

The Syrian American Medical Society: History, Action, Challenges, and Hope

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Introduction

The Syrian conflict, ongoing since 2011, has left millions of Syrians displaced and in dire need of humanitarian aid.¹ As the nation endures ongoing violence and displacement, and as the suffering of its people intensifies, several organizations have stepped in to lend a helping hand. Among them is the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), which, standing as a shining example of compassion and resilience, continues to provide medical relief to affected communities in Syria and its neighbouring countries. This article delves into the history, relief efforts, and challenges faced by SAMS, and in so doing, reveals the impact of its tireless work.

The Syrian American Medical Society- Action

SAMS was founded in 1998 by Syrian American medical professionals as a United States-based, non-profit, and educational organization. Since its inception, SAMS has been dedicated to providing quality, evidence-based medical education to a wide variety of trainees, along with a platform for Syrian and American physicians to share medical expertise. In the wake of the Syrian crisis,

SAMS expanded its purview and became a leading medical and humanitarian organization that provides crucial medical relief to Syrians and others in need, both within Syria and beyond.^{2,3} Driven by a dedication to healthcare, human rights, education, and medical ethics, SAMS has been at the forefront of humanitarian efforts, serving countless people and striving for a better future for Syria. The work was gradually expanded and capacity building was extended from few staff in one location in US into 6 regional offices in 5 countries including Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, one headquarters office in US and hundreds of full time staffers

SAMS has been unwavering in its commitment to providing medical aid within Syria, despite the numerous challenges and risks involved. They have established, supported, and equipped various medical facilities, including clinics, mobile units, field hospitals, cancer centers, cardiac catheterization laboratories, women and birth centers, referral surgical hospitals, stroke units, and more.^{3,4,5,7} Moreover, SAMS has trained a significant number of physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals to provide life-saving medical care for

patients with war-related injuries, in addition to acute and chronic diseases.^{2,8}

Many Syrians have been severely traumatized by the unforgiving war, leaving them not only with physical but also emotional and psychological scars. SAMS places special emphasis on mental health and psychosocial support, focusing on children, women, and survivors of violence.⁷ SAMS has developed community-based psychosocial programs, particularly in Jordan and Turkey, that address the needs of these vulnerable populations by providing counseling, group therapy, and a safe space to process traumatic experiences.⁷

SAMS recognizes that rebuilding a shattered Syria is a long-term, multi-pronged endeavor, and that at its core, education is needed. Pursuant to this effort, SAMS sponsors academic scholarships for Syrian medical students and graduates. Moreover, it established medical residency and fellowship programs in areas of Syria with otherwise limited resources and minimal educational opportunities. In line with the spirit of scholarship, SAMS actively participates in research studies that document and elucidate the humanitarian impacts of the conflict.

Challenges Faced

Undoubtedly, SAMS faces numerous challenges in its effort to provide medical relief to Syria and its surrounding countries. A few of the primary challenges encountered include the following: security concerns, lack of access, and financial constraints.

Many medical facilities supported by SAMS have been deliberately targeted by airstrikes, shelling, and vandalism.¹ In many cases, they have been rendered completely inoperable. These calculated attacks pose a significant threat to the safety of staff and patients, and many SAMS-affiliated providers have lost their lives in the line of duty.¹ These attacks have far-reaching consequences, as they contribute to the further decimation of healthcare infrastructure, making it exceedingly arduous to provide adequate medical care to those most in need. Due to this unfortunate reality, in many areas of Northwest Syria, SAMS has spearheaded efforts to build underground medical facilities, fortified from aerial assaults. However, undertaking such efforts is not without cost, as more time, energy, and money is inevitably expended.

The immense scale of the Syrian catastrophe demands tremendous financial resources. To meet these colossal needs, SAMS relies on a combination of individual

donations, along with grants from US- and European-based agencies. However, with each passing year, the number of refugees and internally displaced people grow, and along with it, their medical and humanitarian needs. SAMS continues to expand its services as a response, but more financial support is required if that response is to be sustained.

The Earthquake Response:

On February 6, 2023, in the midst of winter, Southern Turkey and Northern Syria experienced a series of cataclysmic earthquakes that resulted in widespread damage to civilian infrastructure (including a few of SAMS' own medical facilities) and new displacement of thousands, creating humanitarian needs on an unprecedented scale. For the roughly 4.5 million people in Northwest Syria, close to the earthquake's epicenter, the impact was particularly calamitous, since they had already endured more than 11 years of devastating trauma and conflict. With a strong foothold in the region, SAMS quickly positioned itself to make an impact on the ground. In Syria, SAMS' facilities received thousands of trauma victims and performed urgently needed surgeries to treat a wide array of crush injuries. SAMS swiftly mobilized its resources and worked in coordination with local and international partners to deliver immediate and lifesaving assistance in the form of trauma supplies, medical consumables, medications, equipment, support for medical teams, and repair for damaged facilities. Moreover, SAMS established mobile clinics to provide emergency healthcare services in the affected areas.

SAMS also provided a platform for physicians from around the world to share their expertise, both in person and virtually. SAMS organized several emergency medical missions to the affected regions where groups of physicians from the US traveled overseas to directly serve those impacted by the earthquakes. Our generous volunteer physicians donated their time and skills to provide medical, surgical, orthopedic, anesthetic, obstetric, and pediatric care, among others. In addition, SAMS' generous medical and non-medical volunteers demonstrated and maintained cultural sensitivity during this difficult time. By providing care to match the unique needs of the affected communities, SAMS established a strong sense of rapport with both the refugee communities and the local populations. This allows SAMS to provide much-needed support to more families and provide more effective medical care to more patients. Now a few months removed from the earthquakes,

SAMS continues providing survivors with extensive follow-up general and subspecialty medical care, physical rehabilitation, and mental health services.

In addition to the direct physical harm the earthquakes caused to the victims, it was paramount for SAMS to address the impact this had on the infrastructure and refugees who did not have a home to return to. An aerial view of the destroyed neighborhoods in Southern Turkey and Northern Syria showed apocalyptic scenes of destroyed buildings and rubble leading to a desperate scramble to find survivors shortly after the quakes. In addition to leading search and rescue operations, SAMS worked with other NGOs to provide temporary shelter to those who lost their homes. SAMS also supported the rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged infrastructure in the region.

Conclusion

The efficiency of SAMS' relief efforts can be attributed to its well-established presence in the region. This allowed SAMS to respond expediently and coordinate with local partners. By working closely with other NGOs, local authorities, and international organizations, SAMS was able to amplify its impact, maximize efficiency, and create a more comprehensive and sustainable response. Although SAMS faced challenges, SAMS' response illustrates the importance of preparedness and the need for a robust network of partners to ensure effective and efficient medical intervention in times of crisis. SAMS' approach to relief efforts was to not only address immediate medical needs but also long-term rehabilitation and social-emotional support, which is a crucial component of recovery for the affected communities. While recognizing the many seen and unforeseen challenges, SAMS will continue to work collaboratively with its generous volunteers, fellow NGOs, local populations, and private and public donors to help provide medical and humanitarian care to patients and their families.

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