



# Syria's Uneven Aid Distribution Threatens Future Peace

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### **The significant imbalances in the distribution of aid between different geographical areas in the current Syrian war threaten not only the immediate survival of civilians, but also the future prospects for peace.**

The Syrian crisis counts among the direst of our times, and never has there been a humanitarian emergency reaching comparable volumes of assistance. Formerly a relatively prosperous middle income country of about 21 million people, more than five years of war have plunged Syria into staggering poverty. Having lost their livelihoods, 13.5 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid.

Irrespective of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), belligerents have targeted residential areas and vital infrastructure such as water and electricity supplies, as well as medical facilities. In a desperate effort to survive, half the country's population have been forced to leave their homes, not knowing whether they will ever be able to return. Of these, 4.8 million have crossed the borders as refugees, while a further 6.1 million people remain uprooted within the country.

While humanitarian assistance such as food and water, shelter, and medical aid are indispensable, it is deeply problematic that the distribution of aid in different areas in the country is highly uneven. Needs are estimated to be greatest in territory controlled by opposition forces – yet it is here that least aid is being delivered. In 2015, for example, only 27% of World Health Organisation administered medical aid reached opposition areas, as did the same share of food aid delivered by the World Food Programme only last month. Under the

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umbrella of the UN, both are the biggest humanitarian actors in their fields. Why are these imbalances occurring, and why are they critical for future peace negotiations and reconstruction?

## **The Syrian war**

In Syria, the multitude of armed groups, estimated to number several hundred, complicates the distribution of aid as much as the fact that the country is now engulfed in not one, but two wars. Since 2011, civilians have been caught up in the original conflict between the regime and opposition groups seeking a change of government. But another battle is being fought between these opposition groups and Daesh, which proclaimed the establishment of their so-called Islamic State in July 2014. In areas controlled by the latter, the US-led international alliance is attacking Daesh positions across Syria and Iraq, while the Syrian and Russian air forces target other opposition-held areas.

Given that the presence of armed groups, their alliances and infighting differ significantly at the local level, humanitarian actors are thus operating in a highly fragmented terrain that requires often daily negotiations and re-evaluation of safety concerns for their own staff.

## **An aid system controlled by the government**

To some extent, aid imbalances occur in war zones anywhere in the world. Generally, humanitarian aid can only be delivered when belligerents grant aid organisations permission to access people in need and guarantee for the security of their staff. Syria is exceptional, however, in the severity and persistence of aid imbalances. Although belligerents on all sides have interfered with aid deliveries, the Syrian government still controls about half the

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Syrian territory, thus presenting the single largest threat to impartial aid. By claiming to uphold Syrian sovereignty, it has quietly retained tight control over the aid system in place.

Only 17 INGOs are permitted to operate in designated areas of the country with limited reach, and their choice of local partners is limited to NGOs licensed by the government. Even after more than five years, the UN are still not allowed to carry out needs assessments in the country independently of the government, and they have remained obliged to issue the annual [Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (SHARP) – which is the basis for planning and monitoring the response each year – jointly with them. Even if convoys are approved for deliveries into opposition areas through rapidly changing bureaucratic procedures which can stretch over months, they are regularly stripped of surgical equipment and even delivery kits at government checkpoints.

Contravening the Hippocratic Oath and IHL, anti-terrorism legislation has rendered the medical treatment of anyone associated with the opposition a crime since June 2012. Intimidation, arrests and killings of medical staff, such as ambulance drivers, doctors and nurses were common at the beginning of the war, while medical facilities including hospitals, blood banks and coordination centres are regularly being subjected to targeted attacks.

Horrifying accounts have emerged from those trapped in such conditions, such as in Eastern Aleppo, where the remaining population was evacuated over the past week after years of heavy assault. By designating all opposition-held areas as being controlled by “terrorists” – an expression which is by no means limited to Daesh – the regime has portrayed the populations in these territories as undeserving of aid. In so doing, it puts the lives of millions in need at risk.

## **Fear of losing access**

Although the UN have long denounced the blockade of aid to opposition areas as an illicit war tactic, they have continued to compromise for fear of losing access, which is becoming more and more restricted. Today, 5.47 million live in hard-to-reach areas and 861,200 are trapped in areas under siege in Syria alone. Although, again, it is not only the government conducting sieges, 15 out of 18 areas are currently besieged by its armed forces. Sieges seek to enforce surrender – just as as Darayya did after 2.5 years without aid to civilians. Where humanitarian aid does reach opposition areas, airstrikes by Syrian and Russian government forces destroy residential neighborhoods and carry out targeted strikes on medical facilities, leaving not only wounded fighters, but also civilians without resort.

Conversely, not only has the government ensured that the vast majority of aid is channeled towards areas under its own control, but it has also used its leverage to strengthen its economy. Citing a lack of alternatives, the UN have paid tens of millions of US-dollars to implementing organisations and suppliers owned or run by individuals associated with the government who are under EU sanctions. These are not legally binding for the UN – yet current practice render them devoid of meaning. All these measures are without consequences for the government.

## **A parallel system: the unofficial humanitarian response**

While opposition areas are systemically being deprived of direly needed humanitarian aid, an unofficial response has quietly emerged in parallel to the UN-led response which is co-ordinated with the government through SHARP. Early in the conflict, hundreds of local NGOs and expat-founded NGOs abroad

sought to fill the gap the UN-led response left in opposition-held territory. From the conflict's onset, the government refused to licence local NGOs in these areas, knowing full well that these are indispensable partners for major INGOs, most of whom had no prior experience of working in the country.

While it is impossible to establish the actual financial volume of the unofficial deliveries, which are not accounted for in the annual SHARPs, they are highly unlikely to reach levels anywhere near that of the official UN-led response. Although *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders) warned that since the beginning of the war that opposition-areas were being strongly disadvantaged in life-saving aid, it took three years until UN resolution 2156 was implemented, which allowed for additional cross-border deliveries mainly from Turkey – with deeply insufficient results, as present figures show. If local NGOs are permitted to work with the official response at all, strict monitoring processes are put in place on money spent, and rightly so. In the view of some, however, the recent revelations on UN-suppliers render these requirements into a farce.

### **Why do belligerents seek to control aid?**

Where belligerents can ensure access to aid in areas under their own control, a resemblance of normality can be maintained in which former state services are being replaced by external assistance. Before the war, the Syrian government implemented socialist-inspired welfare programmes over the course of decades, including needs assessments, which aimed to maintain political consent even within a highly repressive dictatorship. It is now drawing on humanitarian aid as a substitute. In a similarly systemic manner, Daesh have sought to control humanitarian actors, of which only very few are managing to uphold access and operational independence. In areas controlled by Kurdish

forces and different groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, aid deliveries are often facilitated and coordinated by the Local People's Committees or Local Administrative Councils, respectively.

While these are often credited for their efficiency, they are nonetheless political bodies who should not seek to monopolise aid deliveries for political gain. Belligerents seek to portray access to aid as a testimony to their ability to fulfill basic needs and protect survival. Where they manage to secure regular access to aid, the result is an order which is functional and might appear as either a continuation of the previous status quo or as a credible alternative to the latter. It is that perception which, by blocking aid deliveries to populations in territories under the control of the enemy, is sought to be destroyed with the aim of undermining their respective quest for legitimacy.

### **The dangers of Syria's aid imbalances**

Aid imbalances are dangerous not only because they raise the question as to who is most disadvantaged in receiving aid, but also because other wars have shown that access to social services and aid influence the directions in which people move. Demographic changes are a decisive factor in the outcome of war. From the viewpoint of belligerents, deserted neighborhoods are more difficult to defend because they lower the morale amongst fighters. For civilians, aid imbalances which privilege areas under the control of a given warring party over others deepen existing divides. Populations in areas less reached – especially if imbalances occur over long periods of time – will be physically and mentally weaker, exposed to poorer living conditions, and with comparatively fewer options to reach out for assistance. Violence, and in the Syrian case aerial bombardments in particular, prompt populations to flee; access to life-saving resources influence where they seek refuge.

In Syria, data on population movements within the country are still scarce, but the key question is whether those who cannot afford to leave the country are drawn from opposition- into government-held areas out of sheer need. If so, the international aid system threatens to not only enhance social fragmentation, but also further depopulation. In a country where a third of the population has been forced to flee, how will peace negotiations allow for their voices to be heard? For those who remain in the country, in which areas are residents still strong enough to engage, where do factories and business remain functioning that can stem the unfathomable project of future reconstruction, and how will the divides that have been deepening for so long now be bridged?

## **Future outlook**

With every day passing, the aid delivered contributes to shaping the conditions under which peace will be concluded and reconstruction will begin. Aid imbalances are no new phenomenon, but the scale at which opposition-held areas are being disadvantaged in the Syrian case is. The present war has plunged organisations in the official response into a most severe crisis.

In an unprecedented decision, 73 local NGOs declared stopping all collaboration with the UN in October this year in protest against their perceived partiality. It has long been argued that in line with IHL, humanitarian aid must be carried out independently and it must be neutral and impartial in intent, but it is inevitably political in effect. In the Syrian war, however, humanitarian aid has become politicised to the point that it may severely impact on the outcome of the war.

The idea that delivering some aid is better than no aid at all thus represents a dangerous approach. Although slow progress has been made in raising



awareness of government interference over the course of this year, the struggles of the unofficial response in opposition areas in particular remain underestimated and underreported. With added pressures resulting from chronic shortages of funding, humanitarian organisations on all sides are caught up in having to reach as many recipients as possible – regardless of where they are located – to meet donor expectations. As a result, there is little room for self-critical reflection, and internal divides on the present responses remain largely invisible for the public.

In contrast to these trends, concrete measures to counter present imbalances are urgently required. These could mean greater numbers of aid drops – similar to those recently resumed in Dayr al-Zur – in areas under siege, hard-to-reach areas, and others where ground access cannot be secured. They also require a coherent approach which does not tolerate interference by any warring party – including the government. For cases where belligerents insist on unacceptable compromises, protocols are needed which allow for humanitarian deliveries to be stopped as result.

If it comes to a point where these measures are being taken, it must be clear that responsibility does not lie with the humanitarian system, but the warring party refusing to abide by the very principles on which humanitarian aid is based. Addressing these challenges remains an indispensable condition for ensuring even and fair access to humanitarian aid for those in dire need now, and for their prospects of living in the country in the future.

Image credit: [IOM Iraq/Flickr](#).

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