

SYRIA

Trapped in the country, and out of the picture

SPOTLIGHT

By any measure, the humanitarian situation in Syria worsened significantly in 2015. The country's civil war is now in its sixth year, with four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council actively engaged in the hostilities, and it has caused one of the worst displacement crises since World War Two.^{81, 82} As of December, intense fighting and violence had forced more than 10.9 million people, or over half of the country's pre-war population, to flee their homes. Put another way, an average of 50 families have been displaced every hour of every day since 2011.⁸³ Of the total, at least 6.6 million people have been internally displaced.⁸⁴

The bulk of international attention has focused on the millions of people who have risked their lives and those of their children to seek safety elsewhere in the region or in Europe, with diminishing hope of finding safety, acceptance and opportunity. Having initially admitted large numbers of refugees, however, neighbouring countries have increasingly restricted the flow of people out of Syria, or sealed their borders altogether.⁸⁵

As a result, hundreds of thousands of people are trapped inside the country, abandoned in camps or staying with host communities near border points with no legal escape route and often living in subhuman conditions.⁸⁶

The main causes of casualties and displacement in Syria are well known. They include indiscriminate attacks in populated areas, the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure such as schools and healthcare facilities, and sieges during which people are deliberately deprived of aid and basic services such as food, water and medical care.⁸⁷ Such acts were relentless in 2015, and as of October, at least 1.3 million people had been newly displaced, many for the second or third time.⁸⁸

Despite a broad awareness of these drivers, there is relatively little understanding of their specific consequences: who the IDPs are, where they flee to and in what number, and what their needs are. This incomplete picture and the failure to conduct an accurate assessment of the situation

mean that the humanitarian response, which is already overwhelmed, is unlikely to be using the resources available efficiently.

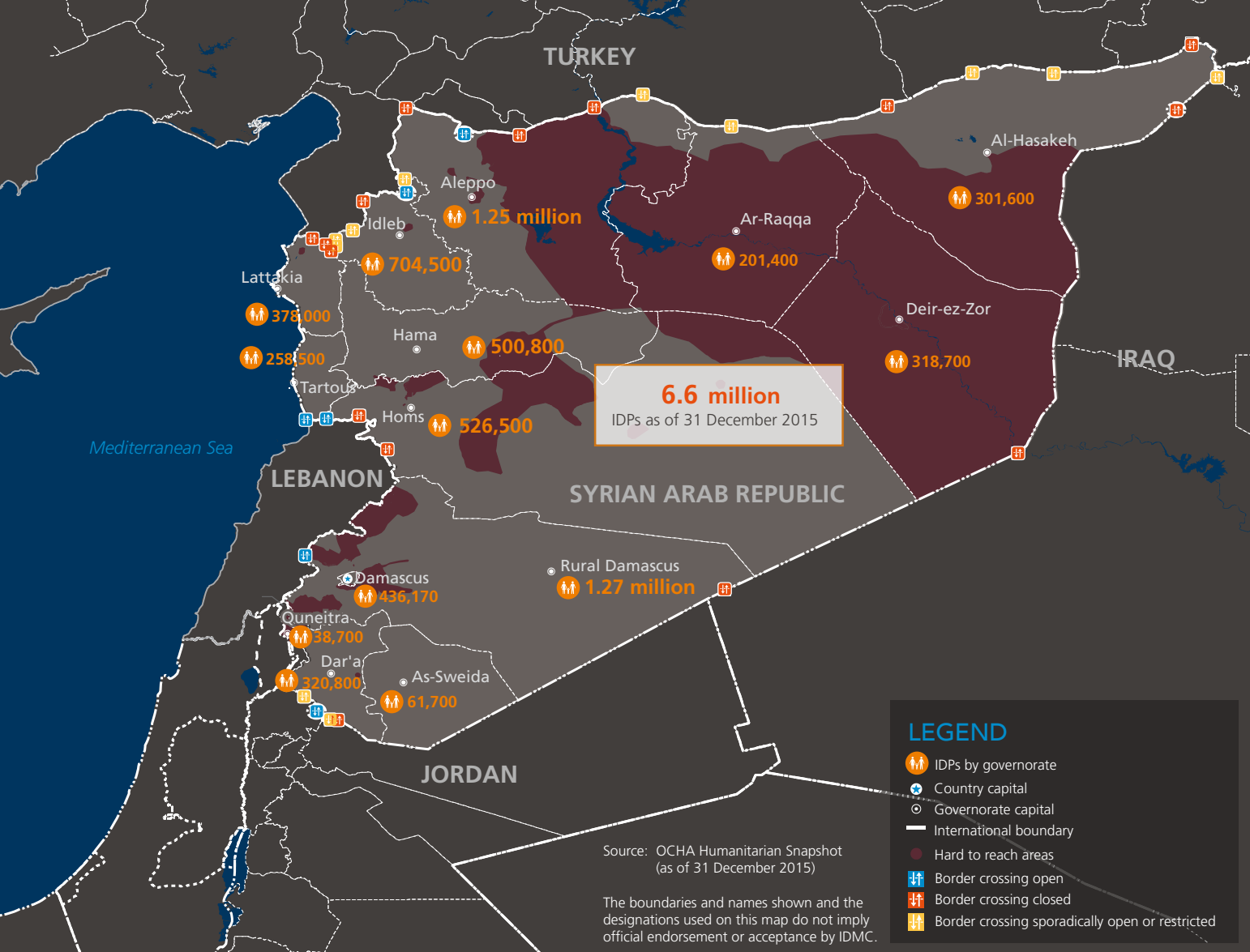
The limitations of current data collection efforts worldwide, as outlined in our confidence assessment tool (see methodological annex), can be broadly grouped into three categories in Syria – security and access restrictions, the political environment and methodological challenges.

More than 4.5 million people were living in areas of the country that the UN considered to be either difficult or near impossible to reach in 2015, including besieged cities, and humanitarians had less access than in 2014.^{89, 90} The number of people living in areas OCHA classified as besieged more than doubled from 2014 to almost 500,000 people in early 2016, of whom less than one per cent received food aid.⁹¹

Monitoring internal displacement was further hampered by the intensity of the conflict and the volatility of its frontlines. The presence of the Islamic State (also known as ISIL and ISIS) made the north-eastern governorates of Ar-Raqqah and Deir Ez-Zor particularly difficult to access, and the lack of data collection in such areas is likely to have led to significant under-reporting.

The unpredictable complexity of Syria's political environment also impedes the collection of reliable data. OCHA's displacement estimates, for example, which are only aggregated at the country level once a year, are based on information gathered from various government entities, UN agencies and the Syrian Red Crescent Society. In areas under opposition control, it has also had to rely on NGOs active there and local authorities. As such, data collection and reporting are subject to the influence of parties to the conflict, including some that have played a central role in causing displacement in the first place.⁹²

Methodological challenges meantime may result in under-reporting or double counting, and a distorted understanding of the needs of people fleeing within and beyond Syria. The estimated 6.6 million IDPs in the country as of the end of 2015 is fewer than the 7.6 million at the end



of 2014,⁹³ but the figure relative to the population as a whole has most likely increased, given the number of people who have fled abroad. The current reporting systems for refugees and asylum seekers also make it very difficult to know how many were formerly IDPs. As such, when figures for IDPs and refugees are combined, many people are counted twice.

The fact that many, if not most IDPs have been forced to flee more than once presents another methodological challenge. Multiple displacements are difficult to track in any context, and particularly so in Syria. On the one hand, such people may not be counted at all because they live in host communities where they are largely invisible, but on the other multiple displacement may mean that people are counted more than once – each time they are displaced.

Agencies that estimate the number of IDPs in different parts of the country use different methodologies, and those trapped in besieged cities will have been displaced relatively short distances given their inability to leave the area. Efforts to

count these IDPs effectively are hampered both by the methodological challenge of identifying them among the besieged population as a whole, and by the lack of access to areas under siege.

Compared with the attention given to Syrian refugees, the country's IDPs have been neglected, with significant implications for humanitarian funding and assistance, not to mention the lives of those affected.⁹⁴ The pace of displacement remains relentless, and people are likely to continue to uproot their families at a similar rate unless the fighting is brought to an end.⁹⁵ Despite needs increasing throughout 2015, it was harder than ever to get aid to the most desperate.⁹⁶

Data gathering is a vital part of saving lives. Timely and reliable information on the trajectories of families fleeing violence within Syria and the tipping point to cross the country's border contribute to a better understanding of their situation. This in turn improves the quality of advocacy and programming on their behalf, and ultimately the likelihood that efforts to protect and assist them will be better resourced and targeted.