

# Syria's Medical Community Under Assault



*"The targeting of the medical community in Syria has reached epic proportions. The insidious attacks on medical professionals, facilities, and transport have devastated the country's public health infrastructure, exacerbating an already overwhelming crisis."*  
- Donna McKay, PHR executive director

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## Introduction

Since the war began in Syria in 2011, hospitals, field clinics, ambulances, and vehicles transporting medicine and medical supplies have been deliberately targeted for destruction by government and opposition forces. Medical personnel have also been arrested, tortured, executed, and "disappeared." These crimes against the principle of medical neutrality – which ensures safe access to medical facilities, protects health care workers and their patients, and allows medical workers to provide unbiased care – have compounded the suffering of civilians and hastened the devastation of an already fragile health care system.

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## Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Destruction of Medical Facilities
- 2 Loss of Medical Personnel
- 3 Resulting Health Consequences
- 4 References

Syrian doctors treat a wounded man in a field hospital in the besieged rebel-held city of Qusayr.

Photo: Antonio Pampliega/AFP/Getty Images



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## Destruction of Medical Services

As of April 2013, 37 percent of hospitals in Syria were out of service and 20 percent were partially damaged.<sup>1</sup>

As of July 2013:

- 92 percent of ambulances had been damaged<sup>2</sup> and 52 percent were out of service,<sup>3</sup>
- Almost half the public health centers in Homs were no longer in operation,<sup>4</sup> and
- 70 percent of health centers in Aleppo, Deir ez Zour, and Idlib governorates were either damaged or out of service.<sup>5</sup>

In July 2012, Aleppo's blood bank was bombed.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the 2.5 million people living in the city of Aleppo have been without blood supply or blood bags.<sup>7</sup>



Remains of a rebel field hospital in Qusayr in Syria's central Homs province.

Photo: AFP/Getty Images

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## Loss of Medical Personnel

As of September 2013, 15,000 doctors had fled the country.<sup>8</sup>

- Of the 6,000 physicians practicing in Aleppo Governorate before the war,<sup>9</sup> only 250 remained as of July 2013.<sup>10</sup>
- While Eastern Ghouta had 1,000 doctors before the war, only an estimated 30 remained as of December 2013.<sup>11</sup>
- Little to no mental health services are available, as most mental health professionals have left the country.<sup>12</sup>

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## Killings and Abductions

As of January 24, 2014, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria reported that at least 398 medical personnel have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, of which 149 were doctors, 82 were nurses, 80 were medics, and 40 were pharmacists.<sup>13</sup>

As of mid-November 2013, 32 Syrian Arab Red Crescent workers had died while carrying out humanitarian work in Syria, all clearly displaying the red crescent emblem.<sup>14</sup>

On January 2, 2014, five international Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff members were taken from their house in northern Syria; as of January 10, MSF was still working to secure their return.<sup>15</sup>

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## Resulting Health Consequences

An estimated 9.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, as of November 2013.<sup>16</sup>

179 deaths had been caused directly by the denial of access to medical assistance, as of January 27, 2014.<sup>17</sup>

70,000 cancer and 5,000 dialysis patients are not receiving necessary treatment.<sup>18</sup>

Hospitals do not have refrigeration to store blood, and they do not have the testing materials to determine blood type; patients have died from transfusions of the wrong blood type.<sup>19</sup>

In Hama governorate, an average of 30–35 malnutrition cases are reported every day by Charity for Social Care, a local NGO running a clinic.<sup>20</sup>

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## Outbreak of Disease

Syria is facing its first polio outbreak since 1999, with 71 reported cases of acute flacid paralysis (AFP), 11 of which have been proven through testing to be wild poliovirus.<sup>21</sup> The WHO has confirmed 17 cases of polio virus,<sup>22</sup> an incurable disease that continues to spread in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan, as well as the Horn of Africa.

Before the war there were fewer than 3,000 cases of leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease that affects several internal organs; there are now over 100,000 cases.<sup>23</sup>



A doctor carries a wounded boy at a hospital in Syria's northern city of Aleppo, who was injured when a shell, released by regime forces, hit his house.

Photo: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/GettyImages

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## Limited Supplies and Medications

There is a dire need for anesthetics, blood, blood bags, antibiotics, infant vaccines, hospital beds, electricity, fuel, radios, and nurses.<sup>24</sup>

Local production of pharmaceuticals has fallen by 90 percent, as of June 2013.<sup>25</sup>

Many pharmacists are selling medicine at extremely high prices;<sup>26</sup> a months' supply of hypertensive medicine costs 15 times what it did pre-war,<sup>27</sup> and phenobarbiturates cost 30 times more.<sup>28</sup>

Clean water supply in conflict-affected areas has reportedly decreased to one third of pre-crisis levels; water pumping in Deir ez Zor in eastern Syria has dropped by up to 90 percent.<sup>29</sup>

# Syria is facing its first polio outbreak since 1999.

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\*The ongoing conflict inside Syria has made the verification of statistics around the crisis particularly challenging. However, Physicians for Human Rights has cross-referenced information and sources whenever possible in order to provide the most accurate and up-to-date numbers and statistics.



Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) uses medicine and science to document and call attention to mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. PHR was founded in 1986 on the idea that health professionals, with their specialized skills, ethical duties, and credible voices, are uniquely positioned to stop human rights violations. PHR's investigations and expertise are used to advocate for persecuted health workers, the prevention of torture, the investigation of mass atrocities, and holding those who violate human rights accountable.



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