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SYRIA

State policies and military actions continue to threaten further displacement

There are four distinct groups of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria. One was displaced by the ongoing violent repression of the popular protests which started in March 2011, while the three other groups have faced protracted internal displacement. These older situations were caused by the destruction of the centre of the city of Hama in 1982, the displacement of Kurds from their homeland in the north-east of the country in the 1970s, and the occupation of the Golan Heights by Israel since 1967.

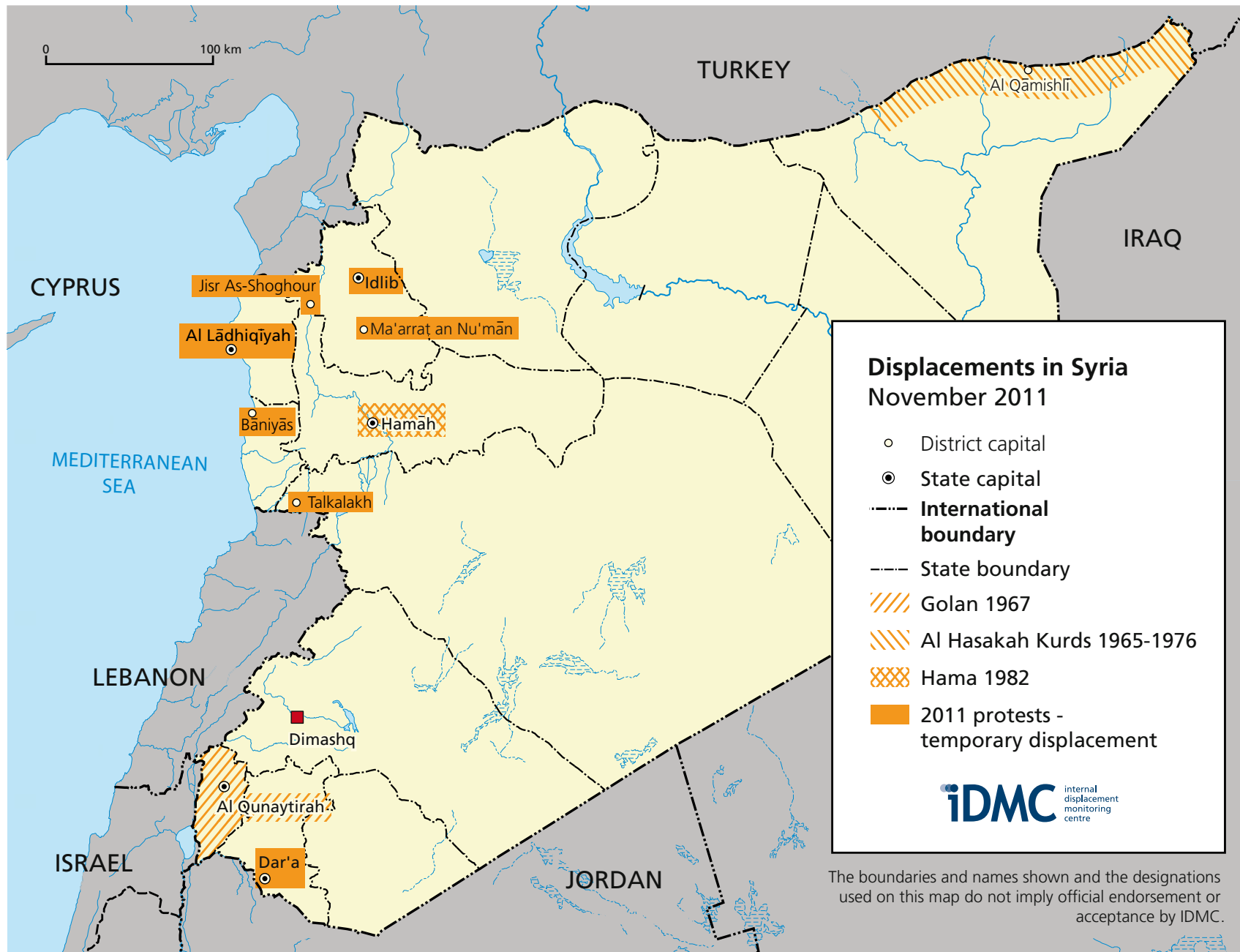
All internal displacement situations in Syria, except of those from the Golan, have been the result of the government's policies and military actions against its own people. Therefore, it has been difficult to conduct assessments or get information on these displacement situations.

The displacements since March 2011 have affected the whole of the country; most have been temporary, with people fleeing their villages and cities before or during an attack and returning after government forces have left. However, the use of tanks and other heavy weaponry has resulted in some destruction of houses and property and longer displacements for those affected.

In 1982, following the seizure of Hama by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, the army bombarded the city, killing about 20,000 inhabitants and forcibly displacing a large number. There is little information on the whereabouts of people whose homes were demolished or who have remained displaced out of fear of persecution.

An unknown number of Kurdish people displaced in the 1970s from the north-eastern province of al-Jazeera have remained in protracted displacement. Following the government's attempt to create an "Arab belt" along the Turkish border, up to 60,000 Kurds reportedly left to cities of the north such as Aleppo and Hasaka, and many of them were forcibly displaced. There were no reports of those displaced achieving durable solutions.

The largest group of IDPs in Syria were displaced from the Golan by the Israeli occupation since the Six-Day War of 1967. With their descendants they are estimated to number at least 433,000. They have largely integrated in their current places of residence, principally in the provinces of al-Suwayda and Damascus in the south of the country. Israel annexed the Golan in 1981, a decision not recognised by the international community. Peace talks have been stalled for decades, leaving the IDPs with no prospects of restitution or compensation for their lost property.



Source: IDMC

More maps are available at www.internal-displacement.org

Background and causes of displacement

Of the four continuing situations of displacement in Syria, the two oldest began just after the height of the Arab nationalism era. The pan-Arab alliance gathering Syria, Egypt and Jordan against Israel was the justification for Israel's June 1967 offensive which displaced the Golanese.

The same Arab nationalism inspired the campaigns to deny the identity and political aspirations of the Kurds in Syria. Their aspirations to statehood since the region's borders were marked out after World War One were seen as a threat which justified severing the links between the Kurdish communities which were now in Syria and those in Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

The third displacement wave took place in 1982 when Islamists emboldened by the waning of Arab nationalism felt that power was within their reach and tried to take over the city of Hama by military force. The government's retaliation destroyed the city centre and displaced its inhabitants.

The latest displacement situation is taking place as the government attempts to repress a popular uprising which has followed others in autocratic states of the Arab world, prompted by the development of Arabic-speaking international media and internet.

The occupied Golan Heights

When Israel seized the Golan Heights, a plateau overlooking the Jordan Valley and the

Sea of Galilee in the Six-Day War of 1967, nearly all its inhabitants were displaced within Syria. According to the Syrian government, Israeli forces forcibly expelled the inhabitants and destroyed villages and farms; the Israeli government maintains that they fled following reports of violence (Arnold, 1 February 2000).

Following the 1967 war, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which called for the Israeli armed forces' withdrawal from occupied territories. Syria attempted without success to regain the Golan in 1973, prompting the Security Council to adopt Resolution 338 urging the belligerents to agree to a ceasefire. This was signed in 1974, and Israel returned to the 1948 demarcation line, withdrawing from the destroyed town of Quneitra. The UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was set up to maintain the ceasefire UN News, 1 October 2007; BBC, 1 October 2007).

The demarcation line is not an internationally-recognised border, and therefore people who fled within Syria are considered internally displaced people (IDPs). In December 1981, Israel annexed the Golan and it has since been under Israeli jurisdiction. In 1981 the Security Council found that "the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan was null and void and without international legal effect" (UNSC Resolution 497, 17 December 1981).

In recent years only five villages in the Israeli-occupied Golan have remained inhabited by an estimated 22,000 Syrians, while there are 22,000 Israeli settlers (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, para.10; UNCHR, 16 April 2003; Mission of Syria to the UN, October 2004; UNSC, 11 December 2006).

The Arab Belt

Syria's Kurds, who are non-Arabs (Ajami), have been considered a threat and targeted by successive Syrian governments. In 1962, the government deprived about 120,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship by conducting a census in the Kurdish heartland. People were given no realistic notice of the census, and they were asked to prove that they had resided on Syrian territory since 1945. Those unable to do so were registered as "Ajanib" (foreigners), although they are still forced to serve in the army, while those who failed to be registered were considered "Maktoum" (concealed) and never issued any documentation at all. They were

not allowed to own, extend or repair property. With their descendants inheriting the same situation, some 300,000 of the estimated 1.7 million Kurds in Syria were still stateless in 2011 (HRW, 2009, Vanly, 1992; Dekker, 2011; Lowe 2006,).

In 1965, the Ba'ath government devised the "Hizam al-Arabi" (Arabic Belt) to sever the links between Kurds in Syria and those in Turkey and Iraq by expelling them from a strip of border land 15 kilometres wide and about 280 km long, and replacing them with Arab farmers. Tens of thousands of Kurds were subsequently dispossessed, either under the guise of land reform or on the basis of their statelessness, and forcibly displaced away from the border. Three years after President Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, the plan was still being implemented "to establish model state farms in al-Jazeera province", and by 1975, about 41 "model farms" had been set up. The project was stopped in 1976 but its effects were never undone. Since then, the government has continued to forcibly transfer Kurdish activists and civil society members by from their habitual place of residence (HRW, 2009; Vanly, 1992).

The massacre of Hama

The failure of the unification of Egypt and Syria between 1958 and 1961, and the humiliation of the Arab defeat against Israel in the war of 1967, undermined the notion of Arab nationalism promoted by autocratic rulers, and pan-Islamism started to develop in its place. The 1960s saw a resurgence of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in both countries, and clashes intensified after Hafez al-Assad, a member of the Allawite Shi'a sect considered apostate by the Sunni majority, came to power (T. Friedman, 1995; R. Fisk, 1990; Human rights Watch, 1996).

In February 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed by the government, seized the city of Hama. In a month-long siege the government subjected the city and its 250,000 inhabitants to indiscriminate bombardments, until troops

backed up by tanks regained control of the city. It is estimated that about 20,000 (overwhelmingly civilian) inhabitants were massacred and entire neighbourhoods, such as al-Hader and al-Zandaqi were flattened. The population was either displaced by the destruction and violence, or forcibly expelled. In the aftermath the government reconstructed some of the historical city centre, but not other areas (Friedman, 1995; Fisk, 1990; Syrian Human Rights Committee, 2006).

2011 protests

The latest displacement situation is taking place as the government attempts to repress a popular uprising prompted by the development of Arabic-speaking international media, the internet and the ousting of other autocratic rulers in the Arab world.

Anti-government protests in Syria have continued since March 2011, despite over six months of violent repression. The government of President Bashar al-Assad, who replaced his father Hafez in 2000, has responded with military force and caused displacement in and from cities and towns throughout the country. Protests started in Dara'a on 11 March and covered most of the country by May. Tanks moved into Dara'a, Banyas, Homs and the suburbs of Damascus in May, and into Jisr al-Shughur, Khirbet al-Juz, Darkush, Hitya and Maarat al-Numaan in June. Between 2,000 and 5,000 civilians and over 350 security personnel had been killed and over 20,000 people arrested by the start of July, but the subsequent Fridays saw the largest protests yet in favour of a peaceful transition to democracy (AFP, 2 July 2011; IRIN, September 2011).

During August, in the holy month of Ramadan, the repression escalated with armoured units firing on civilians in Homs, Hama, Deir al-Zour, Dara'a, Aleppo and Idlib. On 15 August, the Palestinian refugees in the coastal camp of al-Ramel were temporarily displaced by attacks by the armed forces around the port of Lattakia, which reportedly included shelling by gunboats

(Irin, August 2011). This violence has continued unabated well into the autumn 2011.

IDP figures

The number of people remaining internally displaced in Syria has been very difficult to assess. Information is available on the number displaced from the Golan, but there are no reliable figures on the number of Kurds forcibly displaced by the authorities or of people displaced by government repression in 1982 and 2011. In a country where independent academic activity is not tolerated and civil society members are regularly jailed and ill-treated, the mere researching of this information can be considered seditious by the government.

Reports vary on the number of people displaced from the Golan during the Six-Day War. The Syrian government reported there were 250 villages and farms in the Golan prior to the 1967 occupation with only five remaining after. According to the Syrian government, approximately 130,000 people were displaced as a result of the 1967 conflict, and they and their descendants numbered 433,000 in 2007 (Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, September 2007). The Israeli government has stated that only 70,000 people were displaced from the Golan in 1967 (USCR 2002). Most of the IDPs from the Golan have resettled in the suburbs of Damascus or in Sweida in the south of Syria (Fecci, June 2000; Khawaja, 2002).

There have been no reliable estimates of the number of Kurds forcibly displaced by the Arab Belt plan, and it has been difficult to distinguish between them and those moving by choice to the cities. Human Rights Watch and Minority Rights Group have cautiously reported that a significant portion of the 60,000 Kurds who moved from al-Jazeera province in the 1970s were forcibly displaced, while I.C. Vanly claims that 140,000 Kurds were forcibly displaced to the desert (HRW, 2009; Minority Rights Group, 2009; Vanly, 1992).

The number of people internally displaced due to the massacre of Hama remains unverifiable. No independent reporters were present to estimate the displacement and estimates have varied from about 10,000 to over 20,000 (Fisk, 1990; HRW, 1993; Friedman, 1995). Journalists were focused on the civil war in Lebanon and the massacres of Palestinians there in Sabra and Shatila.

In 2011, information from within Syria has again remained limited, with international humanitarian or news agencies denied access and so unable to get a clear picture of either temporary or longer-term displacement in the country. Protesters have reported the destruction of their homes and farmland in military operations, particularly in Dara'a, Tel Kalakh and Jisr Al-Shughur. The entire 41,000 population of Jisr Al-Shughur reportedly fled in June in fear of military retaliation following the death of some 120 security personnel there. That month it was also estimated that about 70 per cent of the 100,000 population of Maarat al-Numaan had been displaced. Nearly all the Palestinian refugees in the camp of al-Ramel were displaced in August, and sought refuge in other cities such as Homs, or on the beach or elsewhere in Latakia. As with most displacements in 2011, camp residents returned within a week (HRW, July 2011). Syrians who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have confirmed such reports of temporary internal displacements.

Protection needs of IDPs

There has been no field research on the living conditions of IDPs in Syria, and no immediate humanitarian needs have been identified. It has been dangerous to assess the situations of people displaced as a result of government actions.

The information available suggests that most of the people displaced from the Golan and their children have integrated into the areas where they initially took refuge. Some reports suggest

that in the past they have been given priority for public service jobs and university places by the government. Although they do not have particular vulnerabilities which distinguish them from the rest of the population, many have expressed a desire to return (Fecci, June 2000; Khawaja, 2002).

Relatives of Golanese IDPs still living in the occupied Golan have reported that the restriction by Israel of their contact with displaced family members is the single most important issue tied to the displacement. This contact has been severely restricted since 1992, and in 2011 it is still nearly impossible for most people displaced from the Golan to meet family members there. Separated family members are generally unable to attend funerals, weddings, births or other important family events, although the Israeli government sometimes gives individuals permission on a case-by-case basis. Students, pilgrims and brides have been regularly allowed to cross the separation line, under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 21 March 2005, 16 March 2007 and 28 June 2004; Syria Today, 1 January 2005; UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, Sect.B). Since the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, people from different sides of the demarcation line have been able to meet in Amman, while links have improved with internet and telephone access.

Prospects for durable solutions

With the government not recognising that its actions have caused displacement, it is not foreseeable that these IDPs will achieve durable solutions. Except for the case of the Golan Heights, neither the government, nor the international organisations have acknowledged the internal displacement in Syria. Those whose houses have been destroyed or damaged have often been victims of repression intended to dissuade other alleged opponents of the government. Thus there is no prospect of compensation or assistance by the government, and it is unlikely that victims would

have approached pursued perpetrators of human rights violations or sought reparations.

Highlighting the situation of Golanese IDPs suits the government's objective of underlining the demarcation prior to the 1967 war as its international border with Israel. Therefore the government has asked various UN bodies to take up their cause in order to maintain the pressure on Israel.

Neither the return of the displaced population nor compensation for their property loss can be envisaged without a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. This would depend on solutions to the issues of water rights (the Golan is a crucial source of Israel's drinking water), disputed boundaries, and security (ICG, 16 July 2002; Middle East, July 2007).

Attempts to negotiate a political solution to the conflict between Israel and Syria began in 1991 at a peace conference on the Middle East convened in Madrid. In 2000, negotiations broke down over disagreements over the Golan. The Israeli government had insisted on a return to the Protectorate borders of 1948, but the government of Syria insisted on an unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 line, which would ensure Syria greater access to the Sea of Galilee (MEMRI, 23 Jan 2000; The Guardian, 8 May 2003 and 17 July 2003). Prospects for the restitution of the Golan and the return of the displaced population are also complicated by the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in the area.

National response

The Syrian government has regularly presented its concerns regarding the ongoing occupation of the Golan and the return of IDPs to the UN's human rights mechanisms and the Security Council. Although Syria regained control of the area around Quneitra in 1974, there has been little significant progress in facilitating returns to the Syrian-controlled Golan and Quneitra in particu-

lar. The government has kept Quneitra in ruins as a memorial to the Israeli incursion and ongoing occupation of the rest of the Golan, but in 2005 it inaugurated a new hospital and the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two villages destroyed in the 1967 war (Syria Today, March 2005; IHT, 23 October 2004).

Grassroots organisations on both sides of the demarcation line have called for the situation of IDPs to be resolved. Several local groups have formed among displaced Syrians to raise awareness of their plight, such as the Popular Commission for the Liberation of the Golan, but some of these groups also appear to have militant political motives (Syria Today, March 2007; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 November 2006; MERIP, 26 July 2007). Israeli activists have also lobbied their government to restart peace negotiations on the Golan, and to respect the right of displaced Syrians to return to their homes.

It remains doubtful whether the government is genuinely willing to integrate its Kurdish population and resolve the situations of those it forcibly displaced in the 1970s. It has so far continued to oppress them instead. In 1977, Administrative Directive 15801 erased the Kurdish names of places and towns in favour of new Arabic names: the Kurd Dagh region was renamed "Jabal al-'Uruba" (the Arab's Mountain) and Kubani "Ain 'Arab" (the Arab's water source). It prohibited Kurds from using their own language in schools, workplaces and in publications, and from celebrating holidays such as Nowruz (HRW, 2009 and 1993).

In September 2008, Presidential Decree 48 restricted property transactions in border areas. Inhabitants of these regions, mainly Kurds, have since needed an authorisation to buy, sell, repair or extend their properties; the authorities have no deadlines within which they must give authorisations, nor do they have to qualify their decisions. Kurds have seen this decision as further limiting their demographic and economic growth (HRW, 2009).

However, since the 2011 protests began, President al-Assad has announced reforms such as the end of the emergency laws and the single party policy. In April he announced that Syrian citizenship would be restituted to the 220,000 Ajanib stateless Kurds (not the 80,000 Maktoum stateless Kurds), although these reforms have not been put into effect (Anne Dekker, 2011; CNN, 7 April 2011; AI, 2011).

The president has later adopted an increasingly confrontational tone, claiming that the "troubles" are caused by violent extremist groups, while the violent repression of the civilian population continues.

International response

A number of UN agencies are present in Syria, but most operate under a development framework and none has adopted a role in monitoring humanitarian needs or providing assistance to IDPs. The plight of IDPs and other victims of human rights violations by government security forces has been taken up by human rights monitors such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Minority Rights Group.

The UN has reaffirmed on numerous occasions that Israel's annexation of the Golan in 1981 was without international legal effect and urged it to allow the IDPs to return and recover their properties. The UN's Human Rights Council (and previously the UN Commission on Human Rights) has long limited its response to reminding Israel of its responsibilities and condemning it for its violations of past resolutions. In November 2006 the Council emphasised that the displaced population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties (UN HRC, Resolutions 2/3, 9 January 2007).

Otherwise, the position of the international community on Syria has not enabled strong action in

favour of IDPs and other vulnerable groups there. The UN Security Council has not condemned the government, due to its consistent support by China and Russia; and economic sanctions have had little impact on already limited international trade. Crucially, UN and other humanitarian organisations have unanimously chosen not to condemn the government so as not to jeopardise their presence in the country. Thus no humanitarian support has been given to Syrian IDPs, even those from the Golan, but foreign refugees have been allowed in and supported by the Syrian authorities, in part on the basis of its pan-Arab ideology (Chatelard, June 2011).

Regional organisations such as the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation never raised the issue of minority rights, and even supported the Syrian government in its repression by adopting a similar stance on Kurdish identity and consistently diverting attention to the Israeli occupation of the Golan and the Palestinian territories.

The determination of protesters in the face of brutal repression has, however, increasingly forced the international community to react. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) established a fact-finding mission in April, but it was never granted access to Syria. In August, UNRWA condemned the firing on Palestinian refugees in al-Ramel camp and called for immediate humanitarian access (Ali Abunumah, 2011; IRIN, 2011). In October, efforts to pass a UN Security Council Resolution on Syria were thwarted by the vetoes of China and Russia. Regional states such as Turkey denounced the repression of civilians, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Tunisia withdrew their ambassadors. In an unprecedented step, the United States and French ambassadors stayed in Hama for a few days in July ahead of an expected retaliatory attack by government forces. This gesture allowed the people of Hama to organise one of the largest protests of those months, but after the diplomats left the

security forces attacked, killing over 130 people (AFP, August 2011; UN Watch, August 2011).

The Arab League only mounted pressure and proposed a peace plan in late 2011, after some of its Gulf members and Turkey, and most importantly China and Russia, criticised the military repression. On 2 November, the Syrian government accepted the peace plan, which required them to end the violence, take troops off the streets and release imprisoned protesters, but the next day, it was reported that Syrian tanks had opened fire on the inhabitants of Homs (BBC, November 2011).

The ICRC has operated in Syria since 1967, to restore and maintain family links broken by Israel's occupation (ICRC, 28 June 2004 *and* 19 June 2003; Arabic News, 14 November 2002). The ICRC continues to call for the resumption of the family visit programme (which was stopped in 1992) to enable people separated from their displaced family members to meet in Syria for two weeks every year (ICRC, 23 March 2007).

The ICRC has also been at the forefront of the international response to the protests in 2011. In July, it was granted access to Dara'a and Idlib after it criticised the poor access in early May, and its president visited Damascus in June. The ICRC and the Syrian Red Crescent distributed essential food items to over 5,000 people and sleeping kits to over 2,500 people. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has also provided material assistance to some 2,000 Palestinian refugees who were displaced in August (CICR, July 2011).

Note: This is a summary of IDMC's internal displacement profile on Syria. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.

IDMC aims to support better international and national responses to situations of internal displacement and respect for the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are often among the world's most vulnerable people. It also aims to promote durable solutions for IDPs, through return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country.

IDMC's main activities include:

- Monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalised violence and violations of human rights;
- Researching, analysing and advocating for the rights of IDPs;
- Training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs;
- Contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

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