

# International Assistance for All in Syria

## Executive Summary

Over the course of the decade-long conflict in Syria, unprecedented amounts of international assistance have been mobilised in response to the humanitarian crisis it is causing. But the well-intentioned assistance has been politicised, manipulated and diverted into the hands of one side of the conflict. Such distortions are setting a dangerous pattern for Syria's future reconstruction and present a serious risk of aggravating the conflict in the long term. More just and realistic parameters of international assistance are needed, especially as the conflict heads towards the recovery and reconstruction phase.

Major donors have thus far conditioned the financing of Syria's reconstruction on political transition. However, this conditionality does not address the current reality of politicisation and manipulation of international assistance, thus allowing the government to maintain the upper hand. While removing the political conditionality is not a productive option, neither is the status quo. Establishing a **human rights-based conditionality** is necessary in order to guide all current and future forms of international interventions more realistically and justly.

Although such a conditionality cannot be applied to humanitarian assistance, there is a need to label international aid interventions correctly and embrace a human rights-based conditionality in all forms of aid that go beyond the traditional scope of humanitarian action.

To deliver such principled aid, the international community should:

- **tailor aid to Syria's multifaceted reality;**
- **avoid compromised channels of assistance delivery;**
- **go local, small and incremental;**
- **use trusted local intermediaries;**
- **monitor thoroughly; and**
- **reactivate the role of the private sector.**

This approach is realistic and operates as a comprehensive package of measures rather than a menu to select from. The international aid community has the leverage to bring this about. In doing so, it can allow more Syrian communities to access international aid whilst ensuring it contributes to, rather than hampers, a sustainable peace.

## The Dilemma of Aid in Syria

A decade-long conflict in Syria has left the country divided, demolished and exhausted, with no end of suffering in sight. The global pandemic of COVID-19 is bringing yet another level of strain. As the intensity of military operations is decreasing, the dire humanitarian and recovery needs have become more visible; yet the international community is struggling with the right way to respond in the absence of a possible political transition.

In some ways, the response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria has been unprecedented. For example, more than 20 billion euros in international assistance since 2011 has helped prevent famine and a total collapse of the health system. Aid is also currently helping to prevent a major pandemic outbreak. Yet, the assistance has been systematically politicised, manipulated, and diverted to one side of the conflict rather than to all Syrians. Moreover, the international community has failed to use its leverage with the government in Damascus to improve access or ease restrictions. And despite UN efforts to define “parameters and principles for UN assistance in Syria”,<sup>1</sup> implementation has been highly problematic and a rights-based approach is still absent.<sup>2</sup> All of this is setting a dangerous pattern for future reconstruction and represents a serious risk of aggravating the conflict in the long term.

Against this backdrop, the **Syria Resource Group (SRG) seeks to identify and help voice the views of the Syrian population on international assistance.** The SRG is an independent, multidisciplinary and non-affiliated platform of 17 leading Syrian experts focused on helping the international community achieve more just and tailored parameters for its assistance, especially as the conflict heads towards the reconstruction phase.

This paper provides the SRG’s key considerations on international assistance provision in Syria. It is based on broad consultations with communities and local actors involved in the implementation of internationally-funded projects across the Syrian territory. It outlines a Syrian vision on how the international community can provide efficient assistance that helps the country today, while also creating more realistic conditions for sustainable peace instead of further conflict. The group understands the term “assistance” in its broadest sense, as the lines between emergency, rehabilitation, early recovery, reconstruction and development assistance are often blurred in the Syrian context.

The first part of this paper proposes a concept of assistance centred on a human rights-based conditionality. The second, longer part suggests creative and realistic solutions to operationalise it.

## Engagement but with Conditions

While most de-facto authorities in Syria have exploited international assistance to serve their political agendas in one way or another, the Syrian government has systematically violated human rights and manipulated international and local efforts in its administration of aid.

International organisations operating through government channels are bound by the government's unjust and discriminatory frameworks that dictate where to work, with which communities, in what sectors, and through which mechanisms. Interference by the government goes beyond programming and is fully entrenched in the procurement and operational sides of the international community's work. This makes international donors vulnerable to complicity in human rights violations, like demographic engineering, forced evictions, and violations of housing, land, and property rights, to name a few.

Conditioning the financing of Syria's future reconstruction on political transition – a prerequisite promoted by major donors, notably the EU and US – has so far restricted the ability of the government in Damascus to systematically escalate its political agenda in the reconstruction phase. However, the approach falls short of ensuring the efficiency and non-politicisation of current humanitarian and non-emergency assistance – including the rehabilitation, stabilisation and early recovery projects that are highly linked to the reconstruction phase. Additionally, the prevailing conditionality has been subject to different interpretations, sometimes resulting in potential donors being unable to have any form of engagement in the country.

While lifting the political conditionality would strip the international community of its leverage against the regime and the process of reconstruction itself, maintaining it “as is” restricts the ability of internationals to influence current developments on the ground. This gives the government the upper hand at a very sensitive juncture.

**What is needed is a human rights-based conditionality** that is carefully drafted and applied to any engagement by international donors in Syria beyond emergency response (i.e., to all forms of assistance that in any way set the ground for future reconstruction). This conditionality should be used immediately to guide current interventions in Syria, and should be implemented and monitored **in all phases of foreign-financed programmes: planning, programming, contracting and implementation**. In addition, it should complement rather than replace the political preconditions for reconstruction financing in the future. Finally, it should contain all elements of peacebuilding and be very conflict sensitive.

Acknowledging that humanitarian aid cannot be restricted by such conditionalities, there needs to be a clear rationalisation of the terminology used by the international community to redefine interventions that are currently labelled as humanitarian. Despite their nature, they are prone to being manipulated; and because they go beyond the traditional scope of humanitarian action, such interventions lay the groundwork for the reconstruction phase. As such, the international aid community needs to embrace the characteristics of principled aid and be guided by human rights and conflict sensitivity.

## Answering the “How”

In such a highly politicised context, how can the international community provide the much-needed assistance for Syria efficiently and without doing harm? The answer lies in **1) tailoring aid to Syria’s fragmented reality; 2) utilising uncompromised channels of assistance delivery; 3) going local, small and incremental; 4) using trusted local intermediaries; 5) strong monitoring; and 6) reactivating the role of the private sector.** A combination of conditionalities, consistency, political leverage, and openness to unconventional tools will also be necessary.

**Using a tailored approach:** Today’s Syria and that of the future reflect a diverse ensemble of subnational realities. If one holds a vision of a sustainably peaceful future for all Syrians, each of these realities matters and a **tailored approach is imperative.** In particular, when the international community provides assistance in Syria, a diverse range of interventions could be made available to all areas, depending on their compliance with the human rights-based conditionality. Such engagement may be incremental, since not all local actors in targeted areas will be able to comply immediately. But based on their progressive performance and the ability to scale up while maintaining the required human rights conditions, aid can flow in future.

**For example:** In regime-held areas, the international community may refrain from engaging with the regime in all kinds of non-emergency assistance – including rehabilitation of houses and provision of infrastructure in areas where communities have been forcibly evicted and blocked from return, and where discriminatory urban legislation that jeopardises housing, land, and property rights is being enacted (such as eastern Aleppo, and Damascus suburbs). Once conditions to protect the rights of local communities are in place, interventions may be negotiated to serve those communities, while ensuring no diversion of funds occurs. As for regime-recaptured areas where large communities remain in their damaged houses with no access to basic services and infrastructure (such as in Daraa), the international community can explore options to work with local communities to rehabilitate houses and infrastructure and provide basic services, while adhering to the framework of the human rights-based conditionality.

**Avoiding the wrong channels:** Any international assistance – humanitarian, COVID-19 response, stabilisation, or reconstruction – should be **delivered through channels that are not compromised.** Throughout the Syrian conflict, international aid has been weaponised and used as a tool to punish large swathes of the population. This has further eroded the social fabric and further entrenched the conflict. It has also created aid “mafias” and an industrial-scale war economy with all its networks, webs and agents. These can all act to spoil any future sustainable peace. As such, the international community has every interest in ensuring that all forms of assistance create peace dividends and bypass potential spoilers, so as to slowly dismantle the empire that has been created.

Nine punishing years of war teach us that this is not an easy task, and the international community will thus need to use all its leverage to define the rules of the game. Once made, it will also need to insist on them and be ready to withdraw when they are broken. To proceed this way, a correct understanding of the environment and realities on the ground is indispensable. This includes an accurate mapping of public institutions – on a central, regional and local level – to identify vulnerabilities and points of potential abuse. It also involves having a correct understanding of the formal and informal power structures and a clear set of criteria for vetting partners from the private sector and civil society.

The present reality of widespread manipulation of international assistance shows that criteria are neither applied consistently, nor in all phases of aid delivery. Understanding that capacity on the side of the donors may be an issue, a plethora of civil society and local initiatives exist which can help design a vetting system based on credible local experience. This could translate into a system of positive branding of organisations and entities that comply with the rules of the game, and hence qualify for access to funding and/or reduction of restrictions and sanctions. A creative approach could produce a system that provides donors with the needed guarantees and helps reduce the risks that might otherwise result in donors withdrawing their funding (and making the Syrian population, yet again, the main victim).

**Going local, small and incremental:** Rather than taking a top-down approach in which large and highly centralised programmes are in the hands of the Damascus government, donor strategy should instead be based on going local, small and incremental. In its broadest sense, “local” means the optimal level of locality – whether neighbourhood, town or region – where the human rights-based conditionality can realistically be applied. **A local approach would help act where the needs truly are** and guarantee a fairer and less discriminatory access to aid for all communities, thus ensuring the assistance is for Syrians rather than for Syria.

Small and local initiatives are more efficient, deliver higher impact and offer better value for money. In times of scarce resources, this is of particular relevance. Smaller initiatives also reduce the risk of large-scale corruption, manipulation and misconduct, in addition to helping resuscitate local economies, kickstart small businesses, and create jobs locally. While this approach could risk diluting national development strategies or undermining state-building coordination, the reality is that as long as there is no political transition in Syria, the aim of inclusive state-building remains a distant dream. To partially mitigate the risks of prioritising small and local initiatives, priority could be given to sectors that do not require planning beyond the local level or have a scalable nexus with regional and national networks.

**For example:** Rehabilitating infrastructure for communities in the recaptured districts of Daraa does not necessarily need to be part of a centralised mega-reconstruction project managed by regime ministries. Local communities in Daraa have already started clearing rubble, opening streets, and restoring broken water and electricity networks in certain neighbourhoods, using their own collective financial and human

resources. The international community could tap into this as an entry point to bypass corrupt regime institutions and work directly with ordinary local communities to support their projects, ensure their efficiency, and scale them up where relevant. In areas where war damage requires planning beyond the local level, as in the installation of central infrastructure (such as power plants on regional levels), planning on the local level can still be relevant if implemented in an incremental way that allows for the possibility of coordination between the local and the regional (i.e., restoring local power networks in synch with the fixing of regional power plants).

**Using trusted Syrian intermediary structures:** Implementing small and local projects implies higher management costs for donors, but the solution could be using intermediary structures inspired by experiences from other conflict contexts. In the absence of confidence in central government, trusted **Syrian intermediary institutions and committees could take on the role of assistance coordinators**. They would have to be Syrian, highly credible and capable, linked to communities on the local level, and independent from ruling authorities. The Syrian Recovery Trust Fund could be an additional or alternative vehicle if its mandate and structure were adjusted. A Syrian bank registered abroad could likewise be a solution to help channel the assistance to Syrians while complying with the multiple sanctions that are in place. Not only would this allow actors that adhere to the human rights-based conditionality framework to avoid the current chilling effect of the sanctions; it would also allow better monitoring, by centralising the financial flows of the assistance.

**For example:** In Northern Ireland, after the Good Friday Agreement, committees composed of a mix of local community leaders were entrusted with the management of a large EU-sponsored trust fund. The committees were comprised of representatives of the communities and used a built-in transparency process. Similar solutions could be developed for Syria.

**Monitor, monitor, monitor:** One might argue that a number of organisations already play an intermediary role and are part of the donor system, like UN agencies and INGOs. Nevertheless, their credibility as impartial actors has been compromised. Despite their commitment to doing no harm and preventing human rights abuse, their principles are not respected throughout their programme cycles, with particular vulnerabilities detected in procurement. As such, if these organisations are to continue their engagement, a **robust system of monitoring is needed** to ensure that everyone – international donors included – is successfully adhering to the principles of human rights-based assistance and building sustainable peace.

**Involving the private sector:** The private sector – both within and outside the country – is another important actor in addressing humanitarian, recovery and possible future reconstruction needs in Syria. Traditionally, the private sector in Syria has exercised a self-initiated social responsibility that could be revived at this stage. It could work in partnership with the international community to rebuild the social capital, consolidate

trust-based systems through its traditional networks and actors, provide support in monitoring aid and assistance to ensure efficiency and cost effectiveness, and help in spreading technical know-how. The private sector could also play a significant role in providing access to finance through its well-established links with regional and international banks and access to international trade markets that, if leveraged, could help revive the Syrian economy. While the lack of legal and financial infrastructure and reform in Syria are hindering the private sector's investment in Syria's long-term recovery, having international security guarantees could facilitate its involvement in the short term.

## Conclusion

Many of the measures proposed in this paper will require consistent application and, most importantly, a willingness to exercise political leverage. The prospect of imposition or reduction of sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and reconstruction financing are powerful tools in the hands of the international community. And while the prospect of a political transition is remote, positive behaviours of certain Syrian actors can still be stimulated and rewarded if such tools are smartly activated.

If one thinks creatively about international assistance in Syria, many avenues can be opened that would allow scores of Syrian communities access to the aid they desperately need to cover their basic needs, face health crises, or rebuild homes and lives in a way that does not pull them back into the war. The Syrian-conceived ideas provided here offer a glimpse of what this could look like (and can easily be further elaborated by the Syria Resource Group). Above all, what they show is that a better framework is possible – one that can contribute to, rather than hamper, sustainable peace.

## Endnotes

1. Feltman, Jeffrey D. 2017. "Parameters and Principles of UN Assistance in Syria." [https://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/UN-Assistance-in-Syria-Feltman\\_October\\_2017\\_.pdf](https://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/UN-Assistance-in-Syria-Feltman_October_2017_.pdf)
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The **Syria Resource Group** (SRG) is an independent, multidisciplinary and non-affiliated platform of leading Syrian experts based in the country, closely connected to it, or actively involved from abroad in creative, realistic and principled solutions to Syria's future reconstruction and the international financing of it. The SRG promotes a deliberately Syrian-led approach by providing local-level assessment, generating locally conceived proposals and solutions, and helping shape – rather than merely react to – international aid offerings. The group aims to promote inclusive assistance for the Syrian population, taking into account the diverse demographic, political, economic and security realities of the country. The Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) backs the SRG with operational support and international expertise, helping ensure that the SRG's ideas and vision are effectively promoted and channelled.

Founded in 2012, the **Institute for Integrated Transitions** (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.