



# Planning from the Future

Component 2. The Contemporary Humanitarian Landscape:  
Malaise, Blockages and Game Changers

## **No End in Sight: A Case Study of Humanitarian Action and the Syria Conflict**

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## Acronyms

3RP	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
CCCM	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CSO	civil society organization
DFID	Department for International Development, UK Government
DTO	designated terrorist organization
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
EU	European Union
FIC	Feinstein International Center at Tufts University
FSA	Free Syria Army
GoJ	Government of Jordan
GoL	Government of Lebanon
GoS	Government of Syria
GoT	Government of Turkey
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HPF	Humanitarian Pooled Fund
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee for the Red Cross/Red Crescent
IDP	internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	international NGO
ISCCG	inter sector/cluster coordination group
ISIS	Daesh or the Islamic State
LNGO	local NGO
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NFIs	non-food items
NGO	non-governmental organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PFF	Planning for the Future
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
R2P	responsibility to protect
RHC	Regional Humanitarian Coordinator
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SHARP	Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SIMAWG	Syria Information Management and Assessment Working Group

SNC	Syrian National Council
SOC	Syrian Opposition Coalition
SRP	Syria Response Plan
SSG	strategic steering group
TPM	Third Party Monitoring
TPS	temporary protective status
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinians in the Near East
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
WASH	water and sanitation
WFP	World Food Program
WoS	Whole of Syria
YPG	Kurdish People’s Protection Units

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## Abstract

As part of a larger research project—Planning from the Future—which examines the past, present, and future of humanitarian action globally, this case study identifies the main blockages and game changers in the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis. Findings are based on reports, news sources, and academic writings, as well as key informant interviews with 52 representatives of donor countries, the United Nations, international NGOs and Syrian local organizations working inside Syria, cross-border, and within neighboring countries. The humanitarian system has largely failed in Syria. The scale of the conflict and humanitarian need constitute one of the largest crises of our time, and only a fraction of humanitarian needs are currently met by the system. Humanitarian action has been used as a fig leaf for political inaction and has been highly politicized and influenced by donor interests and political preferences, clashing with the application of first-order humanitarian principles. Meaningful protection continues to remain elusive and humanitarian leadership has been weak while mistrust within and between organizations runs high. Humanitarian actors are trapped by their mandates, and donors are risk averse. As a result, interventions are largely driven by what agencies can do, rather than what is needed. Those in the most need—the besieged, civilians under ISIS control, Palestinians—are the least served. Gulf countries, despite their presence and influence, are largely excluded from the Western-driven humanitarian systems, as are Syrian organizations, which are the primary humanitarian actors on the ground. Extreme insecurity and GoS restrictions have led nearly all humanitarian operations to follow remote management models. The middle-income status of neighboring countries has allowed for creative programming using cash, iris scanners, and the private sector, although these “innovations” were also late to the scene. Despite these failures, the Syria crisis has also shown how effective and inspiring local humanitarian responses can be, whether Syrian grass-roots initiatives, diaspora organizations’ action, the protective use of social media, civil society groups’ bravery, intricate and complex communication systems, or volunteers on the shores of Greece and in the Balkans.

## Planning from the Future—the Project

Kings College (London), The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute (HPG/ODI) in London and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (FIC) are partnering on a 15-month research project “**Planning From the Future: Crisis, Challenge, Change in Humanitarian Action.**” The research looks at the past, present and future of humanitarian action:

- HPG leads the analysis of the blockages in the past and how these have led to changes in the humanitarian architecture (Component 1).
- FIC identifies the key blockages and game changers in the humanitarian landscape today (Component 2) and at urgent measures to reform it that could immediately be taken (Component 3).

- Kings College looks at the future and asks whether improvements contemplated today will be adequate to meet the growing vulnerabilities, dimensions, and dynamics of humanitarian crises in the longer term (Component 4).
- The three partners will then come together to provide a synthesis of their findings and recommendations in a final report to be issued in early 2016 (Component 5).

## Component 2—the Humanitarian Landscape Today

Despite impressive growth, institutionalization, and professionalization, the humanitarian system is facing an existential crisis. While time-tested tools, funds, and capacities are readily available, the system has succumbed to a widespread malaise and is not delivering. Recent crises from Afghanistan to Somalia, Haiti, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan as well as current emergencies—Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic, among other less visible crises—question the very foundations of humanitarianism and the galaxy of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals. The intractable nature of many crises and the instrumental use of humanitarian action to cover up for the political failures of the so-called international community are leading to a growing realization that the humanitarian system as presently constituted is not fit for purpose—and growing dissonance about what the purpose should be.

As part of Component 2, FIC is producing a series of papers that capitalize on recent or ongoing research. These include case studies that analyze blockages and game changers affecting humanitarian action in recent crises—and what these crises tell us about the state of the humanitarian enterprise. FIC has also prepared background papers on emerging or under-researched policy and operational or systemic issues that need to be better understood because of how they affect the changing humanitarian landscape.

## Introduction to the Case Study: The Syria Crisis

The conflict in Syria and the resulting humanitarian crisis have resounded in one way or another throughout most of the world. Peaceful protests against an authoritarian regime in March 2011 sparked violent retaliation by the government and the arming of a (fragmented) opposition, plunging the country into an infernal civil war, with spillover effects to Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, as well as Europe and Africa. Estimates vary on the number of Syrians killed since the start of the conflict, but a variety of sources currently puts the figure at over 250,000 people.<sup>1</sup> This includes at least 185,000 civilians, or 75 percent of the total estimated deaths, of which 20,000 are children (SNHR 2015).

Syria's population numbered 22 million before the conflict, and an estimated half the population have been displaced from their homes (Mercy Corps 2016). Syrians registering as refugees in neighboring countries number 4.3 million, and an additional 2 million Syrians are believed to live in host countries under alternative legal frameworks or without official status (UNHCR 2015a).<sup>2</sup> This figure includes an estimated 500,000 Syrians who have arrived in Europe by boat

during 2015 (The Associated Press Berlin 2015). But the conflict is not just about death and displacement. More than three-quarters of Syrians are living in poverty and two-thirds in extreme poverty. The United Nations estimates that the current “total number of people in need” in Syria is 13.5 million, which includes 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (OCHA 2015a).

The scale of the conflict and the magnitude of humanitarian need constitute one of the largest crises of our time, posing significant challenges to contemporary humanitarian architecture. Within Syria, the conflict and response are highly politicized, often described as a proxy war, with local, regional, and global powers influencing the landscape. Protection has taken a back seat despite the on-going targeting of civilians by government and non-government actors that have led to grave human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, and blatant violations of international humanitarian law (IHL). Humanitarian access remains an enormous challenge, with remote management modalities the norm. The humanitarian response has been deeply divided and fragmented among multiple fault lines—including geography (cross-border/cross-front-lines), relationships within and between agencies, and leadership structures. The “Whole of Syria” integrated approach introduced by the United Nations in 2014, with mixed success, has attempted to bring together multiple operational centers and organizations to build trust, share information, and improve coordination. New modalities have been tested and employed, but the appropriateness of “regular” interventions for largely urban, non-camp based populations in middle-income countries remains questionable. Humanitarian principles, in concept and practice, are constantly challenged in this atmosphere.

## Methodology

This case study draws on reports, news sources, and academic writings as well as key-informant interviews with 52 representatives of donor countries, the United Nations, international NGOs (INGOs) and Syrian local NGOs (LNGOs) working on the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict. Interviews were held over Skype and in person in Amman, Beirut, Istanbul, and Gaziantep during the last quarter of 2015 and January 2016. Key informants work at the regional level or within refugee receiving countries or hold positions concerned with cross-border activities from Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan. While interviews were conducted with humanitarian actors within opposition-controlled Syria, few interviews were possible with key informants operating inside government-controlled areas. This omission arises from security considerations, travel restrictions (for the author), and the inability for those inside Syria to speak freely without surveillance. As such, key informants who had previous experience in government-controlled Syria were sought out for interviews. Another limitation was that the author was not able to interview donors from Gulf countries.

Findings here overwhelmingly represent the perceptions of interviewees, but are fact-checked and independently referenced whenever possible. Key-informant names are not included in this report to respect confidentiality. Results are also buttressed with data from two previous studies conducted by this author, which focused on Syrian NGOs, local councils, the Syrian Opposition

Coalition (SOC) and Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and international organizations operating from southern Turkey into Syria.<sup>3</sup>

## Background to the Conflict

In February 2011, “The People Want to Topple the Regime” was spray-painted on the walls of a school in the southern city of Daraa (Thompson, 2015). The authors—a group of teenage boys—were promptly jailed and tortured, sparking popular protests across the city in March. Security forces of the government of Syria (GoS) opened fire on demonstrators, prompting a streak of protests in various locations throughout the country. This event is most often referred to as the “spark” that set in motion the revolution. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands of people were regularly protesting (Rodgers et al. 2015). Demands included the resignation of President Bashar Al-Assad and broad political reforms including the freedom of press, speech, and assembly; the existence of multiple political parties; and equal rights for Kurdish people. The GoS met these demands by opening fire on some demonstrators and the widespread detention and torture of others. Snipers forced people out of public spaces, water and electricity were shut off, and food was confiscated in locations where the protests were most pronounced (Cornell University Library 2015).

In response, supporters of the opposition organized and armed themselves. Rebel brigades formed and wrested control from the government in several locations (Rodgers et al. 2015). Localized “civil unrest” was classified by ICRC as civil war by the end of 2012 when the number of casualties reached the threshold for “internal armed conflict” under the Geneva Conventions. An opposition government in exile—the Syrian National Council<sup>4</sup> (SNC)—was formed towards the end of 2011. This body included several factions such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Syria since the 1980s), Kurdish groups, the Damascus Declaration Group (a pro-democracy network), and other dissidents (Cornell University Library 2015). The SNC formed the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in 2014, supported by technical assistance from a variety of countries and financially backed at the outset by the government of Qatar.

Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring—which swept from Tunisia through North Africa into the Middle East—it is no surprise that Syrians engaged in peaceful protests demanding political and civil rights. Violent repression of popular movements seen to challenge the central authority is not new in Syria. The country has long been held under authoritarian leadership—with severely curtailed political and civil rights including under the father of the current president, Hafez-al Assad, who presided from 1971–2000.<sup>5</sup> President Bashar al-Assad has been in power since 2000. In addition to this history of repression, the Alawite minority has had nearly exclusive access to formal economic, political, military, and social networks of power in the country. The years prior to the uprisings were also marked by economic stagnation, corruption, and drought, which led to an economic crisis particularly for the agricultural sector—abolishing the livelihoods for 800,000 agricultural workers (Lund 2014). Widespread access to social media



has improved communication and the dispersion of ideas and is considered a facilitator of the Syria uprisings and the Arab Spring more generally (Howard and Hussain 2013).

Four and a half years ago, the conflict appeared to be one side against another—pro-democracy rebels versus Assad. Since then, the opposition has fractured, splintered, and been coopted, with the original fight transforming into a radicalized sectarian war involving local, regional, and global powers with no end in sight. Syrians involved in the “revolution” for democracy feel that their cause has been hijacked.<sup>6</sup> Extreme sectarianism is unfamiliar to many residents of contemporary Syria.<sup>7</sup> And Western support has U-turned from “Assad must go” to “ISIS must be destroyed,” sidelining many of the institutions and initiatives that received initial Western support. While difficult to succinctly characterize the war, one analyst aptly described Syria “today [as] the largest battlefield and generator of Sunni-Shia sectarianism the world has ever seen, with deep implication for the future boundaries of the Middle East and the spread of terrorism” (Tabler 2015).

## Stakeholder Analysis

The key interest groups connected to the Syria crisis—political, military, economic and humanitarian—number in the dozens. The following paragraphs provide a summary of main actors, but do not purport to present a complete analysis of all stakeholders involved in this complex and rapidly changing crisis.

## Conflict and Political Actors

The main armed actors involved in the Syrian civil war today include the GoS military and security forces, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), Daesh or the Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda-backed Jabhat Al-Nusra (Al-Nusra), a range of armed groups with an Islamic agenda (from almost secular to moderate to extreme), and more secular rebel groups known as the Free Syria Army (FSA).<sup>8</sup> Each armed actor has a different set of interests, but most have a named enemy and seek exclusive control over territory or imposition of a certain type of governance over a population. The GoS has engaged in anti-terrorism rhetoric to justify attacks on the opposition. Each armed actor also has a different set of sponsors, including local, regional, and global powers. This panoply of divergent interests and sponsors has led many<sup>9</sup> to see the Syria conflict as a reinstatement of the Cold War or a proxy war.

In terms of international involvement on the ground, Hizbollah and troops from Israel, Iran, and Turkey have also made a recent appearance on Syrian soil.<sup>10</sup> From the air, the US, UK, France, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Russia, Israel, and the Syrian Air Force have or are currently dropping bombs (Moore 2015; US Department of Defense 2015). In terms of alliances, the GoS largely counts on Hizbollah, Iran, and Russia for support. Syrian Kurdish forces are generally supported by the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) headquartered in Turkey (Tabler 2015).

In October 2015, the US abandoned its “train and equip” program—largely considered an outright failure—aimed at capacitating moderate Syria rebels associated with the Free Syrian Army. Since, they have aimed to militarily support the Syrian Democratic Forces—a Kurdish led militia dominated by Kurds but including a minority of Arabs—to fight ISIS and other extremists (Reuters 2016). Covert military operations sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency are believed to continue.<sup>11</sup>

Interests between allies, even traditional allies, rarely align, as described by a high-level US government official, “This conflict is designed by the devil. Turkey’s number one enemy is the Kurds, number two is Assad and number three is ISIS. The number one enemy of the US is ISIS and number two is Assad. Saudi Arabia has another set of preferences, as do Qatar, Kuwait, and Russia.”<sup>12</sup> As an illustration, during data collection, the government of Turkey bombed Kurdish forces in Syria receiving US support trying to take over ISIS-controlled areas. Several kilometers away, Russian forces claiming to target ISIS were in fact bombing civilian locations held by Western-backed moderate rebels.<sup>13</sup>

A recent estimate of territorial control has not been officially calculated, and dynamics have shifted since Russian air intervention began in the fall of 2015. Conflict analysts estimate that the GoS currently controls about one third of Syria, Kurdish forces between 10 and 20 percent, ISIS between 30 and 40 percent and other armed groups the remaining territory (17–27 percent). However, the majority of the Syrian population continues to live in government-controlled areas.<sup>14</sup>

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has remained largely stymied in a Cold-War-style gridlock since the start of the Syria crisis. Two main resolutions have been passed. Under Resolution 2139, passed in February 2014, the UNSC “strongly condemns the widespread violations of human rights and international law by the Syrian authorities, as well as the human rights abuses and violations of international law by armed groups. . . .” (UN Security Council 2014a, 2). The resolution also demands that authorities lift sieges, cease attacks on civilians (including using indiscriminate weapons such as barrel bombs), and allow unhindered humanitarian access.

Five months later, the UNSC passed Resolution 2165, which both reaffirmed 2139 and authorized the United Nations and implementing partners to operate across conflict lines and borders crossings—thereby providing an overt legal framework for cross-border humanitarian operations from Jordan and Turkey into Syria.<sup>15</sup> The resolution also affirms that the UNSC “will take further measures in the event of non-compliance with this resolution or Resolution 2139 (2014), by any Syrian party,” (UN Security Council 2014b, 4). However, no enforcement mechanism was established and there have been no consequences for on-going violations of these resolutions.

As mentioned above, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces is the self-appointed opposition governing body of Syria. The coalition’s mission includes the “removal of the Bashar al-Assad regime and ‘its symbols and pillars of support’; dismantling of

the Syrian security services; unifying and supporting the Free Syrian Army; rejecting dialogue and negotiation with the al-Assad government and, ‘holding accountable those responsible for killing Syrians, destroying [Syria]’, and displacing [Syrians]’ (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1). The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) was formed by and under the larger umbrella of the coalition in 2013. The SIG is based in Turkey and meant to serve as an executive body for opposition-controlled Syria. While 140 countries recognize the coalition as the “legitimate representative of the Syrian people,” the SIG has been fraught with divisions and tensions—dissolving and reforming multiple times—and is “mired in a vicious cycle of mistrust, mismanagement, and alleged corruption, and has grown increasingly marginalized since the US prioritized attacking the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria above Assad’s removal” (Ackerman 2015). The SIG has seen massive cuts from its only substantive financial donor—Qatar—leading many SIG government employees and ministers to abandon their posts. At present, a few ministries are functioning as coordinating bodies or venues to attract international funds<sup>16</sup> from INGOs. Otherwise, the SIG is seen as a “sinking ship,”<sup>17</sup> and both the coalition and the SIG suffer from a serious lack of legitimacy on the ground in Syria (O’Bagy 2012).<sup>18</sup>

Diplomatic efforts to find a political solution include informal and formal negotiations starting in 2011. The most significant, known as the Geneva II Conference, occurred in 2014. The next attempt occurred nearly two years later (end 2015). Known as the Vienna Process, negotiations involved foreign ministers from Russia, the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Middle Eastern and European countries, but without representation of the political opposition. The third round of Geneva talks is underway (early 2016), in fits and starts. Negotiations in the current round are brokered by Staffan de Mistura, who was appointed “special envoy” by the UN secretary general in 2014, following the resignations of Lakhdar Brahimi and, before that, Kofi Anan to “provide good offices aimed at bringing an end to all violence and human rights violations, and promoting a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis” (UN News Centre 2014). Just ahead of the most recent talks, de Mistura said that “expectations [are] low and [I am] preparing for a long haul.” US Secretary of State John Kerry likened it to “chart[ing] a course out of hell.” Talks are slated to (re)start on the subjects of humanitarian access to besieged areas, combatting ISIS, and local ceasefires (Black 2016). But stumbling blocks are many and include Assad’s role in a transitional government, growing divisions between arch-rivals/enemies (Saudi Arabia and Iran, among others), and the splintered and dispersed make-up and representation of the Syrian political opposition (Al Jazeera 2015; Black 2016).

## Humanitarian Actors

### Donors from the West and the Rest

The 2016 United Nations humanitarian appeals<sup>19</sup> for the Syria crisis—including the Syria Response Plan (SRP) for in-Syria/cross-border humanitarian action and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for refugee assistance—are the largest the world has seen. Nearly 3.2 billion USD was requested for the SRP and 4.55 billion USD for the 3RP. The 2015

humanitarian appeal for the Syria crisis was also high (4.3 billion for the 3RP and 2.89 billion for the SRP), but quite a large percentage went unfunded (57 percent of the SRP and 41 percent of the 3RP).<sup>20</sup> The largest donors through this formal system have been the US (29.3 percent), followed by the UK (11.7 percent), Germany (9.4 percent), and the European Commission (9.1 percent). Gulf donors figure prominently in the response to the humanitarian appeal. In 2015, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait contributed 450 million USD (OCHA, Financial Tracking Service 2015).<sup>21</sup> Donors such as ECHO, DFID, and the USG have permanent staff presence in border countries.

The OCHA Financial Tracking System, however, does not capture all the humanitarian activities taking place in Syria. The general perception is that Gulf countries are heavily involved aside from what is reported, but little is known about to whom, what, and where funding goes.<sup>22</sup> Qatar is the one main exception, and the largest contributor to the Humanitarian Pooled Fund (HPF) of OCHA Turkey (OCHA 2015c). The fund is a multi-donor country-based pooled fund that is accessible to Syrian NGOs, INGOs, and UN bodies to “provide flexible and timely resources to partners thereby expanding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, increasing humanitarian access and strengthening partnerships” (OCHA 2015c). Managed by OCHA Turkey, the main objective is to strengthen the capacity of Syrian NGOs in line with the priorities of the SRP. In addition, the Qatar Red Crescent is an active member of the regional and Turkey based NGO forums. Qatar’s participation in these systems was Qatar-initiated, with little to no outreach on the part of the UN or other actors in the dominant humanitarian system.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey is also heavily involved in the Syria response, but OCHA is only reporting about 1 million USD in support to the humanitarian response in 2015 (OCHA, Financial Tracking Service 2015). The Turkish government prefers to support its own systems directly (Turkish INGOs and Turkish Red Crescent) rather than the UN and international INGO systems.<sup>24</sup> These systems include numerous refugee camps and support to Turkish NGOs. For example, UNHCR is only peripherally involved in refugee camps in Turkey, and their role is similarly limited in supporting non-camp or urban refugees.<sup>25</sup> The Turkish Red Crescent (among other activities) oversees and controls the flow of humanitarian convoys passing through the border checkpoints into Syria.<sup>26</sup>

### **LNGOs, INGOs, and the United Nations**

Prior to the crisis, several INGOs, UN agencies, and the ICRC—primarily concerned with Iraqi refugees and Palestinians—were present inside Syria. After the start of the crisis, operational space shrunk, particularly for INGOs, as the GoS forced several to make the “choice” between operating across borders from Turkey or inside government-controlled Syria.<sup>27</sup> During the first years of the crisis and in the absence of a UNSC Resolution allowing for cross-border operations, the UN was the largest humanitarian actor inside Syria, but had limited presence in border countries. The UN’s decision to avoid cross-border engagement without a UNSC resolution was deliberate in order to ensure their access to government-controlled areas.<sup>28</sup> The GoS regards humanitarian organizations (Syrian or international) assisting in opposition-controlled areas as

“aligned with the opposition” or “aligned with terrorists.” Deliberate targeting of Syrians involved in relief operations in regime-held areas is a foundational tactic of the GoS.<sup>29</sup>

From the start of the crisis, INGOs, particularly in Turkey, were quickly able to scale up, creating their own coordination mechanism and engaging in large-scale and heavily-funded cross-border operations into opposition-controlled Syria.<sup>30</sup> Cross-border operations sponsored by INGOs were also initiated from Jordan and Iraq, although to a lesser extent. Lebanon, which stands by principles of non-engagement, has not allowed cross-border operations as such. However, INGOs do support Syrian partners in programming from Lebanon to south and central Syria.<sup>31</sup>

Worsening security conditions related (but not exclusively attributable) to the presence and expansion of Al-Nusra and ISIS in 2013 have resulted in a remote management model, whereby international organizations rely almost exclusively on Syrian staff or local Syrian NGOs (LNGOs) to conduct cross-border operations.<sup>32</sup> Syrian organizations predominantly cropped up in response to the crisis and included grassroots organizations from inside the country as well as diaspora-run organizations from the US, UK, Turkey, and the Gulf (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015). For agencies operating in government-controlled areas, which at present include the UN, ICRC and a handful of international NGOs, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) must approve and oversee all operations and acts as the implementing partner for international humanitarian organizations.<sup>33</sup>

After the passage of UNSC Resolution 2165 in July 2014, the United Nations ramped up its cross-border operational presence from Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.<sup>34</sup> The “Whole of Syria” approach (WoS) was born soon after (August 2014) with the expressed interest in bringing together the disjointed and largely un-coordinated humanitarian operations between UN and INGOs, and within and outside Syria. Leadership under the WoS design is split between the humanitarian coordinator (HC) of Syria and the regional humanitarian coordinator (RHC) based in Amman, Jordan.

Less is known about Gulf-supported NGOs. Gulf countries tend to fund their own national NGOs and Red Crescent organizations, which in turn fund Syrian organizations (the exception being Qatar’s direct funding of the Humanitarian Pooled Fund of OCHA Turkey).<sup>35</sup> According to the head of one Syrian organization, there are two Saudi NGOs, three Qatari NGOs, and three Kuwaiti NGOs active inside Syria.<sup>36</sup>

For countries surrounding Syria, UNHCR is the coordinating agency for the refugee response. Many INGOs active in cross-border operations also engage in programming for refugees in host countries. Due to concerns about confidentiality and security risks for Syrian partners, many INGOs (and the UN at times) have firewalled programs (host country versus cross-border) within a single host country, or between bases of operation (e.g., Damascus versus Turkey or Turkey versus Lebanon).<sup>37</sup> This prevents information about Syrian partners being known more broadly in the organization or region. UNRWA is the *only* agency concerned with Palestinian refugees inside Syria, providing humanitarian assistance and health and education services to this

population (UNRWA 2016b). UNRWA is operational in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon and has its own separate funding appeal for the Syria crisis.

## Major Themes and Defining Characteristics

Is Syria fundamentally different from other crises past and present? What are the defining features of this crisis, and how have humanitarian systems dealt (or not?) with these specificities? Where do the challenges lie for the humanitarian response and what are the blockages, successes, missed opportunities, and critical junctures historically and henceforward?<sup>38</sup> This section examines such key questions and presents a variety of perspectives from donors to Syrian responders and those in between operating inside Syria, across borders, and within refugee host countries.

“A perfect storm” is an oft-used phrase to describe the Syria crisis—a confluence of difficulties that involve enormous scale and extreme scope; local, regional, and global politics; severe violence; competing interests; and systemic intransigency. Whether viewed as “one-of-a-kind” or a series of “knowns,” humanitarian responders describe the Syria crisis as highlighting the weaknesses and exposing the cracks of the humanitarian system. “Overwhelmed” and “in need of overhaul” are regular descriptors employed to characterize humanitarian architecture in Syria.<sup>39</sup> Not one of the 52 donors and representatives of UN agencies, INGOs, or Syrian organizations interviewed for this study believes the system is successful in doing what it should or can to protect and provide humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected Syrians.

## The Conflict Environment

Civilians bear the brunt of the violence in the Syrian conflict. As described above, 75 percent of all deaths are thought to be civilian, including at least 20,000 children (SNHR 2015). Such deaths are not accidental, nor should they be seen as “collateral damage,” but reflect a deliberate tactic of war. While all sides have violated IHL, the GoS has been the most deadly in its attacks on civilians. Ninety-six percent of civilian deaths during the conflict has been perpetrated by Syrian government forces between March 2011 and October 2015 (SNHR 2015).<sup>40</sup> Russia’s recent arrival to the conflict has also increased the civilian death toll. Russian forces have reportedly conducted more than 5,000 airstrikes since their involvement in the autumn of 2015 (Slim 2016).<sup>41</sup> During their first two months of bombing campaigns, they have purportedly killed 600 civilians, mostly in the northwest of the country (Syrian Coalition 2015). GoS and Russian forces regularly bomb civilian areas including hospitals, markets and schools as well as granaries, mills, and bakeries (Malsin 2015; Sly 2015).

The GoS frequently drops barrel bombs—defined as “large, improvised explosive devices, which are delivered from helicopters and consist of oil barrels, fuel tanks or gas cylinders that have been packed with explosives, fuel and metal fragments to increase their lethal effect in civilian areas” (Amnesty International 2015a, 6). Russian warplanes have similarly been using

“unguided” munitions (Malsin 2015). In October 2015 alone, there were 16 attacks on hospitals, 10 by Russian forces, 5 by Russian or Syrian forces, and 1 car bomb of an unknown source (PHR 2015). Often barrel bomb attacks on civilian areas are of the “double tap” style, where a second bomb is dropped after paramedics arrive to help the victims (Shaheen 2015). Russian intervention has simultaneously increased humanitarian need and reduced operational space for humanitarian organizations in opposition-controlled areas (Sly 2015).

Siege tactics—which occur “when armed forces completely surround a populated area, taking control of all roads and passable terrain” (SAMS 2015, 11) are used in the Syrian conflict. Long-term sieges are often accompanied by air and ground bombardment, and all types of access to these areas are blocked. Civilians in such areas are “being intentionally denied basic necessities such as food, water, and medicine as part of a cruel tactic of war” (SAMS 2015, 5). This war tactic has led to the death of civilians through starvation, dehydration, and lack of medical care for injuries and treatable diseases. The GoS, and its allies (most recently Hizbollah), has been the party most responsible for long-term sieges and accompanying civilian deaths (SAMS 2015). In the besieged city of Madaya alone, 35 people have died from starvation in a six-week period (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces 2016). Population estimates for besieged locations are disputed. OCHA puts the figures at 11 locations and nearly 400,000 people (UN News Centre 2015), while the primary research conducted by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) reports 49 locations with more than 640,000 people (SAMS 2015). A spokesperson for MSF reported between 1.8 to 2 million people living under “various degrees” of siege in Syria (IRIN 2016).

In addition to barrel bombs and sieges, chemical weapons have been used against civilian populations. In August 2013, between 350 and 1,400 civilians were killed by chemical attacks using sarin gas in the suburbs outside Damascus (Chulov 2014). Investigations led UN representatives to state that they were “probably” orchestrated by the GoS (Chulov 2014), and Human Rights Watch presented evidence that “strongly suggests” that Syrian government forces were responsible (Human Rights Watch 2013). Under a deal brokered by the US and Russia, the GoS subsequently agreed to hand over its chemical weapons for destruction, although many doubt that all were recovered (Deutsch 2015). Most recently, evidence shows that ISIS has been using chemical weapons in Iraq and Syria on the battlefield and against civilians. Evidence has also been mounting that Assad’s forces used chemical munitions in opposition-controlled and contested areas several times in 2015 (Brennan 2015; Deutsch 2015).

The tactics of war used in Syria—the deliberate and continuous targeting of civilians—including barrel bombs, the use of chemical weapons, torture, and besieging civilians are clear human rights abuses, and a violation of IHL amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity (Amnesty International 2015a). Security Council Resolution 2139 (UN Security Council 2014a)—which demands authorities and warring parties lift sieges, cease attacks on civilians (including the use of barrel bombs), and allow for unhindered humanitarian access—has been violated *on a daily basis*, and violence against civilians has only increased while humanitarian

access has diminished (Hartberg, Bowen, and Gorevan 2015). For example, food aid to hard-to-reach areas fell by 97 percent in the four months following the passage of UNSC Resolution 2139, and inter-agency convoys within Syria reached 63 percent fewer people in 2014 than 2013 (Hartberg, Bowen, and Gorevan 2015). In 2015, only 10 percent of UN requests to support hard-to-reach and besieged areas were approved by the GoS (OCHA 2016). As mentioned above, no enforcement mechanism has been stipulated for non-compliance with UNSC resolutions; nor have consequences for continuous violations been discussed. More recently, in response to widespread images of starving children and adults in Madaya, Ban Ki-Moon declared that such siege tactics amounted to war crimes, but no mention has been made that the UN Security Council would refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (Sengupta 2016). As one journalist aptly noted, “. . . Syria seems to have moved the needle on what is acceptable in war, and tomorrow’s chances of holding it accountable are as thin as ever” (Sengupta 2016).

This type of conflict, with civilian targets and multiplicity of actors, is responsible for widespread suffering and displacement. As mentioned above, recent figures estimate IDPs at 6.6 million and the number of people in need of protection and humanitarian assistance at 13.5 million (OCHA 2015a). Palestinian refugees living inside Syria are particularly hard hit. Sixty percent of the 450,000 Palestinian refugees have been displaced, and 95 percent rely on humanitarian assistance from UNRWA (UNRWA 2016b). Most reside in government-controlled areas. Palestinians inhabit a peculiar space in the humanitarian system. UNHCR’s interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention leaves Palestinians ineligible to register as refugees or to receive assistance or protection from UNHCR. UNHCR’s overall budget and operations for the Syria response shadow that of UNRWA, leading to significant protection gaps for this population inside and outside Syria. “Doubly-displaced” Palestinians fleeing Syria often face discriminatory policies and practices in terms of entry and access to services in host countries, despite having fled the same conflict (Al-Kilani 2015). By the end of 2015, approximately 17,000 had fled to Jordan and 42,000 to Lebanon (UNRWA 2016a).

In addition to enormous in-country humanitarian needs, the extent of the refugee exodus, particularly to neighboring countries is remarkable. Turkey hosts nearly 2.3 million Syrian refugees (3 percent of its population), Jordan 632,000 (nearly 10 percent of its population), Lebanon 1.07 million (more than 25 percent of its population), Iraq 245,000 (less than 1 percent) and Egypt 124,000 (less than 1 percent) (OCHA 2015d; UNHCR 2015c). As described above, an additional 2 million Syrians live in host countries under alternative legal frameworks or without official status, and are thus not included in the official refugee figures (UNHCR 2015a). An additional 500,000 Syrians have arrived in Europe by boat in 2015 (The Associated Press Berlin 2015).

## Protection

Given the civilian dimension of this conflict, the appropriate question to ask is how the humanitarian system has addressed the issue of protection. One of the main findings of the recent



Whole of System Review on Protection is that humanitarians perceive that they “do not have a role to play in countering abusive or violent behavior even when political and military strategies and tactics pose the biggest threat to life . . . [nor] . . . in challenging the impact of armed conflict, and other situations of violence, on civilians” (Niland et al. 2015, 11). Such perceptions were also reflected in those involved in the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis.

The focus of humanitarian action in Syria is largely on the delivery of relief items, and has little regard for the actions and conditions that create the need for relief. Some senior UN officials involved in the humanitarian response are frustrated by the system’s inability to simultaneously engage in humanitarian assistance *and* address on-going human rights abuses, violations of IHL, and war crimes inside Syria.<sup>42</sup> Other UN and donor representatives are more cynical and do not see that humanitarians can engage in protection programming in the midst of a war, naming this aspiration “a joke” and “the perpetuation of a fiction.”<sup>43</sup>

Several actors are frustrated by this disconnect, believing that humanitarian assistance was being used as a substitute for real political action—that it had become instrumentalized. As one donor described, “humanitarian assistance is simply a Band-Aid for assuaging our conscience that we have watched 200,000 people slaughtered and four million displaced.”<sup>44</sup> Senior-level UN representatives also expressed the belief that humanitarian assistance is being used as a replacement for protection, political action, and solutions.<sup>45</sup> The recognition that humanitarian action is used as a fig leaf for the failure of politics has been documented elsewhere (Donini 2012).

Protection has been strikingly absent from or late to the humanitarian response. The word “protection” only first appeared in the revision of the 2014 Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP).<sup>46</sup> The Whole of Syria approach was incredibly slow to bring in dedicated and experienced staff on protection—with working groups and specialists brought in only during years four and five of the crisis.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and an independent commission of inquiry have only just begun to collect information and report on human rights violations in Syria (in the last quarter of 2015). Some sectors/clusters have published periodic reports on incidents such as hospital bombings but, according to one protection specialist, “they will give up this work because there has been no formal response from the international community.”<sup>47</sup> Several INGO representatives described their difficulty in determining what is possible—even five years on—in terms of protection given the environment inside Syria—particularly as civilians are continuously targeted by multiple parties to the conflict.<sup>48</sup>

Protection activities have been generally limited to “soft interventions” such as psychosocial support, mitigating sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the construction of child-friendly spaces. In the words of one senior UN representative, “This is nice and everything but we need physical protection.”<sup>49</sup> Syrians prioritize physical safety (from bombs and violence of armed groups) as their primary need, but humanitarian programming continues to be focused on delivery of food baskets and NFIs—demonstrating an extreme discrepancy between what the

humanitarian system provides and what is needed on the ground. Syrian organizations regularly challenge this artificial divide between humanitarian assistance and protection of at-risk groups.<sup>50</sup> Dozens of LNGOs signed joint letters to pressure the international community to protect civilians as opposed to providing relief items.<sup>51</sup> As one leader of a Syrian LNGO described, “What are we doing? We provide food baskets so that when Syrians are killed by barrel bombs, they aren’t hungry.”<sup>52</sup>

For the first time since the start of the conflict five years ago, a protection needs assessment was released by the protection cluster/sector for the Whole of Syria approach (in October 2015). The report highlighted the main protection threats to civilians. The top five concerns included lack of personal and civil documents, family separation, child labor, child recruitment, and explosive threats (Whole of Syria Protection Sector 2015). Such information should help humanitarian actors design appropriate programs to fill gaps and address on-the-ground needs. Note however, that the interview instrument included pre-selected closed responses, limiting what respondents could report. For example, there was no option to choose “aerial bombardment” or “violence perpetrated by security forces or armed groups,” despite the fact that Syrian LNGOs report such insecurity as the most significant protection threat to civilians inside Syria.<sup>53</sup> The report also did not mention besieged civilians, or the specific situation of Palestinians refugees, two groups that are known to have great protection needs.<sup>54</sup>

The reasons for the inability to come up with a timely, integrated, comprehensive, and meaningful response to the protection crisis in Syria are varied. The systematic inclusion and prioritization of protection at the strategic, leadership, and operational levels continues to be lacking. The tendency still is to add protection on to traditional relief assistance (see the Whole of System Review on Protection for a complete analysis: (Niland et al. 2015). The Syria case demonstrates that humanitarian programs choose to invest in the distribution of relief items over protection. “Delivering stuff” in Syria—whether to regime or opposition-controlled space—is certainly easier than trying to keep people safe. Organizations operating from Damascus are further limited, as they are not even able to name (let alone program for) the protection violations being committed by the GoS without losing the limited access they have. These factors together have resulted in protection being largely dis-embedded from the humanitarian response for Syria.

### **The Politics of Engagement and Access, Humanitarian Principles in Practice**

*To work on humanitarian issues in Syria is to walk an ethical tightrope. The humanitarian principles which underpin the Western aid system are under extraordinary pressure. Independence, neutrality, impartiality and humanity are under continual strain due to murky—if necessary—compromises and accommodations. Conventional humanitarianism is besieged. (Parker 2013, 3)*

The efficacy of humanitarian action is based on a number of factors, perhaps none more important than access. Those with power—political, military, or economic—determine access. Access is not only about physical space such as a neighborhood, village, district, or border

crossing, but (as will be described in the following paragraphs) it also lurks in donor preferences and regulations, organizational mandates, and what can be spoken about openly and is an integral part of negotiated deals. Interviews with humanitarian actors in and around Syria highlighted how they continuously face dilemmas at the intersection of access and humanitarian principles—particularly humanity and impartiality.

As described above, the unfolding of the Syrian conflict and the humanitarian architecture that filled in around it, means that the United Nations and the ICRC are the predominant humanitarian actors inside government-controlled areas. Prior to UNSC Resolution 2165 allowance for cross-border operations in July 2014, INGOs and their Syrian partners were the main humanitarian actors operating in opposition-controlled areas. After the resolution, the UN became operational from Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey into Syria.

### **Inside Government-Controlled Areas**

Recently scholars have asserted that humanitarian organizations operating inside Syria “despite their pretensions to neutrality, have contributed to supporting sovereignty and political outcomes at odds with those neutral aspirations” (Martínez and Eng 2016). The predominant view held by donors and representatives of the UN, INGOs, and LNGOs based in countries bordering Syria is that the UN’s operation from government-controlled areas has compromised its principles, particularly as they relate to impartiality.<sup>55</sup> Attitudes expressed by interviews based outside Syria were often vitriolic, accusing the UN in Damascus of being in bed with the government, and allowing the GoS to manipulate aid for its own aims.<sup>56</sup>

The most concrete example of the violation of impartiality relates to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which must approve and oversee all humanitarian operations that take place from government-controlled areas (Steets 2014). SARC does most of the on-the-ground delivery and distribution of relief items on behalf of the UN agencies, ICRC, and INGOs based in Damascus. In Syria, the SARC acts as an auxiliary to the government, which is a party to the conflict. Furthermore, there is currently no system to track SARC’s adherence to humanitarian principles, or monitor its work more generally (Steets 2014). The widespread view outside government-controlled areas is that the SARC is an arm of the GoS, and its decisions are based on the political preferences and the war-related goals of the regime. Thus approvals for access are not based on need,<sup>57</sup> but are regularly used as sticks or carrots to reward or punish an organization’s behavior. For example, one UN official in Jordan described that of 67 requests to SARC for cross-border deliveries, only 3 were approved despite demonstrated need. Her belief is that the agency was being punished for publishing a report about civilian casualties and violations of rights.<sup>58</sup> Another representative from an international organization operating from Damascus described that the rate of denial for requests increased after they challenged the government for diverting medical supplies from opposition-held to government-controlled areas.<sup>59</sup>

The amount of GoS—and SARC—oversight is extraordinary. Interviews with the former head of a UN agency operating from Damascus described, “We were spied on, followed, our computer traffic was monitored, our notebooks stolen, they knew what we were doing. I’m not sure anyone appreciates how hard all of this was . . . the daily grind of getting a tiny concession of access or movements of goods. The SARC were used as a proxy to control and spy on us and contain us.”<sup>60</sup> Others described that organizations had to seek approval for everything, even installing a toilet.<sup>61</sup>

Leaving the SARC aside, humanitarian actors outside Damascus vocalized frustration with the Humanitarian Coordinator/Humanitarian Country Teams’s discourse, which regularly defends the “sovereignty” of Assad’s government. Others assert that Damascus-based UN staff has contracted “Stockholm Syndrome.”<sup>62</sup> Syrian representatives of LNGOs describe dismay at the HC’s avoidance of the term “besieged” in public settings, and point out the contradiction between the extreme needs of besieged populations and lack of humanitarian assistance to those populations—many of which are located just kilometers from UN offices.<sup>63</sup> In practice, this means that humanitarian organizations (UN and INGOs) in regime-controlled areas have almost no access to besieged areas. For example, in 2015, the UN has only reached 0.5 percent of the besieged population with food in any given month and 3.6 percent with medical assistance (UN News Centre 2015), despite the fact that this group has some of the most urgent humanitarian needs in the country. The scale of need greatly surpasses what is being provided due to GoS restrictions on access (IASC 2015).<sup>64</sup>

Others wonder why the UN is not conditioning their aid on humanitarian principles. For example, one senior regional representative of a UN agency described that their organization should have presented red lines to the GoS during the initial engagement period. While recommendations were drafted from her office, the opportunity was missed. Suggested red lines included that SARC would not decide where NGOs work, no “forced partnerships” would be made with SARC, and Third Party Monitoring (TPM) would be everywhere.<sup>65</sup> The alternative view is that the UN will be thrown out of the country if it advocates more directly for protection, or conditions its assistance on adherence to humanitarian principles.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the fact that SARC and GoS control of humanitarian operations is highly partial, those operating in Damascus rationalize their continued engagement based on the principle of humanity. The sense is still that people would suffer *more* without the SARC and that despite the restricted operational environment, international organizations working from Damascus are doing more good than harm.<sup>67</sup>

Syria, after all, is not the only country where the UN has chosen to engage despite the government being a party to the conflict. In the words of one former senior UN official based in Damascus, “Is this the first time the government has manipulated a UN operation? Where have people been? This is absolutely not rare for a government involved in a conflict to be manipulative and calculating, and attempting to instrumentalize humanitarian assistance . . . the

question is: Is it better to stay in and do more good than harm? And if it is not, then the decision remains with the Secretary General and the head of agencies to pull out.”<sup>68</sup>

Damascus-based organizations come into direct conflict with organizations involved in cross-border operations when they attempt to serve the same areas. Decisions made about which agency should do what where often appear politically motivated, fueling further tensions between and within organizations. The former head of a UN agency based in Damascus described that the UN was under great pressure from Western donors to deliver from regime to opposition-controlled areas (“cross-line”), as if people in opposition-held territory were in more need than those in government-controlled territories.<sup>69</sup>

Organizations operating cross-border describe that many cross-line operations from Damascus are done as “photo opportunities” and to “prove” that the GoS has access to or governing capability over opposition-controlled areas.<sup>70</sup> Others claim that UN Damascus wants to continue to control the majority of the SRP budget by showing that cross-border operations are not needed—that all areas can be served by Damascus. Donor and INGO representatives described several examples of duplication, inefficiency, and operations that increased risk to beneficiaries.<sup>71</sup> One INGO representative described, “Recently (a UN agency) took a truck cross-line from Damascus to the Turkish border to an area that was already being served by the humanitarian community from Turkey. Because it could. The convoy passed 50 villages along the way that have received nothing to date. All this to make a political statement.”<sup>72</sup> Another UN agency also trucked goods to Kobani (a Kurdish area on the Turkish border) after a sector/cluster issued a paper expressly cautioning against distributions to that location because of mines and the fear that a distribution would pull civilians into the mined area. The Damascus-based UN agency later admitted that it had not read the paper, and had embarked on the distribution because they saw it as a “good opportunity.”<sup>73</sup>

### Cross-Border Operations

As in government-controlled areas, armed groups and civil governing bodies in opposition-held areas manipulate access and assistance to advance particular political-military strategies. Organizations that operate in such space must continuously negotiate and renegotiate access (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015; ICG 2013; Margesson and Chesser 2014). Nearly every humanitarian agency interviewed for this study described access as their number one challenge in delivering humanitarian assistance.<sup>74</sup> Armed groups number in the dozens, and each locale reflects a different configuration of control.<sup>75</sup> Local sovereignty can be dominated by a single actor, or shared between multiple groups, meaning that humanitarians may be required to negotiate with competing actors for access within municipalities. An INGO working with Syrian partners in Northern Syria described interfacing with dozens of armed groups in a single sub-district.<sup>76</sup> A Syrian NGO that runs material assistance from the Turkish border to opposition-controlled Damascus suburbs must negotiate more than 50 checkpoints—each controlled by a different armed group (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015).

Armed groups run the gamut between complete attempted domination of humanitarian operations to absolute non-interference and various configurations in-between.<sup>77</sup> ISIS has a reputation for completely controlling aspects of relief, including beneficiary selection, and rebranding assistance in attempt to build popular support for their cause. However, more recently, some organizations have reported that ISIS is loosening its control on humanitarian activities, particularly around medical items, WASH activities, and salary support to hospital staff.<sup>78</sup>

The Relief Offices of Local Councils—local governing bodies operating in opposition-held areas—are also directly engaged with humanitarian organizations, often helping to identify local needs, target vulnerable families, and distribute relief. The degree to which Relief Offices operate neutrally or impartially is an open question. Interviews with Syrian organizations revealed that some organizations simply add “Relief Office” to their name to try to attract international support, hiding their political intentions.<sup>79</sup> Several armed groups also have established their own Relief Offices with their own principles and criteria. They redistribute international aid or provide assistance to populations under their control from their own sources.<sup>80</sup>

Donors directly and indirectly influence how their partner organizations access humanitarian space. Counter-terror legislation allows for the prosecution of organizations that intentionally or unintentionally support designated terrorist organizations (DTOs) through material support. But material support is expansively defined as training, services, expert advice or assistance, and personnel (Weissman 2011). With these fears and concerns in mind, the USG—with its strict interpretation of counter-terrorism legislation—has steered partners away from working in ISIS controlled areas.<sup>81</sup> Some informants were vehement that such policies violate humanitarian principles and amount to collective punishment against civilians who are in desperate need of assistance, as people who live in ISIS-controlled areas are not necessarily pro-ISIS.<sup>82</sup>

US organizations’ fears of violating counter-terrorism legislation have also been named as the primary barrier to supporting cash modalities. Cash is seen as riskier than commodities in terms of the ability to be tracked and monitored and the possibility of diversion.<sup>83</sup> However, the main way to reach besieged areas is to program in cash. As with ISIS, (fear of) counter-terrorism legislation has prevented donors and their partners from reaching some of the most conflict-affected populations inside Syria. Syrian LNGOs who have the ability to work in such areas have yet to find Western partners to support them.<sup>84</sup> The one exception was a special call for proposals from a Humanitarian Pooled Fund (OCHA Turkey) in mid-2015, which made available grants for working in besieged areas. Note however, that the largest contributor to the fund is Qatar (OCHA 2015c).<sup>85</sup>

Donors also have clear geographic preferences based on politics. One Western donor described that there was “continuous pressure to do more in Kurdish areas.”<sup>86</sup> This was confirmed by a variety of INGOs, including one that was slated for a funding cut for projects in one non-Kurdish location.<sup>87</sup> However, the donor promised the funding would be backfilled if the INGO was

willing to work in Kobani (a Kurdish area). Despite evidence of YPG/PYG forces committing human rights abuses and limiting humanitarian space (Amnesty International 2015b; Human Rights Watch 2014), the Kurds continue to be the preferred ally of the West inside Syria—both politically and militarily (Reuters 2016). The humanitarian behavior of donor countries reflect these preferences, further calling into question the application of humanitarian principles in the Syria case.

Border controls imposed by surrounding countries also limit humanitarian access. Lebanon, which was not part of UNSC Resolution 2165, does not allow humanitarian assistance to flow to opposition-controlled areas. Humanitarian organizations working from Lebanon and seeking to support civilians living in these areas must do so under the radar, risking prosecution. These regulations also present operational obstacles in terms of staff visas, banking, and options for programming.<sup>88</sup> Border regulations in Jordan also affect humanitarian access. The government of Jordan requires that all Syrian partner organizations involved in cross-border activity be vetted and registered. To date, this totals only five organizations. INGOs in Jordan describe that their cross-border operations are hampered because they have so few partners to work with inside Syria.<sup>89</sup> Turkey also periodically closes border crossings for political and security reasons. One regional coordinator for an international organization described that, save for one truck, they have been unable to transport relief items into the Kurdish-controlled province of Hassekeh, despite demonstrated need.<sup>90</sup>

## Remote Management

OCHA defines remote management as the withdrawal of international staff and the transfer of program responsibilities to local staff or partner organizations for security reasons. One of the defining features of the Syria crisis is that humanitarian operations follow a remote-management model due to high insecurity and restricted access.<sup>91</sup> Syria is considered the second-most-dangerous place for aid workers in the world (after Afghanistan), and 67 aid workers have been killed and 47 kidnapped since the start of the crisis (Humanitarian Outcomes 2016; Humanitarian Outcomes 2015).<sup>92</sup> The shift from direct implementation to remote management occurred en masse following the expansion of ISIS and Al-Nusra, and the detention, kidnapping, and killing of aid workers.<sup>93</sup> Remote management in the Syrian context involves sub-contracting to local Syrian organizations, engaging in longer-term partnerships where projects are jointly designed and implemented, or retaining Syrian staff to implement programs directly (while being managed from outside Syria) (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015). As such, today the majority of humanitarian assistance is provided on the ground by Syrian organizations—either grassroots or diaspora in partnership with an INGO or UN agency. (As mentioned above, LNGOs do not receive direct funding from donors, except through the Humanitarian Pooled Fund, which is run out of UN OCHA Turkey).<sup>94</sup>

Shifting to a remote-management model creates inherent tensions between INGOs and Syrian NGOs. First, remote management only improves security for expatriate staff. As in other

settings, local actors are the primary targets of violence in humanitarian situations. Of the 67 aid workers killed in Syria, 62 were Syrian and 5 were international (Humanitarian Outcomes 2016). In Syria, LNGOs engage in humanitarian work despite high security risks, but often without the associated security training, the daily security briefs, the life insurance policies, the security guards at their homes, convoys for travel, medevac insurance, or the danger pay that are provided for staff of international organizations (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015). Members of Syrian NGOs interviewed expressed their belief that some INGOs were largely shifting the burden of risk to LNGOs.<sup>95</sup> On the flip side, the INGO remains responsible for the work and behavior of their LNGO partners, including adherence to humanitarian principles and compliance with counter-terrorism legislation.

The inability to set eyes directly on humanitarian programs was a key challenge identified by all donors and INGO staff interviewed for this study.<sup>96</sup> The remote-management style of engagement makes direct monitoring and evaluation (M&E) by the funding agency impossible. At present, Third Party Monitoring (TPM), where “neutral” or “external” companies are hired by INGOs to observe, solicit beneficiary feedback, or evaluate program effectiveness is considered the gold standard for M&E in Syria (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015). A plethora of small TPM businesses (both expatriate and Syrian) have cropped up in border areas, particularly Turkey, to offer this service. While TPM may be a good solution to lack of direct access for more traditional M&E activities, drawbacks include cost and (at times) insensitivity to local conditions and beneficiary privacy (Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015) and concerns about falsification of data. TPM often led to tensions between local organizations and their INGO partners, as well as between LNGO management (outside Syria) and ground staff (inside Syria).<sup>97</sup>

INGOs, UN agencies, and donors also spoke about the widespread use of social media and named it as one of the factors that has made the Syria conflict unique.<sup>98</sup> Related to the humanitarian response, INGOs spoke in particular about their use of social media as a method for M&E activities. Individual beneficiaries and communities are generally quick to post on media sources if assistance does not arrive as planned or does not align with preferences or needs. One INGO described, “I know communities even though I’ve never seen them because they are providing [positive and negative] feedback through WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook.”<sup>99</sup> A UN agency representative stated, “It keeps us on our toes.” Access to social media may in fact be one important avenue for enhancing downward accountability, a less expensive and bottom-up complement to TPM.

One interesting outcome from this remote management mode of operation is that some INGO leaders—particularly those who have worked in multiple crises—believe that their programs are better run and monitored in Syria than in any other place in the world. In addition to social media access, representatives of INGOs attributed this to the elevated capacity of LNGO partners, who might lack specific humanitarian and sector knowledge, but have high levels of education, skill, and competency as compared to citizens of other crisis-affected countries.<sup>100</sup> While some INGOs



marveled at this unusual competency, representatives of Syrian LNGOs described that their ability to advocate, demand respect, and complain was not always well received by their international partners.<sup>101</sup>

## Donor Influence

### The West and Cash

A general critique of modern day humanitarianism is that accountability mechanisms orient responders upward toward donors rather than downwards toward affected populations (ALNAP 2015; Brown and Donini, A. 2014; CHS Alliance 2015; Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff 2015). This issue may be highlighted more so in Syria, given the extreme focus on compliance with counter-terrorism legislation. As well, the permanent presence of donors alongside their humanitarian partners in border countries, and their closeness to and involvement in operations, may also swing the accountability pendulum upwards. This is particularly felt by INGOs, and donors admit that their “micro-managerial presence” is higher with this group than with UN bodies.<sup>102</sup>

The level of influence that Western donors wield over operations was described along a spectrum, with some INGO representatives insisting that involvement of their donors was minimal and focused at an administrative level, while others felt that “donors call the shots, they direct operations. INGOs don’t advocate or challenge them because they are interested in their own presence and survival.”<sup>103</sup>

The subject of cash assistance as a modality came up in nearly all interviews. Across Western donors, the Europeans are the most vocal in terms of their support for cash programming, believing that it is the best mode for an individual or household to meet needs holistically. At times, they have insisted that their partners utilize cash—particularly related to refugee programming in border countries where markets are functioning—and have withdrawn funding when partners have been unwilling.<sup>104</sup> Representatives of the USG have also felt that cash was the most appropriate in some circumstances, but that their primary obligation was to ensure that support would not fall into the hands of DTOs, and cash is seen as higher risk than commodities are. This is particularly the case for programming inside Syria. “The risk averse atmosphere has made it impossible to do programming beyond NFIs.”<sup>105</sup>

Another barrier to cash programming relates to mandates, with USAID/Food for Peace and WFP needing to ensure that beneficiary support is provided or spent on food related items only. This is difficult to control with cash and, as such, voucher systems have been devised for the purchase of food.<sup>106</sup> However, this has led to the creation of parallel systems within the UN (vouchers for food, cash cards for other types of support for a single beneficiary), which are inefficient in terms of cost and coordination.

Aside from counter-terrorism legislation and mandate issues, several donors described that paternalistic biases embedded in traditional humanitarian systems have prevented the rapid use of cash for the Syria crisis.<sup>107</sup> Cash allows an individual or a family to prioritize basic needs and

buy what is needed, passing the decision-making power from organization to individual. However, concerns remain at some senior levels that cash will get misused at the household level: “We still have a paternalistic view that all refugees must eat pulses; otherwise they will buy cigarettes and alcohol.”<sup>108</sup> One senior UN official critiqued the condescending undertones woven into the fabric of Western humanitarian aid architecture: “Now we are starting to talk cash, five years later, as if this is totally progressive. As if now people have the right to make their own decisions. If you fled, you are vulnerable, which means that you are apparently incapable and stupid. So you get a kitchen set.”<sup>109</sup>

Dispensing cash is also less visible than distributing items, thus providing fewer photo opportunities. In a conflict as high profile and visible as Syria, these photo moments are cherished by funders. One UN representative explained that their agency is sometimes pressured to engage in activities that are not needed or necessary but provide good optics for the press. Despite programming in cash, they had to distribute goods on multiple occasions to please the donors and media.<sup>110</sup>

### **Non-Western Donors**

A defining feature of the Syria response is the heavy involvement of non-Western actors—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait—described as a “big players” by representatives of various UN agencies. Together in 2015, these countries officially contributed 450 million USD bilaterally and to the UN and Red Cross/Crescent organizations (OCHA, Financial Tracking Service 2015). However, Gulf countries are also active through INGO partners that are not a part of these channels and are thus not coordinated with the rest of the humanitarian system. Representatives of UN agencies expressed concern that little is known about the actual humanitarian activities of these donors, including who and what they fund and where they work. While UN representatives spoke about the need to bring Gulf actors into the system, few genuine attempts have been made to do so.<sup>111</sup>

UN and LNGO representatives described that Gulf NGOs are less independent of their own governments than Western donors and INGOs are<sup>112</sup> and that they are politically or religiously motivated. They tend to prioritize work in border areas, and they choose Syrian partners that they believe are aligned with the opposition.<sup>113</sup> Gulf donors and their partners are more willing to work in besieged areas compared with those from the West.<sup>114</sup> The Qatar Red Crescent was repeatedly referred to as the “exceptional” Gulf organization, in that it is well engaged with the UN systems. It regularly provides IHL training for Syrian local organizations and is an active member of the Regional NGO Forum.

### **Syrian Local Organizations and Partnerships with Western and Non-Western Donors**

Syrian organizations that receive Western and Gulf funds compared and contrasted their experience working with both types of donors. Leaders of Syrian LNGOs described that the vetting process to become a partner is similarly laborious between the Gulf and the West. Gulf donors are vocal in their fear about being placed on the US terror list and thus require substantial

documentation from potential Syrian partners at the outset. However, once they have been approved, little is required in terms of on-going monitoring and evaluation, or documentation requirements from the Gulf partner.<sup>115</sup>

After an organization has been approved by a Gulf donor, the process to fund projects is minimal. The proposal is often a single page that explains the location and project activities. Requirements for needs assessments are few and monitoring and evaluation plans are rare. The money is generally disbursed quickly.<sup>116</sup> In practice, Syrian organizations choose to engage Gulf donors in emergency situations or when a rapid response is needed. One telling example involves a Syrian organization that had both Western and Gulf NGO donors. During the chemical attacks in Damascus in August 2013, the LNGO identified a factory that could produce and deliver life-saving antidotes to local hospitals within a period of hours. The Syrian organization first called their Western INGO partners who said that while this was a worthwhile endeavor, support would not be possible because of the need to obtain more than one quote for the cost of the medicine, vet the pharmaceutical company, and set up monitoring and evaluation plans to observe the distribution. Support from Gulf donors was sought, the money was provided on demand, and the antidote delivered to multiple hospitals on the same day of the attacks.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, Syrian organizations describe Gulf donors as “reactive,” meaning that if a Syrian organization is able to show human suffering through video or photographic footage, Gulf actors will respond quickly. Situations that generate a rapid response have included bombings, freezing temperatures, starving people in besieged areas, or overcrowded hospitals. As the head of one Syrian NGO explained: “We say to them [Gulf donors], ‘Winter is coming, please help.’ They say, ‘No.’ But after the first storm and there is a picture of a frozen person, they all come at once and give us money.”<sup>118</sup>

Syrian organizations describe that with Western money, they are able to improve their standards, and their organizational capacity. Gulf partners, will not explicitly agree to support any core organizational costs or administrative fees for Syrian organizations. However, given the lack of reporting requirements and firm restrictions on funds from Gulf donors, LNGOs are able to reallocate resources as needed.<sup>119</sup>

In addition, for their calls for more physical protection, representatives of Syrian organizations were also disappointed by the continued focus on relief items (food baskets, winterization kits, hygiene kits) as opposed to longer-term or transitional activities focusing on resilience and livelihoods. They described that despite providing documentation on the need for resilience and livelihoods activities inside Syria, the majority of donors (Western and Gulf) continued to limit the menu of options available to relief item distributions.<sup>120</sup>

## **Humanitarian Systems and the “Whole of Syria” Approach**

As described above, prior to UNSC Resolution 2165, no system was in place to integrate, coordinate, or collaborate between different centers of operation in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. INGOs were the predominant actors engaged in cross-border activities,

while the UN and ICRC were concerned with the government-controlled areas inside Syria. Both the UN and INGOs worked on the refugee response in border countries.

In an effort to correct for existing divisions and to help bring together a fragmented response involving multiple countries, the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach was created by “the humanitarian leadership” following UNSC Resolution 2165 in August 2014 (OCHA 2015b, 1). The stated purpose was to create a “single framework [to] maximize efficiency, reduce duplication, and ensure greater accountability, effectiveness and reach of humanitarian programming” cross-border from Turkey and Jordan and inside Syria (OCHA 2015b, 1). Leadership is shared between the humanitarian coordinator (HC) for Syria and the regional humanitarian coordinator (RHC) based in Amman, Jordan.

Three coordination mechanisms oversee the WoS. They include (1) the Strategic Steering Group (SSG) co-led by the Syria humanitarian coordinator (HC) and the regional humanitarian coordinator (RHC) for the Syria crisis, (2) the Inter Sector/Cluster Coordination Group (ISCCG) chaired by OCHA and (3) the Syria Information Management and Assessment Working Group (SIMAWG), also chaired by OCHA (OCHA 2015b). For the WoS, 11 sector/cluster arrangements exist, with UN agencies leading in all sectors/clusters. INGOs play a co-lead role for eight sectors/clusters including camp coordination and camp management (CCCM), education, food security and agriculture, health, nutrition, protection, shelter and non-food items (NFIs), and water and sanitation (WASH)<sup>121</sup> (OCHA 2015b).

One confusing reality of the Whole of Syria arrangement is that it doesn’t include all groups of conflict-affected people. For example, the approach only includes cross-border operations and inside-Syria operations and not refugee populations or host communities in border countries. Also, operational centers or “hubs” integrated into the WoS system are Damascus, Jordan, and Turkey but not Lebanon and Iraq. Only recently have efforts been made to bring Lebanon closer to the WoS system, particularly following the recognition that cross-border operations from Jordan and programming from Lebanon may be duplicative in certain areas or negligent of others. Moreover, despite the presence of Palestinians affected by the Syrian conflict both inside and outside the country, UNRWA is not formally included in the WoS. The design of the WoS structure doesn’t favor a “whole of caseload” approach, and seems to also exacerbate tensions between UNHCR’s mandate and response-coordination role vis-à-vis refugees and the IASC/HC/cluster systems that do not cover refugees, a divide that exists in other contexts<sup>122</sup> (Niland et al. 2015). Throughout the study, UNHCR’s engagement with WoS was described as “skeptical” or “tepid” at best.<sup>123</sup> In other words, the WoS has not taken a “whole of humanitarian caseload” approach.

Despite the fact that a named principle of WoS is “coordination structures [that] are as light as possible and must clearly add value . . .” (OCHA 2015b, 2) the structure of the WoS is complicated and has been described by donors, the UN, and INGOs as “bureaucratic,” “unclear,” “diffuse,” “top heavy,” and “difficult to manage.” Roles are confusing, and leadership is “dispersed.”<sup>124</sup> The organogram is nearly unintelligible, with reporting lines murky, and

undefined relationships between hubs and the overarching WoS structure. One donor noted, “we have created a monster” that moves too slowly to generate information that is actionable from a programming standpoint.<sup>125</sup> The design favors process, and because the RHC and the HC of Syria co-lead the Strategy Steering Group, many on the outside feel that it favors Damascus because the HC can block any process within the WoS.<sup>126</sup> As one senior UN official described, “Beneficiaries lose out from this because money goes into coordination structure rather than stuff.”<sup>127</sup>

Lack of strong leadership is one of the main complaints about the WoS system, although UN and donor representatives describe that leadership has improved since the system’s inception.<sup>128</sup> It should be noted that one of the main recommendations from the Operational Peer Review for Syria is “lighter and more agile leadership” (IASC 2015). In addition to inefficiencies, the WoS approach is expensive. The overall cost is estimated at 24 million USD.<sup>129</sup>

Donors described that their support for the WoS structure was to generate a comprehensive overview of humanitarian needs, map out who is doing what where across all organizations, and identify gaps. Several donors expressed grave concerns that completing the first objective, which is to create a humanitarian needs overview (HNO), took nearly a year.<sup>130</sup> Even this process was fraught with complication. After methodologies between hubs and the Syria HCT were agreed upon and data collected, findings were refuted by the Syria hub the day before the overview was to be unveiled. Donors and regional leaders of organizations were both panicked and exasperated, with the Syria hub threatening withdrawal and a year’s worth of work wasted. The traditional discourse of the “untrustworthy” and “malign” Syria hub “in bed with Assad” and “looking to guarantee its own survival” was quickly invoked, re-exposing the fault lines that have yet to be bridged between “inside” and “outside” UN/humanitarian systems. Donors sprang into action writing letters to pressure the RHC and HC to resolve differences, with the subtext being that funding would be withdrawn. The crisis was ultimately averted and a compromise was struck between sides.<sup>131</sup>

INGO representatives, in particular, question the need to invest money and time in the WoS structure. Organizations tend to fall into two camps. One group describes that WoS hasn’t changed their operations for better or worse. The others complain that there are high information demands, but that they have received nothing tangible in return. INGOs in general do not see WoS as a structure that can help lead the humanitarian response for Syria. Most see it as an information gathering exercise that can be done with a few decent information managers.<sup>132</sup>

Another weakness presented for the WoS approach is the lack of Syrian representation within the structure. As described above, Syrian organizations are providing the vast majority of humanitarian assistance for the crisis. Yet, WoS meetings are predominantly convened in Amman and Beirut. Syrians in Turkey or Syria cannot get visas to either country (nor can Syrians travel between Lebanon and Jordan). The majority of Syrian LNGOs operate from Turkey, where visa restrictions are less severe than Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>133</sup> As described previously, non-Western actors are not actively drawn into the structure. All larger coordination

meetings and sector/cluster meetings are conducted in English, as are all documents and other electronic communications related to the WoS.<sup>134</sup>

## Working Relationships, Fragmentation, and (Mis) Trust

Another defining feature of the Syria crisis, as described by involved donors and humanitarians, is the high level of mistrust that exists between different actors. This has led to very little information sharing and, as a result, a poorly coordinated and inefficient response. Confidence between actors has certainly improved since the beginning of the response—in part due to the advent of the WoS (IASC 2015)—but the general sense is that there is a long way to go. Rather than remaining gridlocked, information sharing has increased, but only to the speed of a slow moving traffic jam.

Mistrust stems from a variety of conditions that date to the early days of the conflict. As mentioned above, the cross-border operations to opposition-held areas of Syria were almost exclusively managed and run by INGOs during the first three years of the crisis (until UNSC Resolution 2165). They established their own coordination mechanisms outside of the UN system and viewed the UN as largely aligned with the Assad regime, due to the partiality of operations inside government-controlled Syria. Negative perceptions of the GoS and those willing to operate by its rules increased as Syrian aid workers (operating in opposition-held areas) were deemed terrorists, jailed, tortured, and killed by GoS security forces. The GoS' requirement that INGOs choose to either work in government- or opposition-controlled areas (not both), required several organizations to close their offices in Damascus, fueling further resentment towards those agreeing to operate inside government-held Syria.

As such, the stage was easily set for mistrust between the UN and INGOs, as well as between the “inside” and “outside” UN bodies. When the UN began to operate cross-border, INGOs were hostile and turf wars ensued. As one high-level official described, “I wouldn't say the relationship was strained; I would say that there was a visceral hatred.”<sup>135</sup> Donors and INGOs described that they wondered what the UN's arrival would add to cross-border operations and were disappointed in what ensued.<sup>136</sup> One donor even described that “the UN's late arrival proved to INGOs that it [the UN] is not needed for a response.”<sup>137</sup>

Poor communication was also a consequence of firewalls instituted between UN agencies and between INGOs working in regime-held areas and cross border, as well as organizations across or within single host countries. Secrecy was initially explained by the very real (and continued) security threat to Syrian partners and staff and the potential loss of access to certain locations. UN representatives described that a former head of office in a border country refused to sit with a Damascus representative of the same agency.<sup>138</sup> An INGO representative described that their agency had literally been split—one floor housed the within-government area operations and a separate floor housed cross-border operations—and neither spoke to the other.<sup>139</sup> The assumption was that any information flowing through organizations operating in regime-controlled areas would go directly to the Assad government. While this might seem paranoid, the former head of

a UN agency in Damascus confirmed that the GoS was involved in everything and “the idea that we could talk [from Damascus to offices in] Turkey over the phone was ludicrous.”<sup>140</sup>

Tension also exists between organizations involved in stabilization activities<sup>141</sup> and humanitarian operations. Stabilization programs in Syria—which largely focus on civil society development and governance—have involved a fair amount of humanitarian assistance such as food and NFIs, health services, education, and infrastructural support. However, such organizations are barred from participation in formal sector/cluster coordination meetings. An interview with the head of a stabilization program described that they are not included because they are not considered humanitarians and because of concerns that information from cluster/sector meetings would be used for non-humanitarian purposes. The irony of this division is that stabilization budgets are often much larger than those allotted to humanitarian agencies, and often cover similar activities in the same location.<sup>142</sup>

Mistrust exists between Syrian LNGOs, conflict-affected populations, and the international community. The gridlock of the UN Security Council, the lack of coherent policy for Syria from the West, and the focus on ISIS above Assad has damaged the credibility of the UN and Western governments among Syrian organizations.<sup>143</sup> This was heard in informal conversations, but was also crystallized by a series of letters written by a consortium of Syrian civil society organizations to the UN representatives and CEOs of INGOs in Turkey. As paraphrased in an interview, letters took the tone of “thank you for your support, but you have not done enough to stop the killing and we see you as complicit with the regime.”<sup>144</sup> Credibility of the UN was further damaged when the UN delivered 320 boxes of expired high-energy biscuits to Zabadani in October 2015—a besieged area where a cease-fire was brokered to allow for humanitarian access. The United Nations insisted that the expired biscuit incident was related to “human error” and did “not pose health threats” (The Associated Press 2015). Syria media sources, on the contrary, reported 200 cases of food poisoning, mostly of children, which they related to weakened immune systems following 120 days of siege by the regime (Muhkalalati and Kieke 2015). Interviews with representatives of Syrian organizations in Turkey at that time also revealed a widespread belief that besieged Syrians had been poisoned or died from UN food biscuits—demonstrating high levels of mistrust toward the Western dominated humanitarian structures.<sup>145</sup>

A further complaint is the “monopolistic” behavior of UN agencies—particularly those that act as donors, implementers, and coordinators. Syrian LNGOs, INGOs, and even representatives of UN agencies questioned the efficiency of having a single organization play multiple roles. The two main criticisms cited were multiple levels of overhead costs (donor to UN and then UN to INGO—and then sometimes to LNGO) and the creation of “super-structures” that have a “crowding-out” effect on other organizations.<sup>146</sup>

## The Refugee Response

The Syria crisis is notably defined by the immense volume of refugees it has generated in neighboring countries, and more recently, the arrival of half a million Syrians on Europe's shores (The Associated Press Berlin 2015). The impact of refugees on border countries is considerable, particularly from a demographic perspective. Turkey hosts 2.2 million registered refugees, more than any other country in the world (Amnesty International 2015c). Ten percent of Jordan's population is comprised of Syrian refugees and in Lebanon this figure jumps to one-quarter (UNHCR 2015c). Unlike other crises, 85 percent of refugees in border countries reside *outside* of camps,<sup>147</sup> which influences how the humanitarian architecture interfaces (or not) with them. This study found that the refugee response is also characterized by several adaptive ways of working, which is tied to the middle-income country status of border states and the higher skill and education levels of Syrian refugees as compared to other crisis-affected populations.

The last quarter of 2015 saw a bump in funds—particularly from European donors—to host countries and international organizations working on the refugee response. This funding was provided with the express interest in keeping refugees in the region and away from Europe.<sup>148</sup> Few key informants believed that extra food or blankets would substitute for rights and the opportunity for meaningful livelihood activities in border countries.<sup>149</sup>

As with any crisis, receiving refugees is a highly political affair. None of the border countries is particularly keen on hosting refugees and certainly not indefinitely. Each country applies various strategies to “manage” the situation and to “benefit” from the presence of refugees.

### Turkey

Turkish President Erdogan continuously refers to refugees as “guests,” underlining his attitude that their stay should be temporary. Borders are mostly now closed for refugees; evidence is that the government of Turkey (GoT) has forcibly returned hundreds of Syrians (Amnesty International 2015c), and one Turkish NGO described that the military shoots refugees trying to enter at illegal crossings.<sup>150</sup> While the UN insists that it plays an advocacy role with border country governments when refugees build up on the Syrian side of the border, recent reports show that migrants are increasingly trapped inside Syria and unable to cross the borders (Sly 2015).

The GoT has been described as a “monopolizer” of the refugee response. INGOs have little-to-no access to refugee camps, and UNHCR plays a very limited role.<sup>151</sup> According to a UN representative in Turkey, the GoT has a less developed strategy for non-camp (largely urban) refugees. Refugee assistance is left up to locales—cities or governorates—that generally do not have a standardized or harmonized approach. The UN and INGOs must negotiate with local authorities or the GoT to access these populations, particularly for needs assessments. According to this same UN official, the last comprehensive needs assessment for urban refugees was done in 2013.<sup>152</sup> Relatedly, the GoT conducts its own refugee registration and related data collection.



INGOs and UN bodies must “negotiate hard” for this information, and if it is released, questions linger regarding the quality or integrity of the data.<sup>153</sup>

The operating environment for INGOs in Turkey has also been difficult. Procedures for registration for international organizations conflicted, many were closed down, and some continued operations secretly. Even though the majority is currently registered, many face fines in the hundreds of thousands of dollars for their prior clandestine operations. While this environment has improved, INGO representatives, particularly those that work with Kurdish populations inside Turkey or Syria, describe that they are “treated as spies” by the GoT.<sup>154</sup>

However, Turkey is the only country in the region that has provided “temporary protective status” (TPS) to Syrian refugees (launched in spring 2015). TPS includes access to health and education, but does not include the right to work (ACAPS 2014).<sup>155</sup> A Turkish NGO described that Syrian refugees have security but not access to livelihoods, and this has been a push factor for refugees moving towards Europe.<sup>156</sup>

Regarding the half-million Syrians who have left Turkey for Europe, this situation is widely regarded as a bargaining chip for the GoT, which has negotiated three billion euros in assistance with the EU, the loosening of visa restrictions for Turkish citizens traveling to Europe, and the possibility of EU membership. In response, the GoT must stem the tide of refugees to Europe (Bedenbaugh 2015; Howitt 2015; The Economist 2015). Before the deal, Turkey’s policies toward smugglers was lax, but arrests have since increased, leading analysts to wonder if Turkey has orchestrated this situation to its benefit from the start (Business Day 2016; Howitt 2015).

## Jordan

The government of Jordan (GoJ), like the GoT and government of Lebanon (GoL), is concerned about the length of stay for refugees currently inside its borders. Jordan’s preference is for encampment, but at present, 85 percent live outside of camps (ACAPS 2014). Refugees often live in informal settlements in urban centers, on land in agreement with factory or farm owners (where they are often employed), or among Bedouins. The GoJ periodically tries to forcibly encamp refugees living in such settlements but often they are “tipped off” in advance by their landlords and successfully evade encampment.<sup>157</sup>

Refugees were initially granted access to healthcare and schools in Jordan, but health services have recently been restricted. Syrians cannot legally work in Jordan (ACAPS 2014).<sup>158</sup>

Concerned with the history of refugee-temporary-settlement-turning-permanent as was seen with Palestinian refugees who arrived in 1948 and 1967, the GoJ has limited the materials that can be used to support refugee accommodation. The GoJ has banned the use of cement or solid building materials in camps.<sup>159</sup>

The space for refugees inside Jordan is shrinking. During the first year or two of the crisis, the GoJ welcomed Syrian and Iraqi refugees “uncontrolled and with open arms”.<sup>160</sup> As Turkey began to limit its border crossings to Syrian refugees, Jordan followed suit and closed all except one.<sup>161</sup> Currently, one border point is open, but is located deep in the desert, at the far east of the

country. Given its remoteness, lack of services, and insecurity, traffickers transport Syrians to the crossing for a sum of 150–200 USD. While the border is officially operational, it is closed on most days. At the time of writing, approximately 3,500 Syrians have built up on the “berm” or the strip of “No Man’s Land” on the Syria-Jordan border and actual border crossing. UN agencies describe that they advocate for the entry of refugees, particularly as there have been deaths at the berm caused by dehydration and a lack of medical care.<sup>162</sup>

The relationship between the GoJ and UNHCR was described as steeped in “permanent tension.” This tension comes from two main sources. First, the GoJ has allegedly continuously tried to inflate the numbers of refugees inside the country. While UNHCR has registered over 600,000, the GoJ, at least for a time, insisted that there were 1.5 million. The second point of contention falls along a UNDP/UNHCR fault line. The Jordan Response Plan has included a fair amount of funding that is unrelated to the Syria crisis, including transportation and infrastructure requests. The INGO perspective is that the GoJ is not being challenged on its aid practices or its refugee policies, especially those that decrease protection or prevent durable solutions.<sup>163</sup>

The GoJ is heavily involved in cross-border activities with INGOs. According to one donor, “Jordan is a gate keeper. They are 100 percent supportive and 100 percent controlling of humanitarian assistance going in. They are so involved because they see this as mitigating the refugee crisis [by preventing people from crossing].”<sup>164</sup> As part of the “controlling dimension,” the GoJ requires that it vets and registers Syrian LNGOs that work with international partners cross-border. Given that such operations are remotely managed (meaning that INGOs rely on LNGOs for implementation), GoJ restrictions prevent INGOs from bringing their programs to scale.<sup>165</sup>

## Lebanon

Lebanon and Jordan are on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of direct involvement with refugees. At the start of conflict, the GoL was only peripherally involved in the refugee flows and response. It was only after March 2014 and following new governmental appointments that the GoL became more involved in the refugee response.<sup>166</sup> In mid-2014, border control was stepped up following the death of Lebanese soldiers by Islamic extremists. According to a UN representative, “Now it is nearly impossible to come in as a refugee.”<sup>167</sup>

One of the main characteristics of the refugee response in Lebanon is the fractured nature of the GoL. Line ministries are aligned with different confessional groups, and they do not necessarily communicate with one another, let alone agree. Different ministries become involved in different sectors, and there is “no overall vision.”<sup>168</sup> Further divisions exist between the municipal level and the central government. The overall sense is that the GoL is practically a non-functioning government, as evidenced by a lack of regular electricity, access to water, and, more recently, a moratorium on garbage collection (Saab 2015). Security is also divided, with Hizbollah—rather than the national police or army—running the airports and the border. The government is wracked with corruption and clan-based politics.<sup>169</sup>

The fractured nature of the government and the quantity of refugees in the country makes it difficult for the UN to engage in advocacy. A palpable fear is sensed among donors and UN representatives that Lebanon is “on the brink” of dissolution and complete destabilization, and that “it has taken more than its fair share of refugees.” The majority of refugees are Sunni, which presents a threat to the current confessional balance.<sup>170</sup>

At the insistence of the GoL, no camps exist in the country. Like Jordan, the fear is that camps will turn into permanent settlements, and refugees will stay indefinitely. In terms of advocacy, the UN has focused on trying to improve the conditions of the 1,700 informal settlements that exist within the country. The GoL has blocked this, always referring to the “Palestinian camps,” that became permanent settlements in Lebanon (as in Jordan).<sup>171</sup> However, many services in Lebanon are privatized, which provides a bit of a silver lining for humanitarian organizations looking to bypass the governmental knots. Organizations have partnered with the private sector to provide services related to water, shelter, education, and healthcare (UNHCR 2015b).<sup>172</sup>

The government’s official policy and unofficial practice towards refugees raise red flags for those concerned with protection (ACAPS 2014). In the spring of 2015, the GoL refused to allow the UNHCR to officially register new refugees.<sup>173</sup> Those who are registered must re-register each year. For children, access to school is declining and, and, with additional cuts to assistance, they are taking to the streets to beg. Malnutrition levels are expected to rise.<sup>174</sup> Freedom of movement has been significantly curtailed, and refugees are regularly detained in the web of new check-points that have appeared throughout the country (ACAPS 2014).<sup>175</sup> Legal residence is further limited, as the GoL has instituted a 200 USD fee for the application, a cost that is prohibitive for most refugees.<sup>176</sup> Not only are refugees not granted permission to work, they were required to sign a statement that they would not work when they registered. As one UN official explained, “This is an open door to abuse. The income they are getting is lower and lower. They are potentially subject to abuse. They can’t move around; they can’t work. Any assets they had are now depleted.”<sup>177</sup>

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UNHCR’s ability or interest in advocating for refugees in border countries appears to be constrained by inter-agency relationships, as well as the local, regional, and global political atmospheres. One area of particular weakness relates to the highly contentious issue of border permeability. As described above, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan at present have de facto closed borders, limiting the ability of Syrians to seek asylum (ACAPS 2014). Advocating for the entry of additional refugees is a deeply unpopular position. UN representatives described that they missed opportunities early on to push for open borders because they hoped to forge positive relationships with host governments, and “now it’s too late.”<sup>178</sup> Negotiating positions are weakened by Europe’s closed-door policy for refugees coming from the region, particularly related to Turkey (Amnesty International 2015c). The message that “refugees are also assets” has had limited impact in host countries. Interestingly, UNDP and UNHCR recently conducted a

study showing that for every dollar of humanitarian assistance given to a refugee had a 1.6 multiplier effect in the Lebanese economy (UNHCR and UNDP 2015).

The middle-income status of host countries surrounding Syria has allowed for a broader spectrum of interventions than seen in other settings. Jordan seems to have the most advanced systems. Ninety-five percent of refugees in Jordan have been registered with iris readers.<sup>179</sup> UN agencies (except for WFP) have forged partnerships with banks to distribute monthly cash benefits. In essence, a refugee receives an SMS when their transfer is ready. Their iris is scanned at the bank, and they receive the money. No card is needed. In theory, several providers (UN and INGOs) could link up to this system and provide financial support through a single technology.<sup>180</sup> In Lebanon, iris scans are used for registration but not for banking. HCR has moved from in-kind programming to making cash available on ATM cards. In Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, WFP uses vouchers for assistance that can be redeemed at specific shops for food items.<sup>181</sup> Aside from the use of cash, HCR in Lebanon has forged relationships with a range of private actors, has looked at biogas solutions for solid waste treatment, and Airbnb and TripAdvisor for shelter (UNHCR 2015b). Despite these “new” forms of programming, a sense remains among donors, the UN, and INGO representatives that the system is stuck with a “camp-based response for an undeveloped country.”<sup>182</sup>

## Key Conclusions

### Conflict and Protection

- The conflict in Syria continues unabated with warring strategies geared toward targeting and maximizing the suffering of civilians. The GoS is responsible for violations of IHL and human rights, and the commission of war crimes including the use of chemical weapons, dropping barrel bombs on residential neighborhoods, public spaces, hospitals and schools; besieging communities; and engaging in torture, extra-judicial killings, disappearances, etc. Other armed actors are also responsible for violating IHL.
- The scale of the Syrian conflict and the magnitude of humanitarian need constitute the largest crisis of our time, and only a fraction of humanitarian needs are currently met by the system.
- Of the 22 million Syrians present in the country before the conflict, 4.3 million have registered as refugees and 13.5 million have been identified as “in need.” Six and a half million have been internally displaced and between 400,000 and 640,000 are besieged. More than two out of three Syrians live in extreme poverty.
- Refugee flows have enormous impacts on neighboring countries, including sizeable demographic shifts and the risk of destabilization. Refugee outflows further afield have underlined the collapse of the asylum regime and lack of integrated refugee policy in Europe. They have prompted extreme reactions that include prolonged detention, denial of asylum, refoulement, and a multi-billion euro package for Turkey to keep refugees out of Europe.

- The UN Security Council has remained mostly blocked, and Syria has become a proxy war for global powers. Global interests are misaligned, and the Syrian political opposition is splintered. The likelihood of a political solution in the near-term is doubtful.
- Humanitarian action is being instrumentalized and is used as a substitute for real political action.
- There is a lack of a holistic, overarching humanitarian analysis and related protection strategy for the Syria crisis.
- Protection has been mostly absent as well as a late addition to the humanitarian response. The word itself only first appeared in the 2014 revision of the SHARP. Dedicated protection staff (for the UN, cluster/sector, and working groups) arrived during years four and five of the crisis.
- Humanitarian organizations focus on the delivery of relief items over meaningful protection programming. Humanitarians largely do not see their role as challenging strategies that maximize the impact of conflict-related violence on civilians.
- Protection programming inside Syria is largely conceived of as child-friendly spaces, psychological counseling, and SGBV prevention, despite evidence that the most pressing protection need is physical safety.

## The System

- The 2016 UN humanitarian appeal for the Syria crisis and refugee response is the largest the world has seen. In 2015, 57 percent of the appeal for affected groups inside Syria and 41 percent of the refugee appeal for those who crossed borders went unfunded. Available documented evidence and the perceptions of humanitarians indicate that the system is not meeting the life-saving needs of conflict-affected Syrians.
- The Whole of Syria (WoS) approach instituted in 2014—including cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan into Syria, and Damascus-based (within Syria) operations—presents an improvement from the fragmented, diffuse, and heavily siloed operations during the first four years of the crisis. However, significant problems remain.
  - Leadership is dispersed—split between the RHC in Amman and the HC in Damascus. The system suffers from a lack of clear lines for reporting and confusion about the roles of operational centers (“hubs”) and how they relate to the WoS architecture. There is a high degree of tension and distrust between key actors.
  - The WoS approach does not, in fact, cover all of the Syria crisis. Cross-border operations from Lebanon and Iraq are not included in the architecture and neither are the work of UNWRA and the situation for Palestinians (inside and outside Syria). The refugee responses in the region, in Europe, and elsewhere are also excluded from the “Whole” of Syria approach.

- UNHCR and WoS/HC/HCT/OCHA operations are disconnected and disjointed. No “whole of caseload” approach exists for the Syria crisis and thus no holistic strategy.
- For the most part, INGOs do not see the added value of the WoS structure.
- Non-Western actors, despite their large financial and operational presence, are not brought into the humanitarian system.
- Syrian organizations are mostly unrepresented in the WoS approach, despite providing the bulk of assistance on behalf of or in partnership with international partners inside Syria.
- The WoS approach is expensive and process heavy. It is bureaucratic and slow moving and has produced few outputs since its inception mid-2014. It is largely seen as upward focused (toward donors) rather than downwardly accountable (toward Syrians).
- Mistrust is rife—particularly toward the UN system operating from Damascus, as it is seen as partial and beholden to the GoS.
- While there have been slight improvements, information sharing and overall coordination capabilities remain poor.
- There are inefficiencies and conflicts of interest when a UN agency acts as a donor, implementer, and coordinator.
- There is very weak advocacy between UN agencies and donors in host countries related to refugee entry and protection rights.
- There has been little foresight or analysis on the issue of refugee flows beyond the region and in related EU policies.

## Humanitarian Operations

- Violence against aid-workers and extreme insecurity has prompted nearly all cross-border operations to follow remote-management models.
- The majority of humanitarian action in opposition-held areas is conducted by Syrian LNGOs (as mentioned above, they are not included in the WoS structure).
- Operating within a remote-management model has led to the development of Third Party Monitoring (TPM) schemes and increased reliance on social media.
- The UN, ICRC, and a few INGOs operate in government-controlled areas with the permission of the GoS. All humanitarian action must be approved, overseen, and implemented by SARC, which is an auxiliary to the government. Principles of humanity and impartiality are regularly violated, but rarely have international organizations conditioned their support on humanitarian principles.

- There are real tensions between organizations operating cross-border and those working from Damascus cross-line. This has led to duplication, inefficiencies, and increased risk to intended beneficiaries. The push for cross-line operations is seen as politically motivated and, in particular, as serving the interests of GoS and Western donors.
- Programming is heavily influenced by donor interests and political preferences, often conflicting with the application of first-order humanitarian principles.
- Besieged areas are extremely underserved, due to donor restrictions on the use of cash, and blocked access by the GoS. Despite a few high-profile (one-off) operations, the international community acts with indifference toward besieged areas inside Syria.
- ISIS areas are also underserved. Donor restrictions related to counter-terrorism legislation prohibit partners from engaging in such areas. However, some humanitarians have been able to access ISIS-controlled areas in a principled way.
- Western donors tend to encourage programming in Kurdish areas, over other areas, demonstrating politicization of action and creating tensions with Turkey.
- Cash programming is encouraged/required by some donors and avoided entirely by others due to fear of violating counter-terrorism legislation. Pressure for photo opportunities at times has encouraged the distribution of relief items rather than more appropriate assistance (such as cash).
- The overall sense is that the system is not “fit for purpose” for the Syria crisis.
  - Funds from Western donors are difficult to release due to vetting requirements, and other procedures related to counter-terrorism legislation. As such, organizations cannot engage in a rapid response, particularly toward unexpected events such as chemical weapons attacks. For local organizations to respond, they must rely on more flexible Gulf funding sources.
  - Food baskets and NFIs continue to be the predominant forms of assistance inside Syria despite evidence that many areas should (also) focus on protection, livelihoods, and resilience-type programming.
  - Standard interventions (developed for rural camp-based populations) are not appropriate for middle-income countries where the majority of refugees are non-camp based and markets are functioning. While most international organizations began their response with these standard interventions, some innovations have taken place (as compared to other crises in the world). This includes registration with iris scanners; cash assistance through bankcards; and (particularly in Lebanon) partnerships with the private sector for water, education, health, and shelter.

## Implications

The Syria case has highlighted the inherent and, at times fatal, flaws of the humanitarian system. The humanitarian system has largely failed in Syria. For five years, humanitarian action has been instrumentalized—it has been used as a fig-leaf for political inaction. The magnitude of suffering is extreme and so is the callous disregard for the plight of Syrians—on the inside, in border countries, and those knocking on Europe’s doors. As such, the Syria crisis is a potential game changer in the annals of humanitarianism. Like Rwanda, there may very well be a “before” and “after” Syria.

International complacency toward real time inhumanity—at both the political and humanitarian levels—sends a signal to new actors that the West is not just shallow, but hollow. Other actors, whether from the Gulf or the Global South or elsewhere, will likely (continue to) grow in prominence and dominance as they challenge the Western establishment and its lackluster humanitarian performance.

Syria also highlights how badly practiced the humanitarian apparatus is at addressing the many factors that undermine the protected status of war-affected populations. The inability or unwillingness to challenge the role of external actors in generating or exacerbating strategies designed to maximize the harm and suffering of civilians, together with limited engagement to support asylum seekers, questions the integrity of the formal humanitarian system and its relevance in a changing global order.

Humanitarian leadership has been weak, confused, and often working at cross-purposes. The existence of a strategy has been questionable, while coordination has been overlapping or befuddled. Funding has been inadequate, meaningful protection strategies were totally absent, and impartiality compromised. UN agencies in particular are trapped by their mandates, donors are risk averse, and all responders have difficulty moving away from their comfort zone and thinking, let alone acting, outside the box. Funding decisions are often driven by what agencies can do, rather than by what is needed. Decisions are made based on fear of violating counter-terrorism laws, rather than reaching the needs of besieged civilians. While all of this is not unique to Syria, the scale of the crisis puts into stark relief just how fundamentally broken this system is.

Ending on the positive, however, the Syria crisis has also shown us how effective and inspiring local humanitarian responses can be. Be it Syrian grass-roots initiatives, diaspora operations, the protective use of social media, brave civil society groups inside and out the country, intricate and complex communication systems, or volunteers on the shores of Greece and in the Balkans. Local and other actors with *bona fide* humanitarian credentials need to be given the space (and tools) to address humanitarian need in new and creative ways beyond the rigidity of the formal humanitarian apparatus.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Figures based on Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and OCHA.

<sup>2</sup> As of November 30, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Data collection for these studies took place between June 2013 and October 2014 and again in January 2016. See: Howe, Stites and Chudacoff (2015) and draft papers co-authored with Professor Dipali Mukhopadhyay of Columbia University.

<sup>4</sup> This body is now referred to as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces or the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) or Etilaf.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent source on President Hafez al-Assad and the experience of Syrian people living under his rule, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Dominion*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews conducted in Turkey between November 2013 and January 2016 with various Syrians who engaged in the original uprising.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with Syrian members of humanitarian and civil society organizations between June 2013 and January 2016.

<sup>8</sup> The FSA is not a cohesive military entity but rather a set of opposition brigades that operate independently but have sometimes been associated with sets of core principles. Some “FSA” groups receive varying degrees of covert and overt support from the West.

<sup>9</sup> Based on a review of contemporary press sources and interviews with Syrian representatives of NGOs and CSOs, as well as INGO, UN and donor representatives.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the country director of a conflict and security focused international organization, November and December 2015. See also (Wallace and Et al. 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Interviews conducted with senior representatives of governmental and international agencies, January 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Interview October 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Estimates of Russian strikes hitting ISIS targets vary between 10 and 33 percent, with the vast majority hitting opposition-controlled areas of Syria. See (Malsin 2015; Slim 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with conflict and security advisor, November and December 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Cross-border authorization was renewed under Resolution 2191 in December 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with several representatives of the SIG, January 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with European representative, January 2016.

<sup>18</sup> This lack of legitimacy was echoed in several interviews with Syrian members of CSOs and local NGOs as well local councils conducted between June 2013 and January 2016.

<sup>19</sup> This includes contributions to the appeal and additional contributions including bilateral and Red Cross/Red Crescent systems.

<sup>20</sup> Numbers accessed on the Financial Tracking Service website “Funding to 2015 Response Plans” at <https://fts.unocha.org>.

<sup>21</sup> Kuwait pledged the fifth largest amount, but only fulfilled one third of its pledge.

<sup>22</sup> Based on interviews with several UN and donor representatives in Jordan and Turkey.

<sup>23</sup> Based on interviews with senior UN representatives in Turkey, October 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Based on interviews with members of Turkish NGOs, INGOs, and Syrian LNGOs conducted in Gaziantep from September 2013 to October 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Based on interviews with a senior UN representative.

<sup>26</sup> Based on interviews conducted with Turkish Red Crescent, October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Based on interviews with INGOs and Western donors between June 2013 and October 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Based on interviews with representatives of the UN, December 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Based on interviews with members of Syrian humanitarian organizations and international organizations that partner with Syrian organizations, June 2013 to January 2016.

<sup>30</sup> The majority of programming took place in northern Syria, although some Syrian local organizations were able to penetrate under-siege areas in southern Syria from the Turkish border. Interviews with Syrian LNGOs between June 2013 and December 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Based on interviews with donor and INGO representatives Lebanon, October 2015.

<sup>32</sup> This involves both partnership and sub-contractual, short- and long-term arrangements. For a complete study, see Howe et al. (2015)

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- <sup>33</sup> Based on interviews with senior UN staff, humanitarian researchers, and a former Damascus-based UN representative.
- <sup>34</sup> Prior to UNSC Resolution 2165, UN agencies played a more “behind the scenes” technical support role for cross-border operations. OCHA was officially present in Turkey under “responsibility to protect” (R2P) since March 2013. Based on interviews with UN officials and leaders of INGOs Gaziantep, Turkey, and Jordan, October 2015.
- <sup>35</sup> Based on interviews conducted with Syrian LNGOs in partnership with Gulf-funded NGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>37</sup> Firewall in this sense refers to the decision to cut off communications between programs or locations, including ability to access information electronically. Based on interviews conducted with INGOs and UN agencies between December 2013 and October 2015.
- <sup>38</sup> This paper will discuss Syria specifically, but will not provide a systematic comparison of Syria with other crises.
- <sup>39</sup> Based on interviews conducted with donors and representatives of INGOs and UN agencies in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, October 2015.
- <sup>40</sup> As of November 19, 2015.
- <sup>41</sup> As of January 11, 2016.
- <sup>42</sup> Based on interviews with high-level UN officials, October 2015.
- <sup>43</sup> Quote from UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with Western donor, October 2015.
- <sup>45</sup> Interviews conducted October 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> Interviews with humanitarian researchers.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview October 2015.
- <sup>48</sup> Based on interviews with leaders of INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>49</sup> Based on interview with senior UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>50</sup> Based on interviews with Syrian LNGOs, November 2013-January 2016.
- <sup>51</sup> Based on interviews with UN officials and representatives of INGOs and LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>53</sup> Based on interviews with Syrian LNGOs, December 2013-January 2016.
- <sup>54</sup> Based on interviews with Syrian LNGOs, December 2013-January 2016, and humanitarian researchers specializing in protection.
- <sup>55</sup> Interviews conducted in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, October 2015.
- <sup>56</sup> Based on interviews with donors, UN representatives, INGO and LNGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>57</sup> Interviews conducted with donor, UN and INGO representatives in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, October 2015, plus interviews with LNGOs, December 2013-January 2016.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview conducted with high level UN official in Jordan, October 2015.
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with regional coordinator of international organization, January 2016.
- <sup>60</sup> Interview, January 2016.
- <sup>61</sup> Interview with humanitarian researcher, January 2016.
- <sup>62</sup> Stockholm Syndrome is a term used to refer to hostages—in captivity for a lengthy amount of time—who have developed positive feelings toward their captors. Interviews with Western donors, October 2015, and humanitarian researchers, January 2016.
- <sup>63</sup> Interviews with Syrian LNGOs, December 2013-October 2015. One Syrian LNGO reported that the besieged Yarmouk Camp is about three kilometers from UN offices, Daraya and Moadamia are six kilometers, and E. Ghouta about 11 kilometers.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with regional coordinator of international organization and humanitarian researchers.
- <sup>65</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with UN representatives, October 2015 and January 2016.
- <sup>67</sup> Based on interviews with former head of UN agency, Damascus, senior-level representatives of INGOs. October 2015 and January 2016.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview, January 2016.
- <sup>69</sup> Interview conducted January 2016.
- <sup>70</sup> Interviews conducted with regional and country INGO representatives, Western donors, and Syrian LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>71</sup> Interviews conducted with regional and country INGO representatives, Western donors, and Syrian LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>72</sup> Interview with senior INGO representative, October 2015.



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- <sup>73</sup> Interview with Western donor representative, October 2015.
- <sup>74</sup> Interviews with senior staff of INGOs in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, LNGOs, and other international agencies, October 2015.
- <sup>75</sup> These include groups with executive authority and the ability to project force such as the PYD/YPG, IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh Al-Islam, GoS, Hizbollah, coalition forces, the Russian government, Iranian government, Turkish government and Israel. A plethora of additional groups control territory at the local level. Based on interview with conflict and security analyst, November and December 2015.
- <sup>76</sup> Interview with senior staff of an INGO, October 2015.
- <sup>77</sup> Interviews conducted with organizations involved in cross-border operations, June 2013-January 2016.
- <sup>78</sup> Interviews with senior staff of INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>79</sup> Interviews with Syrian staff of INGOs and members of Syrian NGOs, December 2013-October 2015.
- <sup>80</sup> This author conducted key informant interviews with representatives of three armed opposition groups in 2014.
- <sup>81</sup> Interviews with Western donors, October 2015
- <sup>82</sup> Interview with Western donor, October 2015.
- <sup>83</sup> Interviews with Western donors and senior staff of INGOs operating cross-border, October 2015. For more on the tradeoffs between cash and in-kind programming, see (Gordon 2015).
- <sup>84</sup> Interview with executive director of Syrian LNGO, October 2015, and case study of LNGO conducted by author, December 2013-October 2014.
- <sup>85</sup> Note that the UK has pledged 32 million USD, but has paid 5.3. Qatar has pledged and paid 20 million. Other donors include the US, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, France, and Spain.
- <sup>86</sup> Case study of European donor conducted by author, December 2013-October 2014.
- <sup>87</sup> Interviews with senior staff of INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>88</sup> Interviews with donors and INGOs in Lebanon, October 2015.
- <sup>89</sup> Interviews conducted with INGOs in Jordan, October 2015.
- <sup>90</sup> Interview with regional coordinator of international organization, January 2016. Note that the Hassekeh border crossing has two check-points on the Syrian side, one controlled by the GoS, and the second by the Kurdish authorities.
- <sup>91</sup> Note that this section pertains to cross-border operations, as those within government-controlled areas (Damascus-based operations) are completely overseen, managed, and run by SARC.
- <sup>92</sup> From March 2011 to November 2015.
- <sup>93</sup> Based on interviews with INGOs and LNGOs, June 2013-December 2013.
- <sup>94</sup> Based on interviews with donors, UN, INGOs, LNGOs, December 2013-October 2015.
- <sup>95</sup> Interviews conducted with LNGOs, December 2013-January 2016.
- <sup>96</sup> Interviews conducted in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, October 2015.
- <sup>97</sup> Based on interviews with TPM companies and INGOs that use TPM services, August 2014-January 2016.
- <sup>98</sup> Based on interviews conducted with donors and INGOs, December 2013-October 2014.
- <sup>99</sup> Interview with country director of INGO, October 2015.
- <sup>100</sup> Interview with INGOs, December 2013-October 2014 and October 2015.
- <sup>101</sup> Based on interviews with LNGOs, December 2013-October 2015.
- <sup>102</sup> Interviews with Western donor representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>103</sup> Interviews with INGOs in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, October 2015.
- <sup>104</sup> Interviews with European donors, October 2015.
- <sup>105</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>106</sup> Based on interviews with donors and UN representatives.
- <sup>107</sup> Based on interviews with donors and UN representatives.
- <sup>108</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>109</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>110</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>111</sup> Interviews conducted in October 2015.
- <sup>112</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>113</sup> Based on interviews with UN representatives and LNGOs.
- <sup>114</sup> Based on interviews with LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>115</sup> Case studies conducted by author on LNGOs, December 2013-October 2014 and interview with LNGOs, October 2015.

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- <sup>116</sup> Case studies conducted by author on LNGOs, December 2013-October 2014 and interview with LNGOs and UN representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>117</sup> Case study of Syrian LNGO conducted by author, December 2013-October 2014.
- <sup>118</sup> Interviews conducted October 2015.
- <sup>119</sup> Based on interviews conducted October 2015.
- <sup>120</sup> Based on interviews with LNGOs in October 2015.
- <sup>121</sup> There is no INGO co-lead for early recovery and livelihoods (UNDP), emergency telecommunications (WFP), and logistics (WFP). Within protection, UNHCR is the overall lead, with UNICEF leading the sub-sector of child protection and UNFPA leading the sub-sector concerned with gender-based violence.
- <sup>122</sup> See other case studies as part of PFF.
- <sup>123</sup> Interviews with donors, representatives of UN agencies and humanitarian researchers.
- <sup>124</sup> Based on interviews, October 2015.
- <sup>125</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>126</sup> Based on interview with regional senior level UN staff, October 2015.
- <sup>127</sup> Interview with senior regional UN representative Jordan, October 2015.
- <sup>128</sup> Interviews, October 2015.
- <sup>129</sup> This includes WoS positions and OCHA support for WoS, as well as NGO co-leads. Internal document shared during interview, October 2015.
- <sup>130</sup> Interview with Western donor organizations, October 2015.
- <sup>131</sup> Based on author observation and interviews with UN and donor representatives in Jordan, October 2015. “People in need” figures were included in the final report; total population figures were not. The assessment can be accessed here:  
[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/estimated\\_pin\\_idps\\_per\\_governorate\\_151105.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/estimated_pin_idps_per_governorate_151105.pdf).
- <sup>132</sup> Interviews with INGOs in Jordan and Turkey, October 2015.
- <sup>133</sup> Based on interviews with UN and INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>134</sup> Based on interviews with donors and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>135</sup> Interview conducted October 2015.
- <sup>136</sup> Interviews conducted October 2015.
- <sup>137</sup> Interview conducted October 2015.
- <sup>138</sup> Interview with senior UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>139</sup> Interview October, 2015.
- <sup>140</sup> Interview January, 2016.
- <sup>141</sup> Stabilization programming in and around Syria tends to involve strengthening civil society (governance and community based organizations) and countering violent extremism.
- <sup>142</sup> Based on interviews with Western donor, October 2015.
- <sup>143</sup> Interviews with Syrian LNGOs, December 2013-October 2014 and October 2015. Letters not on public record.
- <sup>144</sup> Interview with Syrian LNGOs and INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>145</sup> Interviews with Syrian LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>146</sup> Interviews with representatives from UN agencies, INGOs, and LNGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>147</sup> Based on interviews with UN regional official, October 2015.
- <sup>148</sup> Based on interviews with European donors, UN agencies, and INGOs that receive European funds, October 2015.
- <sup>149</sup> Based on interviews with UN representatives and INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>150</sup> Based on interviews with Turkish NGOs and a UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>151</sup> Interviews with UN agencies and INGOs. June 2013-October 2014, October 2015.
- <sup>152</sup> Interview conducted October 2015.
- <sup>153</sup> Based on interviews with UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>154</sup> Based on interviews with INGOs in Turkey, October 2015.
- <sup>155</sup> Also information verified in interview with UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>156</sup> Based on interview with Turkish NGO, October 2015.
- <sup>157</sup> Based on interviews with UN representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>158</sup> Based on interviews with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>159</sup> Based on interviews with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>160</sup> Based on interview with UN representative October 2015.
- <sup>161</sup> War wounded individuals are allowed to cross at other checkpoints.

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- <sup>162</sup> Based on interviews with senior UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>163</sup> Based on interviews with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>164</sup> Interview with Western donor, October 2015.
- <sup>165</sup> Based on interviews with INGOs, October 2015.
- <sup>166</sup> Based on interviews with INGO and UN representatives, October 2015
- <sup>167</sup> Interview, October 2015.
- <sup>168</sup> Interview with UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>169</sup> Based on interviews with donor, UN, and INGO representatives.
- <sup>170</sup> Based on interviews with donors and UN representatives.
- <sup>171</sup> Based on interview with UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>172</sup> Information also based on interview with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>173</sup> Note that the UNHCR has set up a parallel system of registration, but refugees are not provided with a full assistance package.
- <sup>174</sup> Based on interviews with donors and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>175</sup> Information also based on interviews with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>176</sup> Based on interviews with UN and INGO representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>177</sup> Interview with UN official, October 2015.
- <sup>178</sup> Interviews conducted with UN officials in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, October 2015.
- <sup>179</sup> Interview with UN representative, October 2015.
- <sup>180</sup> Based on interview with donors and UN representatives, October 2015.
- <sup>181</sup> See section on cash for an explanation of these differences.
- <sup>182</sup> Quote from interview with UN representative in Lebanon.