

THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC AND THE CIVIL WAR

The Humanitarian Context

Constitutionally a semi-presidential republic, Syria is a closed authoritarian regime ruled by President Bashar al-Assad since 2000 and, before that from 1970, his father Hafez al-Assad. Inspired by a series of pro-democracy protests in countries throughout the Middle East from late 2010, known as the 'Arab Spring', many Syrians began taking to the streets calling for regime change. In March 2011, non-violent, pro-democracy protests erupted in the southern city of Deraa in response to the arrest and torture of school children for painting revolutionary graffiti. These protests were met with violent repression as government security forces opened fire on demonstrators, catalysing nationwide protests demanding the Assad's resignation, which were in turn violently crushed. The escalating violence rapidly disintegrated into a civil war as rebel brigades formed to battle government forces across the country. By 2013 there were thought to be as many as 1000 armed opposition groups fighting inside Syria. These groups are diffuse, varied in mission and method. Some are supported financially and militarily by a range of different international powers, including Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. A few high-profile groups, including Islamic State and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, have adopted terrorism and jihadist insurgency tactics, recruited foreign fighters, and undertaken high-profile attacks and executions. On the diplomatic front, frequent national and international attempts to consolidate a legitimate and strong political opposition, or broker peace have consistently failed.

In January 2013, six months after the conflict was formally declared a civil war, the Syria crisis was confirmed as a level three (the highest ranking) humanitarian emergency, which resulted in the largest ever appeal launched by the United Nations. Mortality rates and numbers of those affected and displaced are extremely difficult to determine and verify, not least due to security and access issues and concerns over the manipulation of statistics.

Nevertheless, the current number of people killed in Syria is estimated to be over 250,000, which includes at least 10,000 children. OCHA states that 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance – 6 million of whom are children and 1.5 million of whom have a disability. Over 4.8 million have fled the country, with the majority pouring into the neighbouring countries of Turkey (2.7m), Lebanon (1.1m) and Jordan (0.64m) – triggering a regional refugee crisis. The number of those internally displaced is estimated at over 6.6m and those designated as ‘hard to reach’ or besieged at 4.5 million. It is also thought that 8.7 million people are unable to meet their daily food needs, that 70% of the population are without safe access to drinking water, and that 5.3 million people are in need of shelter. This is in part owing to the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure – which has included attacks on, and military use of, schools, hospitals, economic assets and water networks. There has been a fundamental disregard of human rights by all parties to the conflict, with attacks on civilians – including aerial bombardments and starvation through besiegement – being used as tactics of war.

The UN’s Strategic Response Plan for Syria offers a programmatic framework for addressing the key humanitarian issues arising from the crisis. The plan emphasises multi-sectoral programming focused on the most vulnerable groups, and calls for increased flexibility in humanitarian programming and improved humanitarian access. It also aims to mainstream protection work, focus on emergency response preparedness, and ensure the strategic use of country-based pooled funds. However, a core difficulty in meeting these aims is a chronic funding gap, which is forcing agencies to scale down programming. Funds requested for the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan in 2015 were US\$2.9bn, and only 43% of which were met. This shortfall was echoed for the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, which required \$4.3bn and received just \$2.8bn. With these severe funding shortfalls and the absence of a viable political solution on the table, the humanitarian outlook for Syria in 2016 remains dire.

**‘No voice can be heard above the gunfire’:
Protection, partnerships and politicking in the Syrian Civil War¹**

Jessica Field*

When the ground shook²

The Palestinian *mukhayim* (refugee camp) of Yarmouk³ is situated just a few miles from the centre of Damascus city and is essentially a suburb of the Damascus governorate. Prior to the Arab Spring revolts in Syria, Yarmouk was a vibrant town with schools, hospitals, thriving markets and a distinctive Palestinian-Syrian culture. Hosting nearly a million Palestinian refugees with a smaller number of Iraqi refugees and Syrian residents,⁴ its inhabitants were largely integrated into Syrian society. But, within less than a year of the onset of the Arab Spring protests,⁵ the camp – of around one square mile in size – descended into a volatile situation of sectarian fragmentation, violent conflict and government besiegement. Given its close proximity to the country’s governing centre, it has become a fighting ground for groups across the ideological and political spectrum and, to complete the microcosm of the wider conflict, civilians trapped inside are cut off from food, medical supplies, and even the most basic humanitarian assistance.

One Palestinian-Syrian interviewee from Yarmouk, Ahmad,⁶ described to me the spiralling tragedy of his home town over the course of 2012, noting that the fighting interests have included supporters of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, of the rebels, of Hamas and other external powers, and of all the shades of grey in between. Some of his friends, Ahmad explained, joined the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other groups for pragmatic reasons: ‘they needed the money’ and perceived there was no viable alternative.⁷ Others in the camp aligned more explicitly with an ideological cause. Physical security was, and remains, precarious. Ahmad himself experienced his family home attacked and burnt twice – once by pro-regime actors and the other by an opposition faction, each believing him loyal to the other – and he also lost a close family member to a sniper besieging the city. December 16th 2012 – or ‘Day Zero’, as he referred to it – saw the Syrian army’s aerial bombardment of the camp in a standoff with rebel forces. The ‘Battle of Yarmouk Camp’, as it later became known, resulted in the death of an unconfirmed number of civilians; reports suggest dozens

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were killed in the strike.⁸ ‘The ground shook’, Ahmad recalled, as the bombs hit a school and a mosque. It was shortly after this that he fled to Lebanon. Now Yarmouk has around 18,000 inhabitants who either cannot escape the besieged area, or have nowhere else to go.⁹ Aid has not been delivered inside the camp since March 2015 and a recent typhoid outbreak has placed an already severely vulnerable population in a critical state of humanitarian need.

Introduction

Ahmad’s story and the situation of Yarmouk embody some of the dynamics of the wider Syrian conflict and highlight two complex and connected realities. First, that the revolution/civil war has created a volatile situation of extreme insecurity, with rapidly changing events on the ground, widespread violations of human rights, and a context in which those caught up in the conflict include civilians, fighters, and proponents of diverse ideological causes, with these identities subject to fluid interchange. The second reality is that there has been a wholesale failure by the Syrian government, opposition forces and international community to provide protection and humanitarian aid for civilians in the midst of the brutal fighting.¹⁰ In 2014 the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan requested US\$2.2 billion, of which only 48% was received.¹¹ In March 2015, a collection of the Syria response’s largest international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) published a report entitled ‘Failing Syria’.¹² The report criticised the United Nations (UN) and other international actors for their failure – following UN Security Council Resolutions 2165, 2139 and 2191¹³ – to improve access to populations inside the country and to influence belligerent parties in the conflict to cease attacks against civilians, end arbitrary detention, kidnap and torture, and lift the sieges of populated areas. The most recent analysis by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in March 2016 numbers the people in need of humanitarian assistance at 13.5 million, with 4.8 million refugees and 6.6 million internally displaced by the violence.¹⁴

What is the reason for such an ineffective response inside the country? Some cite the huge scale of suffering and related need for ever-increasing funds as a key barrier;¹⁵ some the complexity of remote management in such an insecure environment;¹⁶ and others the impeding international political interests.¹⁷ On the ground, many blame a lack of capacity-building by international partners and insufficient financial support as limiting their activities.¹⁸ For all, the risk of violence against aid workers, and the threat of culpability under donor states’ counter-terrorism legislation for engaging, deliberately or otherwise, with proscribed groups inside Syria, remain inhibitive.¹⁹

These are all valid limitations that speak of the complexity of undertaking a humanitarian response in a highly politicised, volatile and rapidly changeable

civil war. Yet, they are not explanations and understandings of ineffectiveness that can be applied throughout the entirety of the conflict, from its categorisation in July 2012 as a civil war, to the present day. Many are challenges that have developed and expanded as a result of the way that the initial response unfolded. In other words, many of these challenges can be attributed to the growing duration and growing scale of the conflict over the longer term, and are a result of the particular way that aid actors (and other stakeholders) have reacted to that escalation of violence and international politicking.

The underlying challenge that has remained consistent (in presence, though not scale) throughout this conflict – and the challenge that has been the single most cited cause of aid ineffectiveness in interviews for this research and in other evaluations²⁰ – has been the inability of the international community, including humanitarian actors, to provide protection for civilians in the midst of the violence. This will be the first subject for interrogation in this paper. To what extent was it possible to anticipate the protection crisis and why has the international community been so ineffective in mitigating its escalation?

One of the other most frequently cited challenges for effective action that arose in interviews – and one which is echoed in other evaluations and research – is that of weak partnerships between international actors (primarily, in the case of this research, INGOs) and their local counterparts (namely, Syrian organisations).²¹ These partnerships have become more necessary since the escalation of violence and failings in protection have increased the number of people inside the country needing assistance, and simultaneously decreased the viability of foreign actors operating inside the country for security reasons. However, despite the operational necessity of remote management, partnership development across the sector has experienced common and frequent limitations, for instance: short-term contracts (when the need is for longer-term support), a dominant service-delivery focus (when the need is for a mixture of service and advocacy), output-orientated capacity-building (where outcomes should be the priority), and so on. Why have partnerships not received the investment required to meet the needs of those assisting affected communities and, by extension, the needs of affected communities themselves? The second half of the paper will attend to this question.

The two issues – failure in protection and limitations in partnership development – are not unconnected, and underlie broader impediments to meeting the needs of those affected by the conflict. Both are products of a humanitarian system that is ill-equipped, politically and bureaucratically, to adapt programming and approach to intrastate conflicts as they unfold in a politically volatile environment. And powerful actors’ positions within that system affect, in turn, how other stakeholders view what constitutes an ‘effective’ response at different stages of assistance, and subsequently how the parameters are moved to account for changing priorities. For instance, as terrorism has grown as a concern for states and inter-governmental agencies

– such as the UK, the US and the United Nations – which are funding aid programmes inside the country, NGO programming has shifted to mitigate aid diversion to proscribed groups through distancing, sometimes at the expense of meeting the needs of affected communities.²² Before examining these shifting understandings of effectiveness in more detail, it is first necessary to set the scene and place the relationship between ordinary Syrians – who would later become victims of *and* responders to the crisis – and their government in a wider historical context. Could such an escalation of violence against civilians have been anticipated? And, if so, why were such concerns not acted upon?

The ‘Assadisation’ of Syria

Syria has seen over 45 years of authoritarian rule under the Assad family. Hafez al-Assad – a Syrian Air Force pilot, then intelligence officer and later Minister of Defence in the Ba’ath Party under Salah Jadid – led a coup in 1970, becoming the leader of the Ba’ath Party and president of Syria from then until his death in 2000.²³ During his rule, Hafez constructed a government of trusted associates, and strengthened the army and security services that came to underpin his state.²⁴ He espoused an ideology of secular pan-Arabism and institutionalised his own ultimate authority, attempting to unite the country – hitherto characterised by competing local, national and regional alliances, and marred by a recent violent history of decolonisation, French mandate control, and a series of government putsches – ‘around his person’.²⁵ Hafez’s closest advisers were few in number and usually connected to him through family or patronage ties; more widely, the country’s institutions became dominated by members of his own Alawite ethnic community, though the influence of sect should not be overstated.²⁶ Hafez’s highly personalised rule consisted within a broader inter-religious coalition, whereby he co-opted ‘segments of the population via patronage and channeling social forces through a corporatist system involving the creation of popular organisations, professional associations and unions’ for peasants, teachers, artists, workers, engineers and so on – which were as much for personal enrichment as political surveillance.²⁷

Where they occurred, dissent and challenge were violently crushed.²⁸ A wave of Islamist attacks aimed at destabilising the government in the early 1980s was met with the extensive arming of those who supported the regime and bloody retribution for those who did not – for instance, in Aleppo in August 1980 and Hama in April 1981, ‘scores of males over the age of fourteen were rounded up almost at random and shot out of hand’.²⁹ In 1982, the city of Hama rose up against the government. What followed was a raging battle between the government and opposing forces; the army besieged Hama with 12,000 men and, although the insurgents were eventually defeated, just like in Yarmouk, the real cost was borne by civilians:

Without food, water or fuel ... they were all too often buried in the ruins of their homes ... Many civilians were slaughtered in the prolonged mopping up, whole districts razed, and numerous acts of savagery reported, many of them after the government had regained control of the town. Entire families were taken from their homes and shot.³⁰

Most estimates number the dead of the Hama uprising somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000.³¹ From here on, ‘violence and governance became indistinguishable’.³² Tight control was maintained by multiple security services and media blackouts, and the regime exhibited an ‘almost obsessive adherence to institutional procedures’, such as elections, that gave it the appearance of legitimacy, which was important for the regime’s projection of power domestically and internationally.³³

This is not to say that the Ba’ath regime suppressed all social activity. Some of the population could come together – albeit under surveillance and control – through, among other mechanisms, state-organised ‘civil society’ associations, many of which undertook state-approved charitable and social activities. Although they were not what is traditionally understood as ‘civil society’ – namely, non-governmental groups of people linked by common interests independent of, and often presented as bulwarks against, a state – these groups, particularly charities and faith-based organisations, offered private welfare alternatives to the state in times of hardship, through donations and limited voluntary service.³⁴ Trust was integral to their workings. The regime was often suspected of spreading rumours about groups suspected of disloyalty in order to turn communities against them, and its spies were widely feared. As mistrust and suspicion were so potent, trust networks of close (often highly localised), reliable associates took on great importance³⁵ – something highlighted in more recent reports as a defining characteristic of emerging Syrian NGOs in the current civil war context.³⁶

When, in 2000, power passed to Hafez’s son, Bashar, the regime ‘developed important new features that consolidated a further “assadisation” of power while posturing with more liberal reforms’.³⁷ Despite apparent changes in state-society relations – such as the addition of civil society to the Syrian dictionary (*mujtama’ madani*) and the creation of bodies such as the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society or the Friends of Civil Society³⁸ – core power remained within a small circle, increasingly consisting of second generation members of the Assad family. Sunni establishment figures were diminishing in number and remained mainly as token leaders rather than part of the heart of the government’s authority.³⁹ Where Hafez had to a certain extent courted the rural population, Bashar turned away from them, cutting back on social services, projects and support in order to boost the urban economy, which left private charity – predominantly Islamic NGOs – to fill the gap.⁴⁰ Between 2006 and

2010, the country suffered a serious drought and the decrease in rural support left many impoverished citizens to migrate to the cities to seek help and work – a situation of dislocation and discontentment that would exacerbate certain dynamics of the civil war.⁴¹ It is significant that the uprising emerged in full force in rural towns like Deraa just as Bashar's crony capitalism had lost him the rural support-base his father had enjoyed.⁴²

While Bashar was not wholly resistant to economic and political reform, he has always been 'deeply dependent on the regime he inherited and of which he is a quintessential product'.⁴³ It is unsurprising, therefore, that Bashar's reaction to the Arab Spring-inspired revolution was very much in line with his father's approach to domestic dissent throughout his time in power.

The 2011 uprising famously began in Deraa in March, when fifteen boys aged between 10 and 15 painted the 'Arab Spring'-inspired slogan '*As-Shaab / Yoreed / Eskaat el nizam*', (The people / want / to topple the regime) on a school wall in their home city.⁴⁴ The government took the graffiti as a political statement and as part of a larger existential threat. The regime's secret police responded to the action as they had to insurgents and civilians in Hama in 1982 (and as they would to future rebels). The boys were arrested, detained and tortured for two weeks. But instead of quelling discontent, this act of repression catalysed further demonstrations. The protests for the boys' release expanded rapidly throughout the country – and were also met with brutal repression, including the spraying of bullets and throwing of stun grenades at protesting civilians, the denial of medical assistance to those injured, and further arrests, detentions and torture.⁴⁵

After the Deraa killings, Bashar al-Assad gave several speeches to Parliament in which he offered neither apology nor, initially, any suggestion of reform. In the regime's internal discussions about how to quell the escalating unrest, Bashar's younger brother, Maher, apparently favoured a hard-line response; such a position won out over the possibility of a negotiated settlement.⁴⁶ In terms of anticipating the trajectory of the crisis, therefore, the intensification of violence was a clear early tactic of the authoritarian Assad regime as a means to fragment and repress the revolution.⁴⁷

Civilian ambiguity

It is important to note that ordinary citizens have been – and continue to be – the direct and intended targets of this violence. 'Warring parties', argues Hugo Slim, 'do not see civilians like humanitarian agencies do'.⁴⁸ Engaging civilians, he posits, is the very purpose of war, as a critical broader aim of a conflict is either to eradicate a people or 'reduce them to such a degree that they will never pose a significant threat'.⁴⁹ And this is partly because everyone's – not just soldiers' – roles and relationships become part of the war in some way.⁵⁰

Women, for instance, are not only sometimes active fighters, they can also have very 'real ideological stakes in war and are sometimes highly effective guardians and activators of militant politics'.⁵¹ The school children of Deraa had, in-part, daubed such slogans on the wall in response to the arrest and interrogation of their female teacher, who had expressed her wish that an Arab-Spring style revolution start in their country.⁵² Elsewhere, women have played a central role in the creation and organisation of opposition networks inside Syria (such as the Local Coordination Committees) and have mobilised early protests, borne witness to atrocities, as well as working to offer relief to those in need.⁵³ Children, too, have marched and chanted alongside revolutionaries like Syrian football star-turned-opposition leader Abdul Baset Al-Sarout, whose initially peaceful and charismatic appearances at public rallies were denounced by the regime and led to him and his supporters being directly targeted, and taking up arms in their turn.⁵⁴ The ideological involvement of women and children at these and other such protest marches imbues them with a political ambiguity that muddies the water of their 'innocent' civilian identity in the eyes of the belligerents. And Baset's own transition from non-violent charismatic protester to armed rebel leader is indicative of the path many young adults have followed over the course of the conflict – including the friends of Ahmad mentioned in the opening section.

The point here is not to conflate non-violent protesting actions with violent fighting ones. Nor is it to justify or excuse attacks against these ideologically engaged, politically active and sometimes militarised citizens. Rather, it is to highlight the contradictions and complexities of 'civilian identity' and what constitutes hostile activity and political action in such a situation of revolution and civil war. This fluidity and political ambiguity is partly why civilians are the targets of attacks from the various organised fighting forces – for punishment of protest and dissent as well as for deterrence. As such, and arguably unsurprisingly, from the outset of the Syrian Civil War hospitals and schools have been frequently targeted and destroyed in opposition-held areas under the Syrian Government's strategy of indiscriminate air attacks, which include air munitions and improvised barrel bombs.⁵⁵ Opposition insurgents and rebel groups have joined the 'race to the bottom ... using car bombs, mortars and rockets' on civilian populations.⁵⁶ Explosive weapons in urban areas are reported to account for more than 50 percent of civilian deaths.⁵⁷ The predominantly foreign-led, self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' – which entered the Syria conflict publicly in 2013 with a policy of Islamic fundamentalism, expansion of territory, and practice of terrorism – controls large swathes of Northeast Syria and has carried out many high profile beheadings, including of aid workers and journalists. Throughout the country, children are being deliberately targeted in kidnappings, torture, conscription, sexual violence, child marriages and enforced labour. Protection in Syria, states Eva Svoboda, seems to be an empty concept.⁵⁸ It is at least an ill-understood and poorly

enacted one.

Protection paralysis

Where current protection strategies fail, it is not in their understanding of who to protect – that is clearly articulated in the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which state that civilians should be protected from attack ‘unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities’.⁵⁹ The strategies fail because they do not undertake protection activities in practice. Of course, protection activities do not simply involve the physical shielding of civilians from violence, something which many NGOs are not equipped to do; protection can involve a whole range of actions, from information-gathering and advocacy to the provision of services for victims or the deployment of certain actors as a deterrence measure.⁶⁰ Given that, in most contexts of violence against civilians, affected communities do not wait for external assistance – they will flee or seek shelter,⁶¹ or may undertake a range of engagements with fighting forces in order to ensure survival and limit abuse⁶² – building early relationships with local communities and strengthening their capacities for self-protection and aid delivery may be a suitable course of action.⁶³ However, in intrastate conflict settings, humanitarian agencies, by and large, are preoccupied with the delivery of services – an approach that does not account for the relationship between increased mortality and morbidity and the military strategies employed by the fighting parties as the conflict unfolds,⁶⁴ let alone the clear historical precedent of authoritarian leaders such as the Assads taking such repressive action in the first place.

One foreign aid manager based in Turkey spoke of her agency’s lack of effectiveness as the conflict continued into a second year: ‘[We were] doing tons of hand-washing promotion [to Syrian refugees and the displaced inside Syria]. There’s no evidence that this is needed, wanted or makes a difference. Also, nutrition. We’re running a nutrition programme. This is a well-nourished country! ... Syrians want us to advocate for them and don’t want to be forgotten’. Also speaking from Turkey, a Syrian medical aid worker noted that ‘the UN has been a dinosaur in this situation. They’d rather go by the book than respond to needs’, the biggest of which, he noted, are security and protection problems: ‘the situation is very difficult for everyone inside. Barrel bombs fall all over our medical facilities and areas of operations ... Advocating to stop barrel bombs, this has to be a priority [for the UN and international community]’.

The choice to prioritise services above other activities, and the decisions regarding how these services are most effectively delivered, are often influenced by organisational and political concerns. Speaking out early to condemn atrocities committed against civilians by their government and opposition forces is a difficult decision for humanitarian actors to take, as such advocacy

can have negative consequences – not least, denial of access.⁶⁵ Given the Assad regime’s history (under both Hafez and Bashar) of tight media control and the violent crushing of popular dissent, it is possible that the government would have perceived strong international condemnation of reported regime attacks on civilians early on in the conflict as a direct threat to domestic military and security goals, which may have resulted, in the short term, in what Labonte and Edgerton label ‘deterrent access denial’.⁶⁶ Taking this approach, state authorities intensify hostilities and further deter humanitarian actors through implementing burdensome bureaucratic measures and sanctions.⁶⁷ This assumption would not have been entirely unfounded, given Assad’s early proclamations blaming foreign interference for the war even as he escalated violence against the population.⁶⁸ Such an outcome would not only present the risk of barriers and access restrictions, but also jeopardise the physical security that aid workers require in the field.

Additionally, the predominant emphasis on services has been exacerbated by the UN’s decision to work with the Assad regime rather than foster a space and dialogue for genuine protection action, including advocacy and the condemnation of breaches in international humanitarian law. Apparently bound by the principle of national sovereignty set out in its charter, and due to pressure from members of the Security Council – especially Russia and China – the UN has continued to recognise and engage with Bashar al-Assad as Syria’s legitimate head of state, and has limited its condemnation of regime attacks on civilians, particularly in the first years of the conflict.⁶⁹ Russia and China have used their veto powers on four separate occasions ‘to block action in response to mass atrocity crimes in Syria, including ... [a] draft resolution that would have referred the Syrian situation to the International Criminal Court’ for, among other acts, the use of chemical weapons by the government on its people.⁷⁰ Such a political impasse has resulted in the lowest common denominator being the only feasible response to humanitarian need at the Security Council level, the only ‘effective’ approach to achieving consensus: namely, the delivery of aid and services such as food and health. And this impasse has had a trickle-down obstructive effect, as the UN’s humanitarian agencies are bound by the same charter.

OCHA, for instance, established its main operating base for its response in Damascus, and works with the Syrian government to deliver aid inside the country through government-registered agencies, particularly the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Civilians in areas under siege are numbered between 400,000 to 800,000⁷¹ (at least half of whom are besieged by government forces), with a total of around 4.5 million declared ‘hard to reach’.⁷² To deliver aid to these communities, OCHA requires permission from the government, which it seeks and rarely receives. As a result, in the first eight months of 2015, UN agencies were only able to reach an average of 4% of people in besieged areas across the country.⁷³ Moreover, a recent analysis by Annie

Sparrow accuses the UN of being actively complicit in Syrian government attempts to ‘sanitise’ reports documenting need and suffering. According to Sparrow, OCHA’s recent Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria – drafted in consultation with the Syrian government – ‘minimises the magnitude of unmet needs by redefining the meaning of protection to exclude civilians as the object of attack and by removing key elements, such as the demining of unexploded ordnance’.⁷⁴

Concerns over whether the United Nations is too political to respond impartially to an intrastate humanitarian crisis, and too invested in the protection of states above civilians, are certainly not new. Ingram wrote almost 25 years ago that, ‘Even if acting impartially, the parties [involved in a conflict and humanitarian response] will tend to see the UN as having goals that go beyond saving lives and that threaten their interests. The United Nations is above all an organisation of states, and even its humanitarian agencies are not apolitical’.⁷⁵

The consequences of that compromised position have been seen before the crisis in Syria. Between 2006 and 2009, for instance, Sri Lanka was embroiled in the culmination of a long and bloody civil war, in which the Sri Lankan government and rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) undertook extensive attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure – as well as providing woeful levels of food and medical supplies to affected communities – all as part of a deliberate fighting strategy.⁷⁶ Humanitarian organisations were expelled from the main conflict region of the Vanni in 2008, actions that were met with virtual silence by the international community, particularly at the level of the UN Security Council; all of which created an impression of impunity for the Sri Lankan government and LTTE.⁷⁷ Subsequent analyses have noted that in this crisis, international humanitarian organisations displayed a lack of coordination, effective communication, and forceful advocacy on behalf of affected Sri Lankan civilians. As a result, communities lost confidence and trust in humanitarian organisations’ abilities, and desire, to help. Moreover, it is now acknowledged that the Sri Lankan government successfully manipulated the ‘War on Terror’ narrative to its advantage, using the terrorism designation as a justification for severe domestic restrictions and violent retribution.⁷⁸ This familiar arc was traced by Bashar al-Assad, just a year into the Syria conflict, when he demanded that the ‘terrorism’ of opposition action stop before he would accept any kind of peace plan, and with Syria’s close ally, Russia, bombing more moderate rebel groups and destroying civilian infrastructure from the air, under the guise of attacking the terrorist group Islamic State (IS).⁷⁹

Of course, it is wrong to place responsibility for preventing and/or stopping these wars at the feet of humanitarians. But there is an early role for humanitarian organisations to play in forcefully advocating for the protection

of civilians, and also in the early coordination of emergency relief resources with those best placed on the ground to gather information necessary for assessing needs, to gather material for advocacy, and to deliver aid itself. Most of the major INGOs have certainly approached this responsibility in earnest, exploring diverse avenues for advocacy impact – from the co-authored ‘Failing Syria’ report condemning the failure of the UN and states in this crisis, to engagement with Russian experts in order to ascertain possibilities for direct advocacy influence. However, beyond the political stalemate exacerbated by the disposition of the UN, many INGOs in Syria have also been criticised for not maximising opportunities; for struggling to develop ‘a coherent response’ and for frequently ‘missing the opportunity to work with diaspora and local groups’ on the ground.⁸⁰ Local organisations, often staffed by highly educated and professional Syrians – medics, engineers, teachers, ‘citizen journalists’⁸¹ and so on – have consistently maintained the best access to affected communities inside the country and, as witnesses to the unfolding conflict, have offered the best source of real-time advocacy material on war crimes committed in the field.⁸² Certainly, in situations where attacks against civilians constitute the primary causes of mortality and morbidity, information gathering for protection action is an essential part of the humanitarian toolkit, *alongside* negotiating access and service delivery. Thus, the question arises, was there the possibility of undertaking alternative or enhanced protection and relief activity through the early supporting of Syrian community self-protection and relief-mobilisation efforts? Five years into the conflict, much of the current literature suggests that broader investment in community engagement and partnerships is the way forward.⁸³ Indeed, it is a call for change that has been echoed in various analyses throughout the sector for several decades.⁸⁴ The reality, however, is that some fundamental institutional and bureaucratic issues need to be addressed before any real change can take place.

Inflexible Institutions and a Divided Response

No single humanitarian organisation, posits Michiel Hofman, can carry the weight of assistance on its own. They ‘all provide a piece of the overall aid effort, creating a large degree of interdependence. So when a large part of this aid system [such as the UN] has to opt out of engagement with NSAGs [non-state armed groups] for political reasons, the system collapses’.⁸⁵ In the case of Syria, at least, the result was not total collapse but fragmentation – the UN’s decision to continue working with the regime in Damascus left many international and local NGOs and diaspora groups feeling as though delivering aid via the UN and SARC (seen as closely connected to, and influenced by, the regime)⁸⁶ compromised their ability to deliver aid and services in response to need alone, as well as their neutrality and safety – or at the very least the

appearance of their neutrality in the eyes of local communities, gatekeepers to rebel-held territories, and partner organisations. In several interviews, aid workers expressed the feeling that the provision, or withholding, of aid was often used by the government through SARC to encourage allegiance and discourage subversion. One even went as far as to declare that the government was waging war by starvation in certain besieged areas, including Yarmouk – a criticism that resonates today with the recent coverage of the siege of Madaya, a town of an estimated 393,700 people, a number of whom are reported to have died from starvation during the siege.⁸⁷ Consequently, from 2012 onwards, some of the largest INGOs responding to the conflict – including Save the Children, World Vision, MercyCorp, the International Rescue Committee and the Norwegian Refugee Council – established bases of operation from Amman, Jordan (into southern Syria), and Antakya, Gaziantep and Kilis in Turkey (into northern Syria). Some organisations also began covert cross-border operations from Lebanon into the West of the country. From the North, INGOs and national NGOs were, in the first years, able to operate a foreign presence inside Syria, but since concerns over the security of foreign aid workers in rebel-held areas peaked in response to several high-profile attacks on staff, most non-Syrian NGOs have kept their country offices and foreign staff presence across the borders of neighbouring countries. In the absence of official Syria-wide coordination by OCHA until late 2014, each regional hub of INGOs operated its own coordination system, dividing responsibilities along geographical lines and using these mechanisms to share information and coordinate activity.

On the surface, this *modus operandi* appears an effective way of managing a very complex and dispersed humanitarian situation. However, this fractured approach had several serious limitations, not least an exacerbation of mistrust, which in many cases can be traced back to earlier failures in broader engagement with affected communities resulting from a poor understanding of the on-the-ground realities of an intrastate conflict, bureaucratic constraints, and concerns over security.

Firstly, coordination of activities and information only occurred within the regional clusters, not across them. One aid worker based in Jordan suggested that this was due to the absence of a systematic mechanism for sharing information; another, also based in Jordan, explained it as partly due to a territoriality over information, funds and operations that exists between various programme managers in the neighbouring countries. Whatever the case – and it is likely a product of a multitude of factors – this situation was compounded by communities' lack of trust and security concerns in dealing with any humanitarian actors operating in Damascus, including the UN and INGOs such as Oxfam. Interviewees – particularly Syrian staff – situated in these regional hubs frequently expressed concerns that information shared with agencies and the UN in Damascus would reach Assad's government and

be exploited by the regime, putting operations and individuals at risk.

Further complicating this coordination, organisations running cross-border operations from Lebanon have been dependent on secrecy, acting as they do without formal permission from the host Lebanese government. These organisations would see not only their operations placed in jeopardy should logistical and personal information be shared too widely, but their foreign staff visas and entire ability to operate in the country. In this situation, information gathering, analytical capacity and information sharing across countries about the situation inside Syria have been limited and/or de-prioritised. Added to this, the 2014 'Whole of Syria' initiative championed by the UN⁸⁸ – which, two years after UNSC Resolutions 2165, 2139 and 2191, moved to activate OCHA-led clusters from the neighbouring countries – presents a complicated web of competing information channels ill-suited to keeping abreast of rapidly changing humanitarian needs on the ground. As one INGO manager based in Turkey stated: 'The Whole of Syria approach is another example of aid ineffectiveness. [It has] just added to the bureaucracy. I understand the need for a bigger picture but it's just the way they've gone about it that has been very ineffective. Evidence comes from the bottom and goes to the top. Whole of Syria is very donor-driven [top-down] and time consuming'.

A second limitation is that the coordination of activities and sharing of information, where it occurred within these regional hubs, tended to privilege certain types of actors as more legitimate sources of information and partners in action. A foreign aid worker based in southern Turkey in 2014 recalled a situation in which Syrian partners were repeatedly warning that a certain area inside the country was unsafe for continuing operations in the short term, but the INGO, preferring to use its own separate security analysis, continued distributing in the area – only to narrowly avoid barrel bombings in the following days. There was, she recalled, very little confidence placed in Syrian staff as trustworthy sources of security information, even though, she reflected, 'they knew the area so much better'. Another aid worker, a Syrian NGO (SNGO) manager based in Turkey, recalled a situation where 'an INGO sent a truck of aid into Syria when we told them not to and the truck got confiscated'. 'There are some things that are easy to predict on the ground', she continued: 'Syrians can tell you this. But INGOs have no trigger for this'. A recent study by Refugees International supports these assertions, finding that local groups have ground assessments readily available, but that these are often 'not taken seriously'.⁸⁹

Over-cautiousness is also evident in the strategies many INGOs used to select their partner Syrian organisations for direct implementation inside the country. Particularly in the early years, links were primarily made through pre-existing contacts or with Syrian organisations known within the INGO community that had passed early vetting procedures and were used by multiples agencies – in other words, known and familiar networks.⁹⁰ While the quality of those known

agencies may have been high, the selection was small and this highly selective process not only put pressure on the small pool trusted to undertake activities in such a large crisis, but as a practice it also underlines the risk-mitigation approach of many international organisations when visibility on the ground for foreign workers is so limited.

Moreover, the INGO cluster system established in Turkey was primarily attended by INGO representatives – there were very few Syrian organisations with a seat at the table, particularly in the first years of the conflict.⁹¹ This was due to the limited staff capacity of Syrian NGOs and their general inability to spare a staff member to attend, as well as, often, the incomprehensibility of the meetings' jargon-laden discussions⁹² – a result, SNGO interviewees felt, of inadequate capacity development and investment in administration and staff costs from donors (a subject to which this paper will turn shortly). As one foreign aid advocacy manager in Jordan explained:

We failed to engage with local actors ... Humanitarian needs overviews are not being translated to Arabic, there is little engagement with diaspora groups. There is a lack of information and coordination ... [And with the] Whole of Syria approach – Syrian organisations are not sharing their information [because] they are not trusting the system. 'Whole of Syria' won't be able to deal with the mistrust. But in theory the system will be put in place. There are four years of distrust between Syria and actors.

Thus, those with the largest field presence and best ground visibility – Syrians – have not been trusted sources of information from an operational standpoint, and the needs assessments from the UN and INGOs, across their various sites of operation, have neither been fully triangulated across the region, nor translated into Arabic for Syrian staff and organisational oversight at the field level. The result has been a marked lack of effective communication – particularly in the first years, between field and headquarter operations – of reliable, up-to-date information on which to base collective advocacy, and an undermining of the role that Syrian staff and organisations might play in determining suitable and effective operations.

However, these issues of operational division, ineffective coordination, and mistrust have been less a cause of ineffective humanitarian information gathering, protection advocacy and assistance, than a symptom. Key causes of this trust deficit, and of ineffective action, are two interconnected political and bureaucratic realities: concerns over organisational risk following the growing hold of the terrorism narrative on perceptions of this humanitarian crisis, and the ineffective development of partnerships with Syrian actors.

Countering terrorism, preventing partnerships

The impact of counter-terrorism legislation (CTL) on operations inside Syria is well documented.⁹³ The relatively recent moves by key donor states, such as the US and UK, to tighten their legislation against support for terrorist activity abroad has resulted in a roll-back of humanitarian action. Humanitarian organisations, particularly those with bases in countries with stringent CTL, have been forced either to limit the scope and reach of their actions – often to the detriment of intended beneficiaries⁹⁴ – so as to avoid potential legal repercussions, or to undertake more covert operations – such as the cash-carry across Lebanon's border – tightening the circle within which they share information –⁹⁵ essentially, a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach.⁹⁶ The latter is less a conscious attempt to mask illicit engagement with potential terrorist groups – each NGO interviewed as part of this research works very carefully to avoid feeding into terrorist activity – but rather it is driven by an understandable concern that even though they are distributing aid through remote management as diligently as they perceive possible in this situation, CTL outlines such broad definitions of support for terrorism that basic humanitarian acts recognised by IHL – such as providing impartial medical care to an injured person – may be considered a criminal act if the patient happens to be member of a terrorist-designated group.⁹⁷ Not only is this legislation disproportionately affecting the operations of independent Islamic organisations – many of which are seeing funding decreases and bank transaction freezes⁹⁸ – it is also exacerbating the environment of mistrust around individual Syrian humanitarian actors as partners for non-Islamic INGOs, actors who are, paradoxically, both the key to humanitarian access and, because of that access, falling under suspicion regarding their loyalties.

While no CTL prohibits contact with a terrorist or non-state armed group for humanitarian purposes,⁹⁹ the on-the-ground reality in Syria and other such complex crises is that non-state armed groups are not wholly separate from the communities living under their influence. They often emerge from, and are embedded within, these communities, to which Syrian humanitarian actors also belong.¹⁰⁰ In many ways these linkages are vital to the success of a humanitarian operation inside the country: Syrian aid workers are able to negotiate access to an armed opposition- or terrorist-controlled area precisely because they either were or are a part of key trust networks or a certain community – or they at least share a sense of what community means in that cultural context. Oliver Walton explains that local groups and communities have often developed highly effective strategies for dealing with authoritarian regimes and other armed forces, which are built on a detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the threats they face – something 'that is difficult for international actors to replicate'.¹⁰¹ And, of course, these aid workers speak Syrian Arabic and have themselves been affected by the conflict, thus enabling a certain

amount of humanitarian empathy on both sides. As one Syrian worker of an NGO with multiple bases in and outside Syria noted, ‘the opposition groups are happy that we are delivering aid in their areas. Not happy as in they want us to give them aid. For the opposition groups aid does not mean so much to them, but it’s important for the communities’. ‘The basic challenge’, they continued, is not access through opposition groups, but the threat of the regime’s barrel bombs, as ‘aid workers are not protected [and] need safe corridors for civilians and staff’. Another SNGO aid worker, operating from Turkey, stated that she could not recall any problems her organisation had experienced in accessing affected areas under the control of armed opposition groups, including proscribed groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. ‘Hard to reach?’ questioned yet another SNGO worker based in Lebanon, ‘what is that? They [foreign aid workers] mean hard to reach for them’.

The flip-side of that real or perceived shared community and the relative ease of negotiation that SNGO actors enjoy with certain NSAGs and terrorist groups is suspicion and concern by remote managers in INGOs over the misappropriation of humanitarian goods inside the country as a result of these close ties. Such misappropriation could render an organisation complicit in aiding terrorist groups under CTL. The suspicion is tacit rather than explicit; it arises from three key factors: the aforementioned ambiguity of Syrians in a context of civil war where they *may* have political sympathies for a given side, quite independently of their work for humanitarian organisations; the confusing and rapidly changing context of NSAG allegiances, which inject negotiations and operations with uncertainty and instability; and the preoccupation of the international community with the terrorising actions of Islamic State.

The (in)security culture of INGOs

There are hundreds of armed groups operating inside Syria, with operational allegiances forming between different ideological factions as they seek short-term gains in unfolding battles over longer-term strategic advantage. For instance, despite being ideologically opposed in broader terms, the FSA, a more moderate grouping supported at one stage by the UK, has coordinated with the Islamic Front, a hardline Salafist coalition reportedly funded by Saudi Arabia¹⁰² – and with Jabhat Al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda-affiliated organisation – in order to force Islamic State from Northwest Syria in 2013.¹⁰³ Although ostensibly a military threat to the Syrian Government, the presence of in Syria has actually been a *strategic asset* to the regime, as international concern over the terrorist group has shifted the perception of the conflict away from that of a population rising up against its government, towards that of the same government fighting terrorists. Indeed, anecdotal comments from

interviewees suggest collaboration between the two forces. This complicated and volatile reality is forcing Syrian humanitarians operating inside the country to be pragmatic in order to gain access to populations and deliver aid. One SNGO aid worker noted the reality of managing expectations of neutrality and impartiality between the remote headquarters and the field:

When working on the ground, [neutrality] is not the reality. [You] can only work with both sides of the conflict as part of the Syrian population, but not as [external] actors ... The work is complicated enough to manage a degree of impartiality inside [the country], let alone deal with it on the outside ... The funny thing is to try and censor politics after the fact.

This is not a case of partisan politics influencing the delivery of humanitarian services, which would be incompatible with humanitarian principles, but of a humanitarian identity complicated by the civilian ambiguity noted earlier in the paper. The reality is that these Syrian aid workers have – by virtue of their nationality and personal connections to affected populations and places inside the country – roles and relationships that are unavoidably connected to the civil war in some way.

Privately held political views are not problematic in and of themselves, as long as they do not influence choices in action, but what this dynamic creates for INGOs, and their remote managers in particular, is a tension in accountability to donors, as the SNGO field-need for pragmatic and flexible action can be incompatible with donor-sanctioned operating norms, rules of engagement, and reporting requirements. For instance, purchases and the transportation of aid goods inside the country cannot always be accounted for with receipts and invoices, due to the reluctance on the part of drivers to commit their efforts and names to paper.¹⁰⁴ This disrupts the required audit trail for donor accounting. As another example, one Syrian aid worker who coordinates a secret network of lawyers inside the country explained that their lives are at such risk due to their anti-regime activist legal work that he does not reveal their identities to anyone – not even to other lawyers in the network; the donor organisations paying the lawyers’ salaries therefore have to place a lot of trust in him and his organisation. This often necessary secrecy puts donors and organisations working remotely at risk of contravening CTL. In a risk-averse humanitarian system that requires a paper trail of action and the transparent deployment of checks and balances,¹⁰⁵ the possibility alone of contravening CTL is enough for INGOs to self-police and to reduce operations to conservative, piecemeal and short-term assistance – or even to cut assistance altogether. ‘Anti-terrorism legislation’, stated one INGO country director, ‘is the antithesis of good practice’.

This concern is particularly deep when it comes to dealings with Islamic State. In the words of a foreign INGO worker based in Jordan, ‘nobody can operate in IS-held areas due to fears over counter-terrorism legislation. It is possible to work around it, but that creates a divide between accountability mechanisms coming from on high and country office operations. Something considered minor in the field might have broad implications up high’. IS looms very large in the minds of actors designing aid programmes for inside Syria, with damaging effects for partnership development. ‘Donors look at the caliphate map as dictating the response. The regional approach is inherently top down. It is all informed by the caliphate state’, declared an OCHA official. A medical doctor from a diaspora organisation operating in a neighbouring country confirmed as much, as he explained one reason his organisation was pulling out of certain IS-controlled areas:

Work in Al-Raqqah is much easier than Deir ez-Zor [two IS-controlled regions at the time of interview] but we can’t guarantee the organisation’s safety in the international community ... Record [keeping] and channels are difficult. There is insufficient reporting and we have obligations towards donors. [In these areas] money must be channeled through IS.

Here, accountability to donors took precedence over meeting needs on the ground; effectiveness was understood in terms of compliance. Of course, concerns over personal security in IS-controlled areas are very well founded, as the group has undertaken many high-profile kidnappings and executions of aid workers, Syrian and foreign, over the last few years. This has certainly influenced the decisions of foreign organisations not to engage with the group. However, the rationale for such decisions in this context must also be connected to the related preoccupation of both international media and Western governments’ with IS terrorist activities and the tightening of CTL.

It is important to note that the challenge of engagement with militant groups that have attacked aid workers is not a new one – humanitarian aid agencies have come up against similar challenges in Somalia, with Al-Shabab, and in Afghanistan with the Taliban.¹⁰⁶ Experiences in these situations have shown that success in delivering aid to affected populations through remote management comes from early communication with the groups and trust-building using local partners and community networks that have links to individuals on the inside of the militant groups.¹⁰⁷ Although early relationship-building would have been difficult with IS, which arose in an area of Iraq that had been off-limits to foreign agencies for a long time previously, the group has been accepting small amounts of aid from select partners through careful negotiation. This suggests that such relationship-building is not

impossible, and that the group ‘is not completely indifferent to the suffering of civilians under its control’.¹⁰⁸ And of course, there are many other rebel groups operating inside Syria to which access has not been so restricted and with which negotiations have occurred, even though these groups may have potential connections to proscribed groups.

However, depictions of IS’s arbitrary ruthlessness and terrorism have come to dominate in the wider international imagination, resulting in a turn by powerful governments – who are also the largest donors to the response to the crisis – towards military engagement at the expense of opening space for negotiation. This is not without precedent either. Liam Mahoney, looking at protection strategies and conflict reduction in the protracted crisis that has engulfed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in recent decades, notes that: ‘[t]he potential protection or conflict-ending impact of armed force tends to be greatly overestimated. The presumption that a gun can only be met with a gun is incredibly strong’.¹⁰⁹ The difficulty facing humanitarians in such a context is that the governments embracing military solutions while simultaneously enhancing CTL are also often key donors, and so pre-emptive action is often undertaken by humanitarian agencies wanting to avoid organisational risks, such as loss of funds, or charges under CTL.¹¹⁰ As a result, effective action is understood as a withdrawal from IS regions and other areas controlled by proscribed groups, and therefore away from populations living within those boundaries.

Such self-policing and pre-emptive withdrawal has created a humanitarian aid and protection vacuum in certain areas of Syria where there is dire need. With no local partners negotiating access and maintaining presence on the ground in IS-controlled areas, there is not only a lack of humanitarian assistance flowing in, there is also a lack of information about the situation for civilians flowing out. This silence prevents protection advocacy on behalf of the population, and contributes to the perception that the group is the primary threat in the country and must be dealt with militarily, to the detriment of political solutions such as stronger advocacy against impunity – which ultimately strengthens the hand of political actors, such as Assad and Russia, who are seeking to instrumentalise the war for their own strategic gains, with the former seeking to survive in power, and the latter seeking to support Assad and discredit challenges to its own authority domestically and abroad.¹¹¹

Moreover, the securitisation of aid in the climate of fear surrounding CTL has resulted in an intensification of concern over the political sympathies and interests of Syrian partners, which is impinging on the development of partnerships and all organisations’ abilities to deliver aid elsewhere in NSAG controlled areas. As one OCHA official in Jordan explained, the amount of aid required for displaced and affected populations inside Syria is difficult to enumerate, partly because there is ‘no [on-the-ground] evidence coming from disinterested parties’. Another aid official, an INGO worker also in Jordan,

noted that due to the ‘alignment’ of many Syrian actors, ‘it is difficult to explain impartiality’ to Syrian humanitarians. A third, based in Turkey, noted that ‘it is a challenge to find local staff who put principles before politics’. It is difficult to measure how the concerns over the political sympathies of Syrian staff directly affect working relationships and decisions over how to approach partnerships or programming; the initial focus on developing partnerships with ‘known and familiar’ SNGOs may have been a manifestation of these concerns, so too the dismissal of field security observations by Syrian staff members.

The key problem here is that the humanitarian system’s technical approach to partnership development and capacity building¹¹² does not require foreign humanitarian organisations or individuals to challenge those mistrustful and securitised perceptions at the outset, or even to consider the extent to which political sympathies enable, inhibit, or make no difference to fieldwork in the first place. In the early phases of any civil war where the existence of NGOs or an independent civil society is limited – commonly observed to be the case of pre-2011 Syria¹¹³ – the default position of the international humanitarian community is to assume that foreign-led relief activities are, at least initially, the most effective, by virtue of their organised character, with human and material resources immediately deployable, missions led by trained experts, adherence to internationally agreed standards, and the principles of impartiality and neutrality – all supposedly existing apart from the local and national politics fuelling the conflict.¹¹⁴ The concomitant assumption is that locals will be embroiled in emerging events – often either as victims or perpetrators – and lack the necessary skills or experience to respond in line with established best practice, but that over time they can become trained aid workers and effective partner organisations through the process of capacity-building. While it may be true that certain practices, standards and norms are not known to embryonic local groups, communities and individuals, this process of partnership development often risks ignoring affected community agency and overlooking local priorities.¹¹⁵ However, it has also become a distancing tool, used, unconsciously, to keep local partners at arm’s length as a means of avoiding security and legal risk for their international managers and funders. Follow-up from training sessions, ongoing mentoring, and longer-term discussions with point-people, for instance, rarely take place.¹¹⁶ Thus the concerns of foreign aid managers that Syrian partners and aid workers have political positions that affect their ability to do the work, cannot understand the principles of neutrality or, at worst, have ulterior motives for the aid, often remain unchallenged.

This distancing is certainly not the result of malicious intent or conscious condescension – for decades humanitarians the world over have expressed the desire and need for building local capacity in emergency and post-emergency settings.¹¹⁷ It is driven by institutional pressures and constraints, not least those of time and the structure of emergency deployments for staff, who are

‘[o]ften young, overworked, operating in high-stress situations, and subject to sudden reassignment ... [F]ew are equipped or mandated to gain a deep understanding of communities in conflict ... In short, their capacity to build capacity is limited’. And of course this approach has a significant impact on understandings of effectiveness in the field.

Organisational and personal risk is thus passed in one direction: away from donors and INGOs and towards SNGOs operating on the ground. SNGOs in this instance have become contractors and service deliverers rather than mutually accountable partners with shared ownership of programmes.¹¹⁸ Many SNGOs have consequently found themselves competing for short-term grants that not only offer limited sustainability for projects, but also offer little or no cover for administration and salary costs – thereby causing these organisations to absorb the expenses themselves and stagnate or go bust.¹¹⁹ Other SNGOs are prevented from even receiving the grants in the first place, so strong is the necessity that a Syrian partner look, sound and operate like an INGO in order to mitigate the risk of aid misappropriation. In other words, the partner must already be a recognisable part of a system that builds trust upon a foundation of established ‘best practice’ checks and balances.¹²⁰ One Syrian interviewee in Lebanon noted that part of the strength of their partnership with a particular INGO – and the fact that they have several partnerships with different INGOs – was that ‘after four years we learned how to speak [their] language’. Effectiveness has come to be, somewhat cynically, understood as isomorphism – a need to mimic their international partners. A recent social media campaign spearheaded by Syrian civil society actors under the Twitter hashtag #That’s_what_the_donor_wants uses sarcastic humour to poke fun at these hierarchical relationships.¹²¹ ‘I should start English classes #That’s_what_the_donor_wants’, remarks one of the posts. Another dryly jests:

- Hajj, there’s a donor at the door. – Hurry up, remove this prayer rug, and hand me my shorts and t-shirt, and if they ask you, you tell them this is a prayer room for all different religions, and switch the Quran channel to Rotana Music.
- But... why all this?
- #That’s_what_the_donor_wants.

These comments and experiences point to a fundamental disconnect in understandings of trust and effectiveness between international humanitarian organisations and local Syrian partners. Where local aid workers rely on interpersonal networks and trusted connections inside the country to navigate the volatile conflict dynamics and negotiate and gain access to affected populations, international actors do not require such face-to-face engagements

and can be wary of personal networks as they manage remotely, thus relying instead on systems of checks and balances that require diligent reporting.¹²² On a partnership level, interviews and wider research suggest that this process-focussed approach to trust erodes confidence of local aid workers in the international community's commitment to building the effective interpersonal relationships required for tackling the main humanitarian issues.¹²³ And another impact of an approach based largely on checks and balances has been the self-censorship of certain information by local aid actors who fear losing the funding and support from international agencies that they *do* have.¹²⁴ This further diminishes the information coming from inside the country about protection failings and human rights violations, which is so vital to improving the effectiveness of the response.

The impact of the contracting culture on overall humanitarian effectiveness is difficult to fully appreciate in the Syrian context at the moment, not least due to the limited information coming from the field. However, what does seem apparent from this research is that the relative lack of familiarity of Syrian national staff to the international humanitarian system – and their perceived political ambiguity in this context – have been understood as untrustworthy – something undoubtedly exacerbated by the risk-averse culture that has developed in international organisations operating in volatile conflicts since the War on Terror narrative and the threat of CTL fostered a 'chilling' effect throughout the aid community. Moreover, the contracting culture in this environment – particularly of early INGO-SNGO relationships – and related risk displacement from the top downwards, seems to have inhibited context-sensitive and relationship-focussed functioning between INGOs and SNGOs. Service delivery has remained unchallenged as the dominant form of perceived effective action, and Syrian aid actors have increasingly come to understand humanitarian effectiveness as conformity to a system – one that builds certain groups' capacities (those in known and familiar networks) in certain ways (through training sessions) – as the means of acquiring funding to undertake humanitarian activities. As a result, conflict-affected populations throughout Syria – in IS-held areas, other NSAG-held areas, and government-besieged areas – have suffered from a variety of ineffective aid dispersals. Short-term SNGO contracts, which focus heavily on services and distributions, have either not met the most pressing needs – such as protection – or have created severe food-basket dependency for vast swathes of affected populations inside the country.¹²⁵ A lack of investment by INGOs in developing long-term partnerships with a diverse range of groups has resulted in an incomplete patchwork of information on need coming from the field, which has prevented more comprehensive needs assessments for affected populations. This has been compounded by an unwillingness of INGOs to share the incomplete information they do have among each other and across the region, partly due to

concerns over the sensitivity of the information, partly due to a lack of a suitable platform, and partly due to a fear of compromising themselves under CTL. All of this is ultimately leading to a dearth in collated and verified information and evidence of the vast humanitarian need and human rights abuses occurring throughout the course of this war – a dearth that is not only weakening the humanitarian case for aid, it is also limiting international protection advocacy (i.e. weakening the the pressure on the international community to take notice of internationally-recognised crimes they are obliged to condemn and respond to under IHL and international human rights law). In this sense, it seems, the aid system created some of its own obstacles to evidence gathering and improving humanitarian aid for the affected communities, alongside the obvious constraints of the insecure context.

Conclusion

Many of these issues are not new; the effects of political stalemate had been seen in Sri Lanka, concerns over aid diversion had been present in Afghanistan and Somalia, and a militarisation of approach seen in the DRC. Moreover, a rapid escalation of violence was to a certain extent predictable in light of modern Syrian history. This suggests a systemic lack of capability for, or prioritisation of, independent analysis of the wider historical, political and security context from the outset of an intrastate conflict. In the case of Syria, the necessary assessments – as to whether the government would be committed to civilian protection, regardless of its policy pronouncements; and of what a population might value and require in a humanitarian response, particularly in terms of working as humanitarian responders themselves, alongside international actors – were not made.¹²⁶ The former is vital for anticipating the trajectory of an evolving crisis and what key future needs – i.e. protection – may arise; the latter provides an important foundational source of information for early international-national-local partnership-building, and can highlight principles that are integral to positive and mutually beneficial working relationships among all aid actors – i.e. trust, a perceived lack of which runs through the core of criticisms over the effectiveness of this response).

In the heat of a conflict, there is a pressure to act immediately in order to save lives, typically using pre-existing 'best practice' templates of what will work as quickly and efficiently as possible, such as through the delivery of services to those affected. In some instances this means working with established institutions like the government and the SARC, in others through informal clusters set up along the border. But the haste, without broader contextualisation, deeper horizontal coordination, and capacity-building framed around mutual needs in partnership, can result in missteps – and some response mechanisms, once set in motion, are hard to undo. In civil war

contexts, humanitarians must move beyond the reactive ‘life-saving’ paradigm and analyse what and who are (or will be) the main causes of injury and loss of life. This requires a much broader assessment of the context than is currently usual. Such an analysis in this case may not only have identified the high likelihood of a rapid and intense escalation of violence against civilians early on in the uprising, it would also have shown protection to be the single biggest humanitarian concern. Effective protection cannot be undertaken without early and extensive investment in partnerships with local actors – activities which should go beyond technical capacity-building and should focus on trust-building, bringing in shared advocacy agendas, as well as looking at individual and community protection strategies.¹²⁷ This action, given civilian ambiguity and the negotiations local humanitarians have to undertake on the ground in civil war contexts, simply cannot ignore the ‘political’, and requires understandings of ‘trust’ in international-local humanitarian engagements to move beyond the current technocratic paradigm.

ENDNOTES

1. Khawla Dunia in a poem, ‘And the Demonstrations Go On’, in Layla al-Zubaidi, Matthew Cassel and Nemonie Craven Roderick (eds.), *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus*, Robin Moger and Georgina Collins (trans), (New York: Penguin, 2013).
2. The content of this report does not reflect the opinion of Save the Children UK. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the report lies entirely with the author. Research for this field study was undertaken in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in April-May 2015. A total of 47 semi-structured interviews, one inter-agency meeting, and general observations were undertaken with: international non-governmental organisation (INGO) staff in London; staff from INGOs in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey; diaspora NGOs and Syrian NGOs operating in Lebanon and Turkey; academics and researchers in various locations; and individuals affected by the crisis. Research participants overwhelmingly identified protection – or lack thereof – as the key issue impeding effective humanitarian action more broadly, and differing approaches to, and understandings of, partnerships as contributing to day-to-day limitations and challenges in aid delivery. As a result, these are the key themes focussed on here. It is important to note at this juncture that the scope and timescale of the field study have resulted in a specific focus on these issues from the perspective of humanitarian actors operating inside Syria across borders from the field research locations of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. There is much to be said, and much analysis to be done, on understandings of effectiveness as they have been impacted by humanitarian operations from Damascus but – although these will be touched upon in the analysis – they will not form a central theme of interrogation. Nor will the related, and equally challenging if not programmatically distinct, Syrian refugee crisis feature as a focus of this analysis. This is not only for reasons of space limitation and the fact that these issues are receiving increasing attention elsewhere, but also because there is a need for a targeted, critical analysis of all of the specific issues that contribute to a greater and more comprehensive picture. As this field research engaged with individuals in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, who in turn raised concerns about protection and partnerships, it seemed logical to direct focus and unpack these themes in relation to the Syrian and wider humanitarian context.
3. Yarmouk is an unofficial Palestinian refugee camp in a suburb of Damascus, established in 1957 to house the Palestinians who fled the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49.
4. Natasha Hall, ‘Palestinian Refugees and the Siege of Yarmouk’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (13 March 2014). Accessed 11 Feb 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=54925>.
5. The Arab Spring protests were a wave of revolutionary demonstrations, violent and non-violent, that began in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread throughout the Arab world.
6. Name changed for anonymity.
7. A situation common in wider Syria: ‘[F]or many young men being a fighter has become more of a job than a calling – a career path they feel they have to follow for lack of alternatives. As in any job market, employers will compete for the biggest talent by providing different benefits’. Mowaffaq Safadi, ‘Don’t rely on Syria’s “moderate” fighting force. It doesn’t exist’, *The Guardian*, (16 December 2015). Accessed 17 December 2015. <http://www.theguardian>.

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