AREF AL-KALI, MD:  
ON THE NEEDS IN Syria

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, it has been awful for Aref Al-Kali, MD, to see his native country at war and know that millions of people, including friends and family, are suffering. But the Mayo Clinic hematologist knew he couldn’t sit idly by and watch when civilians and medical providers started being targeted. He already was involved in the Syrian American Medical Society’s (SAMS) educational programs. As the war escalated, Al-Kali got involved with the SAMS Foundation’s efforts to provide medical help, supplies and support to people in Syria and refugees around the world.

Today, Al-Kali serves as national vice chair of the foundation, and he’s actively involved with its volunteer medical relief work. He recently made time to talk about the situation in Syria with *Minnesota Medicine* writer Suzy Frisch.

**What is the current state of Syria, especially related to medical care?**

There are 13.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Six million people are displaced within Syria, and almost 5 million are refugees in neighboring countries. The worst thing about the crisis is that about 90 percent of the people killed are civilians, and half are women and children. They are targeting health facilities and besieging several towns and cities, like eastern Aleppo. There are 400,000 to 500,000 people there without access to anything. Even if we try to help, there are areas where help can’t get in.

**What effect is this having?**

All U.N. agencies have failed to get medical supplies to the people who need it—can you imagine—for more than four years. There’s no fuel—how can you run a hospital with no electricity? How do you run a ventilator? They are doing ventilation by hand because a machine isn’t available. Or there is no light in the OR and they have to operate with a flashlight. In eastern Aleppo, there is one CT scanner for 300,000 people, and they can’t get another one.

**How is SAMS helping?**

We try to help as much as we can with everything we can: money, expertise and by trying to be an advocate for the Syrian crisis, especially regarding the medical aspect. SAMS tries to supply hospitals with money and support doctors with a salary so they can live. We get them supplies, and we also help with medical knowledge through telemedicine. We have physicians in the United States who are on call every night to help people in Syria take care of sick, traumatized patients. Many times, they are helping nurses because there are no physicians in the area or they don’t have the specialties. SAMS treated 2.6 million people last year, and we have more than 100 medical facilities working in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Greece.

**Where are the greatest needs?**

Different areas have different needs. In Turkey, refugees do have access to the medical system, but they don’t have access to interpreters, so the problem is to find someone who can translate their problems. In Jordan, they don’t have the same access to medical care and it’s helping them with their complaints.

**What is the status of Syrian refugees settling in Minnesota?**

There were 10,000 refugees who came to the United States last year, and about 2,000 the year before. Minnesota had about eight to 10 families, with four of the families coming to Rochester. Most of them had been refugees in Jordan for several years.

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To learn more about or support the work of the Syrian American Medical Society, go to http://foundation.sams-usa.net/?home=true.