

How Islamic Relief is working across Syria's borders

Samina Haq

Islamic Relief is one of the few humanitarian organisations working cross-border to deliver aid in response to the deepening crisis in Syria. The conflict in the country has killed tens of thousands of people, and has driven over 1.5 million across its borders. For those still inside the country, needs are increasingly acute as conditions continue to deteriorate. It is estimated that over six million people are in need inside Syria.

Islamic Relief staff have seen for themselves the horrific situation inside Syria. Millions are thought to be in dire need of food, water and sanitation. In the countries that border Syria, the humanitarian needs of many living in limbo in ever-expanding camps and host communities are deepening. Yet the lack of any significant international presence and proper camp management inside Syria is striking.

Islamic Relief has been delivering humanitarian assistance to the people of Syria since May 2012, both within the country and in neighbouring countries. Working effectively in Syria and across the border in Turkey has been vital to get aid to where it is most needed. Islamic Relief is one of the few agencies working cross-border, in partnership with a local Turkish organisation. Partnering with a local agency means that we can operate efficiently within Turkey and across the border into Syria. Our local partner supports us in procuring food and non-food items within Turkey and getting them into areas deep inside Syria as quickly as possible, though the large volumes required mean that the process from procurement to delivery can be a long one. As well as receiving in-kind donations, Islamic Relief purchases medicines and medical supplies directly, contracting companies and purchasing goods with money transferred directly to the supplier. Around 90% of the goods are Turkish, and most suppliers take the goods direct to the border. With goods coming from Istanbul and Ankara, this can be expensive even when Islamic Relief handles the logistics – but there is no other option at present.

Islamic Relief undertakes capacity-building as part of its agreement with partners. This includes the provision of training to staff and NGO partners (including nine local Syrian NGOs) in disaster management and emergency response methods. We have a team inside Syria that assesses needs, distributes aid and monitors distributions as far as is possible, for example through local councils. A small team of permanent staff covers Idlib, Atma and Aleppo, and also travels widely throughout the country. We also have Syrian employees working in Turkey to provide logistical support. Security, of course, is a major



Islamic Relief delivering aid in Syria

issue for cross-border work, both along the borders and inside Syria. To combat the security risks – including the high risk of aid workers being kidnapped – Islamic Relief minimises its presence inside Syria. Our local partnerships allow work to continue.

Despite the risks, Islamic Relief attempts to work in both opposition- and government- held areas – supported by staff who are able to negotiate with local councils and camp and community leaders. As a result, we have been able to gain access to areas that are completely cut off from systematic humanitarian assistance. Islamic Relief has distributed aid in the suburbs of Idlib, the coastal area of Lattakya, Aleppo, Al Raqqa and the eastern areas of Deir Azzor, Al Bokamal and Al Mayadeen, in addition to most of the border camps. Recently, however, the relief road to Damascus has been cut, and Islamic Relief has been unable to get its convoy through crossing-points. Homs and Hamah are presently under siege and cannot be reached. For the internally displaced inside the country, there is no official UN registration so families languish in makeshift camps with nowhere to go and without access to the most basic of supplies. The scale of the suffering is horrific.

Both the government and opposition groups must help to ensure that aid reaches those most in need. This must mean allowing aid to cross lines of control, and allowing organisations such as Islamic Relief to continue their cross-border work, and for those agencies working out of Damascus to be allowed to reach populations in opposition areas. Around one million people have been helped by Islamic Relief's response to the Syria conflict. Despite the challenges, we will continue to work extensively in Syria and neighbouring countries to reach even more people in this bloody conflict.

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