

Critical Care in Syria, Grim Reality



A report from the Syrian-American Medical Society details the health crisis in war-torn Syria and efforts to help bolster what remains of the country's healthcare system. Responding to this crisis has been made difficult by the targeting of hospitals and healthcare workers, primarily by the government but also by the rebels, according to the report published in *Annals of the American Thoracic Society*.

By all accounts, the healthcare situation in Syria is grim. The authors cite statistics that the Syrian-American Medical Society and other organisations have compiled:

- In the first four years of the conflict, 75,000 civilians died from war injuries; 25 percent of those killed were women and children.
- More than twice that number have died from chronic and infectious disease because of inadequate medical care.
- By 2013, 70 percent of the healthcare workforce had left the country. In Syria's largest city, Aleppo, only 70 of the 6,000 physicians who once practiced there remain.
- Syrian life expectancy has decreased by 20 years since war broke out.

The Syrian-American Medical Society was formed shortly after the war began in 2011 to help Syrian refugees in Turkey. Since then, it has grown into a \$25-million enterprise that has helped more than two million people, says lead author Mohammed Z. Sahloul, MD, a pulmonologist and critical care physician in Oak Lawn, Illinois, who served as its president for four years.

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The Society provides 24/7 telemedicine consulting to nine Syrian ICUs. It has conducted 17 "train-the-trainer" webinars for 850 doctors, nurses, paramedics and technicians on such topics as how to resuscitate trauma patients, the fundamentals of critical care and triaging surgery patients. In classrooms in Lebanon and Turkey, it has trained Syrian doctors in the use of, and equipped them with, portable ultrasound to diagnose bodily injuries. Powered by rechargeable batteries, this technology has proved especially helpful in the war-torn region prone to power outages.

Data from Physicians for Human Rights show that 700 medical workers have been killed in this war, and more than 300 hospitals attacked. "The Syrian conflict is unprecedented in the scale and gravity of the attacks on medical neutrality, which was something that was agreed upon 150 years ago in Geneva," Dr. Sahloul pointed out. The doctor decried the absence of a forceful response to these war crimes by physicians and international medical organisations. Medical neutrality, which is designed to protect civilians and the healthcare professionals who treat them during a war, is something "sacred among medical professionals," he said.

The Syrian-American Medical Society has also documented the use of chemical weapons, another war crime, by the Syrian armed forces. Since December 2012, the group reports that there have been 152 attacks using toxic gases, including eight using sarin, which paralyzes respiratory muscles, and 92 with chlorine gas, which dissolves lung tissue. The Society has trained Syrian healthcare workers in how to treat patients exposed to chemical agents.

Source: [American Thoracic Society](#)

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