

## **Syria – Guidance from the Scottish Charity Regulator**

### **Safe methods of giving support**

Understandably, many people are moved by the situation in Syria and want to help. People all over the UK have donated time and money to charities helping the Syrian people.

The UK and Scottish Governments are heavily committed to helping and are at the forefront of the international effort. We know that many people in Scotland also want to help the Syrian people, and some have even travelled to deliver aid directly. However, the Home Office now strongly advises against travelling to Syria. The whole of the country is unsafe, with strong risks that even those going for humanitarian aid reasons may get caught up in violence and either return home traumatised or even radicalised and trained to carry out attacks.

**The best way to help the people of Syria is to donate to, or volunteer with, charities that are registered in Scotland or the rest of the UK that have ongoing relief operations.**

### **Consider the following key points**

**You should not travel to Syria.** There are serious risks and you may compromise the current relief efforts.

When donating goods or money, **check out charities** carefully to satisfy yourself that your donations are going to reach the people that need them.

It's easier and quicker to **donate to established charities** rather than set up your own there are a number of charities with an established presence in the region and a detailed understanding of the situation in conflict areas overseas.

The following guidance sets out in more detail the issues to consider and the reasons behind the above points.

## Safer ways to help

### 1. Donate to established aid charities

Making donations is the easiest way to help. Donating to charities with experience in high risk, insecure and dangerous environments and an ongoing relief operation in Syria is the best way to ensure your money is used correctly.

For example:

- [SCIAF](#)
- [Mercy Corps](#)
- **Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)**  
This brings together 14 UK aid charities in times of crisis:

Action Aid  
Age International  
British Red Cross  
CAFOD  
Care International  
Christian Aid  
Concern Worldwide  
Islamic Relief  
Merlin  
Oxfam  
Plan UK  
Save the Children  
Tearfund  
World Vision

Collectively, they raise money to reach those in need quickly. DEC launched its Syria Crisis Appeal in March 2013 to provide aid such as food, clean water, emergency shelter and medical care.

[www.dec.org.uk](http://www.dec.org.uk)

### 2. Organise or assist in fundraising events

Fundraising events can be run by local charities or groups. You can explore if there are any local charities or community groups with fundraising activities to help experienced charities working in Syria in your area, and volunteer to help them with the activity. However, before you volunteer or direct others to volunteer, you should **carry out checks** on those charities as set out below.

### 3. Stay in the UK

More hands-on activities may be appealing. However, while you can seek out groups or charities in your area that appear to be providing practical aid for those in need in Syria, you should be aware that **experienced charities will not ask you to go out to Syria** to provide humanitarian aid. It is not safe to travel to Syria and the Home Office strongly advises against doing so. Experienced charities have professional workers with experience of providing humanitarian aid in high risk, insecure and dangerous environments and have ongoing relief operations in Syria and surrounding countries

## Checking up on charities

To help you decide whether or not to support a charity that appears to be providing practical voluntary activities, here are some easy checks you can make.

1. Search for the charity online
2. Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator / Charity Commission checks
3. Contact the charity
4. Contact local authority or police

### 1. Search engines and Internet

Look for websites or blogs directly associated with the group or charity to gain an understanding of their aims, activities, volunteering opportunities and who runs the group. You can also find information by using Google or Yahoo; or search social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. YouTube may also provide information. **Remember that these groups, charities or organisations should not ask you to travel to Syria.**

### 2. The Scottish Charity Register

You can check if a body is registered as a charity in Scotland through the [Scottish Charity Register](#), and in England and Wales with the [Charity Commission](#). A registered charity will display a registration number.

### 3. Contact the charity direct

If you are satisfied to the best of your knowledge that the group is legitimate and provides positive activities, you should make contact with the group to confirm:

- The aims of the group
- The type of activities that are available for volunteering
- When and where the activities will be available

- That they are **not** encouraging or providing opportunities to travel to Syria or the region; and
- Any links to other organisations such as local religious institutions.

#### **4. Contact the local authority or Police Scotland**

If you have carried out searches and still have questions or concerns you can contact your local authority, or Police Scotland on 101.

## **Don't travel to Syria**

We recognise that there is a sincere desire to help people who are suffering as a result of the Syrian crisis, and that people can help by fundraising and donating their time to registered charities. However, the Home Office strongly advises against travelling to the region.

Hundreds of people have already travelled to Syria, many for humanitarian motives or to help family and friends who remain in the country. Some have taken aid there directly, while others feel that they have skills that they can offer. However, people have also travelled to Syria to take part in the conflict. Even people who are travelling for well-intentioned humanitarian reason are exposing themselves to serious risk, including being targeted for recruitment by terrorist groups.

**The whole of Syria is unsafe.** A number of UK nationals have been killed or injured while in Syria, and there is a high risk of terrorism and kidnap. The long standing policy of the UK Government is not to make substantive concessions to hostage takers, because they consider that paying ransoms and releasing prisoners increases the risk of further hostage taking. It is as a result of this that **the families of those travelling in Syria may face the ransom demand** to secure freedom.

**Those travelling to Syria also put ordinary Syrians at risk** by being a drain on medical resources. The availability of medical support is very limited throughout the country, and there are regular disruptions to phone, internet, electricity and road networks. Travellers risk being stranded without the necessary support and are unlikely to reach their destination.

There is also a danger that **those travelling may experience traumatic events** seen in theatres of war, meaning that some people returning home from Syria experience severe mental health problems such as post traumatic stress disorder.

**There are also legal issues** to consider in delivering humanitarian aid abroad. Charity law and laws against terrorism, bribery and corruption apply to those who

deliver humanitarian aid directly. Cash above a certain limit that has not been declared may be seized by the UK Borders Agency. **OSCR and the Charity Commission strongly advise against transporting money in person.**

People travelling to deliver aid to Syria have been denied access to cross the border, or significantly delayed. **There is also the risk of being denied exit from the country.** Charities unknown to the Free Syria Army could be considered as hostile.

**Direct delivery of aid involves very high logistical costs.** Your time, money and personal commitment can deliver greater support to the Syrian people by sending supplies through established charities and international relief organisations.

**Keep your friends and relatives safe.** If you have any concerns about someone planning to travel to Syria, you can contact Police Scotland who will talk with you in the strictest confidence and explain the options available for reducing the safety risk.

**Remember - the quickest, most effective way you can help the Syrian people is to contribute your time, money or goods to a registered charity in the UK.**

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