



Update on Humanitarian Action in Syria

Roundtable

6 February 2025 | 15.00 - 17.00 CET | Hybrid

Summary report

This report was written based on the discussion at that time, and has not been updated with the developments and events after that meeting.

Syria has been enduring a humanitarian crisis for over a decade, when the so-called Arab Spring and the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protests by the al-Assad regime in 2011 triggered a protracted civil war. The authoritarian regime has ruled the country for over fifty years. This ended last year when rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led a rapid offensive through Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs and eventually entered Damascus. On the 8th of December, HTS gained control of Damascus, which caused Assad to flee and the al-Assad regime to fall. Since then, Mohammed al-Bashir has been appointed as prime minister to lead the transitional government until at least March 2025. The end of the Assad regime can be seen as a significant turning point for Syria, marked by rapid change in the political map of the country. This unfamiliar post-Assad landscape is raising numerous questions within the humanitarian sector, including: What are the main challenges in access at the moment, in the different areas? What are the opportunities and risks of engaging with new authorities? And how can Dutch-based humanitarian actors best assist local and civil society groups?

On February 6, KUNO organised a roundtable to discuss the current situation in Syria. The main objective of this session was to come together as the humanitarian sector and to discuss the current situation in Syria after the fall of the al-Assad regime. Following remarks by the speakers, participants - both online and in person - were invited to jointly reflect, ask questions, and engage in discussion. Those present worked at INGOs, the UN, local NGOs, the Dutch MFA and academic institutions. This roundtable was moderated by **Ali Aljaseem**, researcher at the Centre for Conflict Studies at Utrecht University.

Scott Bohlinger, Regional Director of Middle East and Central Asia, **INSO**, provided an introduction by elaborating on safety and humanitarian access in Syria following the fall of the Assad government. INSO is setting up a country office at the moment, after years of working in this context from a remote office. Scott began the session by emphasizing how humanitarian organizations, which have endured decades of restricted access, now face new opportunities to engage in Syria. However, the situation in Syria is still riddled with complexities. For instance, the ongoing lack of physical safety and the risk of various actors or groups exploiting the situation to launch attacks in Syria was pointed out. Moreover, in Damascus, there was a lack of physical

security (not even functioning metal detectors in many places). However, there were also very low threat levels and the situation remained relatively calm at the time of his visit. INSO supports NGOs by providing a range of detailed and updated maps, charts and dashboards.

Similarly, **Ali Aljaseem** also stated that safety and access are areas of concern. He made known that some of the main security risks to NGO staff consist of petty criminality, lack of electricity - it is completely dark at night - and instances of people taking over properties that are used by NGOs. Others present during the roundtable also weighed in on these security risks and questions surrounding access. One speaker who had recently visited Damascus, for example, highlighted how getting a VISA can be an obstacle to entering Syria since rules and regulations are constantly changing. Also, traffic can be hazardous in Damascus and the city faces serious pollution.

Humanitarian needs

The following subject that was discussed was that of humanitarian needs faced by Syrians. The Syrian population still faces huge humanitarian needs, and many communities are not in that stage to receive recovery and development projects. Input from different participants revealed that many Syrians are living below the poverty rate and that there is a need for the provision of basic services such as water and electricity. According to the WFP, over 12 million Syrians – more than half the population – are in the grip of hunger. Shelter is needed since many houses were completely demolished during the conflict and people are living with family, in tents, or other temporarily available spaces. In addition, medical facilities are lacking, or face a shortage of staff and medicine. It was reported that some people have already returned to IDP camps in northern Syria due to the unfeasible living conditions. Another obstacle the returnees are facing is the Unexploded Ordnances (UXOs).

Furthermore, many people in Syria face mental health needs. After years of war, much trauma will be uncovered, as people now might be willing and able to tell their stories. Furthermore, compounding these challenges are a lack of access to education and pressing climate-related issues, including droughts. It was mentioned how the Hama region received about 90 per cent less rainfall this winter than recorded in previous years, which directly affects the agricultural sector. However, providing humanitarian aid can be challenging in the context of Syria. A colleague of an organisation based in Damascus highlighted some operational challenges. They described a liquidity crisis and difficulties when trying to access funds. One staff member, for example, had to go through eight different banks to withdraw a small sum of money.

Following this discussion, the question was raised on how local actors can be best supported, and whether local actors' voices are being heard by donors and international organisations. It was stated by a member of a local aid organisation that emergency aid is still needed for at least another year; many Syrians are without work and are unable to find their place in society. However, at the same time, it is necessary to think about long-term development. The transitional government in Aleppo seems to understand that they are not able to control the county - partially due to lack of police forces - and to some extent rely on religious leaders to encourage a sense of moral responsibility in people to their communities. Therefore, there is a need for a balanced

approach between providing emergency aid and developmental support. The UN early recovery framework could still be relevant until the international community adopts a reconstruction plan.

Engaging with the authorities

Another critical question in the context of Syria is how to engage with the new authorities. HTS was previously affiliated with al-Qaeda and is still sanctioned and on certain terrorist lists. This raises ethical and operational questions and dilemmas when engaging with such actors. Some challenges have been visible with the new acting government, such as bureaucracy, and difficulties are encountered when registering as a new organisation. Initially, HTS adopted the same mechanism it had followed in Idlib, the Humanitarian Action Coordination Office (HAC). However, because of the lack of the legal frameworks, the caretaker government is still sticking to the old mechanism adopted by the al-Assad regime, albeit without the security vetting process the regime used to follow. Except for those registered in Idlib, all NGOs have to re-apply for registration in Damascus.

Both international and local NGOs described how it is difficult to judge how to interact with authorities, since rules are constantly changing, it is unclear what the roles of different organisations and ministries will be, and changes are being implemented by the new government. One commenter mentioned that a common agreement has been made with the Syria INGO Forum to not engage or register with previous umbrella organisations in order not to undermine advocacy efforts to change some new regulations. The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed support for the common request from INGOs to collaborate directly with them. However, this could be challenging due to the Ministry's limited capacity, which has been making it difficult to engage with all NGOs. This risks falling back into the situation for NGOs during the al-Assad regime.

Sanctions

Lastly, the topic of sanctions came to light. Some sectoral sanctions imposed during the al-Assad regime are being lifted. However, many Western economic sanctions are still in place, which have hampered and are still hampering (international) humanitarian aid, despite exemptions. For Syria to become economically stable again, and recover, it is essential that these sanctions will be lifted - and not only with a temporary lift. It was underscored that for a democratic transition in Syria, civil society needs to have the space and resources to achieve this (access to food, water, electricity and more). Local communities that have been crowdfunding with diaspora communities for resources have also been severely challenged by sanctions, and could not benefit from the humanitarian exemptions.

Still, it is expected that it will take a long time for positive change to become visible, as the impact of these sanctions was huge. It was highlighted how there is currently a black market currency rate and a formal currency rate in Syria. As a result, exchange rates are changing frequently, exchange is unstructured, and vulnerable to manipulation. Additionally, participants highlighted that there is a significant gap between the funds available for aid in Syria, and the resources that are needed, which the NGO community is not able to fill - especially after the recent freeze of

USAID and other budget cuts. On both issues, the humanitarian community must stay active in advocating for this at governments and the EU levels.

The roundtable ended on a positive note: A lot needs to be done to build up the country, but people in Syria are generally hopeful for this new area after the fall of the Assad regime. Many Syrians can return and this presents an opportunity for communities to be glued back together again.