

Shelter and Communal Basic Facilities

November 2023

During the past 13 years, millions of Syrians have had to flee their homes to safer areas. In some areas, displacement continues, and many people continue to live in camps. Where the security situation improved, a number of internally displaced people (IDPs) – and, to a lesser extent Syrian refugees – have returned to their areas of origin. However, upon returning, many found their houses damaged or uninhabitable.

According to the [2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) in Syria, the number of displaced people is 6.8 million, of whom over 5.7 million individuals (around 84 per cent) are in need of shelter assistance. Having adequate shelter is a basic human right, to maintain well-being and dignity and to reduce exposure to protection risks.

UNHCR has continuously provided shelter assistance as part of its life-saving and life-sustaining solutions. This includes provision of tents in camps, restoration of collective shelters for those who need temporary housing, and repairs of damaged houses for returnees. UNHCR also supports restoration of communal basic facilities to enhance livelihoods and the capacity of communities.

6.8 million people
are internally displaced

5.7 million people
in need of shelter assistance

44%
of returnees live in substandard, damaged, and/ or inadequate shelter*

Around 90 per cent of the population in Syria is estimated to live below the poverty line. Many struggle to meet their basic daily needs for food, fuel, and clothes. The socioeconomic situation of displaced people and returnees is often worse than that of other Syrians. Under these circumstances, it is challenging for them to find adequate housing and pay the rent, or to cover the cost of repairing their damaged houses by themselves. The situation has further deteriorated after the February 2023 earthquakes, which left many people in pressing need of shelter support.

Newly displaced people who fled their homes need temporary housing. People in the camps in north-east Syria live in tents, collective shelters, or with communities. Many returnees found their houses in the place of origin destroyed and not adequate to protect them from the elements and other protection risks. Many more buildings have been damaged or have collapsed during the February earthquakes.

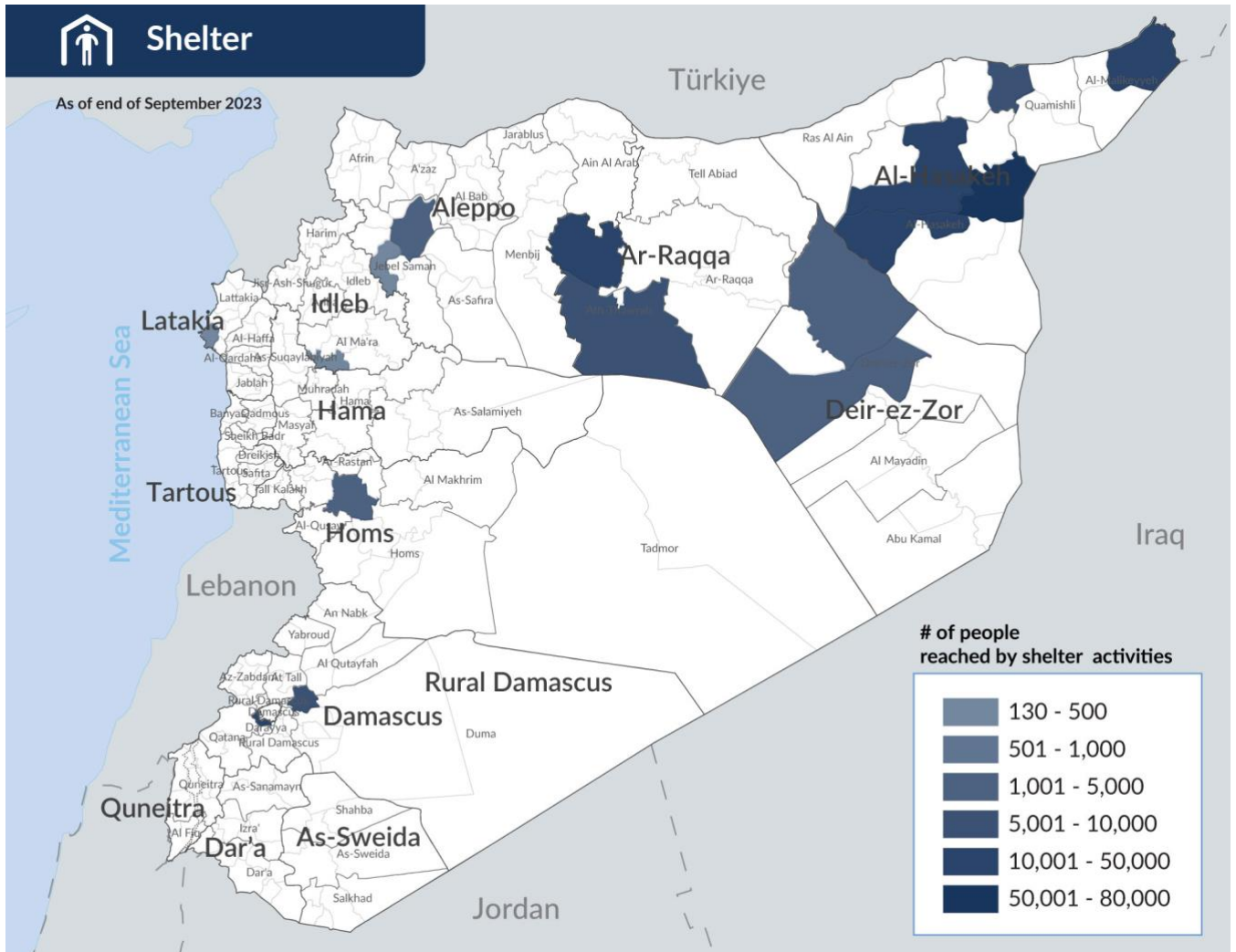
Due to the protracted crisis and deteriorating economy, the capacity of authorities is also overstretched, and many communal basic facilities have remained non-functional for years. For instance, it is estimated that approximately 50 per cent of water and sewage systems in Syria are not functional, while the overall number of people in need of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) assistance in 2023 is 13.5 million, a 2.6 per cent increase from 2022. Such challenges not only put additional constraints on people's daily lives, but also hinder the return of families to urban and rural areas.



UNHCR and its partner repaired a house of a returnee family in Rural Damascus Governorate
© UNHCR/V.Toume

* Humanitarian Needs Overview in Syria 2023

Assistance to shelter and communal basic facilities



From January to September 2023, UNHCR has provided assistance to shelter and basic facilities based on identified needs for some 46,950 families (around 229,750 individuals) in 14 governorates in Syria, benefiting IDPs, returnees, refugees, and host communities.

Shelter interventions by UNHCR Syria range from **emergency shelter response** to **longer-term shelter assistance**, as well as **restoration of communal basic facilities** in return areas.

Emergency shelter response

The emergency shelter response targets newly displaced people and those living in camps. The approximate number of beneficiaries from emergency shelter support is 81,000 across the country as of October 2023. The emergency shelter response entails **distribution of family tents, camp maintenance and expansion, and upgrade of collective shelters**.

(1) Family tents

In north-east Syria, UNHCR provides emergency shelters in eight IDP and refugee camps. Around 28,000 families (approximately 130,000 people) are currently living in tents – which is the only available accommodation type in camps. IDP families outside camps reside in collective shelters or are hosted by communities.

The UNHCR tent is designed for a family of five people. Tents are intended as a short-term solution, though in Syria they are often the only available shelter option for many years. They therefore usually require replacement after one year of use to ensure effective shelter and waterproofing.

The weather conditions in north-east Syria are harsh, with temperatures dropping to sub-zero degrees during winter and rising to over 45 degrees in summer, leading to rapid wear and tear.

Families currently living in tents in extreme weather conditions face significant risks to their health and well-being. Particularly during winter, many cannot secure fuel for heating or afford other basic items that help protect them from the cold. During the last 12 months, UNHCR was able to replace **only 7,703** tents. UNHCR is planning to distribute **22,500** tents this winter, with at least 12,500 of these replacing excessively damaged tents in the camps.



Damaged tents in a camp in north-east Syria © UNHCR

(2) Camp maintenance and expansion

Camps in north-east Syria began as a temporary facility hosting IDPs and refugees; however, with the protracted crises in Syria and Iraq, the camps have been constantly hosting additional arrivals, and thus require expansion and additional infrastructure works. These works include decongestion, upgrading and maintenance of existing shelters, road maintenance, electrical maintenance, management of storm-water drainage systems, and maintenance of basic facilities.

(3) Upgrade of collective shelters

Another type of shelter emergency response is the repair of existing collective shelters accommodating IDPs. Following detailed technical assessments of the damage, various repair works are conducted, such as for shared washing facilities, entrances, staircases, roofs, and pipes. These interventions have increased in the aftermath of the February earthquakes which caused thousands of people to become internally displaced. In total, nine collective shelters hosting 8,374 persons have been rehabilitated since February 2023 to support earthquake-affected families in Latakia and Aleppo Governorates.

Longer-term shelter assistance

Despite the challenging environment in Syria, many people have returned to their place of origin. Between 2016 and 2023, UNHCR has verified or monitored the return to Syria of some 381,850 individual refugees from Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt**. In addition, according to OCHA, from January to July 2023, some 150,000 internally displaced people have returned to their home areas.

** The numbers reported are only those verified or monitored by UNHCR and do not reflect the entire number of returns, which may be significantly higher.

When they return to their place of origin, many people find that their houses have been damaged, requiring restoration. To protect their well-being, reduce exposure to protection risks such as gender-based violence, and support integration into host communities, UNHCR provides longer-term shelter assistance. UNHCR's longer-term shelter assistance addresses mainly returnees whose houses were damaged during the crisis. The assistance can include the provision of shelter packages comprising doors, windows, electrical equipment, and water facilities at the household level, to make the house habitable again. The shelter package assistance is provided mainly when there is no proof of ownership (i.e. in informal settlements) and when the level of damage is minor. As of September 2023, 2,862 shelter packages have been distributed and installed, out of the planned 5,975 to be installed by end of the year.

When the damage is more extensive and residents can prove ownership of the shelter, UNHCR provides damaged house repair support which is a longer-term and more robust type of assistance. This covers repair of affected houses following detailed technical assessments of the specific damages. Such repairs can include structural repairs, electrical works (cabling, installation of lamps etc), and WASH works to the residential units, including the common areas. As of October 2023, 415 houses have been repaired, out of the ongoing 2,533 houses planned.

Restoration of communal basic facilities

Support to communal basic facilities is mainly provided in places where spontaneous self-organized return of IDPs and refugees is taking place. This aims to reduce the burden on the host communities, and to enhance resilience of both returnee and the host communities.

Examples of the restoration of communal basic facilities include minor repairs to schools, primary health care centres, civil registries, markets, sewage systems, water and irrigation systems, installation of solar streetlights, and removal of debris. Support to civil registries is particularly important as a key protection intervention because it facilitates access to civil documentation such as identity cards, which is critical for vulnerable Syrians to have freedom of movement and access to various services.



Restoration of sewage network in Sulaiman Al Halabi neighbourhood, Aleppo Governorate benefiting over 10,000 returnees. ©UNHCR/H.Maarouf

Earthquake emergency response

The February earthquakes have further compounded existing humanitarian and protection needs in Syria, following 12 years of crisis. At least **8.8 million** people were estimated to be affected by the earthquakes in the country, with the majority anticipated to need some form of humanitarian assistance.

To respond to the earthquake emergency, UNHCR as the lead agency of the shelter/non-food item sector has been coordinating with the Operations Rooms established by the Syrian Government in the most affected governorates of Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia, which bring together authorities, national NGOs and UN partners. UNHCR supported rapid structural assessments to damaged buildings aimed at mapping the damages to better plan the shelter interventions according to the identified needs. Classifying shelters into damage categories helped families displaced due to the earthquakes to clarify their short, medium,

and long-term solutions. Following the assessment and findings, UNHCR and partners have continued to provide support to repair shelters of some of the most vulnerable households. UNHCR also supported these assessments by providing logistical assistance and equipment to engineering teams.

A week after the 6 February earthquakes struck Syria and Türkiye, there were more than 300 temporary collective shelters in Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, and Homs Governorates accommodating the affected population whose houses were destroyed or damaged. UNHCR and partners supported the adaptation of the collective shelters such as equipping shelter spaces with lighting and ensuring gender-segregated toilets and washing facilities. Interventions were informed by UNHCR's findings through assessments identifying an increased risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse incidents inside the shelters.



UNHCR and partners conduct adaptation works in collective shelters of Aleppo Governorate, including gender-segregated restrooms, ensuring that protection standards are in place. Photo: ©UNHCR/Z. Ayoubi

Challenges

The operational environment in Syria poses various challenges to UNHCR's activities including shelter assistance. These challenges have caused delays in assistance provision and affected UNHCR's ability to respond to the dire needs:

- **Administrative procedures:** This affects timely project implementation for shelter and basic communal facilities. Through continuous advocacy, UNHCR has succeeded in revising the procedures with the relevant authorities to accelerate the process.
- **Limited capacities and resources:** UNHCR found it necessary to invest in developing the capacity of all stakeholders and entities involved in the implementation of shelter interventions as many counterparts and partners lack expertise in this domain. Another challenge is the limited availability of most of the required construction materials in the local (national) market.

- **Inflation and shortage of funding:** There is a continuous increase in the cost of implementation as construction activities are affected by inflation. The challenging global context also means decreased funding from the international community to the Syria operation. Such factors restrict the capacity to provide a flexible and qualitative prompt shelter response. UNHCR estimates that over 30 per cent of its shelter target could not be implemented in 2023 due to limited financial resources.

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CONTACT: UNHCR Syria External Relations Unit, Email: SYRDAREPORTING@unhcr.org

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CONTACTS

Email: SYRDAREPORTING@unhcr.org

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