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THE DEFINING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OF OUR TIME

David Miliband

TO be asked to set out the humanitarian situation in Syria (and, necessarily now, Iraq) is to be asked to describe extraordinary heroism and appalling failure, great valor and huge cruelty, significant sacrifice and depressing nonchalance. All these qualities have been, and are, in evidence. The figures of death, destruction and displacement remain shocking; even more shocking is the lack of a plan—or effort to create a plan—to bring the suffering to an end. The purpose of this article, therefore, goes beyond description, to exhortation.

Last month, the conflict in Syria entered its fifth year. March 2011—when anti-government protests first erupted in the southern city of Daraa—seems like a lifetime ago for the people served by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and other non-governmental organiza-

tions. The brutal, seemingly endless violence that has since consumed the country, spread across its borders, and sucked in weapons and fighters from across and beyond the region, has claimed more than 220,000 lives, and left every second Syrian in need of humanitarian aid. Satellite imagery reveals that just a fifth of Syria's pre-war lights remain on—such is the devastation wrought by shells, rockets and barrel bombs; in places like Aleppo that figure is over 95 percent.

Half the country's population have abandoned their homes: the four million people who have fled Syria constitute the second-largest refugee population on earth (after the Palestinians). And some three million children—an entire generation of Syrians—cannot go to school, robbed of an education and the skills they will need to rebuild whatever remains of their country.

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David Miliband speaking at the IRC 2014 Freedom Award Dinner

The IRC has been providing life-saving care and support to those affected by the conflict since early 2012 on the ground inside Syria, as well as in cities, towns, and camps across the Middle East. Eight decades of work in the world's war zones and disaster settings have not lessened the shock of what has befallen the Syrian people and their neighbors in the region. The exodus from Syria, and the needs generated by its civil war, have created the biggest humanitarian crisis since the 1940s.

This essay describes the crisis, analyzes its trajectory, and sets out several priorities for action. Four years in, three key points are evident; they reveal a great deal about the nature of conflict

in the twenty-first century, threatening disaster for the people of Syria, the Middle East, and beyond.

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

First, the mismatch between the needs of Syria's civilian population and the help they are receiving is growing—taking a massive toll on the region. One million people inside Syria required humanitarian assistance in 2011. That number now stands at 12.2 million; among them some 7.6 million people driven from their homes, but still trapped inside Syria's borders.

Global contributions are not keeping pace with these needs, which have increased at more than six times the rate

of funding provided since the beginning of the conflict. While food, water, shelter, healthcare, safe sanitation, and hygiene services are desperately required, last year's UN appeal to meet basic needs inside Syria was only 48 percent supported—down from 68 percent in 2013. So the mismatch is not just bad; it is getting worse.

It is not just a lack of resources that is preventing aid agencies from getting assistance into the hands of those in

need. Successive UN Security Council resolutions demanding an end to the litany of international humanitarian law violations perpetrated daily in Syria have yet to improve Syrians' ability to receive basic humanitarian assistance. By

blocking civilian movement, attacking aid convoys, kidnapping humanitarian personnel, and rejecting or miring in red tape official requests for access, the parties to the conflict are disrupting the delivery of lifesaving aid to 40 percent of those in need. All told, some 4.8 million people are currently languishing in areas defined by the UN as "hard to reach"—an increase of more than one million from this time last year. Over 210,000 people are completely besieged, cut off from food, water, and medicine, their lifelines choked, and escape routes blocked.

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Amongst the four million Syrians who have managed to find safety in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, the discrepancy between needs and assistance is also increasing. In exile for years now, with their economic and personal assets long depleted, Syrian refugees urgently require food, water, shelter, fuel, clothing, and education. In Lebanon, the number of school-age refugees outstrips the entire intake of the country's public school system; most live in dwellings that expose them to the elements and

intruders. In Jordan, tens of thousands of families live below the absolute poverty line: rent accounts for more than half of refugees' monthly outlay, forcing parents to send their children to work long hours for meager pay.

And, yet, despite so much need, the UN's Syrian refugee appeal was just 64 percent funded last year, down from 73 percent in 2013, and global pledges to resettle the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in countries outside the region have failed to even approach a level appropriate to the scale of this crisis. At the time of writing (March 2015) the United States has admitted just 550 Syrian refugees in four years.

The impact upon Syria's neighbors of receiving such a massive influx of refu-

gees has been enormous, particularly as the vast majority of Syrians have moved into towns and cities rather than camps. Turkey has become the biggest refugee-hosting country in the world, and last autumn put the cost of hosting Syrian refugees at \$4.5 billion. In Lebanon, Syrians now constitute somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population: the World Bank estimates that the country's basic infrastructure will need investment of up to \$2.5 billion just to be restored to pre-crisis levels. Jordan, one of the most water-starved nations on the planet, hosts more than 620,000 registered refugees; proportionally equivalent to the United States absorbing the population of the United Kingdom. It puts the cost of hosting Syrians in 2014 alone at \$871 million.

These countries' public services, economies, resources, and social fabrics can no longer cope, and their governments are now taking steps to restrict the flow of refugees into their territory; only the most vulnerable can enter at present. There are reports of refugees being forcibly repatriated to Syria, sometimes over missing papers, and the space for refugees within the region—their ability

to access essential services, or earn a living—is shrinking. Lebanon is cracking down on illegal work; Jordan has halted free healthcare.

REGIONAL IMPACT

The second key point is that the Syria conflict is now, obviously, not just a cross-border conflict in terms of refugee flows, but also a trans-border conflict across the Syria-Iraq border.

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Beset with difficulties after years of dictatorship, war and sectarian violence, Iraq effectively constitutes more than a security and humanitarian second front in the Syria crisis, because it too has its own political, security, and humanitarian dynamics and vulnerabilities. The vacuum created by the civil war in the

central and eastern regions of Syria has given the militant jihadists of Al-Qaeda's erstwhile Iraqi franchise space to regroup, recruit, and rebrand as the Islamic State—storming back eastwards and wresting control of vast swaths of territory. In Iraq, some 2.2 million people now lie in areas under its control; violence between its fighters, Iraqi Government forces, and an assortment of armed groups over the course of

2014 resulted in the highest number of civilian casualties in the country since the bloody days of 2006–2007.

The scale and intensity of this violence have created huge challenges for the humanitarian community, which is struggling to respond to an increasingly complex tapestry of displacement in Iraq. Five million people are in need of aid, especially food and shelter, and more than two million people have been displaced internally since January 2014—joining some 750,000 forced from their homes in the 2003 Iraq War. Many have found shelter amongst host communities in the Kurdish region, alongside a quarter of a million Syrian refugees. A battle for control of Mosul, Iraq's second city—and possible Islamic State push on Baghdad—threatens to uproot many more. The UN is seeking \$2.2 billion to respond to humanitarian needs in Iraq; donors have to date provided just 39 percent of that amount.

The rise of the Islamic State has captured the world's attention, and seen a coalition of Western and Arab states emerge to forcibly halt the

militants' advance. With the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries now engaged in limited airstrikes, the responsibility to engage diplomatically is greater than ever.

But such cooperation has not extended to the political track of the Syria conflict, which leads to the third point: diplomatic energies aimed at securing an end to the war—and minimizing the impact of the fighting on civilians—have ebbed to their lowest levels yet. 'Friends of Syria' meetings once drew more than 100 nations. Today, the group has been hollowed out to a core group of less than a dozen countries—the days of such large-scale cooperation and focus seemingly over. Early

Arab League proposals, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's six-point plan, and the Geneva II conference of January 2014, yielded minimal results, but there was at least a sense of commitment and grim determination. Now the prospects of national-level reconciliation are so remote that UN Syria Envoy Staffan de Mistura's focus is on securing a temporary ceasefire in a single city.

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Meanwhile, diplomatic cooperation on Syria at the UN Security Council—which in 2013 yielded agreement on the destruction of the country's chemical weapons, as well as breakthrough humanitarian resolutions in 2014—has ceased, including in the area of securing compliance with the Council's humanitarian resolutions. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council in March 2015: “the conduct of hostilities by all parties continues to be characterized by widespread disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law and for the protection of civilians.” Civilians and civilian infrastructure continue to be deliberately targeted, and indiscriminate bombardment in densely populated areas kills, injures, and maims. For example the water and electrical supplies of more than two million people in the governorates of Aleppo and Daraa were willfully disrupted by warring parties in February, according to a recent report by the UN Secretary-General. More than half of Syria's hospitals have been destroyed or seriously damaged, and belligerents continue to murder medical personnel

and seize surgical supplies; some 5,000 schools have also been ruined.

Neither the Security Council nor warring parties have applied appropriate pressure to halt these and other flagrant violations of basic norms of warfare—abandoning Syria's civilians to their plight, whilst becoming complicit in eroding the credibility of the international legal system into obsolescence.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

This is the state of play. Each of the previous points reflects the nature of conflict in the twenty-first century: more wars within more states going on for longer, displacing more people for ever longer periods—the average length is now 17 years—and gradually eroding prospects of peace and reconstruction. In 2013, for the first time since World War II, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people in the world exceeded 50 million: the figure now stands at 51.2 million—the population of South Africa. In an urbanizing world, those forced to flee are increasingly making for towns and cities: more than half of all internally displaced persons are now in urban areas, while only a quarter of all refugees are in camps—creating a multitude of challenges for host communities and aid agencies.

Conflicts and complex emergencies like Syria now account for three-quarters of humanitarian crises—think Somalia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Yemen. The international system, weak and fragmented—the symmetrical certainties of the Cold War no longer providing geopolitical ballast—can neither achieve the consensus necessary to stop states collapsing, nor overcome increasing assertions of national sovereignty. It is similarly failing to stay the rolling back of hard-won laws and norms governing the conduct of war—not just in Syria, but in theatres many miles from Aleppo and Homs. Violations of international humanitarian law have increased steadily over the past decade. In 2013, violence against aid operations reached an all-time high, with 155 humanitarian workers killed and 134 kidnapped in 251 separate attacks; that year over 80 percent of those killed or injured by explosive weapons were civilians.

And while the number of people affected by humanitarian crises has almost doubled over the past decade, the annual cost of meeting the resultant needs has trebled, reaching \$19.9 billion in 2014. Despite record

levels of contributions in recent years, donors are not keeping up, and the gap between humanitarian needs and the resources provided to meet them continues to grow.

The humanitarian system cannot fix all of this, or tackle the root causes of so much and such deep intrastate disorder: the recrudescence of religious and ethnic politics as a conduit for political,

economic, and social grievances; the increasing inability of weak states to contain the schisms and conflicts that result; and the weakness of an international system characterized by division and hesitation.

But nor is it supposed to. Conflict begins when politics ends—and it is politics that ends

conflict. Humanitarian action deals with the fallout, providing relief, protection, and dignity to those in need. And, in the case of Syria, support for the humanitarian effort is fast fading, as fatigue and lethargy set in.

The challenge is to reverse this course. Even within the limits of a humanitarian perspective, there are some clear priorities. First, the UN Security Council and states with influ-

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ence over Syria's warring parties should take immediate steps to hold accountable all those who fail to honor their obligations under international humanitarian law. It must be made clear to belligerents who target, or show abject disregard for, civilians and civilian infrastructure that such violations cannot be committed with impunity. Pressure must also be brought to bear on all parties which restrict or undermine full, safe, and unfettered humanitarian access to those in need—regardless of whether the constraints are administrative or the result of deliberate violence or insecurity.

Second, and with the appalling interference with humanitarian access in mind, I proposed last year with former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that the Security Council's permanent members, along with key regional players like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, should each appoint a senior diplomat or politician to focus ongoing attention on the human consequences of the Syrian conflict, and to work with all stakeholders—the warring parties, their backers, the UN, NGOs—to improve help for all those in need. The U.S. Government has special envoys for the Syrian political

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crisis and the global anti-ISIL coalition: why not a humanitarian envoy, with a direct line to the American president and equipped with the resources, political muscle, and diplomatic support necessary to cut through red tape, document, and challenge restrictions on humanitarian access, mediate and monitor ceasefires, support the efforts of the UN emergency relief coordinator, and work through the detail of the Security Council's resolutions on the crisis?

Such envoys would also play a key role in supporting a third, critical course of action necessary to alleviate Syrians' suffering: a step change in the levels and range of aid delivered by UN agencies into Syria from neighboring states, and across

conflict lines within the country. The UN's agencies have yet to fully capitalize on the explicit authorization for such operations granted by the Security Council in July 2014: they need to do so, ramping up their cross-border work and including health and protection services in their convoys. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq need to facilitate cross-border work from their territory—including keeping border crossings open and streamlining administrative procedures for NGOs.

Finally, the UN's 2015 \$8.4 billion appeal for Syria and the region—the largest single aid request in history—must be funded. It is a fraction of the costs incurred by the United Kingdom, China, and Russia in staging, respectively, the London, Beijing, and Sochi Olympics this past decade. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq need direct financial assistance, as well as long-term development investment to repair their shaking infrastructure, reboot their public services, and start creating jobs for Syrians and the communities who host them. As UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres has pointed out, it is tragic rather than ironic that Lebanon and Jordan should be considered too wealthy for World Bank programs. Support for these countries is an essential counterpart to the vital call for them to keep their borders open to those fleeing Syria.

OUR BIGGEST FAILURE

None of these measures are a substitute for the political and diplomatic drive and imagination needed to bring this conflict—or series of conflicts—to a close. But the sheer scale of humanitarian needs created

over the past four years by the Syria conflict—along with the global failure to meet those needs, the heavy toll the fighting has taken on civilians and neighboring countries, and the lethargy that characterizes international efforts to halt the violence—lead to a dismaying conclusion: when the dust eventually settles, the Syria conflict will not be remembered simply as the biggest humanitarian emergency of this century, but as our generation's biggest humanitarian failure.

The spillover of Syria's war into Iraq means that the options available to those in the international community keen to secure regional stability, global peace, and security, are far more limited than they were in 2011: as the crisis becomes more and more complex, those options are set to become even narrower—their consequences increasingly unpredictable. But amidst so much complexity and confusion, and through the haze of the tragic violence that has destroyed Syria, one simple truth looms: whilst everyone is losing in this war, the loss borne by Syria's civilians is greatest. We must not abandon them. ●