Let Syria’s Health Professionals Work

World leaders meeting in London to address the Syrian refugee crisis must prioritize the country’s shattered health system by creating mechanisms for thousands of displaced Syrian medical professionals to temporarily practice in neighboring countries to which they have fled.

Syria’s Health Care in Crisis: The Facts

Since mid-March 2011, the Syrian government has waged an all-out assault on its own citizens, targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure in its ruthless and protracted campaign to crush opposition. Over the past five years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented a staggering rise in the deliberate bombing of non-military targets such as hospitals and clinics, and condemned the use of indiscriminate weapons such as barrel bombs and chemical weapons that instill terror and cause egregious injuries.

All of these attacks are devastating and deadly. But the destruction of health care infrastructure carries particularly wide-ranging and long-lasting consequences. The Syrian government’s unprecedented assault is not only disrupting emergency aid, it is also depriving whole communities of routine health care and threatening their very capacity to survive. As the international donor community contemplates the needs of Syria’s embattled population, protecting Syria’s capacity to rebuild its health care system is one of the most urgently-needed investments.

“You must be safe to save others … If you kill the physician or destroy the hospital, the medicine doesn’t benefit any people.”
– Urologist at a trauma hospital in Aleppo

From the start of the conflict, Syrian doctors, nurses, and other health professionals have suffered relentless attacks in what has become the worst assault on health care the world has ever seen. To date, PHR has documented that more than 700 health care workers have been shot, tortured to death, or otherwise killed in the Syrian conflict. Between March 2011 and the end of November 2015, 240 medical facilities were hit in 336 attacks. Fully 112 of those attacks were in 2015 alone, making it the worst year since the conflict began.

Under this constant barrage of violence, estimates indicate that more than half of Syria’s 30,000 doctors have fled – and as health care professionals are killed or driven out, entire communities are left without any medical care at all.
This is the reality in Syria now: repeated airstrikes and barrel bomb attacks resulting in multiple, life-threatening injuries among hundreds of thousands of civilians; decimation of health care infrastructure; deliberate depletion of the pool of trained health care workers; lack of vaccines, antibiotics, painkillers, and essential medical supplies; lack of access to clean water. Even one of these elements would have a devastating effect on any health care system. Together, they spell disastrous consequences for the mental and physical health of the Syrian people.

“Of course, the bill of blood we’ve paid hasn’t been cheap. Blood is covering the earth, but we hope something will come out of it – that we will eventually live in peace and safety.”
– Gynecologist who was forced to flee Syria for Turkey

The situation is only marginally better for the millions of Syrian refugees currently living in camps and settlements in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Whereas refugee streams in 2011 might have comprised mostly healthier individuals traveling ahead to set up a temporary safe haven for their families, now families, their resources depleted, send ahead their most vulnerable members – those who would surely die if they stayed inside Syria. Five years of intense conflict, lack of access to clean water, inadequate food supplies, and severely limited health care have resulted in a debilitated, traumatized, and in many cases dying population in urgent need of care.

Yet despite having fled active fighting, these remarkably courageous people face significant obstacles to care. Overwhelmed by incoming refugee flows, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, where the majority of Syrian refugees reside, do not have the necessary health infrastructure and supplies. This serious resource gap can and should be solved by significant investment in health care, both in camps and in the urban settings where most refugees have resettled.

There is an additional problem, however, which is less tied to monetary resources alone. Thousands upon thousands of Syria’s doctors, nurses, and other health professionals have fled; many live in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but are not allowed to practice medicine due to local regulations. To be sure, authorities anywhere have a legitimate interest in regulating who is allowed to practice medicine in their territory. But current restrictions compound the dire health care conditions in both camps and urban settlements and increase the burden on local health infrastructures, which must now serve refugee populations that – if allowed – could serve themselves as well as contribute to the health of the communities in which they temporarily reside.

“As a physician, I train to take care of traumatic cases. I can serve everywhere … We are experts also.”
– Director of the main surgical hospital in Aleppo

Deliberately depriving a needy population of available care is unconscionable. The regulations that prevent Syrian doctors and other skilled Syrian health professionals from practicing in neighboring countries unnecessarily exacerbate suffering and have consequences far beyond the immediate needs of the Syrian refugees. As the conflict drags into its sixth year without signs of abating, medical workers who have not been able to practice – or those
who fled without completing their training – are missing education and losing skills that will be crucial to rebuilding Syria’s now decimated health care system. In Syria, doctors and nurses who want to continue healing others are blocked by bombs. In neighboring countries they are blocked by regulations. While not uncomplicated, the regulatory roadblocks can be lifted without military action or UN Security Council agreement. This should be a priority.

**Recommendations**

We call on donor governments meeting in London in February to urgently convene the governments of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and their national medical councils, together with government and private donors, representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), key humanitarian NGO medical providers, and Syrian refugee medical groups, to:

- Develop and launch a rapid temporary assessment and licensing process for qualified Syrian health professionals in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to confirm their medical knowledge and assure quality of training;
- Create a streamlined system of temporary work authorization that will enable displaced Syrian health professionals to provide care for Syrian refugee patients in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey for the duration of the Syrian conflict, and until such time as these professionals can return to practice medicine safely and effectively in Syria;
- Invest in non-profit medical centers and support existing hospitals and clinics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey where qualified and authorized Syrian health professionals can provide affordable, and, where appropriate, free services to Syrian refugees, with systems for monitoring, regulating, and guaranteeing quality of service; and
- Invest in host countries’ medical education and residency programs, and in special grants and scholarships, to enable Syrian students whose training was interrupted by the conflict to become qualified and licensed health professionals in their temporary settings, where they can also contribute to treating the large Syrian refugee population.

Addressing this crisis through these proposed recommendations would demonstrate the world’s commitment to the health and well-being of the Syrian people, to the principles of mutual recognition of health professional qualifications, and to core commitments by the global community to sustainable development.

**About Physicians for Human Rights**

For 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used science and medicine to document and call attention to mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. PHR is a global organization founded 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 and medical facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.