Syrian society more broadly (Al Khalidi et al., 2007). In addition to the risks associated with this activity, women and girls appear to be at heightened risk of deportation. The few cases in which the Syrian authorities have enforced deportation of foreigners, including Iraqis, have been in relation to infringements of the law, such as prostitution (UNHCR, 2010b; SIDA, 2010; Olwan, 2009).

Although this research found no instances of overt violence towards Iraqis there are reports that host populations and the authorities often blame them for the worsening economic situation (see Chapter 4), rising rents, increasing crime rates and the increased prevalence of commercial sex work (Al Khalidi et al., 2007). Their substantial presence has also reportedly generated resentment and 'envy' among host communities, particularly in low-income areas where Iraqis compete with locals for accommodation and jobs (ICG, 2008).

The lack of support networks may also increase the vulnerability of certain groups of refugees, particularly unaccompanied men (meaning men with no relatives in Damascus) and women cut off from their families back in Iraq. In Arab societies family and social linkages are particularly important and represent a key informal protection mechanism. Most Iraqis draw on relations and kinship networks that they had prior to their flight from Iraq, and many prepare for their arrival in Syria by establishing contact in advance with relatives in Damascus, who may rent them an apartment or accommodate them temporarily (Dorai, 2009 and 2010). Newly arrived Iraqis therefore often end up settling near their relatives or religious networks, which can ease the start of their new life in the city (Al Khalidi et al., 2007).

By the same token, unaccompanied individuals without such protective family networks appear to be particularly exposed to abuse, harassment and exploitation. One respondent noted that Iraqis from rural backgrounds who arrived in Damascus around 2006 without existing familial linkages and networks were 'isolated' and therefore particularly vulnerable. Similarly, single or separated Iraqi refugee men of 40–50 years of age (university educated, professional, intellectuals, artists, who had been forced to flee Iraq following death threats because of their professions) were identified as a particularly vulnerable category (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011).

The importance of family and social networks has also been highlighted in relation to drought-displaced IDPs living on the fringes of urban areas. According to the UN, leaving rural areas 'has not saved [them] from further hardship and destitution. Instead, they have lost access to their networks and are often exploited at below-market labour rates' (UN, 2010: 6).

Chapter 4

The economy and livelihoods

Under President Hafez Al Assad, who ruled Syria for 30 years until his death in 2000, the Syrian economy was heavily regulated and centrally planned according to the socialist ideology of the ruling Ba'ath Party, which followed redistributive policies, with free public services and large food and non-food subsidies (El Laithy and Ismail, 2005). Bashar Al Assad, who assumed the presidency on his father's death, was heralded as a Western-educated reformer who would move away from the conservative legacy of his father. Soon after coming to power Bashar initiated a series of market-oriented reforms (IMF, 2010; UNDP, 2005). Agricultural and other subsidies were removed or scaled back, health services and other facilities cut and state-owned farms privatised (IMF, 2010; IRIN, 2007; Aita, 2009). Since 2004, nine private-sector banks have opened and restrictions on foreign exchange transactions have been relaxed (BBC, 2009).

These reforms appear to have benefited only a small portion of the population, predominantly the elite of very wealthy Syrians living in Damascus (IRIN, 2008; Sands, 2010). For the great majority of the population life has got harder. Meanwhile, a poor harvest in 2007 resulted in reduced crop yields (for the first time in two decades Syria has become a net importer of wheat), and the government's decision in 2008 to start cutting fuel subsidies led to the tripling of fuel prices, causing food and transport costs to more than double in a matter of weeks (Muhanna, 2010).

Against this background, finding a job in Syria, including in the capital, is extremely difficult. The public sector is a key source of employment, accounting for around 30% of the country's workforce (El Laithy and Abu Ismail, 2005), but jobs are largely controlled by an elite of educated Syrians (Aita, 2009; UNDP, 2005). The formal private sector is poorly developed and constrained by pervasive corruption and state bureaucracy, and represents only a limited source of employment. It is rare for entrepreneurs to succeed in the formal economy if they lack connections with powerful members of the regime (Achy, 2011). Accessing credit to start a business is also difficult; in 2010 the World Bank ranked Syria as one of the worst countries in the world for this (World Bank, 2010). The Heritage Foundation and *Wall Street Journal* 2011 IEF, which measures a country's economic freedom across several indicators, such as property rights, business, trade and investment freedom, ranked Syria 140th out of 179 countries (IEF, 2011).

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) the informal sector constitutes 34% of total employment in the country, and a staggering 79% of employment outside the public sector in urban areas (Aita, 2009). As such, it is the primary source of jobs for Damascus' residents, including displaced and

economic migrants, and is a key source of cheap goods and services for urban residents: Yarmouk, for example, is a major commercial hub for Damascus and beyond (UNDP, 2005; El Laithy and Abu Ismail, 2005; Lababedi, 2009; UNRWA, 2011c). Even so, finding work in the informal sector is not easy, in part because the government's economic reforms have led to significant job losses in many industries, pushing more and more people into the informal job market (Aita, 2008). The unemployment rate is high, at an estimated 10.9% in 2008.³ With annual growth of 3.4% in the population of working age,⁴ more and more Syrians are entering the job market each year (Aita, 2009; UNDP, 2005).

4.1 Livelihood opportunities for displaced people in Damascus

Anyone wanting to work in Syria must obtain a work permit from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and must also hold a residency permit (Aita, 2008; IOM, 2003). However, the process for obtaining permits is particularly difficult since matters are dealt with on a case-by-case basis and decisions are *ad hoc* (Aita, 2009). Labour matters are governed by old and inadequate legislation which is lacking in consistency and clarity. For example, there are no legislative provisions for dealing with people caught without a valid work permit (Olwan, 2009). According to several respondents, cumbersome and inefficient labour laws ultimately mean that the great majority of low-income economic migrants (e.g. Yemenis and Egyptians) do not bother trying to regularise their status, but simply look for jobs in the informal sector.

Only a small proportion of Iraqis work as professionals (i.e. doctors or university professors) in the formal sector and hold legal work permits. Like low-income economic migrants, the great majority of Iraqi refugees living in Syria take advantage of the gaps in labour law and poor enforcement mechanisms to find low-skilled work in the informal sector. The large majority of Iraqis work in travel agencies, garages, hotels and restaurants, on street stalls and in small and medium-sized businesses, such as traditional shops and speciality stores, some as employees and others as shop owners (Al Khalidi et al., 2007; Ali and Dorai, 2010). Like other foreign nationals, Iraqis cannot officially own businesses. In practice, however, they work with Syrian partners who register the businesses in their name, whilst giving their Iraqi partner some sort of guarantee (Al Khalidi et al., 2007).

³ The official unemployment rate has varied considerably over the past 15 years, from 15.2% in 1997 to 2.3% in 2000, 11.7% in 2001 and 8.4% in 2007, and then a sudden jump to 10.9% in 2008 (Aita, 2009). The ILO has questioned the validity of survey techniques to measure unemployment, since there is no systematic registration of unemployment (i.e. through unemployment compensation schemes) (*ibid.*).

⁴ Syria is currently undergoing a demographic 'youth bulge', and 23% of the population is between 15–24 years of age (Kabbani, 2011).

Working conditions in the informal sector are generally poor and exploitative, involving long hours and low salaries (El Laithy and Abu Ismail, 2005). Some Iraqis are thought to be particularly vulnerable. As highlighted in Chapter 3, young men without social and family ties may be especially at risk of exploitation in the workplace. According to one interviewee young Iraqi men may work for more than 12 hours a day, carrying heavy weights, and if they complain they can be easily fired. There are also instances of employers not paying them or paying them less than agreed. While poor Syrians and Palestinians may well suffer the same levels of abuse and exploitation, the crucial difference here is that members of their family can mediate and discuss the matter with the employer, while unaccompanied Iraqi men cannot rely on this type of support and in most cases have no means of redress.

For Iraqi communities, remittances from relatives living elsewhere and savings have represented an important financial

resource. A survey conducted in 2007 indicated that 37% of Iraqi refugees in Syria were living primarily off their savings, and 24% were relying on remittances (Ipsos MORI, 2007). Savings may be an important source of income at the beginning of the displacement experience, but after years of exile many have seen their savings gradually depleted (UNHCR, 2010; Crisp et al., 2009). Clearly, the longer Iraqis are displaced the more pressing is the need to find a regular source of income.

For the thousands of families from rural backgrounds – displaced by drought and currently living in makeshift tents camps on the outskirts of Damascus – integration into the urban economy appears to be particularly difficult. Many have suffered loss of income and assets and have been plunged into poverty, while their rural backgrounds and skills leave them ill-equipped to take advantage of whatever livelihood opportunities the city may present (Muhanna, 2011; UN, 2010).

Chapter 5

Basic services and urban infrastructure

The findings of this literature review indicate that, over the past decade, the quality of public services in Syria, particularly health and education, has been declining. This has been attributed to a number of factors, including cuts to public health services as part of the economic reforms initiated in 2000. Population growth, both natural and as a result of the influx of Iraqi refugees, is also a factor. While the declining quality of public provision affects people from the low and middle classes equally, Iraqi refugees and drought-displaced people living on the outskirts of Damascus seem to face the most serious obstacles to accessing basic services. It appears that many Iraqi refugee children do not attend primary school, and Iraqi refugees are disproportionately in need of mental health services, for which public provision is extremely inadequate. While it was not possible to obtain any primary data on education and health services for drought-displaced IDPs, the limited secondary data available indicates that access to basic services and adequate housing for this group is extremely limited.

5.1 Education

The Syrian national education system comprises six years of compulsory elementary school followed by three years of preparatory school, which completes the basic cycle of education at around the age of 15. Students may then choose to complete three years of secondary school or three years of vocational training (Tiltnes, 2006). Adult literacy overall is high, at an estimated 84% (UNICEF, 2011), but this hides gender differences (men are more literate than women) and differences between rural and urban areas (literacy rates are higher in urban areas) (El Laithy and Abu Ismail, 2005). At an estimated 95% in 2005–2009, primary school enrolment is high (UNICEF, 2011). Primary and secondary education is free to all; tertiary education is also free but there are few places at universities and entry is very competitive (Tiltnes, 2006). The government embarked on reforms of the education sector in 2009, but the current state of the reforms is unclear.

In recent years the quality of public schools has reportedly declined, with investment and expansion failing to keep pace with the growth in the school-age population. Around 10% of schools run on a double-shift system to accommodate the high number of pupils (Tiltnes, 2006). Although this situation predates the recent influx of Iraqi refugees, their presence has exacerbated the problem in areas such as Jaramana and Sayyida Zainab (ICG, 2008; Tiltnes, 2006; Al Khalidi et al., 2007).

Access to primary and secondary schools is free for Iraqi children, though like their Syrian counterparts their families have to pay for school supplies and uniforms and, if enrolment takes place after the start of the school year, textbooks as

well (Al Khalidi et al., 2007). This may be one of the reasons why many Iraqi families do not send their children to school. Enrolment rates for Iraqi refugee children in public schools are very low; in 2007 only 30,000 were enrolled in primary or secondary school (*ibid.*). Since then numbers have fallen further (UNHCR, 2010a and 2010b), to 24,600 in 2009–2010 (UNHCR, 2010a and 2010b). In addition to financial constraints, according to UNHCR the main reasons for Iraqi refugee families not sending their children to school were lack of documentation, return to Iraq or third-country resettlement and difficulties in adapting to the new school curriculum (UNHCR, 2010a and 2010b). There are also reports that children belonging to the thousands of families that have been displaced from rural areas to the outskirts of urban centres have been pulled out of school (Muhanna, 2011; UN, 2010b).

As in Jordan, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), Palestinian families have for decades sent their children to UNRWA schools. In Syria UNRWA is still the main education provider for Palestinian children; 81.4% of registered Palestinian refugee children in 2002 were attending UNRWA primary schools rather than public or private schools (Tiltnes, 2006). UNRWA is considered to provide very good education services in Syria, and the pass rate for state preparatory school exams is almost 30% higher for students coming from UNRWA schools than for students from public schools (Tiltnes, 2006). However, as a result of decreasing funding (discussed in Chapter 7), the quality of education offered by UNRWA is perceived by Palestinian refugees to be declining; UNRWA itself acknowledges that its education facilities are often overcrowded and under-equipped (UNRWA, 2010a).

5.2 Health

Primary and emergency health services in Syria are provided free of charge to all citizens and hospital fees are still heavily subsidised (Galdo, 2004). There is limited discussion in the literature in relation to overall access to and quality of healthcare in Syria, though investment has apparently not kept pace with the growing population, service standards are falling and the healthcare system as a whole is under severe strain (IRIN, 2007; Tiltnes, 2006). Partly as a result of declining levels of public services, private providers have been on the rise, and there are over 500 private hospitals in the country accounting for almost half of all hospital services (Kassab and Lane, 2011). Private healthcare in Syria is expensive and access is essentially determined by one's ability to pay.

The government has extended access to primary health services to Iraqis, regardless of their legal status in the country or registration with UNHCR (Olwan, 2009). Refugees

registered with UNHCR also have access to primary preventive and curative healthcare at UNHCR-supported clinics run by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARC) (UNHCR, 2010b). To access these services refugees pay a flat rate of SYP 25 (5 US cents) for any medical service costing up to SYP 1,000 (\$21.50); above this threshold refugees pay 20% of the costs and the remaining 80% is covered by UNHCR (50%, in the case of dental charges) (*ibid.*). Registered refugees can access public hospitals for routine medical interventions and surgery free of charge since the cost is fully paid by UNHCR (*ibid.*). If the costs of treatment exceed SYP 100,000 (\$2,105) the case is referred to UNHCR Damascus' Exceptional Medical Care Committee for assessment (*ibid.*).

As with education, access to public health services has long been extended to Palestinians, on a par with Syrians. UNRWA also runs 23 clinics across the country, both within and outside refugee camps, where a range of family planning services and primary healthcare is offered free of charge to registered Palestinian refugees (Tiltnes, 2006).

Chronic diseases are the main cause of death in Syria, accounting for 74% in 2002 (WHO, 2002). Syrians, Palestinians and Iraqis all display very similar health problems: chronic, non-communicable diseases typical of middle- and high-income countries, such as hypertension, diabetes and cancer. The nature of the health needs of the Iraqi refugee population has posed particular challenges for UNHCR, accustomed as the agency is to dealing with refugees with health profiles typical of low-income countries, who are mainly affected by communicable diseases (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011; Crisp et al., 2009). Non-communicable diseases are also very expensive to treat.

A number of respondents noted that the provision of psychosocial and mental health services in Syria is extremely limited and public facilities lack capacity in this sector. UNRWA does not offer mental health services, but refers patients to public hospitals which lack specialised facilities (Tiltnes, 2006). This gap in service delivery is affecting Iraqi refugees in particular, whose psychosocial needs are reportedly significant. A significant number of Iraqi refugees have been affected by violence in Iraq, compounded by the trauma of their displacement experience and ongoing stress related to their uncertain status and future prospects. A 2008 UNHCR survey of over 750 refugees in Syria found that every single person interviewed reported experiencing at least one traumatic event in Iraq (UNHCR, 2008b). One in five refugees registered with UNHCR were victims of torture and/or violence in Iraq, which included beatings, electric shocks, objects being placed under fingernails, burns and rape; 77% had been affected by air bombardments and shelling or rocket attacks and 80% had witnessed a shooting (*ibid.*). The impact on the physical and mental well-being of affected refugees and their families is pervasive. The same survey found that depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders were prevalent, refugees

were finding it increasingly difficult to cope with life, and many marriages had not survived the stress (*ibid.*). Domestic violence has also increased (UN, 2010a).

5.3 Shelter and housing

Informal settlements in Damascus are increasingly integrated into the city; retail and service enterprises cater to residents' needs, and running water, electricity and telephone lines have been extended to these areas since the 1980s (Fernandes, 2008; Tiltnes, 2006; Dorai, 2010). Some 95% of informal housing areas in Damascus governorate have electricity, and 88% have sewerage infrastructure (UNDP, 2005). Nonetheless, basic services such as health and education in the informal settlements are much more sparsely provided than in formal areas (UNDP, 2005). Dwellings are made of permanent materials but are not always structurally sound, and are often overcrowded and run-down (El Laithy and Abu Ismail, 2005). According to UN Habitat, some houses are so poorly built that they warrant demolition on safety grounds (UN Habitat, 2001).

Informal settlements are not exclusively areas of poverty and deprivation, but are increasingly inhabited by a mix of people of different nationalities, origins and social backgrounds, including middle-class Syrians (Syria Today, 2009; Fernandes, 2008). According to one respondent, the steep rise in rents and housing prices in Damascus over the last decade appears to have prompted a growing number of people to take up residence in these areas. House prices in Damascus have risen by a staggering 40%–50% between 2003 and 2004, pushing middle-class Syrians to buy or rent homes in Damascus Rural, where it is cheaper (OBG, 2005). These price rises have been attributed to a number of factors, including inflation and generally increasing living costs and the enactment of Rent Law 6 in 2001, which makes it much easier for landlords to evict tenants, reclaim properties and increase rental prices (*ibid.*).

Mainly because tenancy agreements in informal settlements are often verbal and not officially recognised, anyone renting in these areas, whether displaced or non-displaced, is vulnerable to sudden price hikes or the termination of contracts (Al Khalidi et al., 2007; McAuslan, 2008). Iraqi refugees appear to face particular financial barriers to accessing adequate housing. According to the 2010 UN 'Regional Response plan for Iraqi refugees' the great majority of Iraqis surveyed by UNHCR cited paying rent as their most significant financial difficulty (UN, 2010a). The lack of formal leases in informal settlements may represent an additional constraint for Iraqi refugees, since having a formal lease is one of the criteria for obtaining a residency permit (Al Khalidi et al., 2007). Drought IDPs on the outskirts of the city also face significant difficulties in relation to access to adequate housing, largely because of the destitution that has accompanied their displacement experience, pushing many to live in squalid conditions in the camps.

Chapter 6

Land and the environment

6.1 Urban development plans

Damascus is truly ancient – apparently the oldest continually inhabited city on Earth (Lababedi, 2009). It is situated on the Al Ghouta oasis, at the head of the River Barada and at the foot of the mountain range that marks the border with Lebanon. This is a region of little rainfall and with a fragile ecological balance.

Damascus' growth over the past 50 years has effectively taken place in a planning vacuum, without a coherent strategy or an effective legal framework to guide the development of the city. The first (and to date the only) Master Plan was drawn up by the French architect Michel Ecochard in 1960. It sought to control and direct population expansion, protect the Al Ghouta oasis from urban sprawl, ease traffic congestion and promote transport connections with neighbouring countries and towns (Wifstrand and Ria, 2009). Municipal authorities have however never really ensured that Damascus' expansion followed Ecochard's Master Plan (Lababedi, 2009), and over the decades urban growth has spread over the Al Ghouta oasis basin, exerting huge stress on water supplies (Lababedi, 2009; IRIN, 2006).

The municipal authorities have commissioned a number of planning studies to inform the development of a new Master Plan, most recently in 2009, but these efforts have yielded very few results and to date the only official Master Plan remains the (clearly obsolete) Ecochard Plan (Clerc, 2011). Recent efforts to draft a new, comprehensive Master Plan seem to be hampered by a lack of coordination between the Ministry of Local Administration (MoLA) and the governorates of Damascus City and Damascus Rural (Hashimoto, 2009). (The city authorities persist in distinguishing between the governorates of Damascus City and Damascus Rural, but this division is only administrative, and the city effectively stretches deep into Damascus Rural territory.) Each body has apparently undertaken separate initiatives to draw up Master Plans, and there are disagreements about the best way to manage urban growth and reduce overcrowding.

6.2 Land law and policy and informal settlements

The legal framework governing urban development in theory facilitates state acquisition to free up land for public purposes and allow private developers to build housing to meet public demand (McAusland, 2008a). However, rather than supporting the private sector to provide for the housing needs of the urban population, the inefficient legal framework governing urban development has in fact been a key contributor to the spread of informal settlements.

The main laws governing the acquisition of land by the local authorities for urban development are Law 9/1974 and Law 26/2000. Law 9/1974 provides for a collaborative process between landowners and local authorities and the basis for a public-private partnership in the development of urban land. In particular, it allows local authorities to demarcate, take possession of, plan and develop a piece of land for public purposes (*ibid.*). Law 9/1974 also states that private landholders in areas allocated for public development should be provided with a new plot and given financial compensation for any losses incurred. However, the process has in most cases been lengthy, cumbersome and overly bureaucratic (*ibid.*).

The great majority of urban development is guided by Law 26/2000 (as well as other laws governing land management), under which the municipality can acquire an area for urban expansion and compensate landowners at agricultural (rather than urban) use prices, which are often far below the market price (McAusland, 2008a). Municipality authorities then divide the land into plots. According to one respondent the authorities must sell 60% of the acquired land to the Public Housing Corporation and to housing cooperatives, and 40% is sold back to the original owners. When landowners discover, presumably unofficially, that their land is going to be expropriated they try to sell it to a private buyer for informal development as soon as they can, since they can secure more money through this market transaction than through the official compensation they are due if they wait for the land to be expropriated (*ibid.*). This is seen as a major contributing factor to the growth of informal settlements in Damascus.

6.3 Security of tenure in the informal settlements of Damascus

One in three dwellings in Damascus is thought to be built with a degree of informality (on unregularised land or an unauthorised building), and 50% of new urban expansion on the periphery is informal (McAusland, 2008b; Fernandes, 2008). In addition to the inefficiencies of the legal framework governing urban development highlighted above, the literature identifies a range of factors behind the ongoing sprawl of informal settlements in Damascus, including ineffective planning tools, such as obsolete Master Plans, limited planning data, rigid and slow planning procedures that are unable to guide the organic development of the city, the lack of low-cost housing, public housing and social rental programmes and difficult access to credit and mortgages to finance purchases (Lavinal, 2008; Fernandes, 2008; McAusland, 2008b).

Between the 1980s and early 2000s the attitude of the municipal authorities towards informal settlements was largely relaxed and reactive. Little effort was made to regulate and manage

informal expansion and the authorities' involvement was largely limited to the extension of basic services such as water and electricity to these areas (Fernandes, 2008; McAusland, 2008a; Syria Today, 2009). Since 2003, however, it appears that some steps have been taken, at least on paper, to attempt to regulate the development of informal settlements. With the enactment of Law 1/2003, the unauthorised development of private land has been forbidden and authorities are granted permission to demolish illegal houses on such land (Fernandes, 2008; Syria Today, 2009). In 2004 the enactment of Law 46 provided for the regularisation of some informal settlements through the provision of titles and building permits, if residents are able to pay for collective utilities and plot sizes are acceptable according to existing or proposed urban plans (Fernandes, 2008; Lavinal, 2008). It is however difficult to see exactly how the authorities are able to determine what constitutes an 'acceptable' plot size since there is no up-to-date Master Plan for the city and the current Plan is clearly obsolete.

There is little evidence that these laws have been implemented. While the formulation of Law 46/2004 can be seen as a positive step towards more secure tenure in informal settlements, to date it seems that no official procedures have been made available to effectively grant titles to the residents of these

areas (McAusland, 2008a; McAusland, 2008b). In addition, while the existence of Law 1/2003 puts tens of thousands of residents of Damascus at risk of eviction and of having their houses demolished (Syria Today, 2009), in the literature there appears to be no evidence of *en masse* or individual cases of forced eviction in the aftermath of the enactment of this law.

In this context it seems that the long-standing relaxed attitude of the authorities towards informal settlements and their *de facto* recognition of tenure, for example through the extension of basic services and collection of taxes in some areas, even in the absence of *de jure* regularisation of ownership, have generated a widespread perception of secure tenure and conferred some forms of rights onto the residents of informal areas (Fernandes, 2008). However, while good coverage of public services in these areas and the fact that no forced evictions appear to have taken place needs to be viewed as positive, tenure is ultimately insecure in the strictly legal sense. There is no in-depth analysis in the literature as to how *de jure* insecurity of tenure affects urban displaced populations in particular. Presumably the makeshift camps on the outskirts of urban centres, where the drought-displaced have taken up residence, are at heightened risk of forced evictions, particularly if the authorities allot these areas for urban development plans.

Chapter 7

International assistance

Before 2007 there were very few international organisations in Syria (ICG, 2008; Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011); no INGOs were working in the country, and only a handful of UN agencies were operational. This changed with the substantial and growing influx of Iraqi refugees into the country. In 2007 a number of INGOs initiated discussions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to obtain permission to work in the country, primarily to respond to the Iraqi refugee crisis, and UNHCR started to significantly expand its operations. By 2010 16 international NGOs had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARC) allowing them to provide assistance to Iraqi refugees (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011). The close control that the Syrian authorities exert over international organisations makes working according to humanitarian principles especially challenging. Official restrictions that stipulate that INGOs can work only with Iraqi communities and the slow and bureaucratic system of permits are all serious constraints to the planning and delivery of assistance.

Through SARC, the Syrian authorities ensure strict control and supervision of INGOs in the country, including programme activities, targeting and staff recruitment (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011). Permits for research activities are extremely difficult to obtain and INGOs are forbidden from undertaking needs assessments. Several interviewees also noted that INGOs must request specific permission from SARC each time they wish to expand programme activities in new locations and into new areas of work. The procedure to obtain such permissions is deliberately very slow, with consequent delays to programme implementation on the ground (*ibid.*). Tight controls on recruitment (of both national and international staff) are also in place, and job applications have to be vetted and approved by SARC. One respondent noted that, as SARC's expertise is mainly in health and disaster risk reduction, proposed programme activities outside these areas have often been delayed or rejected. While in some instances rejection has been linked to security concerns, lack of knowledge, understanding and capacity can also play a role. Recently, however, SARC has been increasingly willing to consider 'new' programme proposals, and some INGOs have been able to implement income-generating activities for women and programmes to provide legal assistance to refugees.

Since Syria is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the presence of UNHCR in the country is sanctioned and coordinated through its partnership with SARC, which predates the substantial influx of Iraqi refugees in the country after 2003 (UNHCR, 2011a). UNHCR has also signed an MOU with the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs which governs cooperation with local associations under the Ministry's supervision (*ibid.*). One

respondent noted that the terms under which UNHCR operates in Syria are less restrictive than those relating to INGOs, with the relationship between SARC and UNHCR being more of a partnership than overt control.

In this context international political interests have played a significant role in the allocation of humanitarian aid. Western donors have been reluctant to channel aid to Syria, largely because of poor diplomatic relations and fears of inefficiency and corruption (ICG, 2008). Syria's relations with the West, and particularly with the United States, are not good. Since 1979 the US has designated Syria a 'state sponsor of terror' and has accused the country of providing political support and safe haven in Damascus for the Lebanese group Hizbollah and various Palestinian groups (US Department of State, 2011). A US ban on arms-related trade with Syria and financial restrictions including limitations on economic assistance have also been imposed (*ibid.*). Despite these difficulties, for political reasons the US is the largest donor to programmes targeting Iraqis in Syria (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011), though successive US administrations have refused to channel aid directly to the Syrian state and have instead funded international agencies (Chatelard, 2011). Jordan has received a much larger aid package, especially from the US, which has been (on Jordan's insistence, and not unproblematically) channelled directly to the Jordanian state (*ibid.*). This is despite the fact that Jordan hosts fewer Iraqi refugees than Syria (*ibid.*). While humanitarian assistance is usually channelled through international organisations, when addressing the needs of self-settled urban refugees in a middle-income country it is arguably preferable to support provision through existing public structures than creating parallel structures, which may be more costly, potentially stigmatising and less sustainable.

7.1 Assistance to drought-affected IDPs

In response to the prolonged drought crisis, in 2009 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) and the Syrian government launched the Syrian Drought Response Plan (SDRP), implemented jointly by the UN, the Qatar Red Crescent and state ministries (UN, 2009). The SDRP has built on and expanded the government's programme of food assistance. Beginning in 2008, the government has provided 5,600 tonnes of food assistance to 96,660 farmer and herder households in Al-Hassake, Dayr az Zawr, Ar-Raqqa, Homs and Damascus Rural (UN, 2010). Key activities for the SDRP in these areas include the rehabilitation and licensing of wells (enabling owners to qualify for state support), livelihoods support in the form of seeds and fodder and food assistance (OHCHR, 2011b; UN, 2010).

Despite these efforts, the response of the international community to the drought in Syria has been described by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food as ‘unacceptably poor’ (OHCHR, 2011b: 12). At the end of 2009, only 14% of the SDRP was funded,⁵ and in 2010 the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) stepped in with emergency financing. Although the SDRP notes that ‘[m]easures to address the needs of this migrant population should be designed in order to alleviate the precarious living conditions in migrant camps and facilitate their voluntary return’ (UN, 2009: 19), it appears that the focus of the SDRP is on drought-affected rural areas, not on drought IDPs (*ibid.*; UN, 2010). While some activities have been rolled out in Damascus Rural governorate, it is not clear from the SDRP whether they are specifically targeted at the camps in the city’s outskirts. According to a representative of the World Food Programme (WFP), the agency is keen to see displaced people return to their homes and is limiting assistance in the camps to avoid creating a ‘culture of dependency’ (BBC, 2010a). According to one respondent, none of the 14 INGOs operating in Damascus is providing assistance in the camps. While no needs assessments are available, there is anecdotal evidence that humanitarian needs in the camps are significant (UN, 2009).

Even if the government and the international community appear to portray the displacement situation of drought IDPs as temporary, with return to rural areas of origin being seen as the long-term solution, the scale of losses in the north-east is huge and return does not seem to be possible without significant livelihood rehabilitation efforts as part of a long-term strategy aimed at restoring the viability of rural livelihood systems in these areas. With poor prospects for return, particularly for families who have lost all their assets, urgent steps are needed to ensure minimum levels of local integration of these communities, including access to livelihoods, basic standards of living and education opportunities.

7.2 Assistance to Palestinian and Iraqi refugees

UNRWA was established in 1949 to assist Palestinian refugees and coordinate the efforts of NGOs and UN agencies (UNRWA, 2011b). Today, its mandate extends to providing relief, development assistance and protection to registered Palestinian refugees in oPt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (*ibid.*). UNRWA works closely with the government’s General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR) as well as local and international agencies including UNICEF, WHO and UNHCR (UNRWA, 2011a). GAPAR provides utilities in the camps and UNRWA provides basic environmental services including sewage and waste disposal, the provision of safe drinking water (*ibid.*) and health and education services to registered Palestinian refugees.

For a number of years UNRWA has faced severe financial problems. Funding has not kept pace with the growing

⁵ The SDRP requested a total of \$52,938,616 (UN, 2009).

Palestinian refugee population, the needs of refugees and the context where they are living have become increasingly complex, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territory, and donors’ reporting requirements have become more rigorous (UNRWA, 2010a). UNRWA’s financial difficulties have been compounded by the 2008 global financial crisis, which has further restricted donor funding (*ibid.*). Financial shortfalls have resulted in cuts to core services in all countries where UNRWA operates (*ibid.*); in Syria the organisation ‘lacks the resources to enable refugees to seize available economic and social opportunities to move towards greater self-reliance’ (UNRWA, 2010b), and there is evidence that the quality of the services offered by UNRWA has been steadily declining (Tiltne, 2006).

Iraqis entering Syria after 2005 are considered *prima facie* refugees and UNHCR conducts initial interviews to identify the most vulnerable – or those falling within special needs categories – and those eligible for resettlement (Barnes, 2009). Currently 40% of refugees registered with UNHCR fall within these categories (namely critical medical condition, persons with disabilities, women at risk, single parents, children or adolescents at risk, unaccompanied or separated children, older persons at risk, survivors of torture and other special legal and protection cases (UNHCR, 2010)). Upon registration, Iraqis are provided with a Temporary Protection Letter which grants them access to subsidised healthcare (Crisp et al., 2009). Refugees identified as having special needs are also eligible for cash assistance of \$100 a month per person, plus \$10 for each dependant. Currently, one-fifth of registered Iraqi refugees in Syria receive cash assistance (OHCHR, 2011b).

Respondents raised concerns about targeting assistance according to the special needs categories described above and understandings of vulnerability in this context more broadly. As highlighted above, unaccompanied Iraqi men face considerable hardship in Damascus, are socially isolated and suffer high levels of stress related to unemployment and loss of status. They also appear to be most likely to return to Iraq. One respondent mentioned that, according to UNHCR, as many as 75% of voluntary returnees to Iraq during the month of May 2011 were unaccompanied Iraqi men. Until recently unaccompanied men were not included as a special needs category and therefore have largely been denied UNHCR assistance. The vulnerability of refugee men has however been highlighted in the 2010 UN ‘Regional Response Plan for Iraqi refugees’, and targeting this specific group has ‘become a priority because of their growing vulnerability in the country of asylum but also because of their potential for return’ (UN 2010a: 15). In particular, the Regional Response Plan advocates for livelihood support, specifically through equipping refugee men with skills for use in exile, or upon resettlement or return (*ibid.*).

Despite the highly constrained operational environment, a review of the literature points to a number of creative approaches

to delivering assistance to Iraqis in Damascus. UNHCR and a number of INGOs have adopted 'outreach mechanisms' to identify vulnerable refugees in the capital. UNHCR uses women, whom it trains and pays a small stipend to, to locate female-headed households, interview the household heads, identify their needs and provide practical assistance and counselling (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011; UNHCR, 2010). Respondents indicated that a number of INGOs also work through Iraqi refugee volunteers to identify refugee households.

Since INGOs and UN agencies are not allowed to conduct needs assessments or advertise their services, they have adopted a self-targeting approach to establish contact with Iraqi refugees. At the end of 2006 UNHCR established six community centres in areas of high Iraqi refugee concentration in Damascus (Crisp et al., 2009). A number of INGOs have opened similar centres (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011). The centres and the services they offer – recreational and social activities, language classes, IT tuition, sewing and other subjects, and psychosocial support – are open to everyone, both refugees and hosts (Di Iorio and Zeuthen, 2011; UNHCR, 2010). Maintaining these centres is however expensive, and they may be difficult to sustain if funding for the Iraqi refugee crisis declines (Crisp et al., 2009). Handing over these centres to local or state actors when INGOs wish to leave Syria will be difficult. As international agencies operating in Syria are not allowed to work with any national or local actor other than SARC, devising an exit strategy that goes hand in hand with local capacity-building activities, so that state bodies such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and local NGOs or CBOs can ultimately take responsibility for these activities, is particularly challenging.

Since 2007 UNHCR has provided ATM bank cards to Iraqi refugees eligible for financial assistance, to withdraw their monthly cash allowance (OHCHR, 2011b). WFP delivers food aid through mobile phone-based electronic vouchers that allow beneficiaries to choose from a range of food commodities when redeemed at registered stores (OHCHR, 2011b). Such mechanisms help in overcoming some of the difficulties of distributing assistance in urban settings, for example avoiding the need for beneficiaries to wait for assistance in long and very visible queues, or commute long distances to distribution centres (Nyce, 2010).

As far as returning to Iraq is concerned, governments in the region have repeatedly emphasised that allowing Iraqis to enter and live in their countries represents a 'temporary and partial' solution to their displacement (Ferris, 2009). The Syrian government has said that local integration is not an option for Iraqi refugees (Crisp et al., 2009; ICG, 2008). At the same time, poor prospects for peace and economic security in Iraq, ongoing sectarian violence, the inadequate levels of assistance offered by the Iraqi government and slow progress in the implementation of domestic policies to address the needs of returning refugees all militate against large-scale returns to Iraq in the near future (Ferris, 2009; Chatelard, 2011).⁶ In 2010 a UNHCR survey indicated that 80% of the Iraqi refugees questioned were reluctant to return on a permanent basis, with 46% citing political uncertainty as the main reason for not wanting to go home (UNHCR, 2010). Another UNHCR poll, this time in Baghdad, found that 61% of returnees questioned regretted going back to Iraq. Just under half claimed that they had returned only because they could not afford to continue living in exile (RRP, 2011).

The resettlement programme for Iraqis is large; of the 108,000 refugees submitted globally by UNHCR in 2010 for consideration by resettlement countries, 26,700 originated from Iraq. Between 2007 and 2010 UNHCR submitted over 100,000 Iraqi refugees from the region for resettlement, with 45,000 submitted by UNHCR Damascus. Since 2007, a total of 22,647 Iraqi refugees have departed Syria for third-country resettlement. The majority (15,576) went to the United States (UNHCR, 2011b). Canada was next, followed by Germany. According to one respondent, receiving Western countries are increasingly oriented towards the reception of refugees that can be easily assimilated into the local economy, rather than refugees that display certain vulnerabilities. Key informants also expressed concerns in relation to UNHCR criteria for resettlement. Since UNHCR considers for resettlement people who are part of special needs categories, adult men are automatically excluded from this process, despite the fact that they are particularly isolated and vulnerable in the urban milieu and might consider resettlement as a durable solution.

⁶ While the 2008 Iraq National Policy to Address Displacement includes a commitment by the Iraqi government to protect returnees, mobilise resources and strengthen government efforts to help them find housing and jobs, these commitments have not been fulfilled (Cohen, 2011).

Chapter 8

Conclusions and recommendations

Syria has long hosted large IDP and refugee populations. Damascus in particular has exerted a marked pull on all displaced groups, attracted by its employment opportunities, hopes of better living standards and the anonymity of life in the capital. Except for drought IDPs living on the outskirts of the city, the great majority of displaced people appear to have been assimilated into the urban fabric, living alongside lower- and middle-class Syrians, refugees of other nationalities and economic migrants. The situation of stateless Kurds in Damascus is poorly analysed, but the denial of their fundamental right to nationality and ongoing discrimination have put them in an extremely vulnerable position at the margin of society.

Syria is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and there is no domestic policy regulating refugee, asylum or IDP matters. The concept of displacement does not mean the same as it does in Western legal and policy frameworks governing displacement issues, and refugees are hosted on the basis of Pan-Arab principles of bilateral support. Palestinians and more recently Iraqis have been welcomed into Syria on these terms, and under quite generous conditions. Nonetheless, in the absence of a legal framework to regulate matters the legal status of Iraqi refugees remains unclear, and the policy environment is highly unpredictable. The plight of IDPs has been largely ignored by the government, with inadequate responses to the needs of people displaced from the Golan decades ago and, more recently, the thousands of destitute families living in peri-urban areas. The displacement experience of this latter group appears to have been largely ignored.

Compared to host populations, Palestinian refugees and IDPs from the Golan Heights do not seem to suffer from specific vulnerabilities or protection threats. Like their hosts they are affected by rising living costs, problems in finding work, the declining quality of basic public services and the risks arising from living in a highly repressive, corrupt and overly bureaucratic society. That said, there are indications that some displaced populations, particularly unaccompanied Iraqis and drought IDPs, are facing specific protection threats linked to the severing of family and social ties in their areas of origin, leaving them particularly vulnerable and exposed, and making their assimilation into city life difficult. Among Iraqi refugees unaccompanied men appear to be especially vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace, and many are isolated. While no incidents of overt violence were found in this research, there were frequent mentions of resentment towards Iraqi refugees, who are perceived as having put a huge strain on basic services and on the informal job market. The scale and intensity of violence they have witnessed in Iraq, compounded by their displacement experience and poor prospects for the future, have given rise to widespread psychological needs among

Iraqi refugees. Drought IDPs in marginal tent camps also appear to be in a particularly vulnerable position; many live in extremely precarious conditions, with inadequate access to food, basic services and livelihood opportunities. Inadequate attention has been paid to their plight, both by national and international actors. Finally, the thousands of stateless Kurds in the country are unwanted by the government and appear to have been largely forgotten by the international community.

8.1 Recommendations

Today Syria is a country in flux. Inevitably, any proposed recommendations must be seen in the light of developments and the potential political change that the current uprising may bring about. The ongoing unrest in Syria and in the region more widely throws into question the stability and security that Iraqis have fled in search of, and may also threaten the regional political commitment to ‘tolerance’ of Arab refugees (as the Iraqi crisis has already begun to do). This makes it especially urgent for the Syrian government to enact, and for international actors to advocate for, necessary changes in policies to help both local and international actors to respond to new and protracted displacement in Damascus.

- The paucity of secondary information regarding the status of refugees and displaced people in Damascus is closely related to official constraints on need assessments and research more broadly. Until the Syrian authorities ease these restrictions it will be very difficult, both for national and international actors, to devise targeted response strategies and plan according to needs. In particular issues such as the urban livelihood strategies of displaced and host populations, the number and profile of Iraqi populations, informal protection mechanisms, formal and informal housing markets and the legal and policy frameworks regulating urban development and the labour market all require further and deeper understanding and research.
- The government of Syria should give urgent recognition to the plight and needs of displaced populations affected by drought, and of the thousands of Kurds living in the country without nationality. Urgent policy developments are also needed to clarify the legal status of IDPs, refugees and asylum-seekers in Syria. The generous conditions allowing Iraqi refugees access and residence in the country in recent years are welcome, but their protracted displacement should also be recognised and options related to their local integration should be explored.
- International donors should work with the government to ensure that long-term assistance is channelled to support capacity in much-needed sectors such as the rule of law and the judiciary, as well as health, including mental health

and psychosocial services, education, urban planning and development and legal frameworks, including for displaced populations.

- International and national actors should urgently turn their attention to populations living in peri-urban areas, including drought-displaced communities. As part of broader capacity-building efforts, and building on the Syrian Drought Response Plan, international actors should step up efforts to bring the needs of these populations to the fore, as more substantial engagement is required to respond to their needs. To prevent further displacement and livelihood losses support must also be provided to targeted initiatives in affected rural areas as part of a long-term strategy aimed at restoring rural livelihoods, jointly developed with the government.

- International actors must revisit the vulnerability criteria they use. More attention should be given to unaccompanied Iraqi men, in terms of local assistance, including psychosocial care, support for return to Iraq and resettlement opportunities.
- In line with its mandate to protect the rights of stateless people (and taking advantage of its recently launched campaign to combat statelessness⁷), UNHCR should work with the government to resolve the issue of stateless Kurds in the country and remove the barriers that prevent them from acquiring Syrian nationality. More substantial UNHCR-led efforts should also be put in place to better understand and respond to the needs of these acutely marginalised urban populations.

⁷ See <http://www.unhcr.org/4e54e8e06.html>.

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