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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Syrian doctors treat a wounded man in a field hospital in the besieged rebel-held city of Qusayr.
Photo: Antonio Pampliega/AFP/Getty Images

“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
Eastern Ghota had 1,000 doctors before the war; an estimated 30 remained as of December 2013.

### Destruction of Medical Services

In the first 10 weeks of 2014, 20 separate attacks on medical facilities were reported.1

As of April 2013, 37 percent of hospitals in Syria were out of service and 20 percent were partially damaged.2

As of July 2013:

- 92 percent of ambulances had been damaged3 and 52 percent were out of service,4
- Almost half the public health centers in Homs were no longer in operation,5 and
- 70 percent of health centers in Aleppo, Deir ez Zour, and Idlib governorates were either damaged or out of service.6

In July 2012, Aleppo’s blood bank was bombed.7 Since then, the 2.5 million people living in the city of Aleppo have been without blood supply or blood bags.8

In besieged Yarmouk camp, where there were formerly 100–120 pharmacies, the Palestine Hospital now hosts the only pharmacy still in operation.9

Remains of a rebel field hospital in Qusayr in Syria’s central Homs province.
Photo: AFP/Getty Images

### Loss of Medical Personnel

As of March 5, 2014, 440 medical personnel had reportedly been killed since the beginning of the conflict, including 161 doctors, 90 Nurses, 83 medics, and 45 pharmacists, among others.10 Little to no mental health services are available, as most mental health professionals have left the country.11

As of September 2013, 15,000 doctors had fled the country.12

- Of the 1,171 doctors practicing in Ministry of Health hospitals in Aleppo Governorate before the war,13 only 292 remained as of September 2013.14 These physicians, combined with some 250 working in opposition-controlled areas,15 must provide medical services for 4,868,000 people living in the governorate.
- While Eastern Ghota had 1,000 doctors before the conflict broke out, an estimated 30 remained as of December 2013.16

### Targeting of Humanitarian Aid Workers

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.17

On January 2, 2014, five international Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff members were taken from their house in northern Syria; as of March 12, MSF was still working to secure their release.18
An estimated 9.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, as of November 2013.

Targeting of Humanitarian Aid Workers (cont.)

On February 8, 2014, after a ceasefire was negotiated for the besieged city of Homs, two trucks delivering food and medical supplies to civilians were targeted by heavy fire, leaving a Red Crescent paramedic wounded and forcing the trucks to turn back; regime and rebel forces accused each other of the attacks. In besieged Yarmouk camp, at least 12 medical workers have been arrested, six of whom remain unaccounted for; one allegedly died from torture and ill-treatment. Many other medical workers have left the camp in fear of arrest.

Resulting Health Consequences

An estimated 9.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, as of December 2013.

As of March 5, 2014, at least 186 deaths had been caused directly by the denial of access to medical assistance.

70,000 cancer and 5,000 dialysis patients are not receiving necessary treatment.

Hospitals do not have refrigeration to store blood and lack the testing materials to determine blood type; patients have died from transfusions of the wrong blood type.

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.

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

After rebels agreed to a truce that would end the eight-month government siege of Yarmouk Camp, 40,000 people are still stuck inside the camp, slowly starving to death. Amnesty International reports that 179 people died from food and medical shortages between July 2013 and February 2014. Civilians have been shot at by snipers while foraging for edible plants. As of February 2014, around 60 percent of Yarmouk residents were suffering from malnutrition and jaundice. Yarmouk has also seen a rise in scabies and eczema (skin ailments due to endemic malnutrition and lack of hygiene), keratomalacia (an eye disorder caused by vitamin A deficiency), and rickets (caused by deficiencies in vitamin D and calcium).

In Moadamiya, a besieged district in Western Ghouta, food scarcity has resulted in an average 20 kilograms of weight loss per person.

More women are choosing to give birth by caesarian section in order to secure the timing of their delivery and not be in labor in an insecure context. Before the conflict, 19 percent of mothers chose to deliver via caesarian sections. By 2013, 45 percent of mothers were choosing caesarian sections, which increase the mother’s risk of infection, complications from anesthesia, hemorrhaging, and blood loss, among other issues.
At least 186 deaths had been caused directly by the denial of access to medical assistance.

### Outbreak of Disease

Syria is facing its first polio outbreak since 1999, with 140 reported cases of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP). The WHO has confirmed 23 cases of polio virus, 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 caused by unsanitary conditions and exacerbated by malnutrition that affects several internal organs; there are now over 100,000 cases.

In 2010 and 2011, Syria had 26 and 13 reported cases of measles respectively. Vaccination coverage for measles has dropped by 80 percent, and now at least 7,000 people are affected with the illness.

In the first two weeks of January 2014, there were 30 reported cases of Meningitis in children under five, more than double the cases reported during the same time in 2010. Meningitis is preventable with a vaccine. Left untreated, it can kill up to 50 percent of patients and leave others with hearing loss, learning disabilities, and severe brain damage.

### Limited Supplies and Medications

An assessment of 111 sub-districts in northern Syria released in January 2014 found that:

- Nearly 500,000 people were in acute need of health assistance and an additional 2.8 million in moderate need of health assistance.
- 20 percent of the population surveyed reported severe or life-threatening problems with access to food.
- In Homs governorate, there was a 15 percent reported morbidity rate for those who contracted diarrhea.

An injured Syrian woman rides in the back of a van as it arrives outside a hospital following an air strike by regime forces in the northern city of Aleppo.

Photo: TAUSEEF MUSTAFA/AFP/GettyImages
There is a dire need for anesthetics, blood, blood bags, antibiotics, infant vaccines, hospital beds, electricity, fuel, radios, and nurses. Doctors have used old clothes for bandages, and some patients have chosen to be knocked out with a metal bar because anesthetics were unavailable.

As of June 2013, local production of pharmaceuticals had fallen by 90 percent, leading many pharmacists to sell medicine at extremely high prices.

Ar Raqqah National Hospital is the only hospital with dialysis services throughout the entire Ar Raqqah governorate. There is a shortage of medicine, machines, and medical personnel. Between September 2013 and January 2014, Syrian Network for Human Rights documented at least 64 deaths in the Dialysis Section of Ar Raqqah National Hospital due to medical insufficiencies.

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.

References

1. Compiled from open source videos, articles, reports, and social media.

*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.
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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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