



On April 22, 2014, the Brookings Doha Center (BDC), in collaboration with UNOCHA, held a humanitarian roundtable focused on the crisis in Syria at the Qatar Red Crescent Society headquarters in Doha. The roundtable convened Gulf state practitioners, UN officials, and representatives of international humanitarian organizations in order to: 1) foster an in-depth dialogue on the humanitarian work that is being undertaken by Gulf-based organizations and 2) enhance collaboration efforts between Gulf and international organizations such as the United Nations.

During the meeting, participants discussed the main challenges their organizations face in providing humanitarian aid to Syria, along with possible means of overcoming these obstacles. In general, these challenges fell into four broad categories: ensuring access to groups within Syria, engaging with local Syrian organizations, improving coordination and information-sharing between humanitarian groups, and contributing to effective advocacy on behalf of affected populations.

Key takeaways included:

- The UN has not done enough to enforce and implement Resolution 2139, regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid inside Syria; greater funding and support should be provided to non-UN groups who undertake cross-border operations and/or have a presence inside Syria.
- There must be more granular coordination between international, regional, and local actors, particularly in border regions or at the governorate level.
- The UN should enhance communication with Gulf aid agencies in order to better understand what humanitarian coordination should look like on the ground.

- Local Syrian aid organizations should be further supported by and engaged in regional and international humanitarian efforts for Syria; along with this, there should be coordination forums for local groups in Damascus and southern Turkey.

- The international community must present a united front in its advocacy efforts, coming together behind available reports and information in order to maximize their political impact.

- The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and thus comments are not attributed to individuals in this report. The views expressed are those of the participants.

Access and Delivery

Much of the discussion throughout the day focused on the difficulty that aid groups faced in accessing groups within Syria, given the ongoing fighting and the resistance of the Syrian government. Many participants pointed out that Security Council Resolution 2139, which called on all parties in the Syrian conflict to allow unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid within Syria, had had little impact on the ground, with one Turkish participant describing the situation as “the worst case I have seen in my [20-year] humanitarian career.”

A UN official noted that it was difficult for UN agencies to carry out operations outside of regime-controlled areas, given the restrictions imposed by the 1991 UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which requires the consent of the affected country for the provision of humanitarian aid, with the sovereignty of the state fully respected. However, UN representatives rejected the notion that they have no presence within Syria or that their programs were not reaching significant numbers of people in need. One

cited the ongoing efforts of UNRWA to work with Palestinian refugee groups inside Syria, providing education and housing to many thousands. Another stated that while “we can question how and where we work... it is a fact that many agencies reach millions of people every month.” Another noted that UNOCHA had put forward demands for cross-line access following the Resolution: in the first month, the organization’s team in Damascus requested access for 25 cross-line operations and received approval for 15, though only 5 ultimately happened.

Others challenged the UN on this point. “UNRWA and OCHA are doing good work where they are able to operate,” one Qatari participant pointed out, “yet we have some six million people [inside Syria] who are not able to receive a lot of support.” Another practitioner questioned why the UN had failed to press the Syrian regime to allow greater humanitarian access. “Why can we push [chemical weapons inspectors] into the country, but not aid into Yarmouk?” said one representative from a British development and relief organization, referencing the besieged Palestinian refugee camp within Syria. “The UN is sending the wrong message.” Others argued that the regime in Damascus had already violated international law and humanitarian concerns trumped the need to respect national borders. “We need to operate inside Syria, to improve the [implementation of the] Resolution,” said one representative from a Turkish aid group. The same representative cited his organization’s recent cross-border operations, including the coordination of a 300-truck aid convoy which he termed “the biggest international campaign inside Syria.”

In response, a UN official noted that there was room for his organization to be more assertive in supporting cross-border operations – “which we couldn’t do six months ago” – so long as the UN itself was not crossing the border. He also intimated that the UN’s legal office

would soon rule on whether Resolution 2139 could be construed as making an “obligatory demand” to the Syrian government to allow humanitarian access in all areas. Such a ruling would permit the UN to officially sanction cross-border operations despite the lack of a formal Chapter VII resolution.

On a broader scale, several participants brought up the difficulties of securing funding, both from the UN and various donors, especially for cross-border operations. A Qatari participant described a struggle to obtain funds for vaccination campaigns within northern Syria from UN sources, one which encouraged his organization to seek alternate forms of funding in the future. If the UN was unable to operate or fund activities in opposition-controlled areas inside Syria, he proposed, then it should encourage donors to direct their funds towards entities “outside the system” which *can* operate in these areas.

UNRWA representatives in turn described their organization’s struggle to secure funding for activities within Syria, with a \$180-million annual appeal so far only about 20 percent funded. In response, a representative from OXFAM suggested greater transparency and reporting with respect to donated funds, encouraging a “virtuous cycle” of donations by naming governments and organizations that fulfilled their donation pledges as well as those which did not.

Coordination

Discussions of funding pointed to tensions between various members of the humanitarian aid community, with Gulf and Turkish participants complaining of obstacles to coordinating with (and receiving funding from) UN and Western organizations. “We perceive, and I think a lot of organizations in this region [do as well]... that the UN takes its partners from the West, and does not take its partners from the region, who really have

access,” said one Qatari participant. Another Qatari participant cited Western hesitancy to work with Gulf organizations because of the perception that Gulf actors were “very politicized.” These Gulf participants felt that their countries were asked to provide funding for the UN’s activities in Syria, but that this funding was largely steered toward Western NGOs.

For their part, Gulf and regional charities felt that they were often left to fund and organize initiatives to cover gaps in the UN’s coverage, without appropriate coordination. “The most important issue is the lack of coordination, and we all lack coordination,” said a representative of a Qatari charity. He cited a specific example from Lebanon, where his organization tried to help the aid effort, only to spend around six months determining where it could best help refugee populations due to a lack of coordinating information from UN offices. A Turkish participant stated that the lack of effective coordination helped feed stereotypes that regional aid organizations are covertly supporting terrorist groups. “If the UN coordinates... it will be easier for us [to demonstrate] that we are working in the humanitarian field, filling these gaps [in coverage].”

In response, some non-Gulf groups alleged delays and difficult conditions in securing and receiving funding from various Gulf states and organizations. Representatives from UNRWA, for example, stated that Gulf donors resisted donating funds to support Palestinian refugees in Syria out of a belief that the Palestinian refugees were created by the West and should be supported by Western donors. These representatives also stated that many of the Gulf states’ funding pledges had gone unfilled, while aid that did arrive often came with various restrictions, such as prohibiting cash transfers. Commenting on this, a senior UN official noted the need for more meetings

between OECD and GCC donors in order for each side to understand the other’s approaches and priorities. He suggested that the top donors’ forum, proposed at the recent Kuwait II pledging conference, could be an appropriate venue for these discussions, with at least four GCC and six OECD member nations.

Several attendees also cited the UN’s unwillingness to share information, such as names of contacts and information on operations, as a symptom of this mistrust. These participants felt that the UN was concerned that this information would be leaked to the Syrian regime – an attitude which discouraged some local organizations from information-sharing in turn, feeling that this process had become a “one-way-street.” A UN representative acknowledged that the office was weak in terms of explaining “what is actually happening” and “who is doing what” for the humanitarian effort. He noted that UN offices needed to devote more resources to feeding information back down to local groups if operations are to be effectively coordinated.

Finally, a UNOCHA representative disputed the fact that coordination does not exist. “Coordination may be incomplete, but the real challenge is to improve the existing mechanisms and structures,” he said, calling for greater dialogue and communication between the different agencies and organizations. He suggested that his office make a number of follow-up visits to each Gulf country in order to meet with organizations, both collectively and individually, and discuss what type of coordination was required. He also added that, in neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, the UN needs to make a concerted effort to bring international, regional, and local actors together in order to establish “who is doing what” and “what units can partner with whom.” It was generally agreed that aid agencies working on Syria should

be aiming for a more “granular scale” of coordination, for example at the neighboring country, governorate or cross-border levels.

Local Syrian Groups

All parties emphasized the need to better engage and coordinate with local Syrian organizations, based in Syria and border regions, in order to share information and ensure the delivery of aid. As one Syrian participant pointed out, “Syrian NGOs are frustrated that they have information and contributions to make but cannot get engagement.” UN officials emphasized that Syrian groups remain “partners in reconstruction,” and spoke of their role in connecting outside aid groups with local communities inside Syria. Participants from regional and even Syrian aid organizations noted, however, that local Syrian organizations lack support from the UN and the international community. “The UN does not support local actors,” one Qatari participant said outright.

Some participants cited practical concerns, such as the logistical difficulties of meeting far away from the “front-lines” of humanitarian work or the language barrier involved when INGOs or UN agencies conduct meetings in English with limited or no provisions for translation. One Turkish representative noted that his predominately Arabic- and Turkish-speaking field teams were often unable to fully participate in discussions with UN officials, and that they often lost a full day of work traveling from border regions to interior locations such as Antakya or Gaziantep for one-hour meetings. He suggested that solving such problems would facilitate coordination efforts in neighboring countries and help integrate Syrian, Turkish and Gulf organizations within the UN system. Senior UN representatives acknowledged these concerns, while others pointed to recent efforts or earnest desires

to engage with local actors. One UN official highlighted recent engagement with local NGOs in Gaziantep as part of a general effort to improve coordination and information-sharing in southern Turkey. Another UN official focusing on health issues, discussing coordination efforts with local NGOs in northern Syria, noted that, “In our area... there is a great need to know what kind of facilities are available across the border, what people have access to, what people do not have access to... and then trying to coordinate the response.”

To address this, one UN official spoke of recent efforts to accredit and support Syrian organizations to facilitate their operations within the UN system. He also floated the idea of establishing an emergency response fund to support Syrian organizations based in southern Turkey as well as the organization of a coordination forum for local groups in Damascus.¹ Likewise, a Turkish participant brought up a recent conference organized by his group which brought together 46 Syrian organizations and UN representatives in the town of Reyhanli, arguing that continuing such meetings would improve coordination.

Advocacy

In terms of effective advocacy, several participants stressed the need for the UN and other actors to speak out more forcefully against atrocities and violations of international law. For representatives of some NGOs, the UN had failed to take appropriate action in challenging the Syrian regime on the humanitarian crisis. UN officials acknowledged that, while individual agencies lacked political affiliations, the political interests of the UN Security Council’s member nations made it difficult for the body to adequately address even humanitarian concerns. According to a Turkish NGO

¹ At the time of writing UNOCHA had made significant progress toward setting up a number of Emergency Response Funds in neighboring countries.

representative, these political aspects can interfere with domestic advocacy efforts, with potential donors viewing the conflict as a messy political struggle rather than a humanitarian crisis. “The international humanitarian community lacks one voice,” a Qatari representative said. “We need to come together - East, West, North and South - with a strong humanitarian apolitical message.”

UN officials and NGO representatives underlined the importance of their work being perceived as impartial and purely humanitarian-focused. “If we’re seen as taking sides in the conflict, our ability to do humanitarian work suffers,” one official noted. A Bahraini NGO representative spoke of the difficulties his organization faced in convincing the Syrian regime and opposition that its work was non-political. UN representatives focusing on refugees and health issues both emphasized the role of the UN in providing impartial facts to support effective advocacy, keeping track of proven violations of international law and key statistics. “We have an obligation... to report on the facts that we have, and not to get involved in the polemic, lest we ruin our argument,” a UN official said.

Citing the abundance and diffusion of reports documenting human rights violations inside Syria, a UNOCHA official pointed out that “we must go beyond the production of more reports,” arguing that “the best service that we can provide is to become more joined up in coming behind the information.” In order to help Gulf and international organizations establish a joint advocacy effort, a Saudi participant suggested that meetings such as this one take place on a more regular basis.

Finally, while UN officials praised the work of Under-Secretary General Valerie Amos in confronting the Syrian regime on violations, they conceded that bodies such as UNOCHA could argue more forcefully for humanitarian aims. One UN representative felt that the

organization had mounted more effective challenges to various states during past conflicts. “I feel the regime has been able to divide us,” he said, speaking on the efforts of various UN agencies. “When we don’t act with unity that is weakness.”