

## How are the war in Syria and the refugee crisis affecting human trafficking?

By Claire Healy

### *Executive Summary*

Violence in Syria has been driving children, women and men from their homes for almost five years. ICMPD's new research study looks at the vulnerability of displaced Syrian people to trafficking in persons. The research found that people are often trafficked or exploited because they are not able to meet their basic needs. This is exacerbated by complications in relation to legal residence status in host countries and legal authorisation to work. While some trafficking is committed by highly organised criminal networks, the most common type of exploitation is at a lower level, involving fathers, mothers, husbands, extended family, acquaintances and neighbours. The context of general vulnerability means that there are often factors that leave families with no viable alternative for survival other than situations that could be defined as exploitation and trafficking in national and international law.

We therefore need a paradigm shift in how trafficking, refugee, migration and child protection policy are viewed in terms of access to protection. While policy-makers and practitioners might see themselves as working in distinct fields, on specific topics, the human beings in need of protection do not always fall under one single, clear-cut category. We must concentrate efforts to provide access to basic needs and safety for people displaced from and within Syria.

### *Current Context*

The study *Targeting Vulnerabilities* assesses the effects of the Syrian war and refugee crisis on trafficking in persons (TIP) in Syria and the surrounding region. The study applies an interdisciplinary methodology, combining primary research in the field with secondary desk research and remote consultations, as well as analysing qualitative and quantitative sources. The country research findings, together with regional desk research, were compiled and analysed for the study.

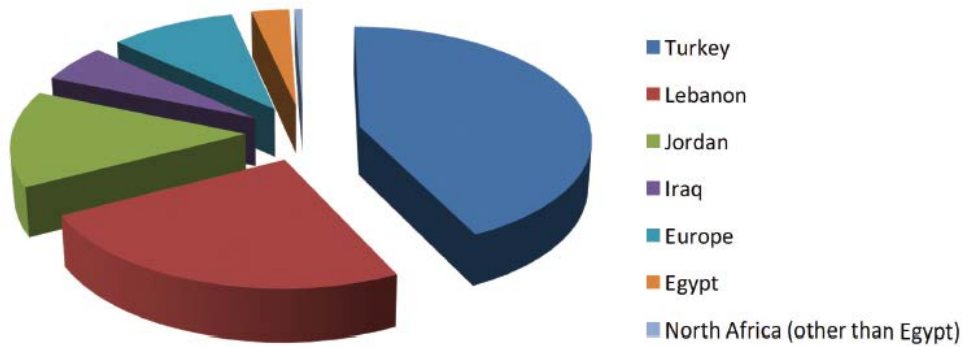
Four of Syria's neighbouring states, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, are the most important hosting countries worldwide for refugees from the war-torn country. Together they host 86.7% of Syria's refugees abroad. According to UNHCR data, an additional 441,246 Syrians sought asylum in Europe from April 2011 to August 2015, with 159,147 in Egypt and other North African countries, giving an overall total of 4,529,572 Syrian refugees.

None of the four hosting countries apply the 1951 UN Convention definition of a refugee to those fleeing the war in Syria. This means that people fleeing Syria are subject to specific *ad hoc* regulations issued prior to and since the outbreak of the war and the beginning of the forced migration movement. On the other hand, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have all ratified the 2000 UN Trafficking Protocol and passed legislation criminalising human trafficking.

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*Often people are trafficked or exploited because they are not able to meet their basic needs*

*New study, Targeting Vulnerabilities, examines the war's impact on trafficking in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq*



Registered Syrian Refugees

In Syria, just 17% of internally displaced people (IDPs) are in camps. Similarly, in all of the four hosting countries, the majority of Syrians are living outside of official refugee camps, among host communities. Lebanon has not authorised the setting up of any official refugee camps for Syrians, while in Iraq the proportion is 39%, in Jordan 19% and in Turkey 15% of all registered refugees. This affects refugees' and IDPs' access to essential humanitarian aid and other services like education, accommodation, vocational training and healthcare. Host communities have also been affected by the war and displacement, particularly the areas within each of the countries that have received higher proportions of IDPs and refugees.

*The majority of displaced Syrians are not living in camps*

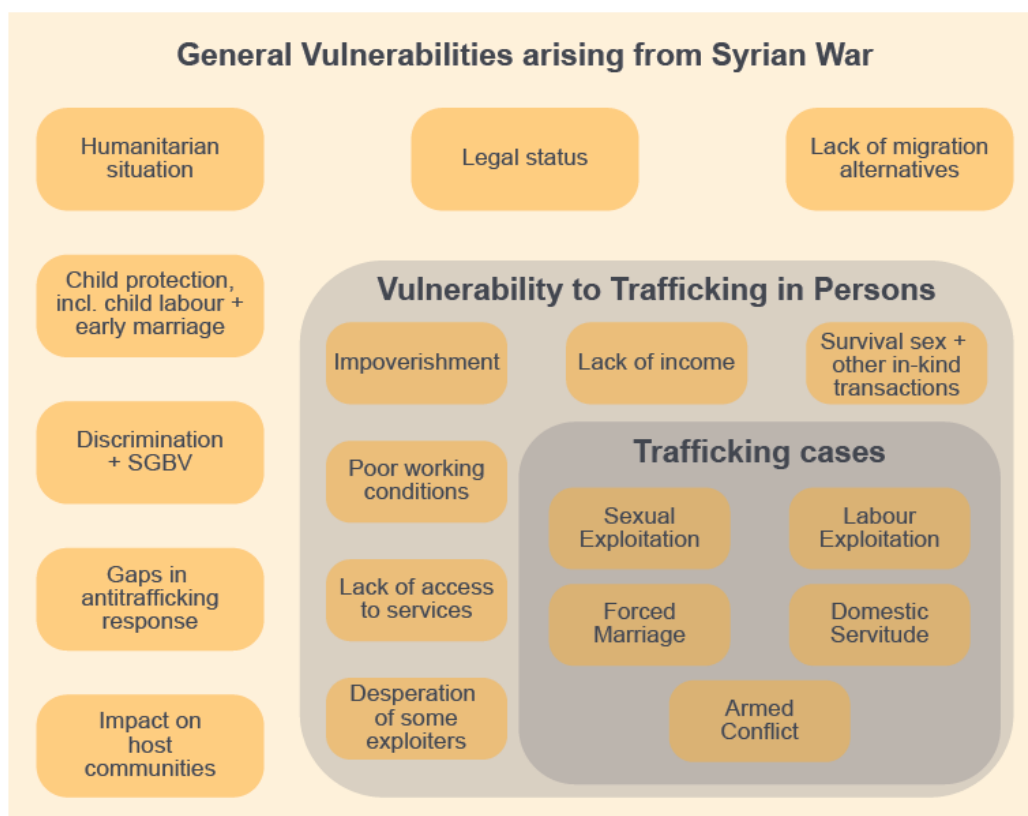


Areas of high population density of displaced Syrians

The violence that has characterised many parts of Syria since 2011, and certain areas within Iraq since mid-2014, has affected people in those territories and those who have fled abroad in a myriad of ways. The complexity of their situations is influenced by the war and violence itself, but also by the legal and institutional systems that they must navigate within Syria and in the four hosting countries in order to maintain a legal status, seek employment and generate income, access humanitarian aid and public services, and seek legal redress if they are victims of abuse.

The desperation of some of these people, who cannot provide for sustenance, accommodation and essential services for themselves and their families, can lead to them exploiting members of their own families. Nevertheless, not all exploiters and traffickers in this context are themselves in a situation of vulnerability, as others exploit and traffic vulnerable people as a form of war profiteering. In addition, a multitude of child protection issues arise in the context of the conflict and the refugee crisis, particularly children remaining out of school and not having birth registration, placing them more at risk of being trafficked.

**People are vulnerable because of the war and violence itself, but also because of the legal and institutional systems that they must navigate**



General Vulnerability, Vulnerability to Trafficking and Trafficking Cases  
 Note: SGBV = sexual and gender-based violence.

The war and displacement have also caused added vulnerability for migrants and refugees whose situation was already precarious prior to 2011 and who were in Syria when the war broke out, including:

- Palestinian refugees from Syria;
- Iraqi refugees;
- Stateless people;
- Refugees of other origins, particularly from Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia;
- Migrant domestic workers from South and Southeast Asia and East Africa.

Some refugees and displaced people have started to move on to countries outside the region, particularly EU Member States. While they are still within the five countries, the need to pay substantial sums of money - and possibly become indebted - to facilitators of internal movement and migrant smugglers is causing people to resort to risky methods of obtaining that money, rendering them vulnerable to trafficking. One major risk is that a situation of internal movement facilitation or migrant smuggling can develop into one of trafficking in persons.

**A risk is that internal movement facilitation or migrant smuggling can develop into trafficking in persons**

## *Main Research Findings*

The effects of the war and refugee crisis, placing people in a situation of increased vulnerability to trafficking in persons, have in some cases resulted in actual trafficking cases. This has not, however, manifested itself in a significant increase in the identification by the authorities of trafficking related to the war and refugee crisis.

People officially identified as trafficked in the countries under study since 2011 are mainly from Syria, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. Also, in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, national citizens were identified as trafficked internally. Most of the trafficking routes originating outside of the region continued largely unaffected by the Syrian war.

The research shows that the five countries under study have made significant efforts to respond to the displacement of IDPs and refugees. However, the incidence of trafficking in persons, and the nature and extent of vulnerabilities to trafficking, have been affected in a number of ways. These effects are partly related to the sheer magnitude of the displacement and partly to the legal, policy, infrastructural, security and socio-economic contexts in the five countries.

The classic organised crime paradigm commonly used for understanding trafficking does not fit neatly onto the actual situation of people trafficked or vulnerable to trafficking in the context of the Syrian conflict. Very severe forms of exploitation and trafficking are indeed taking place, committed by highly organised criminal networks, but the most common type of exploitation is at a lower level, involving fathers, mothers, husbands, extended family, acquaintances and neighbours.

Worst forms of child labour, child trafficking for labour exploitation, exploitation through begging and trafficking for sexual exploitation affected people in the countries under study before the war, but have now increased among Syrians. Particularly in the case of sexual exploitation, a certain replacement effect is in evidence, with Syrian women and girls exploited in prostitution, where before people trafficked for this purpose were of other nationalities. Child labour and child begging have been affected in the sense that conditions have become more severe, with more serious abuses of child rights. The incidence of these phenomena has also increased overall.

In most of the cases revealed through this research, trafficking is not a cross-border phenomenon related to the migratory movement itself, though cross-border trafficking is present in some cases. In general, the forms of trafficking in evidence target the vulnerabilities caused by displacement *post facto*, with the trafficking process beginning when IDPs and refugees are already among host communities.

Some forms of trafficking have emerged that are directly related to the war. This is the case for trafficking by Da'ish (ISIS) for sexual slavery, forced marriage and exploitation in armed conflict; and forced marriage and exploitation in armed conflict by other parties in the Syrian war. Nevertheless, not all forms of human trafficking have been influenced by the Syrian crisis. Indeed, the trafficking of migrants - most of them women - for exploitation in domestic servitude continues, and was only marginally affected by the refugee crisis in the host countries. Even within Syria, since the start of the conflict in 2011, some migrant domestic workers continue to be exploited in domestic servitude.

***There is no significant increase in the identification of trafficked people by the authorities***

***The most common type of exploitation involves family members, acquaintances and neighbours***

## *Policy Recommendations*

Because anti-trafficking capacities are significantly affected by the ongoing war and related conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and because the hosting countries are overwhelmed with the arrival of large groups of people fleeing Syria, these recommendations primarily address vulnerabilities to trafficking. The primary focus is therefore prevention of trafficking. However, the protection of trafficked people and the prosecution of perpetrators is also a central concern, and recommendations in this sense are also included.

***Anti-trafficking capacities are significantly affected by the ongoing war and related conflicts in Syria and Iraq***

1. Address low-level **trafficking by family members and acquaintances**, as well as by organised criminal groups.
2. Identify **trafficking among refugees** and provide protection to refugees who are trafficked.
3. Provide access to **regular employment and regularisation of legal status**.
4. Guarantee **sufficient funding and fair distribution of aid**, including for non-camp refugees and IDPs.
5. Ensure **birth registration and schooling** for children.
6. Address forms of **trafficking directly related to the war**.
7. Incorporate **internal trafficking** into anti-trafficking policy and initiatives.
8. Enforce sanctions to **combat abusive practices**.
9. Identify and respond to **labour exploitation**.
10. Combat gender-based discrimination and reduce the risk of **sexual and gender-based violence**.
11. Address the **vulnerabilities of host communities**.
12. **Reform kafala systems** for the immigration and employment of migrant domestic workers.
13. Significantly expand **legal channels for settlement** outside the region.

By implementing these recommendations, we can contribute to reducing people's vulnerability and increasing their resilience. We need to offer them alternatives that are not merely the 'least bad option', and provide them with what they need in order to better cope with the ravages of violence and displacement.



### *Related Publication and References*

The study 'Targeting Vulnerabilities: The Impact of the Syrian War and Refugee Situation on Trafficking in Persons – A Study of Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq' can be downloaded in full, including all references to field research at: [www.icmpd.org/our-work/capacity-building/trafficking-in-human-beings/publications/](http://www.icmpd.org/our-work/capacity-building/trafficking-in-human-beings/publications/)

The Study is the result of a research project to assess the impact of the Syrian war and refugee crisis on trafficking in persons in Syria and the surrounding region. The project 'Assessment of the Impact of the Syrian War and Refugee Crisis on Trafficking in Persons (AIS-TIP)' is funded by the US Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (J/TIP) and implemented by ICMPD.

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