

Not Nearly Enough

ASSESSING THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE
TO SYRIA'S WAR

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ow in its sixth year, the Syrian civil war ranks among the greatest humanitarian disasters since World War II.¹ The most recent estimate puts the death toll as high as 470,000, the result of bombings, rocket attacks, air raids, shootings, mass killings, starvation, and exposure to toxic substances, among other causes.² In addition to the great loss of life, the conflict has displaced millions.³ 4.3 million civilians have fled the country, 6.6 million are internally displaced, and 13.5 million need additional humanitarian assistance.⁴ Of those who have fled the country, the majority have gone to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Only ten percent have sought refuge in Europe.⁵ Those who remain in Syria not only risk death but also face a greatly diminished quality of life. The fighting has caused such immense destruction that the country has regressed four decades in terms of

human development. Four out of five Syrians now live in poverty, and health and educational structures have been damaged or destroyed completely, with at least 4,000 schools ruined or repurposed.⁶ An estimated 3 million Syrian children have stopped attending class. Access to healthcare has been drastically restricted, as the majority of Syria's hospitals have become inoperative and the majority of the country's health professionals have fled to safety.⁷

Such an extensive humanitarian crisis requires an equally extensive humanitarian response. Both inside and outside the country, the UN, various international NGOs, and local NGOs are working to deliver life-saving assistance to Syrian civilians, led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The group aims to organize the efforts of national and international humanitarian actors to best "alleviate human suffering" and "ensure a coherent response."⁸ Outside Syria, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is leading the international humanitarian response. The agency seeks to "safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees" and to help those in need of asylum to find refuge in another state.⁹

But how well are the needs of those affected by this crisis actually being met, and who, if anyone, should be held responsible for the needs that go unmet? After over four years of fighting and several millions of people in need, the blame cannot be placed on a single actor. An unwillingness by outside governments to put the needs of the Syrian people first has allowed the conflict to escalate into the crisis that it is today and has left millions of civilians dead, wounded, or in urgent need of aid.

Gauging How Well the Needs of Syrians Are Being Met

Personal testimonies illustrate the magnitude of the failure of the international response. In a 2015 Oxfam report entitled "Failing Syria," Samah, a mother of six, compares life in the camp in which she and her family now reside to "dying every day a thousand times over." She describes the daily "cold, illness, and hunger" through which her family must suffer and the humiliation of needing to rely on an outside organization for meager amounts of food. She describes how, if it weren't for her children, she "would prefer to live under the threat of airstrikes" in her home than under the undignified conditions of the camp.¹⁰ Samira, a 45 year-old Syrian refugee and widow, lives in a one-room self-made shelter with 12 other people in Lebanon. She feels that, "living here is worse than in Syria, [because] here, we have to keep worrying about every detail...We need bread for the children; we don't have any food at all."¹¹

Many see pictures of refugees in UNHCR tents and incorrectly conclude that refugees mainly live in UN camps.¹² In reality, the vast majority of refugees live in urban environments. Within Jordan, it is estimated that 84 percent of Syrian refugees live outside the camps. Because they live among Jordanians, the majority of these refugees lack access to UN assistance and are trying to make a living on their own, although the most do not have work permits.¹³

As Western powers grapple over how many refugees, if any, they will accept, it is important to remember that the countries directly bordering Syria have accepted the bulk of the refugees for years. However, neither the refugees nor those accepting them

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anticipated the longevity of this crisis. Four and a half years later, neighboring host countries are growing weary of their role as hosts. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq are experiencing a kind of “host fatigue” as tension increases between natives and refugees and local families find it harder to deal with the continuing strain.¹⁴

Jordan, just south of Syria, and Lebanon, just west, have accepted approximately a million and 1.5 million refugees, respectively.¹⁵ These numbers alone are staggering, but consideration of the size, economic situation, and level of resources that both countries maintain makes the figures even more incredible. Jordan’s pre-refugee population stood at eight million, and Lebanon’s at a mere 4.5 million, which means that refugees now constitute roughly a fourth of the total population in the latter country. Neither nation is economically rich, and both are lacking in natural resources. Lebanon has among the highest levels of national debt in the world, and Jordan is profoundly water-scarce. Ironically, rich Arab neighbors in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, have yet to offer resettlement to even a single refugee.¹⁶ Despite their hard circumstances, Lebanon and Jordan have coped better than expected thus far. However, some warn that the countries may be reaching their limits,

speaking of potentially destabilizing economic and social pressures if the refugee flow continues.¹⁷

The realities of this “saturation” mean that thousands of Syrians are barely making ends meet. As of January 2014, two-thirds of Syrian refugees in Jordan were living in “abject poverty, with less than \$40 per person per month.” In a study conducted by UNHCR and the International Relief and Development in 2014, almost half of the 150,000 refugees interviewed, all of whom were living outside the camps, had no heating, a quarter had unreliable electricity, and 20 percent had no functioning toilet. High rental fees put immense strain on the budgets of Syrian families, forcing many to cram together into one space in order to afford the accommodation.¹⁸ UNHCR is attempting to distribute cash assistance to thousands of the most vulnerable out-of-camp refugees, but the number of impoverished Syrians not receiving this assistance is rising.¹⁹

As poverty increases, more and more Syrians are forced into more desperate means of survival. Mr. Antonio Guterres, the standing UN High Commissioner for Refugees, warns that “more children will drop out of school to work” and others will be forced to engage in prostitution or “survival sex.”²⁰ With such dire lack of access to food and healthcare in some areas, many have embarked on the expensive,

arduous, and often treacherous migration to Europe, a trend that will likely increase as conditions deteriorate.²¹ Some have even decided to return to Syria, desperate to have at least some of their old comforts and possessions. “I’ve no relatives left here and no money,” explained one refugee, a mother of three from southern Syria, explaining herself in a BBC news report. Another, Abu Ahmed, describes

A Syrian refugee family in its rented house in Jordan. UK Dept. for International Development/Wikimedia



his need to go back in order to obtain medical treatment for his daughter: “It’s a hard life here... [but] in Syria, it will be available.”²² That refugees feel desperate enough to return to a warzone speaks to the great inadequacy of the humanitarian response.

The Inadequacy of Funding

The response plan put forth by the UHCHR is intended to assist both refugees in the camps and countries that are hosting refugees outside of the camps. However, the plan demands \$1.3 billion in funding and is currently only funded at 35% of that demand. The number of refugees is increasing, yet funds are diminishing. The humanitarian agencies of the UN are “on the verge of bankruptcy,” meaning that millions are and will continue to be left in need. UNHCR and UNICEF do not receive their budgets from the UN’s central fund, paid by member states. Rather, the UN’s humanitarian work is funded by individual governments and private donors. Refugee commissioner Guterres currently is asking that member states “make more regular payments to the main agencies” to change this system, but there is no easy fix for the dearth of necessary funds.²³ This shortage applies to NGOs as well—their funding is inadequate, and the nature of donations-based aid inherently complicates the situation, as foreign donors change their priorities frequently.²⁴

The Syrian Regime

Another formidable challenge to an efficient UN humanitarian response is the Syrian regime. The government severely restricts the access that humanitarian aid workers have to the country, making it difficult to conduct successful humanitarian operations such as carrying out needs assessments or opening field offices. The government has made it difficult for agency staff to gain visas, forcing agencies to operate out of neighboring countries.²⁵ Assad’s government is not merely hindering the delivery of aid inadvertently, but in some cases intentionally preventing its delivery while also purposefully escalating its need. There have been reports of “intentional policies of starvation in areas

under siege by the government,” as well as military attacks.²⁶ The evident goal of this deplorable strategy is to de-populate opposition-held territory, immediately weakening opposition support, and to discourage potential future support.²⁷ Additionally, while not purposefully attacking civilians like Assad has done, other government leaders in the region have not done their part to ensure that aid is delivered as efficiently as possible. Egypt, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have taken measures to restrict access to aid workers within their borders, further complicating if not completely inhibiting the aid delivery process.²⁸

Obstacles to Access and Tracing

All aid-giving organizations are struggling to reach those in Syria. It is difficult to trace the delivery of supplies all the way to their intended recipients.²⁹ Worse, aid that falls into the hands of militants may bolster their power as they use the aid to supply their own forces or, more seriously, to manipulate those in need by withholding vital supplies of food and other forms of aid. Of course, corruption or manipulation surrounding the aid-giving process is not unique to Syria. In fact, there is less aid theft within Syria than in past humanitarian conflicts, but UN agencies and NGOs have admitted that “it is hard, if not impossible, to know where supplies end up,” especially in areas designated as difficult-to-reach.³⁰



US troops delivering aid to rebel-held areas in Syria.
SMSgt George Thompson/Wikimedia

“That refugees feel desperate enough to return to a warzone speaks to the great inadequacy of the humanitarian response.”

However, the uncertainty of aid delivery is particularly troubling in the Syrian case because of the threat of ISIS. The size, sophistication, and relative success of the terrorist organization makes it unlike any other. Social media images appeared earlier this year “showing Islamic State logos” on the UNWFP food aid boxes. Images such as these, and the general uncertainty as to where aid is ending up may also hurt future donations. Donors want reassurance that their money is making a positive impact, not being used impartially or falling into the hands of the aggressors.³¹

Despite these potential outcomes, aid groups want to continue delivering aid, and thus must accept some level of uncertainty and risk. Food aid reaches just 12 percent of the 4.6m Syrians living in areas defined as “hard to reach,” and medical supplies only make it to 4 percent.³² An ISIS blockade has prevented UNICEF from sending water treatment supplies to the Syrian governorates of Raqqa and Dier ez-Zor for the past eleven months. When members of the Free Syrian Army captured ground around the Nasib border-crossing between Syria and Jordan, UNICEF was blocked from treating 500,000 liters of water.³³ Aid workers reported that “the complex nature of the Syrian conflict...has forced them into clandestine operations.” They must often go through local partners to carry out these operations, making it impossible to trace the delivery of all of their supplies.³⁴

Further complicating the issue of aid access and tracing is the fickle state of the situation on the ground. It is extremely difficult to structure aid systems around a constantly progressing civil war. The constantly-changing, urgent developments of the crisis have created an unanticipated level of need, and the international response has proven itself unfit to handle such a need. Furthermore, although attempting to deliver aid in any conflict situation is perilous, the publicized ISIS kidnappings and killings of aid workers, such as those of the British Alan Henning

and the American Kayla Mueller, have characterized the conflict as a particularly dangerous one. Much of Syria has simply become “too dangerous to operate in.”³⁵ Since the conflict began, “76 humanitarian workers have been killed,” over half from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, the Syrian counterpart to the American Red Cross. In addition, “over 32 United Nations staff members have been detained or are missing.”³⁶

Because of these dangers, most large aid agencies have resorted to providing relief where it is safe, mainly outside of Syria in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Although many are undoubtedly in need in these areas, the concentration of aid-giving outside Syria is partially responsible for drawing Syrians out of the country, creating more refugees. Despite the fact that several more millions are displaced within the country than have fled, it is estimated that aid agencies are spending about \$5.5 billion on registered refugees outside the country, almost twice that which they are spending on those displaced within.³⁷

Assessing the Efforts of the UN, Individual States, and NGOs

However, these factors alone do not fully explain the great inadequacy of the humanitarian response to Syrians in need. The UN, for one, is not without fault. This blame falls less on individual agencies, and more on the UN as a larger body. Ban Ki-moon, current Secretary-General of the United Nations, has expressed his anger at the international communities’ “impotence to stop the war” in Syria, including that of individual members states, and added that the UN’s credibility has suffered because of this ineffectiveness. The Secretary-General has criticized the dynamics of power politics that exist within the UN Security Council (UNSC), namely the blockage of certain effective resolutions for the sake of protecting national interests. The permanent members of the

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UNSC include China, France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S., and though the Secretary-General did not explicitly identify any country in particular, the statement seems aimed at Russia and China who, being allies of Assad, have “on several occasions” purposefully prohibited the passage of resolutions critical of the Assad’s regime.³⁸ Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the UN and former UN envoy to Syria, resigned from the latter position in 2012 after only five months. The diplomat expressed his frustration at the “finger-pointing and name-calling” at a time when action was, and still is, so desperately needed.³⁹

Individual states are not blameless either; the Syrian government is not the only regime fueling the conflict. Even countries with no geographical proximity to Syria have actively contributed to the deepening of the crisis. The question of whether Syria should be labeled a “proxy war” is debated, but countries such as Russia, the U.S., Iran, and various Arab Gulf States certainly have taken means to influence the war either through direct military involvement or through one-sided military aid.⁴⁰ For its part, Turkey has come under scrutiny for its apparent support for ISIS. Evidence suggests that, in addition to undermining anti-ISIS Kurdish militias, it has also provided direct aid to the terrorist group.⁴¹

The support funneled into all sides of the conflict from various outside sources, particularly the transfer of “arms, ammunition and other forms of military support,” is fueling the conflict and thereby actively undermining the effort to improve the humanitarian situation. The degree to which the war is being perpetuated by outside forces and the extent to which the UN is failing to lessen these influences or implement its resolutions is apparent in the fact that over 90% of the weapons currently in Syria were produced by UNSC permanent member states.⁴²

The many inadequacies of the UN in Syria raise questions about the organization’s capabilities as a relief provider. Many independent NGOs have expressed

their belief that they are more equipped to handle the humanitarian crisis. It is not difficult to see how independent NGOs are, in many ways, better suited to tackle the burden of providing aid. NGOs are much smaller and do not have to deal with the multiple levels of bureaucracy, and often have greater knowledge of the situation on the ground. However, it is also important to note that many of the challenges that plague UN agencies, such as restricted access, dangerous conditions, and restrictions from the Syrian regime or other governments, do apply to NGOs as well.⁴³

There is also discussion of whether local Syrian NGOs or international NGOs are better suited to the task. Syrian NGOs are more in tune with the situation on the ground and are better able to understand the limitations they will face, yet at the same time, they are less developed and often do not have the necessary skills to function as relief organizations.⁴⁴ Some international agencies contend that, unlike local NGOs, they are “above the political fray and scourge of local corruption.” While it is true that they may be less subject to local politics, they are still subject to pressures from home, which can negatively impact efforts.⁴⁵

Many Syrian NGOs are new creations, born when the termination of services from the Syrian government left many in need. Civil society organizations, as independent from government control, did not exist in Syria previous to the conflict and so did not learn how to function as truly independent, non-governmental organizations.⁴⁶ These local NGOs often have great potential but lack such necessary components as professional training, financial expertise, experience with human resources and supply chain management, among other skills. If these organizations could develop these organizational skills and be trained in capacities specific to operation in a conflict zone, they might be able to realize this potential. However, most donors are not willing to give these efforts adequate funding.⁴⁷

The role of international and local NGOs is

difficult to assess because of the complicated situation on the ground. Gaining information about NGO operations is further complicated by the reluctance of many NGOs to disclose details about their operations, fearing that doing so may “jeopardize the safety” of their workers or of those they are trying to help. Fortunately, the Syrian government has granted 18 international NGOs and 11 UN agencies permission to operate inside the country and has allowed certain local NGOs to work in conjunction with the UN to provide humanitarian assistance.⁴⁸

Finally, although NGOs prove superior in some aspects, such as having less bureaucracy and greater knowledge of the situation on the ground, UN entities generally have greater access to those in need, especially in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The UN entities have the ability to carry out “large-scale operations with consistent standards, such as vaccination campaigns and food delivery.” Individual NGOs are inevitably more limited and cannot conduct such widespread, impactful operations.⁴⁹

Moving Forward

Though seemingly obvious, the best way to improve the humanitarian response to the conflict is to bring an end to the conflict itself. At the least, fighting must decrease significantly before the relief efforts that do exist can be carried out fully. Humanitarian organizations must be able to do their jobs without facing blockades, unnecessary government restrictions, and fear for their safety. The greatest responsibility for ending the humanitarian crisis lies with those actively fighting in the conflict. However, there are measures that other international and regional actors can take to pressure these parties into a solution and to reduce further escalation.⁵⁰

The UNSC permanent members must put aside their individual interests and take decisive action. Outside states must stop using the fighting in Syria for their own political gain and instead work together to reduce the enormous size and complexity of the current crisis. The UN must end the existing impunity that allows the actors in this conflict to commit such horrible atrocities. The plans put forth by the UN Peace Envoy to ensure greater respect for the rights

of civilians must be taken seriously, and peace talks in which all sides of the conflict are present and the needs of the Syrian people are prioritized must take place. Civil society must be represented in the negotiation of agreements, especially groups that speak on behalf of those most vulnerable in this conflict, such as women and youth. The inclusion of these types of groups is not only just but also necessary if such agreements are to have long-term success.⁵¹

The aim of assessing the various actors taking part in the humanitarian response is not to argue that one should operate exclusively but rather to realize the ways in which these actors are working together and should continue working together to build their capacity for aid. In addition to encouraging cooperation, it would be worthwhile to explore the greater potential of local NGOs on the ground. Rather than deem these groups incompetent, it is better to strategically address the issues that prevent them from reaching their full capacity and aim to fix these inadequacies. Those making donations must not impose misguided priorities on the organizations they are funding, and rather focus on increasing the management skills and operational capacity of those closest to the conflict, who have the greatest expertise of the situation on the ground.⁵²

In the meantime, international actors must continue to supply the direly needed funds to those providing relief, even though the protracted conflict has already cost billions. Relief funds must not be sent only to those organizations directly providing relief, but also to communities that have taken in the bulk of the refugees. In addition to financial contributions, states must continue to bring refugees within their borders, offering resettlement or at least temporary asylum. This burden primarily falls not on the countries that have already accepted millions but instead on those who have yet to take in refugees, especially those who have greater financial means to accommodate them, such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.⁵³

The conflict in Syria is yet another example in which the world has failed to prevent, and now to respond to, a great human injustice. But the humanitarian response, even when effective, can never fully counter nor overcome the pain and destruction created by the crisis in the first place. Until governmental

actors decide to put the well-being of innocent civilians ahead of individual gain, the Syrian crisis, and other such horrific humanitarian crises, will carry on, and civilians will continue to bear the brunt of war. ♦

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