NAVIGATING FRAGMENTATION: HUMANITARIAN AID, BORDERS AND CONFLICT LINES IN SYRIA

The Syrian conflict has birthed a fragmented territory controlled by various armed groups and de-facto institutions. As a result, humanitarian aid needs to cross multiple borders and conflict lines, and transit must be guaranteed by countless negotiation and coordination efforts in order to reach people in need. This leaves many (I)NGOs with the impossible task of balancing the humanitarian principle of neutrality and the practicalities of war-torn Syria.

A convoy of trucks carrying humanitarian aid near the Syrian Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey (July 2023). Photo by OMAR HAJ KADOUR / AFP

RECOMMENDATIONS

For donors

- Require that a duty of care allocation be included in budgets by all (I)NGOs working in Syria, and more generally, in conflict-affected countries. Such allocation should cover evacuation costs, along with accommodation and subsistence costs to cover a two-month period following the unexpected termination of the project for field partners.
- Further support for the localisation agenda, by including Syrian NGOs and experts in the development of humanitarian priorities and programmes.

For (I)NGOs

- Reform mechanisms of accountability to create a cycle of responsibility that flows between donors, (I)NGOs, field partners and receivers of aid. Prioritise accountability along with access.
- Acknowledge the excessive security burden borne by field partners and standardise procedures for reporting violent incidents from all warring parties.
- Except in situations of military siege, attempt to outsource goods locally where possible, to avoid crossing borders and conflict lines.

For diplomatic representatives

- Embassies and consulates should take on a role in humanitarian process by facilitating the work of INGOs based across the Syrian border; they can provide fast administrative support.
- Continue efforts to secure an independent UN border crossing between Turkey and Syria.

CONTEXT

This brief reflects on the practices of humanitarian aid delivery across borders and conflict lines in Syria. It illustrates how **international standards are inadequate and do not reflect the changing nature of modern conflicts** that are becoming increasingly complex and fragmented. The challenges of humanitarian aid in Syria partly stem from multiple layers of fragmentation:

Fragmentation of the territory – Syria is effectively divided into four main spheres of influence and governmental control, with the Syrian government controlling about 70% of the territory. The northwest is divided between two opposition governments and many more armed groups, while the northeast is governed by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration. For the humanitarian community, four areas of governance means that at least four sets of rules and procedures must be adapted to secure the delivery of aid to in-need populations. Another consequence of this territorial fragmentation is the need to engage with multiple – civilian and armed – actors who are often actively part of the conflict. Upholding the humanitarian principle of neutrality is thus practically impossible.

Fragmentation of authority and legitimacy – Syria has seen the emergence of multiple civilian and armed actors and institutions over the past twelve years. In all areas, no single actor has a monopoly over the administration of services, including the delivery of humanitarian aid. In the northwest for instance, armed groups have the legitimacy of force on the ground; opposition governments and their local councils have the legitimacy of representation; and local civil society has the legitimacy of credibility through its action. The coordination chain for channeling humanitarian aid is therefore extremely long and complex, with multiple essential contact points.

Fragmentation of the humanitarian mandate – In line with the humanitarian protection cycle, the mandate of the humanitarian community is to deliver aid and negotiations for border crossings, as lifelines revolve around access. Several key steps are often left out of the process including need assessment, planning, monitoring, and evaluation. This focus on delivery, albeit necessary, negatively impacts the quality of humanitarian programmes – i.e., populations do not receive the type of aid they need – and creates the perception for donors of organisations working in Syria being less accountable and reliable, in turn, challenging an organisation's capacity to secure funding.

THE POLITICS OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Negotiations for the opening of border crossings and humanitarian corridors that cross conflict lines are a key **bargaining chip for several actors**.

In July 2023, the UN Security Council failed to renew its last remaining UN border crossing between Turkey and northwest Syria; a **lifeline for the four million Syrians** in opposition-held areas. The Syrian regime agreed to reopen the crossing on the condition of the international humanitarian community's full cooperation and coordination with the [Syrian] government.

Russia's efforts towards limiting the renewal of the last UN border crossing to six months was a **strategy to curtail the space of Syrian civil society in the northwest**, and to limit attempts by governance actors to provide a viable alternative to the regime. Indeed, it takes local NGOs about two months to plan an intervention, and two months to implement it before they must devote the last two months to advocating for the upkeep of the border crossing.

As for the Syrian regime, in return for maintaining a border crossing, it expects to **reaffirm its monopoly over the Syrian territory and international borders**, to control the flow of humanitarian aid, and to avoid sanctions limiting reconstruction. This normalisation is in line with a thaw of the regime's relations with its regional neighbours.

To mitigate the disastrous consequences of the closure of the border crossing, OCHA suggested **opening a 'lifeline' between the northwest and regime-controlled areas**. However, this is not welcomed by Syrian NGOs who perceive the project as a 'lifeline for the UN, but certainly not for the Syrian people'. For Syrian NGOs, humanitarian negotiations are not only a political bargaining chip but also a diversion from the difficult resolution of the conflict.

BORDERS VS CONFLICT LINES

In Syria, **conflict lines are harder than border lines**. There is little to no humanitarian exchange between the four areas of control, in particular between the northwest and the northeast. The delivery of aid across the conflict lines is limited to relief baskets which is not a substitute for more comprehensive cross-border aid (including non-food items).

The conflict and international sanctions against the regime have taken an economic toll. Some materials are **not available at local markets** and are provided only by UN agencies and some INGOs. The closure of the border crossing will result in the cancellation of development projects that require specific materials, i.e., sanitation infrastructure.

Humanitarian aid helps to **mitigate the 140% inflation rate in Syria** for basic commodities. Many (I)NGOs source their products in neighbouring countries, notably Turkey, to avoid putting further pressure on empty markets.

Opening an access point on the conflict line between opposition-held and regime-controlled areas (through the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint) raises several concerns. Drugs might start flowing into opposition-held areas. Past experiences of military sieges and the closing of the UN border crossing between Jordan and south Syria have shown that the **Syrian regime monetises aid and uses it as a weapon** against perceived enemies.

In addition to endangering in-need populations, the closure of border crossings essential for UN aid transportation has **forced humanitarian workers to find innovative, mostly unofficial, strategies** to reach Syrian populations.

LESSONS FROM THE SYRIA–IRAQ BORDER

Despite the closure of the al-Yarubiyah border crossing in January 2020, **between 40 and 50 NGOs still work to support northeast Syria** from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The transit time has been **multiplied by five**; humanitarian workers and aid transit through an **illegal border crossing** managed by the Autonomous Administration on the Syrian side and the Kurdistan Regional Government on the Iraqi side. Only medicines are sourced abroad and transit via legal routes.

In rare instances, aid is brought through Ibrahim Khalil crossing between Turkey and Iraq and just over twelve miles from the Syrian border. Due to the stance of Ankara against the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration, the discovery of this scheme by Turkish authorities could have disastrous consequences on the work of (I)NGOs and the relations between Turkey and KRI.

The political situation of KRI as a semi-autonomous administration is a key challenge for INGOs that **cannot rely on the support of countries' diplomatic representation** and are increasingly isolated.

LESSONS FROM THE SYRIA-JORDAN BORDER

The closure of the UN border crossing fully **destroyed Syrian local civil society** in south Syria as humanitarian aid is fully controlled by Damascus. For (I)NGOs, reduced access translates into **limited monitoring and accountability**, especially in terms of aid equity.

For beneficiaries, it led to a **decline in the humanitarian aid provided** to the population in southern Syria, in quantity and quality. This is especially the case in reconciliation areas that were home to opposition armed groups and populations, i.e., Daraa al-Balad, Tafas.

Syrian humanitarian workers are particularly vulnerable; they do not enjoy freedom of movement and have lost their source of income.

THE ROLE OF ARMED GROUPS

Coordinating with armed groups is essential to ensuring the safe transfer of humanitarian aid in a country that remains subjected to daily violence.

Due to the fragmentation of authority in Syria, **governance institutions do not have the capacity to ensure the safety** of humanitarian convoys.

Coordination between (I)NGOs and armed groups is indirect; it is established through individuals. In the northeast, for instance, tribal and community leaders are key providers of information and security.

The only UN border crossing to Syria is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Salafi-Jihadi armed group unofficially associated with the de-facto Salvation Government. HTS established civil bodies such as the Free Doctors Union or the Ministry of Local Development to manage humanitarian

aid. **OCHA adapted their framework to function through these channels**.

For the past few years, **OCHA has been dealing with HTS as the only option on the ground for transferring humanitarian aid**. This coordination gave the green light to other INGOs – including IRC, Mercy Corps, GOALS and ACTED – to deal with the group. It is estimated that 90% of (I)NGOs working in Idlib have made informal connections with the Salvation Government for the delivery and distribution of assistance.

However, the UN refuses to involve local councils due to their 'political nature' and affiliation with opposition governments. These double standards of the international community are denounced by Syrian activists and **put local civil society at a disadvantage**.

The Syrian army (and affiliated factions) is the only armed actor in Syria to **impose taxes and royalties on humanitarian aid** when it transits across borders and through checkpoints.

DEVOLUTION OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY

Syrian partners are accountable to (I)NGOs that are themselves accountable to donors. However, **no one is accountable to Syrian humanitarian partners**, let alone to the beneficiaries of aid.

International donors transfer their liability to (I)NGOs, which transfer their own liability to local transporters and merchants for the delivery of aid. For instance, many (I)NGOs source their goods in Turkey to avoid putting further pressure on local markets in northwest Syria. Merchants based in Turkey are liable for delivery to Syria through commercial border crossings. Once they arrive in Syria, the goods are stored in safe warehouses and locals are contracted to transport the aid across Syria. Once it reaches local partners, aid is distributed in coordination with local councils and armed

groups, e.g.: when aid is distributed inside IDP camps.

Risk is transferred from INGOs to local NGOs. Undeniably, Syrian partners on the ground take all risks to negotiate and implement the delivery of humanitarian aid. There must be a **better division of security responsibility on humanitarian actors** across the spectrum.

Despite the risks assumed by Syrian partners, and their unmatched knowledge and access to in-need populations, **the humanitarian process remains highly centralised**. For instance, out of 460 Syrian NGOs, only 4 currently receive funds from USAID to support the localisation agenda.

Many (I)NGOs working in Syria still **do not have any responsibility to protect their workers** as part of their policies and budget requirements. Following the siege of eastern Ghouta, it became compulsory for Syrian NGOs funded by international donors to provide a duty of care to local staff inside Syria. But this practice has not yet been extended to (I)NGOs. Too often, the protection of Syrian partners during military escalation relies on individual inclinations rather than systematic procedures.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Over a decade of violent conflict has left deep scars on the Syrian socio-political and geographical landscape. The country is fragmented into four governance and territorial entities, and communities are divided by conflict lines. Two parallel reports (2021, 2022) have highlighted the challenges and opportunities for a series of local actors, notably local civil society, to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic in the framework of a fragmented conflict.

Yet, global challenges – such as the Syrian refugee crisis, the threat posed by transnational radical groups, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic – do not stop at borders. Identified "fragments" do not operate in complete isolation and are indeed inter-dependant when it comes to the circulation of goods and, since March 2020, the monitoring and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The same goes for relations between Syria and its neighbours despite the privatisation and politicisation of external borders.

The research aims to address this issue by shedding the light on the ever-evolving and interactive process of fragmentation, looking at dynamics of "rebordering" (Vignal, 2017: 826) during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to exploring if and how the humanitarian community can contribute to the creation of "peace routes" across conflict lines and borders, this report also maps the network of responsibility and trust in the process of humanitarian coordination, and the impact of such practices on various governance actors.

Research Questions

- How do forms of aid navigate routes across governance entities, territories, and populations in Syria and between Syria and its neighbours?
- What are the navigation challenges and strategies for people inside Syria and how does fragmentation impact their human rights?
- How does the international humanitarian community get involved locally with de-facto governance institutions, armed groups and local civil society when there is a lack of a legitimate central State?
- How does humanitarian aid transit in Syria impact the political legitimacy and public authority of national governance actors?

Methodology

The data presented in this brief were collected between September 2022 and March 2023 in Syria – in northern Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa governorates – and in neighbouring countries, notably Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. The researchers conducted 84 interviews with international and local civil society members, governance stakeholders, medical professionals, and military personnel. All interviews were conducted in person by the authors of the brief as well as by research assistants with key access to certain stakeholders inside Syria. The researchers attempted to provide a representative sample of the general Syrian population in the areas of focus, and to ensure representative inclusion of political views (i.e., in support of the Syrian regime and opposition governments) and genders (male: 69.65% - female: 30.35%).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was developed by Juline Beaujouan, Principal Investigator of the research – in collaboration with independent researchers inside and outside Syria, including (by alphabetical order) Muhannad al-Rish, Abdallah El hafi, Eyas Ghreiz, Ayham Odat.

ABOUT PEACEREP

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University. PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

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