

2020

ANNUAL REPORT



MULTIFAITH ALLIANCE FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

6 EAST 43RD STREET, FLOOR 22
NEW YORK, NY 10017

+1 917 810 2820
info@multifaithalliance.org




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A message from MFA founder Dr. Georgette Bennett and executive director Shadi Martini

Dear friends,

The past year has been a challenging one for all of us. A deadly pandemic -- something from a bygone era -- crashed into our lives, spreading fear on a massive scale, and an unprecedented level of vulnerability.

Added to that was the churning of prejudice, hatred, and intolerance for the “other”, manifest in the increase of violence against blacks, Asians, Jews, LGBTQs, and political adversaries. Viewed through this lens, the year could be chalked up as one of death, destruction, and despair. But to do that would overlook the extraordinary acts of selflessness, compassion, and courage that equally define 2020.

Perhaps, learning to cope with our own struggles made us more aware of the suffering of others, here and abroad, and we became galvanized to help. It brought out the best in most of us. People refused to sit idly by, and discovered innovative ways in which to feed, clothe, house and care for the sick, and those less fortunate.

Acts of kindness and valor are not new to MFA. We see it every day in the most unlikely of places – the camps of displaced Syrians. Despite a decade of war and now, a pandemic, the strength, and resilience we witness in these overcrowded encampments inspire us and drives our work.

Undaunted by the challenges of COVID-19, MFA’s dedicated team never missed a beat in our supply chain of deliveries. In fact, we have honed a system of sourcing essential aid to fill specific needs requests. Last year, vast amounts of PPE – more than \$500,000 worth of face shields, medical-grade filtering facepiece respirators, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, and personal protective kits – were dispensed to highly vulnerable displaced Syrians through our network of courageous NGO distributors on the ground.

We also are grateful beyond measure to our donors and supply partners whose unflinching generosity has enabled MFA to provide over

\$175 million of emergency aid to more than 2.3 Million Syrians. With our new office in Syria, and two new healthcare facilities in the northeast and northwest regions, we are poised to scale our programs and our effectiveness. Managing operations on the ground gives us the advantage of greater oversight and responsiveness to the precise needs of the people we serve.

Though we haven't lost sight of the problems and challenges still to be faced, we are optimistic for the future. With almost 50% of the U.S. now vaccinated and the virus better under control here in this country, we are putting more focus on advocacy for increased U.S. refugee admissions and raising awareness of the misinformation and disinformation that give rise to the fears about admitting Syrians. We have addressed this issue in a comprehensive document on our website called "Three Great Fears". We believe by learning who the Syrian people are, and the contributions they have and will continue to make to our country, you will be persuaded to welcome them and support the policies of inclusion upon which this country was founded. American values were on display in abundance this past year in every act of kindness and courage, reminding us that there is no limit to what we can conquer when we work together.

Our vision is to carry forward the positive ideals that are instruments for change here at home - and in the region, in the name of humanitarianism. We invite you to join us in our mission to build bridges, alleviate suffering, and help the Syrian people rebuild their lives.

Georgette Bennett
Founder

Shadi Martini
Executive Director





A message from MFA Spokesperson F. Murray Abraham

Dear Friends,

I'm an actor with a pretty vivid imagination, but never before could I have conjured a situation that would prompt me to say: "Hello friends, I'm here and I'm grateful to be alive!" What a preposterous statement had we not been living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Thankfully, my family and I have survived and thrived. I hope you have, too, and like us, you're vaccinated and looking forward to the future.

When I think about the things for which I'm grateful, a bounty of blessings come to mind: my family, my career, and treasured friendships, among them. But gratitude has deep roots in my family, beginning when my grandfather brought my father to America to escape starvation in Syria. Being welcomed into the land of opportunity was a gift for which they, and my mother from Italy, remained thankful throughout their lives. They taught their children the lessons of gratitude and loyalty to this country, for which my brothers, both military men, made the ultimate sacrifice.

Bestowed with this rich heritage, I am honored to represent MFA and spread the word about Syrian people – my people – especially when propaganda about these decent, hard-working, educated, people perpetuate fear and resentment.

So often I hear: "We have our own problems here in the U.S. Why bring in refugees who are looking for a handout?" The simple answer is we can and must take care of our own, but

America still is the land of plenty, and we can do it all. Perhaps a reminder that we all descend from immigrants will help to open our hearts. Our ancestors didn't come looking for handouts – they came seeking opportunities.

The Syrian people want the same thing. Those who have been waiting for the past four years for our immigration ban to be lifted have been scrupulously vetted by the multiple U.S. security agencies responsible for admitting refugees. And, like the hundred thousand or so who came here previously – these Syrians will be self-sufficient within two years. History shows they will start businesses -- among them are doctors who establish medical practices in rural communities where there is no access to healthcare -- and they will create thousands of American jobs.

These are facts, my friends, which you can find at www.multifaithalliance.org. Check it out. And while you're there, I invite you to join me in supporting the work of MFA. They gather and ship massive amounts of humanitarian aid to millions of displaced Syrians, who cannot or will not leave their homeland, hoping for the chance to rebuild their lives and their communities. They have endured ten years of war yet remain strong and resilient. Whether you help them over there or encourage America to open its doors to them here – you not only will be aiding people who are worthy of your efforts, you'll be giving them the priceless gift of hope.

Thank you,
F. Murray Abraham






“They keep telling us about washing our hands and to wear masks. But we barely have money for bread. There are days when my father comes home empty-handed. This means he couldn’t find anything to work on that day. He goes in a corner and speaks to no one. Like he sees through us. Then, my mom knows there is nothing to eat for dinner. Sometimes, she goes around to the neighbors of our tent and comes back with some rice. However, most of the time, she can’t find anything; they are poor like us. There are days I wish I would get sick. I imagine that maybe in the hospital they will give me something to eat. I don’t know much about this virus, but maybe it will halt our suffering. If we die of hunger or of sickness, we will disappear anyway. Do you think anyone cares?”

- Rama, 9 years old

Saving Lives in Syria

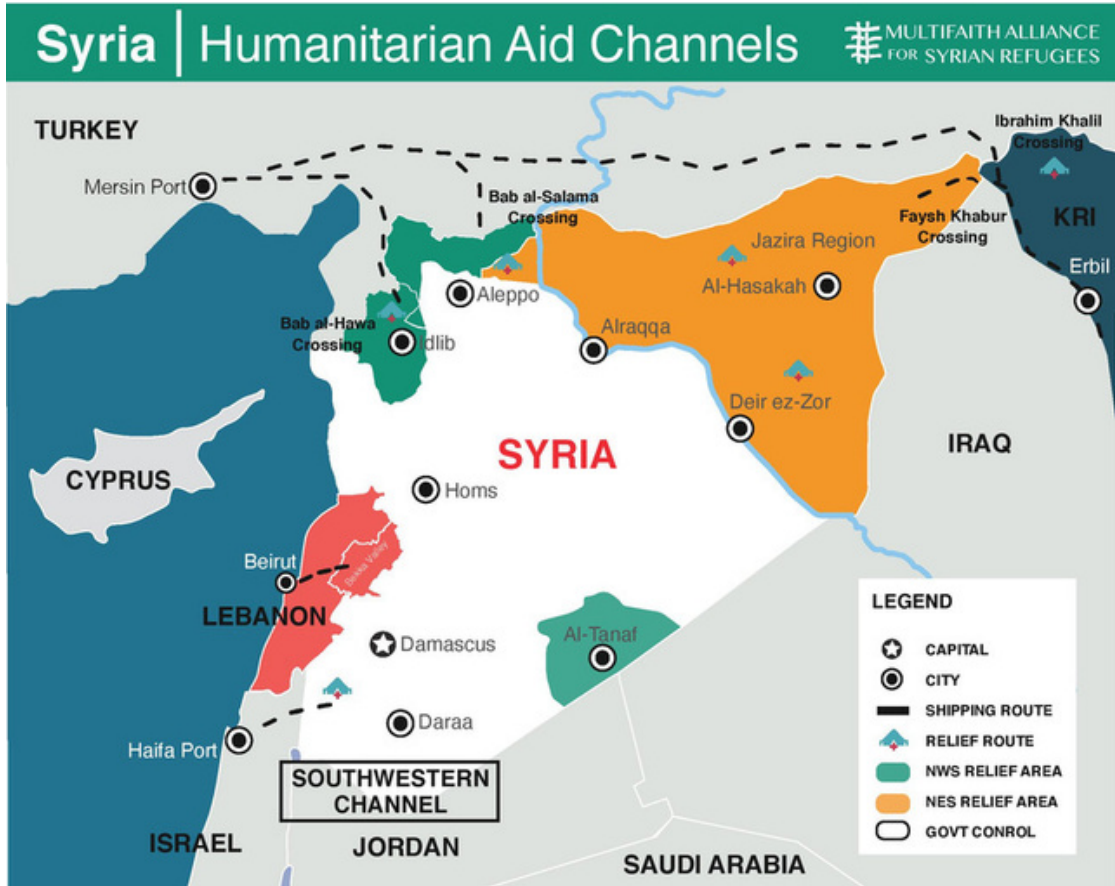


The Syrian humanitarian crisis has continued into its tenth devastating year, with the COVID-19 pandemic further compounding unimaginable hardships. In response, MFA has now shipped more than \$175 million in humanitarian aid and we continue to expand our operations in the region.

In 2020 alone, MFA delivered relief valued at nearly \$26 million -- serving 700,000 displaced people living across more than 105 camps and makeshift settlements. As difficult as the situation on the ground has become, our relief shipments have continued unabated. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we increased our deliveries of PPE and other life-saving medical equipment to more than 48 hospitals and medical facilities throughout northeast Syria, northwest Syria, and northern Iraq.

To reach more people than ever before, MFA streamlined its processes. Compared to 2019, we increased our aid deliveries by 126% (\$10 million) but cut our shipment costs by 38% (\$57,000). Inclusive of 2020 deliveries, for every \$100 worth of aid provided, we've spent just 23 cents on logistical costs.

Throughout this past year, MFA increased its partnerships and broadened its presence in the region. To meet increased demand, we strengthened existing relationships and built new ones with local humanitarian organizations. This enabled us to provide support for refugee communities in Lebanon after the devastating destruction of the port and its surrounding region. We also expanded our capacity through a number of special programs, ranging from emergency housing to providing prenatal vitamins to expectant mothers.



With the crisis more urgent than ever, we accelerated plans to expand our humanitarian response even further and implemented direct operations in the region. We prioritized the services most immediately needed in northwest and northeast Syria for the more than 3 million displaced people who fled to these regions.

In northwest Syria, after analyzing what was currently available and identifying the gaps, priority was given to establishing a radiology center in Idlib city. This will be the only public facility providing free MRI services in northwest Syria. Bringing such services to the area has been central to MFA’s expansion plans - especially after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic when the need for advanced diagnostic screening and follow-up care has become even greater.

This MRI center serves more than 700 patients a month, all of whom are referred from other health facilities in northwest Syria.

MFA provides technical support and finances operating the center, including maintenance of the MRI machines, staff salaries, and other direct and indirect costs.

In northeast Syria, the needs are different. There is a huge gap in the availability and accessibility of basic and essential primary health care. The healthcare infrastructure was decimated by the regime’s deliberate bombings. The scant remaining operations were further diminished, as both donors and service providers rushed to respond to the pandemic. As a result, many primary healthcare facilities were closed.

We made it a priority to open a primary health center in Ar-Raqqa governorate - the only primary healthcare facility in the area with a catchment population of more than 50,000 people. The facility provides essential primary health care services, including general and children’s health consultations, sexual and reproductive health care, distribution of free medicines, and referral services.

These facilities in NWS and NES are beacons of hope for the Syrian people. The health care services they provide enable this vulnerable population to maintain the strength and resilience they need to rebuild their lives. MFA intends to add more of these centers in the region.



Northern Iraq

Since the outbreak of the war, Iraq has welcomed Syrian refugees seeking asylum and safety in the country. Currently, 98 percent of Syrian refugees live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), with 39 percent of the 300,000 who are registered residing in tent camps, and the remainder in urban, preurban, and rural areas.

In October 2020, the Government of Iraq embarked on a sudden IDP camp closure exercise. This resulted in the closing or reclassification of 16 IDP camps and informal sites, affecting over 42,400 individuals, who were forced to relocate.

The deteriorating economic situation coupled with poor basic services and extremely limited livelihood opportunities further hindered host communities' ability to absorb and integrate displaced people. Tens of thousands of refugee families continue to live in poor economic conditions and under increased security risks. Humanitarian needs remain extensive.

Working with trusted local partners, we responded to the massive humanitarian needs in the area by shipping and distributing supplies to cover the basic needs of both refugees and host communities. In this campaign, we provided almost 10,000 people in the Assyrian Christian community of Northern Iraq with emergency food and other critical relief supplies.





On the Ground

My name is Amid Abd al-Karim. I was displaced from Al-Ghab,” Amid says, giving the name of the plain region in northwest Hama. He stands outside, just before a group of tents half-cylinder frames overlaid with plastic tarps. What were makeshift shelters, now commonplace across war-torn Syria, are becoming permanent dwellings for displaced families.

Amin lives in Qartaba camp near the village of Batabo in northwest Aleppo. The camp is home to some 400 people, none of whom have access to basic goods and services. “We left because of the severe bombardments,” Amid continues. “We couldn’t stay in that area anymore. We left with nothing. We have many needs — tents, food, and other supplies.”

MFA worked with its local partners on the ground to deliver emergency supplies to Qartaba camp. The supplies included meal kits and basic hygiene items, like soap bars, toothbrushes, and toothpaste.

Amid’s story is the new normal in Syria. Displaced families continue to be among the most vulnerable and are dependent on humanitarian aid to survive. Just in the past year, MFA provided emergency relief to more than 110,000 people across 118 camps.

“My children have never gone to school and I can’t afford to send them,” said a mother living in Al-Farouk camp in northwest Syria. Displacement often has a damaging and long-lasting effect on children and youth. The humanitarian crisis in Syria has had a devastating impact on educational opportunities.

MFA’s local partners visited this mother during a distribution campaign of MFA relief supplies. Her three boys are unable to read or write. “I can’t afford the cost of pens or notebooks. I have no money or any support,” said the mother. “They only help me. I can’t do anything for them.”

Displaced communities remain vastly underserved, with most displaced persons camps having insufficient or non-existent educational services. Moreover, schools in displaced and returnee communities have limited ability to absorb newly arriving students, and the overcrowding compounds the difficulty of the situation.

“We can’t forget that education is a child’s human right,” said Nesreen, an English teacher at a school in northwest Syria whose students received backpacks filled with school supplies from MFA. “It should be considered an integral element of an emergency response. The international community is responsible.”



Providing Food and Clean Water

Access to food and clean water remains a struggle for displaced Syrians -- increasing rates of malnutrition and water-borne illness in the region. Khouloud, 45, lives in a camp that is located in Darkush since her apartment was destroyed by bombardments. She told us, "Water is not sufficient for cleaning and daily use, how are we supposed to protect ourselves? It is very cold here and we need heating supplies. Our daily lives are very difficult here - more than anyone could imagine. COVID-19 has just added more distress to the daily struggle."

In 2020, MFA sent nearly 12,000 food baskets, each of which feeds a family for a month, and 9,000 water purification kits that enable families to purify water for drinking throughout the year. Taking a long-range view of addressing the chronic water shortage in these areas, MFA has launched a program to provide equipment that uses unique Israeli technology to draw pure drinking water from the air through a patented, high-tech condensation process. These Watergen units have a useful life of 15 years once installed and require little maintenance or upkeep since they are powered by solar panels. Thanks to the generosity of the Kirsh Foundation, we purchased and shipped the first two of ten units we plan to install. The Watergen units are designed to seamlessly connect to the plumbing of a pre-existing building and instantly provide drinkable water to the inhabitants. The units will be installed in schools, hospitals, and public facilities throughout northeast Syria.

Educational Tablets

MFA partnered with the Israeli Foreign Ministry to provide educational tablets to children who do not have access to in-person learning in the city of Idlib, northwest Syria. The destruction of schools and the added difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic have made it nearly impossible for students to study in person. As part of a pilot program, 130 tablets were delivered to students, and the program will be scaled up to serve more than 30,000 children from 49 schools – 24 primary schools, 16 middle schools, and 9 high schools. The tablets, which function without the internet, include Syrian curricula designed specifically for vulnerable children of all ages. The tablets' portability allows for uninterrupted study throughout the process of resettlement, which often includes multiple displacements.

Emergency Tents to Homes Program

In response to a sudden housing shortage caused by aerial bombardments, in 2020 MFA launched its Emergency Tent Program with Orient for Human Relief, which housed 7,000 individuals in large, insulated two-family tents. The tent camps were established in secure areas near the Turkish border and were accessible to large vehicles which distributed supplies as needed. "We've chosen the location to be far from floods and mud," said an Orient worker at the camp near Al-Hamama. "We've paved the land with gravel and basic services are provided."

Moving to more sustainable solutions for the future, MFA is working on a program to source and build more durable, long-term housing communities in a safe zone of northwest Syria. These dependable homes will be equipped with a finished bathroom and water reservoir, and will be situated near hospitals, schools, and relief distribution services.



Helping Syrian Women


Eighty percent of Syrian refugees are women and children. For those who remain in Syria, their vulnerability and the disruption of the healthcare system have had a disastrous impact. Many women in and around Syria live in overcrowded camps with inconsistent access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation, such as washing facilities or latrines. Women face an elevated risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, gender-specific medical conditions like pregnancy and childbirth can be especially perilous without adequate medical care.

MFA continues to support the needs of women through its Women's Relief Program, which serves communities by delivering women-specific supplies to medical facilities and mobile clinics in northern Syria and northern Iraq. In 2020, we provided breast cancer (chemotherapy) drugs, estrogen medication, personal safety whistles, menstrual supplies, and OBGYN equipment that included infant scales, an ultrasound machine, an infant incubator, and maternity kits.

Notably, this past year MFA provided 180,000 expectant Syrian mothers with complete pregnancy vitamins. This was made possible through the generosity of MFA supply partner, Kirk Humanitarian. Their in-kind donation enabled us to distribute high-quality, Halal-certified supplements, which contain fifteen micronutrients that support the health of both the expectant mother and baby. These supplements help to prevent maternal anemia and improve pregnancy outcomes by reducing the risks of stillbirth, low birth weight, and preterm birth.

Dr. Abd Alqadir Suleiman, from Afrin, said that the ongoing war, poverty, and frequent displacements have prevented most families from securing healthy or even basic food for pregnant women, which makes prenatal vitamins even more crucial for pregnancy and lactation.

After 10 Years of War



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"The beneficiaries were happy with the assistance they received, specifically in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the items were useful for the beneficiaries -- items were distributed due to the need of the areas. In some areas, water is not drinkable and they are in need of drinking water. Some areas were provided with food items due to the beneficiaries' needs as they have been affected by the current economic situation. Some beneficiaries were suggesting to provide them with other foodstuffs, as well as materials of protection from COVID-19."

- Our friend Ashur Sargon Eskrya who died in April 2021 as a result of COVID-19

As was widely reported, COVID-19 affected supply channels and logistics operations worldwide -- including displaced communities in Syria, which continued to suffer from lack of food, clean water, and other basic supplies normally provided by humanitarian relief shipments. MFA worked around the limitations presented by the COVID-19 pandemic utilizing every resource available to us, and shipments successfully arrived in Syria with only minor delays. In 2020, our emergency relief included:

- Water purification kits
- Meal kits
- Hand sanitizer
- Thermometers
- Disinfectant soap
- Respiratory products
- Anesthesia medications
- Anti-pollution kits
- Face shields and masks





Providing Medical & COVID Aid

In addition to emergency shipments of COVID-19 supplies, MFA delivered medical equipment and medications throughout 2020. One of the most sinister and brutal aspects of the Syrian crisis continues to be the deliberate targeting of the country's medical infrastructure— the bombing of hospitals and the killing of doctors. As a result, the surviving hospitals and medical centers are often unable to provide anything beyond basic care to those suffering from illnesses and the traumatic injuries of war.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we quickly mobilized to send nearly 6,000 gallons of hand sanitizer, 77,000 bars of soap as well as face masks, face shields, contactless thermometers, ventilators, hazmat suits, and other items needed to combat the spread of the virus in northern Syria. In addition to PPE, we provided hospitals in Syria with medicines and medical equipment, including wheelchairs for the wounded and impaired, medications for certain cancer treatments, as well as supplies that support routine care.

We prioritized distributing medicines for chronic diseases throughout northern Syria. Saad told us, “it was just the right time to receive [the antibiotic] Vancomycin, I really appreciate MFA's work and I hope they keep supporting me.” These supplies supported hospitals, medical centers, and mobile clinics that provide care to communities other organizations cannot reach.

Additionally, given the delay of vaccine distribution in the region, MFA will continue to deliver PPE and other COVID-19 supplies. Notably, in early 2021, MFA provided 50,000 medical-grade FFRs (filtering facepiece respirators) and over 85,000 face shields to frontline Syrian medical professionals, technicians, and aid workers.



Advocating for Syrian Refugees on Capitol Hill

In 2020, the last tumultuous year of an anti-refugee Administration, MFA continued working hard to advocate on behalf of Syrian refugees.

There were a few shining moments in those dark days for refugees and MFA was part of them. During the last Congress, there were House and Senate members from both parties who supported a Joint Resolution acknowledging the outstanding work that MFA and partners had done with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Syrian NGOs to deliver vitally needed aid into southern Syria. The bill, first introduced in 2019, continued to garner increasing support among Congressional members throughout the 116th Congress. While it did not achieve the final passage, it was a landmark bill in its own right.

The resolution reaffirmed support for collaborative efforts between the United States' NGOs, including faith-based organizations, Syrian NGOs, and the IDF "for having provided vital aid to internally displaced people and local residents in southern Syria while also overcoming generations of hostility, promoting dialogue between neighbors, and ultimately advancing long-term stability in the region."

Concurrently, MFA assisted in the passage of the Caesar Syria Civilian Act, (which President Trump signed into law in December 2019) and the full implementation of sanctions that continued to be rolled out in 2020. The Caesar Act puts new sanctions on Syrian leaders and imposes sanctions on companies, states, and individuals that back the Assad government militarily, financially, or technologically, including Russia and Iran.

Since its implementation, it has proven to be a powerful economic weapon in hobbling a regime committing war crimes against its own people.

MFA also worked with our partner organizations to ensure the extension and re-designation of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) visa for Syrians in the US. While we were successful in ensuring that those who already held TPS visas could continue to live (and often work) in the U.S., the Trump administration failed to offer that re-designation to Syrians in the U.S. who held expiring visas and needed to switch to TPS status. However, we stayed the course. By early 2021, the Biden administration announced that it would provide both extension and re-designation for Syrians under Temporary Protected Status.

Simultaneously, MFA participated in webinars and Zoom briefings relating to the Syrian humanitarian crisis. One of our podcasts, related our humanitarian work to the Turkish Heritage Organization's vast audience of members as well as the general public. The podcast also raised awareness of the plight of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Despite massive Syrian humanitarian aid given by the Turks, some, particularly children, still fall through the safety net and are badly in need of food and schooling. That message was taken to the Hill. The goal, when the pandemic ends, is to strongly encourage a Congressional Delegation visit to Turkey to see first-hand why it is critical for the U.S. to provide Turkey with more financial support. For those who must fend for themselves outside of refugee camps, additional food and educational aid are critical.



Advocacy

In 2020 into 2021, MFA played an effective role in gaining passage of the No Ban Act in the U.S. House of Representatives. This legislation ensures that the U.S. President can never again block U.S. entry of entire groups of people (like Muslims) solely based on their religion. The bill is now on the Senate side awaiting action

Hospitals and medical workers have been consistently targeted by the Assad regime with bombings that are considered war crimes. Rep. Brendan Boyle (D-PA) and Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) who co-chair the Syria Caucus in the U.S. House, filed a compelling House Resolution in 2019-20 to draw attention to this travesty. H.Res.395 condemned the intentional military targeting of hospitals and medical personnel in Syria. MFA pressed for bipartisan support for this important resolution during the last Congress and we stand ready to do the same during the current 117th Congress when, hopefully, it will be re-introduced.



Get Involved

Donate

Make a tax-deductible gift by visiting our website at multifaithalliance.org, or to donate by mail, please make your check payable to: "MFA-Tides Center #1146" and send it to:

Multifaith Alliance
6 East 43rd Street, Floor 22 New York, NY 10017

Fund A Container

For \$6,500, individuals or groups can cover 100% of shipping and logistical costs to send a 40-foot container of relief supplies to Syria. Once the supplies are distributed, donors receive a comprehensive report with photographs and detailed information about the container's contents, its value, the location and number of people reached, and the impact it had on them.

Tents to Homes Campaign

For \$1200, donors can sponsor the construction of our dependable homes for a refugee family in one of MFA's new housing communities. These homes are located in a safe zone near the Turkish border, and are equipped with a finished bathroom and water reservoir.

Invite an MFA speaker

By sharing their compelling personal stories, MFA leaders will help your organization better understand the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Our team offers its expertise in collaborating to create a speaking event, virtually or in-person that assuredly will be inspiring and memorable. Learn first-hand about the situation on the ground in Syria from eyewitness accounts of MFA colleagues who work in the Northeast and Northwest regions.

By providing in-depth knowledge of the ongoing crisis, MFA will help you and your organization discover opportunities to become involved in projects and programs that strengthen and empower displaced Syrians to begin rebuilding their lives.

On the home front, with a new administration has come revitalization of our advocacy efforts for rational and humane U.S. refugee policies. Invite MFA's speakers to motivate your community to take action and become voices for policy changes that are lifesaving and honor the precepts of all of our faiths, and reinforce American values to care for the stranger and the oppressed.



Stay in Touch

Multifaith Alliance

6 East 43rd Street, Floor 22

New York, NY 10017

+1 917 810 2820

info@multifaithalliance.org

multifaithalliance.org



@multifaithalliance



@MultifaithAid



@multifaithaid