AFTER ASSAD: NAVIGATING SYRIA'S HUMANITARIAN CROSSROADS

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United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub

GLOW CONSULTANTS

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HUMANITARIAN ADVISORY GROUP

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the research team:

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice. An Australian-based ethically driven business, we combine humanitarian passion with entrepreneurial agility to think and do things differently.

NSDation is a women-led consultancy services company that was established in 2018 to advise on projects in the Middle East and Europe. Our expertise spans Third-Party Monitoring, evaluations, assessments, developing and implementing monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) systems, and dynamic capacity-strengthening activities. Dealing with intricate human development needs demands a broad, innovative, and adaptable perspective.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AFAD	Disaster Emergency Management Authority
AFNS	Aid Fund for Northern Syria
Amanah	Syrian Trust for Development
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EU	European Union
FTS	Financial Tracking Service
GoS	Government of Syria
HAC	Humanitarian Action Coordination Office
HAO	Humanitarian Affairs Office
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRO	Human Rights Observers
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
HTC	Humanitarian Country Team
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al Sham
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IM	Information Management
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Red Cross
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISG	Inter Sector Group
ISWG	Inter Sector Working Group
KII	Key Informant Interview
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation
MDHA	Ministry of and Development and Humanitarian Affairs
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MSNA	Multi-Sector Needs Assessment
NES	Northeast Syria
NESF	Northeast Syria NGO Forum
NFI	Non-Food Item
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NWS	Northwest Syria
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
RAATA	Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCHF	Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SNA	Syrian National Army
SSA	Syrian Salvation Government
SSC	Strategic Steering Committee
UKHIH	United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
VAM	Vulnerability Analysis Unit
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	United Nations World Food Programme
WoS	Whole of Syria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Syria experiences major upheaval in the aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's ousting from power in late 2024, the humanitarian response finds itself at a crossroads characterised by both significant challenges and new opportunities. This report, based on interviews with humanitarian actors at all levels of the Syria response, attempts to articulate the key shifts evolving in the first months post Assad, how these are impacting humanitarian operations, and what actions humanitarian actors can undertake to navigate them effectively.

CHANGING ACCESS DYNAMICS AND HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

While in power, the Assad government severely restricted humanitarian access and regularly weaponised aid to further its political objectives. Now, many organisations can reach previously underserved communities as they expand their geographic scope and adjust to new operational realities, as evidenced by the quick expansion of many Northwest Syria-based organisations, particularly local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite the complexity of the situation, dramatic contextual changes wrought by the transition have generated hopes for a more enabling environment for humanitarian actors.

Policies and procedures are still evolving and are affecting local and international organisations differently. Many involved in the response have expressed concerns about the emerging humanitarian governance framework and potential impacts on the independence of humanitarian operations. This has created a bottleneck, as some organisations are delaying officially registering in Damascus until the situation is clarified. If left unaddressed, these concerns may cause some humanitarian actors to reconsider their existing presence (e.g. those in Northwest Syria), potentially leading to major disruptions in essential services for vulnerable Syrians.

RESTRUCTURING THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

The Syria response's humanitarian coordination architecture has historically been fragmented due to territorial division and Assad-era policies. This has presented immense challenges for effective aid delivery throughout the crisis. Current circumstances offer a unique opportunity to restructure coordination at the national level and establish a more unified and coherent approach. The Damascus-based Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) has released transitional plans for a new structure that aims to 'create a streamlined, standardised, and representative coordination architecture', led by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) in Damascus by June 2025.

While the proposed new structure is an ambitious overhaul, there are concerns among humanitarian actors how it will translate into reality, especially as many specific details remain unclear. This includes uncertainties around funding availability for core coordination and information positions across the proposed subnational framework. Compressed transition timelines have raised concerns about rushed handover processes, particularly in northeast Syria. Reconciling the operational cultures of the three hubs (Northeast Syria, Northwest Syria, Government of Syria) within the new structure is also sensitive and necessitates a highly inclusive phased process to avoid tensions. Furthermore, there is an overarching concern that the new structure will be overly centralised, United Nations (UN) dominated, and roll back some of the genuine localisation progress seen in the Northwest Syria response unless Syrian-led actors are prominently included in senior positions.

Interior of the abandoned and bullet-scarred hospital in Quneitra, Syria. iStock.com / Joel Carillet

✈ RECORD HIGH HUMANITARIAN NEEDS, DWINDLING FUNDING

Over recent years, major reductions in donor funding have increasingly widened the gap between response resources and growing humanitarian needs in Syria. Although further decreases in funding were widely expected, in line with global trends, the unprecedented United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding freeze announced on 20 January 2025 has placed extreme pressure on an already strained and overstretched system adjusting to Syria's transition, at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest level since the crisis began in 2011. While the impacts have been felt across all levels of the response, they have affected the protection sector particularly severely. The end of a wide range of gender, protection, and inclusion programs is expected to have perilous consequences for vulnerable groups. Large information gaps also persist across the Syria response, and the rapidly shifting context and increasingly limited resources means that updated data across sectors is urgently required to inform prioritisation and ensure aid is needs based.

Furthermore, while the expansion of many international and Syrian organisations' geographic access is a major opportunity to channel their expertise and resources to previously neglected communities, it is essential careful steps are taken to understand local dynamics and avoid causing harm. This will be critical to avoid marginalising existing community-based actors. A data-driven and needs-based approach to aid distribution, regardless of sect, religion, or political affiliation across regions, is crucial to help address the reputational damage suffered by UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) during the Assad era, when aid delivery was regularly coopted to serve political interests.[1]

✈ AN OPENING TO BRIDGE THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT GAP

The transition in Syria has renewed calls for a greater emphasis on balancing life-saving assistance with scaled-up early recovery programming to address key drivers of humanitarian needs. This approach could act as a significant and timely bridge between humanitarian and development action. A recurring sentiment expressed by interview participants was frustration about the negative impacts of short-term funding cycles on their ability to reduce aid dependency, build resilience, and support sustainable recovery in the communities they serve. Due to donor redlines regarding funding reconstruction during the Assad era, the discussions on Syria's early recovery response became highly politicised and undermined efforts due to blurred lines between what constitutes early recovery and development aid.

Following the ousting of Assad, many actors hope the humanitarian situation will change. Longer-term, integrated projects that support sustainable recovery are critical to durable solutions for returnees, both from abroad and inside Syria, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in host communities. In addition, the transition opens the possibility for much greater direct collaboration with local governance actors (e.g. authorities responsible for service provision), previously inhibited by donor restrictions and political considerations. Reflecting this, many representatives of Syrian organisations interviewed emphasised a desire to provide technical support to local government entities, with an eye to identifying entry points for development action.

ACTION 1: SUPPORT UNIMPEDED, NEEDS-BASED ACCESS ACROSS SYRIA

UN

✓ **Strengthen engagement and relationship-building efforts with relevant government authorities** to ensure emerging regulatory frameworks do not impose unnecessary constraints that impact the independence and access of humanitarian operations.

INGO/LNGOs

✓ **Continue sustained consultations via well-established NGO coordination bodies** to formulate clear collective advocacy positions around emerging humanitarian governance and access.

✓ **Collaborate through NGO coordination bodies to create a detailed 'living' document with comprehensive practical information** about the shared resource on the new registration and permission processes, including region-specific differences, based on experiences and lessons learned.

ACTION 2: SUPPORT A SYRIAN-LED RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Donors/UN

✓ **Scale up pooled funds nationally to develop LNGOs and reduce competition between humanitarian actors,** building on and replicating the success of pooled funds in Northwest Syria that directly fund Syrian NGOs (e.g. Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS)).

✓ **Increase representation of Syrian-led actors in strategic and operational decision-making processes and entities** through explicit, measurable commitments (e.g. quotas), including across humanitarian coordination and in key forums, to ensure Syrian voices inform and shape the direction of the response at the highest levels.

INGOs

✓ **Reinforce and sustain partnerships with local and national organizations to leverage their operational expertise, while strengthening trust through equitable models,** such as joint decision-making and fair inclusion of indirect costs. Prioritise local leadership to address power imbalances and advance a truly Syrian-led response.

Syrian organisations

✓ **Strengthen existing and new strategic coalitions and alliances** to advocate for increased representation in key decision-making bodies, greater access to direct funding, and more equitable partnerships with response actors.

✓ **Establish dedicated spaces to foster dialogue between previously divided Syrian organisations**, both to exchange knowledge and information to enhance response capacity, as well as address and mitigate any emerging tensions that act as a barrier to meaningful collaboration and partnership.

✓ **Further increase efforts to localise capacity strengthening** by supporting medium and small organisations with organisational and technical development.

ACTION 3: ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE, INCLUSIVE, AND COHERENT COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

UN/HCT

✓ **Ensure decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive while transitioning to a country-wide IASC-coordination model,** taking additional care not to marginalise either international or Syrian NGOs, or hub-specific concerns, in order to secure buy-in from the wider response.

✓ **Ensure strong representation of NGOs– particularly Syrian-led and community-based organizations** across leadership and coordination structures through formal quotas or mandates (e.g. co-chair roles, strategic advisory groups). Building on existing LNGO leadership in Northwest Syria and establishing inclusive, practical mechanisms to support the meaningful participation of diverse Syrian civil society actors across all areas of operation.

✓ **Co-design, share and socialise a detailed roadmap for the transition**, in tandem with, and informed by, inclusive consultation processes and mechanisms.

Humanitarian coordination

✓ **Capitalise on increased engagement among coordination bodies, including clusters and working groups** during the transition by creating dedicated space to exchange hub-specific best practices, and lessons learned for coordination mechanisms that have potential to be adopted into country-wide structures.

ACTION 4: ENSURE HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING IS ETHICAL, DATA-DRIVEN, AND REACHES THOSE MOST IN NEED

All humanitarian actors

✓ **Collaborate to support country-wide assessments**, in addition to sector-specific and area-based assessments, as needed, to address critical information gaps linked to the changing context. More in-depth research is required to understand the complex needs of especially vulnerable groups, such as former detainees.

✓ **Ensure Syrians have a leading voice in defining their needs and priorities** by centering community perspectives in program design and implementation. This must be paired with conflict-sensitive programming grounded in robust analysis of local dynamics to prevent unintended harm, reduce inter-group tensions, and protect humanitarian access.

✓ **Openly address historic distrust and grievances against humanitarian actors through organised community dialogues and clear statements**, aiming to increase community acceptance and mitigate tensions. This is particularly relevant to UN agencies and INGOs, specifically those that were based in Damascus during the Assad era.

Humanitarian coordination

✓ **Tailor approaches to expanding operations in recognition of different operational contexts across formerly divided areas.** This includes cluster/sector coordination actors reviewing and updating programmatic guidance for partners, exploring opportunities to harmonise across former hubs, where feasible, or making clear area-specific recommendations.

ACTION 5: INVEST IN LONG-TERM STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

Donors

✓ **Provide more flexible, multi-year funding for early recovery and nexus-linked activities.** This is essential to reduce aid dependency and act as a bridge to sustainable development opportunities. While emergency aid is still a critical need, long-term investment is required to strengthen the resilience of Syrian communities and support durable, cost-effective solutions for IDPs and returnees.

Humanitarian coordination (HCT, ISCCG)

✓ **Adopt and expand contextualised and area-based approaches that bridge the humanitarian-development divide.** This should be led by senior HCT, in coordination with donors, and be operationalised through the Inter-Sector Cluster Coordination Group (ISCCG).

All humanitarian actors

✓ **Begin the process of systematising links between humanitarian and development action across the response.** Dedicated platforms (e.g. 'nexus' working groups) should be used to strategise, plan, and coordinate related actions.

✓ **Design and implement projects that support sustainable livelihoods and the restoration of basic services**, using area-based approaches and engaging local authorities where possible. Humanitarian actors should enhance efforts to increase complementarity between projects at the area-level.

Syrian organisations

✓ **Actively engage the Syrian diaspora and returnees through formalised mechanisms** to identify where technical skillsets and capacities can best support recovery efforts in localised contexts.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Prior to late 2024, the prevailing assumption in the international community was that the Syrian conflict was "frozen" and would remain so for the foreseeable future. If Assad had not outright won the civil war that began in 2011 (large parts of Northwest and Northeast Syria remained outside of government control), the perception was that he had successfully cemented his grip on power through a ruthless military campaign, backed by Iran and Russia, which killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and left much of the country in ruins. Acknowledging this perceived reality, many countries in the region and beyond, including countries in the European Union (EU), had begun a process of "normalisation" with the Assad government. This is perhaps best symbolised by Syria's reinstatement to the Arab League in May 2023, 12 years after its membership was suspended. In late November and early December 2024, these long-standing assumptions about the conflict and Assad's control over the country were swiftly upended as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) launched a rapid offensive from its stronghold in Northwest Syria (NWS) against government forces, first capturing Aleppo before seizing the capital only nine days later as Assad fled the country. This marked a tectonic geopolitical shift in the region with international reverberations.

Syria's immediate and long-term challenges in navigating the transition are immense. Political and security dynamics remain highly volatile. In his wake, Assad left behind a country devastated by 14 years of war and on the verge of economic collapse. While large-scale armed hostilities across large swathes of the country subsided several years ago, economic conditions for ordinary Syrians have consistently continued to deteriorate, recently becoming worse than at any point since 2011. The staggering depreciation of the Syrian pound and skyrocketing inflation have steadily eroded household purchasing power, leaving most Syrians either struggling or unable to meet their basic needs. It is currently estimated that over 90% of the population live under the poverty line.[2] Furthermore, widespread infrastructure destruction, mass displacement, and state neglect has decimated basic services (e.g. healthcare, education, electricity, and water) across the country. Over seven million Syrians remain internally displaced, with approximately two million living in camps.

Against this backdrop, humanitarian actors in Syria are rapidly adjusting to new political and operational realities while trying to address record-high needs across the country in an increasingly dire funding landscape. Historically fragmented across three operational hubs aligning with the different zones of control in the country (i.e. northwest, northeast, and government-controlled), the humanitarian response is currently facing overlapping pressures. These include the impacts of the abrupt freeze on United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding, as the situation in Syria unpredictably evolves. However, the transition has also opened new possibilities that were unthinkable just months ago, including significantly expanded access, a far more enabling operational environment vis-a-vis the state, and the opportunity to fundamentally transform the humanitarian coordination architecture. Perhaps most importantly, free from the severe restrictions on civil society in place under Assad, the transition has also created an opening for Syrian-led humanitarian actors to increasingly take on a leadership role within the humanitarian response and Syria's recovery.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This report documents the rapidly evolving context in Syria and the challenges and opportunities for humanitarian action at international, national and local levels. The research was designed to explore emerging issues and trends in how the humanitarian system in Syria is evolving in response to ongoing political, social, and economic developments. The report provides real-time insights for humanitarian actors operating in Syria's highly complex environment.

WHY NOW?

Syria is at a critical juncture. What happens over coming months will have implications for years to come, not only in Syria but across the Middle East. Figure 1 summarises key events in Syria from December 2024 to February 2025.

Figure 1: Key events in Syria's transition period

27 November 2024
Rebel groups, led by HTS, launch large-scale offensive from NWS

8 December 2024
Rebels seize Damascus, Assad flees to Russia (where he is offered asylum), transitional authorities (formally HTS) becomes *de facto* governing party in Syria

10 December 2024
Rebels name Mohammed al-Bashir, former head of the Syrian Salvation Government in NWS, to lead a transitional Syrian government until 1 March 2025

29 January 2025
HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa becomes the transitional president; Assad's Baath party is dissolved, the Syrian constitution is suspended, all armed groups and military factions are disbanded

18 February 2025
Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in NES agree to integrate military forces and civil institutions into the new Syrian government

25 February 2025
Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa launches national dialogue on political transition and a new constitution

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire, with insufficient and declining funding to respond to the effects of civil war and overlapping crises and disasters. Figure 2 provides a brief overview of humanitarian needs in Syria, highlighting the critical gaps that remain despite the change in government.

Figure 2: Projected humanitarian needs in Syria as of January 2025

16.7 million people need humanitarian assistance (approximately 70% of the population)[3]

7.2 million people have been forcibly displaced inside Syria[4]

5.5 million people have sought refuge outside the country[5]

45% of 2.3 million internally displaced people are in extreme and catastrophic situations[6]

90% of the population live below the poverty line[7]

15.4 million Syrians are at immediate risk of injury or death from explosive ordnance contamination[8]

14.6 million people are food insecure[9]

14.4 million people lack water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services[10]

8.5 million Syrians require GBV assistance; recent developments have increased GBV risk[11]

Only **35%** of Syria's Humanitarian Response Plan 2024 was funded by the end of February 2025[12]

Only **10%** of Syria's appeal for Humanitarian Response Priorities for January-March 2025 was funded by end February 2025[13]

STRUCTURE

This report has four main sections. This first section provides a rapid overview of the context and explains why this research is critical now. The second section explores the main shifts in the humanitarian system that have occurred or are occurring in Syria. The third section outlines ways for humanitarian actors to strengthen the humanitarian system in Syria. The final section concludes the report, including a summary of its key insights and recommendations.

METHODS

This review was qualitative, with all data collection completed in January and February 2025. Given the complexity and unpredictability of the context in Syria and the rapid nature of this work, the approach was inductive and iterative, based on a rolling desk review of emerging events and reports, and initial scoping interviews to develop and refine the research questions. The research team met regularly to analyse emerging findings and refine data collection tools to reflect the rapidly changing context. Additional interviews were completed to validate key findings.

The Syrian context and humanitarian landscape continued to shift throughout data collection, altering some themes and findings. The report documents the change process and highlights key shifts and potential opportunities for improving the humanitarian response. Figure 3 provides an overview of the methodology.

Figure 3: Methodology

60+ **documents reviewed:**
- Current analysis by research organisations, think tanks, and local experts
- UN documents, needs assessments and flash reports
- Syrian government documents
- News sources

26 **key informant interviews:**
- Representatives of local, national, and international organisations operating in Syria
- Syrian government actors and humanitarian coordinating bodies
- Donor representatives
- Researchers and technical experts

5 **validation interviews:**
- **3** representatives of local and international organisations
- **1** local expert
- **1** donor representative

Localised research partnerships and practices:
- Joint co-design approach with partners, NSDation and KAE Consulting
- Joint analysis process with partners
- **33%** of budget transferred to partners

Syrian woman in the camp for displaced persons in Atmeh, Syria. iStock.com / Joel Carillet

Sample profile:

The research team conducted interviews with 31 stakeholders representing a diverse range of civil society organisations (CSOs), local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), donors, UN agencies and local experts. The in-country distribution of interviewees was as follows: Government of Syria (GoS) – ten participants; Northeast Syria (NES) – three participants; Northwest Syria (NWS) – ten participants; and six participants who provided insights related to the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach[14]. Validation interviews included two participants focused on WoS, one from NWS, and one from GoS.

LIMITATIONS

Evolving situation. The Syrian context is evolving rapidly. This review was intended to provide critical rapid analysis of the humanitarian landscape as it unfolds. Key developments continued to emerge throughout the data collection period, creating complexities in triangulating findings. Insights and proposed actions represent current analysis and understanding in efforts to inform ongoing programming and real-time adaptations, rather than to provide comprehensive recommendations for the future.

Rapid review. Findings from this research were drawn from a relatively small sample of relevant

documentation, 26 key informant interviews, and five validation interviews. This aligned with the primary intention of providing rapid and timely insights to support humanitarian and government actors in Syria, striking a balance between time taken to capture critical issues and time-sensitive opportunities to adapt and respond in real time.

Geographic scope. Given the focused thematic scope of the study, primary attention was placed on areas under GoS and NWS control, as these regions have experienced the most significant developments and shifts in influence and decision-making within the humanitarian response. Key informants from NES were also included to ensure understanding of dynamics across all regions. However, the scope of engagement in NES was comparatively smaller, as the governance-related changes impacting humanitarian operations during the research period were less pronounced than those observed in GoS and NWS.

Availability of stakeholders. The nature and timeline of this rapid review meant some key stakeholders were unable to participate. Some actors were hesitant to participate in interviews due to unclear rules about research participation and external engagement under the new government. Overall, the research included diverse perspectives across stakeholder groups and regions in Syria, including local, national, international humanitarian actors and donors.

SECTION 2: A SHIFTING SYSTEM

This section provides a brief overview of the evolving humanitarian context in Syria. The rapid review uncovered six overarching ways in which the humanitarian system is shifting in Syria. This list is not exhaustive, and the shifts highlighted here continue to change.

SHIFT 1: CHANGING ACCESS DYNAMICS AND HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

> Syria's humanitarian access crisis is not just a logistical challenge—it reflects deeper governance, funding, and coordination failures. Without structural reforms that balance operational flexibility with oversight, humanitarian response efforts will continue to face inefficiencies, political interference, and unmet needs." (Syrian CSO representative)[15]

The ongoing transition in governance structures at the local, regional, and national levels across Syria, which remains extremely fluid, has presented significant challenges and uncertainties for humanitarian actors. It has also presented opportunities, such as expanded geographic scope to implement activities and a more harmonised national-level response architecture. Since early December 2024, these changes have had a major influence on humanitarian actors' operational and strategic decision-making as organisations navigate changing localised dynamics while responding to urgent humanitarian needs. For example, a lack of clarity around emerging political and regulatory frameworks, combined with funding uncertainties, has led some organisations to scale down expansion plans, instead prioritising core service delivery in accessible areas with the most pressing needs rather than committing to broader, long-term interventions.[16]

Governance was highly centralised in areas formerly under the Assad government's control, with local councils, municipalities, and governorate-level authorities operating under strict oversight from Damascus. This high-level of centralised control also extended to humanitarian access and programming, which were closely regulated through security approvals and required direct engagement with government-affiliated 'national partners,' such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) or the Syrian Trust for Development (Amanah). With scarce state resources available, the Assad government's control over aid delivery served as a vital tool to strengthen networks of patronage and consolidate power, frequently at the expense of marginalised groups and communities. Many Syrian civil society actors and much of the population deeply distrust the Damascus-based UN response given its strong links with the Assad government.[17] Moving forward, these concerns regarding impartiality should be addressed by Damascus-based UN agencies, INGOs, and LNGOs to secure greater community acceptance and engagement, and to ensure that trust is established with Syrian civil society actors, including humanitarian organisations.
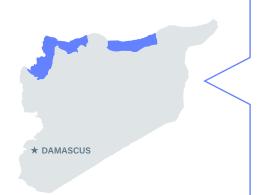
In NWS, governance was fragmented among various local councils, opposition-affiliated administrative bodies, and *de facto* authorities linked to armed groups. International organisations largely operated through LNGO partners in NWS, both due to security concerns and the reputational risks posed by the presence of proscribed terrorist organisations, particularly HTS.[18] However, notable differences in humanitarian governance existed between HTS-controlled Idlib and Syrian National Army (SNA)-controlled Northern Aleppo.

In Idlib, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the political wing of HTS, established in 2021 the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs (MDHA) to oversee and coordinate aid delivery. This was followed by the creation of the Humanitarian Action Coordination Office (HAC), which became instrumental in facilitating the delivery of the cross-border UN-led aid operation from Türkiye.[19] In general, HTS and the SSG created a permissive environment

for humanitarian programming, which has provided a critical lifeline to the nearly 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in camps in areas under their control, although access for humanitarian actors was more constrained closer to former frontline areas. Allegations of aid diversion and misuse have also been levelled against HTS in recent years.[20] In contrast, humanitarian governance in Northern Aleppo, which is controlled by several loosely aligned factions under the umbrella of the SNA, has historically fallen under the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and affiliated local councils. Unlike in Idlib, Türkiye has substantial direct influence and oversight of humanitarian programming in Northern Aleppo, where decision-making by local governance bodies requires approval from government officials in Türkiye and close coordination with the Disaster Emergency Management Authority (AFAD).[21]

Early in the Syrian conflict, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) became the *de facto* governing authority in NES. The AANES established governance mechanisms, that operated independently from Damascus, to manage service provision, security, and humanitarian coordination, through the Humanitarian Affairs Office (HAO), in areas under their control. As a result of the US-backed campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the official military forces of the AANES, significantly expanded their territorial control across NES, which included assuming governance over majority Arab areas in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor governates. Importantly, in 2020, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution that had previously enabled UN agencies to deliver cross-border aid to NES from Iraq, resulting in the NES-based response becoming entirely INGO-led, with support from LNGOs and CSOs.[22]

Figure 4: Shifting areas of access and control as of March 2025

NORTHWEST SYRIA

★ DAMASCUS

INGOs, LNGOs, and CSOs that operated in NWS prior to the fall of the Assad government are continuing to implement projects that were initiated before the government's collapse. Some of these organisations, particularly LNGOs and CSOs, have now registered and are operating in areas formerly controlled by the Assad government. They have established new offices in these regions as part of strategic plans to expand their operations beyond NWS, leveraging the new political landscape to extend their services. The speed at which these organisations have been able to expand operations to newly accessible areas is in part due to the close relationship many have with HAC and the Salvation Government, members of which now largely occupy the most senior positions in the caretaker government.

Another major development in December 2024 was the Turkish-backed SNA's large-scale offensive against SDF-controlled areas of Aleppo. This led to major territorial changes, including the capture of the Menbij city. It also severely disrupted crossline trade and triggered large-scale displacements. NWS-based LNGOs and CSOs have since begun implementing humanitarian activities in these areas that were previously served by the NES response, while the situation on the new frontline remains tense.[23]

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Major uncertainty continues to surround the ultimate outcome of ongoing political processes between the Damascus-based transitional government and the AANES. At present, immediate concerns about the potential for large-scale conflict seem to have reduced due to the breakthrough agreement signed on 10 March 2024, which created a framework for the integration of the AANES and SDF into Syrian state institutions.[24] However, the implementation timeline and details remain uncertain and fraught with challenges. As of late March 2024, NGOs still must register with the AANES to operate in the area, complicating coordination with Damascus. While travel between the south, Damascus, and NWS, has become easier, the situation for the NES region remains more complex and challenging. Checkpoints and security concerns mean some areas remain hard to reach, including large parts of Deir ez Zor governate. Additionally, a process is underway for the large-scale resumption of direct aid delivery by UN agencies in NES, after a multi-year absence resulting from legal barriers. This may include renewed cross border aid operations from Iraq.

In addition, the Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad (RAATA) areas, which were captured by the Turkish-backed SNA during a 2019 offensive, remain under the same humanitarian access and governance framework as SNA-controlled Northern Aleppo.

AREAS FORMERLY UNDER ASSAD GOVERNMENT CONTROL

After the fall of the Assad government, NGOs that previously implemented programmes in NWS can now access these areas. Many organisations have already established offices in newly accessible cities, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. Several LNGOs have also begun closely coordinating with the current government to provide ad hoc support or emergency assistance. UN agencies, INGOs, and LNGOs that were active in these areas prior to Assad's fall are continuing their pre-existing projects without additional requirements. The 10 March agreement is also likely to increase the ability of NES-based LNGOs to establish in Damascus, although the situation remains unclear. However, to initiate any new activities, organisations must obtain renewal registrations from the current government by mid-April 2025. Many INGOs have conducted scoping missions and begun the registration process in line with current procedures. However, both local and international organisations continue to face challenges as governance structures, procedures, and processes remain unclear.

Evolving security dynamics in areas formerly under Assad government control are also impacting humanitarian access, most notably the recent escalation in violence in the coastal regions, which saw the main highway closed for extended periods, and ongoing Israeli military activity in the south of the country.[25]

Torn Syrian flag. iStock.com / TexBr

Table 1: Evolving dynamics of humanitarian access

Governance Arrangements

The transitional government faces a vast array of challenges in establishing an effective and cohesive governance system across Syria. This includes dire economic conditions, security vacuums, the presence of myriad armed groups with their own interests, and malign interference by both regional and international actors. Against this backdrop, new governance arrangements are still being formed, creating significant uncertainty about how aid should be managed and distributed.[26] Following the Assad government's collapse, a patchwork of governance structures arose. Local councils and factions have emerged as *de facto* authorities, leading to diverse approaches to humanitarian aid. In many regions, aid distribution is currently decentralised, which can lead to competition between armed groups and *de facto* authorities for resources and control over aid, complicating international organisations' coordination efforts. Humanitarian actors are also currently facing widespread challenges related to the lack of standardised policies and procedures across different areas, even when dealing with the same overarching authority at the local level (e.g. HAC.)

Security Concerns

Security dynamics in post-Assad Syria remain fragile and complex, with multiple and sometimes interrelated conflicts unfolding simultaneously in various parts of the country. This includes: active hostilities between Türkiye, its proxies, and the SDF; Arab-Kurdish and inter-tribal tensions in Deir ez Zor; country-wide Israeli air strikes and ground operations in the South; an emerging Assad loyalist insurgency concentrated on the coast; and ongoing operations against ISIS, particularly the central and eastern regions. A decade and a half of civil war has fuelled the mass proliferation of small arms and led to the creation of numerous armed groups, numbering well into the hundreds at the height of the conflict. Once relatively stable government-controlled regions are now under the fragmented control of militias or local forces, causing localised conflicts and violence that disrupt or prevent humanitarian operations. Security protocols are constantly changing as new alliances and rivalries form.[27] The dissolution of Assad-era security forces has also created dangerous security vacuums in large swathes of the country, particularly in rural areas, with criminality and lawlessness impacting humanitarian access. As recently witnessed in the coastal regions, deeply held ethno-sectarian and political grievances further threaten to escalate violence, especially in the absence of government actions to address meaningful transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms.

Interior of the abandoned and bullet-scarred hospital in Quneitra, Syria. iStock.com / Joel Carillet

Operational Challenges

Flights to Damascus in several regional hubs have resumed for the first time in many years, and international and Syrian humanitarian workers can enter the country with relative ease. However, within Syria, logistical difficulties have intensified in the post-Assad landscape.[28] Infrastructure is crumbling, and changes in territorial control are disrupting access to aid. Key supply routes have become less safe, leading to delays in aid delivery, while damaged roads and bridges and lack of central coordination complicate aid planning and delivery. In some areas, local forces demand payment for passage.[29] The large-scale presence of unexploded ordnance (UXOs), especially in former frontline areas, also pose both a security threat and serious logistical challenge for returning populations and humanitarian actors. [30]

Furthermore, the transitional government's rapid moves towards economic liberalisation, in combination with the Central Bank's shortage of both local and foreign currency, has led to a serious liquidity crisis in Syria. This interacts with and exacerbates other economic factors, including the impact of ongoing sanctions. This has placed immense strain on households' ability to access cash and meet their basic needs. If the situation worsens, and increased restrictions are placed on withdrawals and transfers, humanitarian actors may also be unable to implement certain programmes. They might also face challenges with procurement, hindering operations, particularly in areas formerly under Assad government control.[31] Persistent and ongoing challenges with the availability of transportation fuel and related price fluctuations in many regions of Syria are also likely to adversely impact humanitarian operations.

Social Dynamics

Social dynamics have become more unpredictable since the Assad government's fall. Some previously loyalist communities are shifting allegiances, creating mistrust of external aid organisations. Others, particularly in NES, tolerate humanitarian actors but prioritise local political or military needs. Fragmentation of allegiance and governance means that aid distribution is sometimes based on political or sectarian loyalty rather than need, and some regions are less receptive to external assistance than others.[32] It is essential, especially in the context of the Assad government's weaponisation of humanitarian aid, that humanitarian actors are aware of existing divisions and tensions and deliver assistance in a way that does not reinforce or worsen inter-group relations. Failure to do so will both undermine Syria's transition to stability and sustainable peace, as well as generate hostility toward aid actors that can limit access and increase security risks.

Emerging humanitarian registration and access processes

The evolving framework for registering humanitarian organisations and securing permissions is affecting local and international NGOs differently. Outside of NES, INGOs' access is now exclusively regulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Office. Initially, there was some speculation in the response that the transitional government would simply scale up the same approach used by the Salvation Government through HAC in NWS, at least for an interim period. However, this was reportedly determined unfeasible for various reasons. The transitional government has publicly recognised the critical importance of humanitarian aid in Syria and voiced a willingness to improve coordination and facilitate humanitarian operations. Nonetheless, procedures and requirements continue to change and related decision-making remains opaque. This has led to widespread uncertainties and concerns among aid actors about the future nature of humanitarian governance in Syria.

Following an initial announcement (January 2024) of general guidelines on licensing and project permissions for humanitarian organisations, which were reportedly vague and led to widespread confusion, MOFA published updated versions for INGOs on 17 March 2024. This includes the Assad-era requirement that INGOs work exclusively through a 'national partner,' which was either SARC or the Syrian Development Organisation (formerly the Syria Trust for Development under Assad). Many participants interviewed for this research voiced concerns about these regulations, particularly regarding impartiality and data sharing. There are also concerns about bureaucratic delays as it is currently understood that all projects will require approval every six months. INGOs are strongly pushing back against these guidelines through sustained advocacy efforts, with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) negotiating with MOFA on behalf of the collective INGO community. Reservations about the new humanitarian governance framework has also limited INGOs' willingness to officially register in Damascus and begin programming implementation until the situation is clarified. Coinciding with the release of the updated guidelines, a directive from Damascus was issued requiring ministry institutions to route all communications with international organisations through the Directorate of Planning and International Cooperation, which has further exacerbated concerns about INGOs' ability to operate independently.[33]

There are also international organisations based in third countries, such as Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon and Erbil in north Iraq, operating through sub-granted local partners that have negotiated special access without registration in Damascus. However, these function on a case-by-case basis and do not guarantee unrestricted access. Furthermore, there is apparently some discussion around whether Syrian-led organisations in third party countries, primarily based out of Gaziantep, should be considered LNGOs or INGOs.

Syrian organisations generally have more flexibility than INGOs, particularly CSOs that were previously operating, as many have an established relationship with the Humanitarian Action Coordination body (HAC). In some cases, local organisations can secure approvals through verbal agreements, especially for urgent humanitarian interventions.[34] This enabled many to rapidly expand to new areas after opposition forces seized power, carrying out rapid needs assessments and emergency activities such as bread distribution.[35] Local NGOs operating in both NWS and government-controlled areas must register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, which theoretically allows them to operate nationwide. However, in practice, they must have specific approval from AANES to operate in NES.[36]

Regulatory pressures and compliance challenges

All humanitarian organisations anticipate increasing scrutiny of their registration and operations. Authorities have mandated license renewals by April 2025, requiring LNGOs to submit detailed financial disclosures, including funding sources.[37] As mentioned above, another mandate requires international organisations to operate

exclusively under a national partner, namely SARC or Syrian Development Organization. This requirement grants these entities full access to sensitive organisational data, including financial records, staff salaries, and beneficiary information, raising serious concerns about operational independence and data security.[38] An interviewee from an international organisation providing health services said:

> Previously, organisations like [ours] had direct relationships with hospitals, overseeing their operations in a collaborative, non-hierarchical model aligned with international health standards. This ensured that medical facilities adhered to global quality benchmarks while receiving the necessary technical and financial support. However, under the new regulations, direct engagement will no longer be possible. Instead, international organisations will be required to secure approval for even basic activities, such as conducting field visits, from their designated national partner." (INGO representative)[39]

This shift could drastically alter the humanitarian response. For example, INGOs and their direct local partners are currently responsible for an estimated 80% of healthcare services in NWS.[40] If some of these organisations withdraw due to the imposed restrictions, the reduction in medical services could be catastrophic. The enforcement of this mandate limits operational flexibility, jeopardises healthcare access, and may force international organisations to compromise their impartiality.[41]

Ultimately, the current registration framework adopted for areas formerly under Assad government control and NWS (no changes have been made to NGO registration in NES at this time) appears to be similar in many ways to the system in place under Assad. It should be noted that the framework is still evolving, and importantly, the new government faces massive capacity challenges. This means that keeping most pre-existing processes and procedures intact was likely identified as the best approach in the short term. However, it has been reported that relations between the UN and transitional government are strained, with OCHA's Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in Syria apparently yet to meet the President Al Sharaa or any of his ministers as of mid-March.[42] This apparent distance will do little to quell the anxieties of INGOs and LNGOs about OCHA's ability to effectively advocate on their behalf for an enabling humanitarian governance framework that more closely aligns with core humanitarian principles.

As was the case under Assad, granting state-affiliated entities control over international operations risks undermining the efficiency, neutrality and effectiveness of aid delivery. The extension of former registration and permissions regulations, without comprehensive revision, reinforces bureaucratic barriers that restrict humanitarian organisations' ability to operate independently. This not only limits their capacity to respond swiftly to urgent needs, but also increases the likelihood of aid being politicised or directed based on state priorities rather than humanitarian principles. It has been suggested that these regulations may change in time, but as of this writing, they remain in place. These issues may cause major humanitarian actors to reconsider their presence, leading to severe disruptions in essential services for vulnerable Syrians.

✈ SHIFT 2: RESTRUCTURING THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

> " One of the major obstacles to humanitarian action today is the lack of coordination between clusters and stakeholders. There is no clear mechanism to organise the distribution of aid or accurately define responsibilities. To date, there is no single coordination mechanism for the whole of Syria."
> (Syrian CSO representative)[43]

The fragmented humanitarian coordination architecture of the Syrian response, a result of territorial division and Assad's policies, has presented immense challenges for effective aid delivery throughout the crisis. Its complex and multi-layered nature has also often meant that it is poorly understood by humanitarian actors.[44] Despite extensive efforts to mitigate and overcome these challenges, and while acknowledging the progress that was made over the years, the response has consistently suffered from a lack of common understanding around coordination mechanisms. This has led to haphazard communication and information sharing, duplication of efforts, gaps in services, and inefficient use of resources. The ongoing transition in Syria presents a unique opportunity to restructure humanitarian coordination at the national level and establish a more unified and coherent approach. However, this is a complex undertaking that also threatens to cause serious disruptions and unintended consequences. In the context of massive funding reductions and fragile governance and security dynamics, many experts have cautioned against a rush to centralise coordination mechanisms, advocating for a more gradual transition, dependent on how the situation evolves.

Overview of humanitarian architecture in Syria

Historically, the Syria response has been divided across three hubs (GoS, NWS, NES), with an overarching WoS coordination mechanism based in Amman. In addition to the Damascus-based UN response, which is led by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and previously covered areas under government control, a parallel UN response was formally established through UN Security Council Resolution 2165 in 2014. The resolution enabled UN agencies and implementing partners to deliver cross-border (from Türkiye, Jordan, and Iraq) and crossline aid in opposition-held areas, without government consent, which is usually a legal requirement for UN humanitarian operations. Between 2014 and 2024, the number of authorised border crossings dramatically reduced from four to one, the Baba al Hawa crossing from Türkiye into NWS, due to a series of vetoes by Russia and China during United Nations Security Council (UNSC) votes on renewing access. In July 2023, in a long-anticipated move, Russia vetoed the renewal of the UN cross-border aid operations through Baba al Hawa, plunging the Gaziantep-based NWS response into deep uncertainty. However, negotiations between the UN and the Assad government ultimately saw the operation continue under a consent-based model. This move by the government was widely understood as an attempt to gain leverage in the broader context of Assad's push for a 'normalisation' of relations with the international community and increased economic support. The shift in legal arrangement also made cross-border UN aid vulnerable to the government withdrawing consent at its discretion, although it remained in place until Assad fled Syria in early December 2024.

In contrast, the NES-based response is entirely INGO-led through the NES NGO Forum (NESF). The NESF was established in 2015, during the height of ISIS-related conflict escalations, to provide critical support across the response in NES, as well as assist in the coordination of cross-border aid from Iraq. In early 2020, UNSC authorisation for the delivery of cross-border aid ended. This meant the NESF had to quickly adapt to an operational context without formal UN coordination mechanisms in place, creating serious obstacles to information sharing, communication, and collaboration with other response hubs. Over time, the NESF has expanded in capacity and assumed roles and functions normally held by OCHA and other UN agencies, such as inter-sectoral coordination, access, advocacy, and information management (IM).

The UN-led WoS approach was initiated in 2015 to provide an umbrella structure for coordination across the three hubs and ensure a *'coherent, efficient, and cost-effective'* response.[45] Within the WoS structure, the highest-level bodies are the Strategic Steering Committee (SSC) and Inter Sector Group (ISG). Given the inherent complexity of the Syrian crisis, stark contextual differences between hubs, and reduced funding, the WoS architecture has faced difficulty fully operationalising its mandate.[46] This has, in part, stemmed from divergent views on core WoS functions and a lack of clarity around the delineation of roles and responsibilities between WoS and hub-level coordination. Reduced capacity due to funding cuts has also meant that WoS support has been increasingly limited to reactive decision-making, as opposed to future-oriented strategic planning for the wider response.

Moving towards a unified coordination structure: an uncertain transition

Soon after the leadership change in Syria, the Damascus-based HCT released transitional plans for a new coordination structure guided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework. The approach aims to 'create a streamlined, standardised, and representative coordination architecture, led by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) in Damascus by June 2025.'[47] It seeks to strengthen the subnational coordination architecture through several hubs across Syria, with area-based coordination facilitated by OCHA and supported by an Inter-Cluster Coordination Group covering all of Syria.[48] Current discussions suggest subnational coordination bodies will be established across seven geographic areas (Damascus; Aleppo-Idlib; Homs-Hama; Suwayada-Daraa-Qunietra; Hassakah-Raqqa; Deir ez Zor; and Tartous-Lattakia). Transition plans also include OCHA assuming responsibility for humanitarian coordination in NES from the NESF and the Inter Sector Working Group (ISWG).[49]

The rapid pace of change and lack of clarity on the transition process have caused widespread apprehensions among humanitarian actors, particularly INGOs and LNGOs. Current plans emphasise the importance of subnational

coordination and 'empowering hubs across Syria,' but are perceived by some to maintain a fairly 'Damascus-centric' approach.[50] Damascus-based HCT-led coordination is widely seen as dominated by the UN at the expense of INGOs and LNGOs, with both being largely underrepresented in cluster or sector working group positions. This is unusual in a global response context, and in stark contrast to NWS and NES responses.[51] Sustained advocacy efforts are underway to push for high-level representation of both INGOs and LNGOs within the new coordination structure. In addition, the current lack of documentation outlining the transition process and how the new structure will work in practice (e.g. organogram) has added to a general climate of uncertainty. On a practical level, there are also serious questions about how an expanded subnational structure will maintain the minimum coordination and IM functions across clusters/sectors in an increasingly constrained funding environment. Others have raised concerns that multiple hubs risk further increasing fragmentation.[52]

In NES, the transition from an NGO-led response to an OCHA-led one under the IASC structure was accelerated by the USAID funding freeze, which has had significant impacts on many NES-based coordination positions. Initially planned to take place in a phased manner through to the end of 2025, the transition has since been moved forward to the end of April. This compressed timeframe has placed significant pressure on humanitarian organisations raising serious concerns about inadequate handover time and a loss of context-specific and institutional knowledge.

All existing NES working groups are set to be phased out or merged with Damascus-based working groups as part of the transition. It is expected that this process will vary greatly between sectors depending on available resources and response priorities. Ideally, existing NES working group coordinators will support new coordination bodies until the end of 2025 to ensure adequate handover time, as advocated for by the NESF. However, due to funding cuts, no handover at all will be possible for several sectors, such as WASH, protection, and nutrition. Furthermore, INGOs and LNGOs in NES have

been operating in communities for many years, building strong community acceptance and a deep and nuanced understanding of complex local dynamics. Careful steps should be taken to leverage this experience and knowledge by the new coordination architecture to ensure continuity of context-sensitive humanitarian programming.

A major unknown for the NWS response is how Gaziantep-based organisations will integrate with those in Damascus, especially given the historically different operational approaches of UN agencies and INGOs in both locations. For example, in Damascus, direct partnerships with local NGOs were restricted, requiring INGOs to work through Amanah (renamed to the Syrian development organization post-Assad) or SARC. Conversely, in Gaziantep, there was greater engagement with local organisations as implementing partners. This fundamental difference in operational culture raises concerns about the extent to which – and how – Gaziantep-based staff will transition to Damascus. Research by ICVA has shown that Gaziantep had the highest level of localisation in the Middle East, while GoS ranked among the lowest.[53] The transition risks dismantling hard-won localisation efforts, unless there is a deliberate effort to integrate experienced Gaziantep staff into Damascus-led operations. The dynamics surrounding integration are also further complicated by a degree of mistrust between Gaziantep and Damascus-based humanitarian actors, stemming from the latter's previous relationship with the Assad government. If the shift results in a closed coordination model favouring UN agencies and INGOs, it will severely undermine the localisation progress achieved over the years.[54]

Torn Syrian flag. iStock.com / TexBr

> "More than ninety per cent of the challenges facing humanitarian organisations today stem from a lack of funding. Projects are designed on paper, plans are meticulously crafted, yet the absence of financial resources makes their implementation nearly impossible. Some areas receive adequate support, while others are left in indefinite waiting. The gap between supported and unsupported regions widens by the day, rendering the humanitarian response uneven and unable to meet actual needs equitably." (Syrian CSO representative)[55]

Over recent years, major reductions in donor funding have widened the gap between response capacity and growing humanitarian needs in Syria. Highlighting this, the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria secured only 34.5% of required funds – a record shortfall.[56] At the beginning of 2024, funding cuts caused the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to end its main food assistance programme, leaving over five million food insecure Syrians without support.[57] Although further decreases in funding were widely expected, in line with global trends, the unprecedented USAID funding freeze (see box 1) announced on 20 January 2025 has placed extreme pressure on an already strained and overstretched system, at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest level since the crisis began. Several other major donor states have also either announced significant reductions in humanitarian funding or are expected to do so in the coming period. The recently held, 9th "Standing with Syria" conference, held by the EU, saw a 29% decrease in pledged funding compared to last year.[58] This funding reality severely restricts the ability of humanitarian actors to address pervasive needs and support longer-term recovery at this critical moment in Syria's history.

Box 1: Impacts of the USAID funding freeze

The USAID funding freeze will have devastating impacts in Syria as the US is by far the largest single donor, funding 25% of the HRP.[59] It is also the main contributor to both pooled funds focused on NWS, the Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS). In NES alone, the funding freeze immediately stopped assistance to over 2 million people across virtually all sectors, with a senior official stating that "*we are looking at a massive scale of loss of support that cannot be met by other donors [...] from a humanitarian perspective, this is catastrophic.*"[60] Displaced people, particularly those who live in informal camps, are projected to be hardest hit as food, water and health services are withdrawn.

While USAID waived the funding freeze for life-saving activities, there was significant confusion about which activities are classified as lifesaving and therefore qualify for funding. This led to delays in approvals, procurement, and retention and payment of staff. In late February 2025, the US government announced the termination of over 80% of USAID grants and contracts globally, including a significant proportion in Syria. It is likely that several INGOs will be forced to cease or significantly scale back their Syria operations and many LNGOs and CSOs will close entirely. The cuts also have major implications for hundreds of projects in Syria that USAID co-funded with other donors. USAID itself is in the process of being dismantled and remaining contracts will now be overseen by the US State Department. The full extent of the impacts remains unclear. Recently, several organizations in NES that initially received termination letters were informed that the decision had been reversed. However, many are still unable to resume activities due to severe liquidity issues, as no disbursements or invoice payments have been received from USAID since the end of 2024 – and there is little clarity on when funds will be released. The latest data on Syria indicates a confirmed reduction of $52 million in funding (representing terminated programs), amounting to 13% of total US support. While significant, this cut is less severe than initially feared.[61]

Impact of maintained sanctions on humanitarian operations

As the humanitarian response in Syria adjusts to the seismic impact of abrupt USAID funding cuts, the Assad-era sanctions remain largely intact, compounding the country's deep economic woes. Significant concerns within the international community remain around the new government's Islamic extremist background, including its previous direct affiliation with Al-Qaeda. Western states seek to use the prospect of sanctions relief as leverage to incentivise tangible moves towards inclusive governance and respect for human rights. Sanctions are likely to remain in place until there is clear evidence that the transitional government is moving in this direction.

> " Sanctions pose a major challenge, particularly at the operational level. Registration process is already difficult, but the biggest hurdle is financial management – figuring out how to transfer funds to partners. This issue directly impacts future planning, forcing us to remain reliant on existing setups in Lebanon and Jordan." (INGO representative)[62]

Sanctions present several challenges for international humanitarian actors in Syria and prevent the scaling up of recovery and development-oriented interventions. For Syria-based LNGOs and CSOs sanctions create often insurmountable barriers to accessing external funding. This can cripple their ability to build capacity and expand activities or, in many cases, cause them to cease operating altogether.[63] Given the renewed international attention on Syria, discussions around humanitarian aid acting as a 'diplomatic bridge' between the new government and foreign states, serving to build trust and good faith, may pave the way for additional sanctions relief and more substantial longer-term recovery funding and investment.[64]

While humanitarian exemptions are technically included in the current sanctions regime, humanitarian actors still face significant sanctions-related challenges. These include:

- Many international banks, financial institutions, and private sector actors are wary of violating sanctions, which can lead to 'over compliance' and refusal to process transactions or engage with any Syria-based entities or individuals, even when humanitarian exemptions are in place. This can lead to major delays in project implementation and leave organisations unable to cover their core costs.

- Significant bureaucratic hurdles in securing humanitarian exemptions, which vary by country. The process is complex and time-consuming, causing delays in aid delivery, as was seen during the Türkiye-Syria earthquake response in February 2023.[65]

- Tight restrictions on Syria's banking and financial sectors make it extraordinarily difficult for Syria-based LNGOs and CSOs to access external funding.

- Broad restrictions on trade and exports create challenges for humanitarian actors in procuring essential supplies, such as medical equipment and medicines, as well as equipment and spare parts for critical infrastructure rehabilitation, including water stations and wheat-to-bread processing facilities.

- Inflated cost of core goods and services, such as fuel, due to financial restrictions and trade embargos results in project budgets reaching fewer beneficiaries.

As sanctions impede humanitarian operations in Syria, donor countries enforcing them are providing less funding, increasing the pressure on humanitarian actors. Sanction removal or loosening is linked with political developments on the ground. However, while in place, sanctions continue to severely undermine the government's ability to reestablish basic services and improve economic conditions. In turn, this threatens to generate increased instability and challenges to their authority.

> **We are currently caught between emergency response and early recovery. The problem is that we have been in this phase for years without being able to transition to development due to ongoing crises and sanctions."** (Syrian CSO representative)[66]

The conflict in Syria has had widespread impacts on economic, infrastructural, and human development progress.[67] Participants frequently expressed frustration about the negative impacts of short-term funding and project cycles on their ability to reduce aid dependency, build resilience, and support sustainable recovery in the communities they serve. The unfolding transition has given many actors hope about the prospect of a gradual shift away from emergency relief and crisis response to recovery and stabilisation. In recent years, due to the protracted nature of the conflict, donors have also increasingly recognised the need for more integrated early recovery assistance, which has been reflected in increased funding allocations for related programming.

> **We have long advocated for the [integrated] approach. We have the expertise, the understanding of the context, and we know the needs. What we lack is the funding to implement long-term projects."** (Syrian CSO representative)[68]

Early recovery activities specifically focus on restoring basic services, livelihoods support and building community resilience in post-crisis contexts as a pathway to longer-term development interventions. Due to donor redlines regarding funding reconstruction while Assad was in power, the discussions on early recovery in the Syria response became highly politicised and undermined efforts, as the lines between what constitutes early recovery and development aid remained blurry.[69] With Assad gone, many anticipate that previous donor reservations may ease. However, the challenges Syria faces in making this shift are immense. The security situation is extremely fragile, and western sanctions remain in place for now. Meaningful progress towards stabilisation will require

complex and sustained coordination between local, national and international humanitarian and development actors. It should be noted that there are also voices in the response that caution against a large-scale and overly rapid pivot to development-oriented programming, given continued instability and record-level humanitarian needs.

Early recovery activities not only reflect the priorities of many Syrians and humanitarian actors but also offer long-term cost-effectiveness for donors. While infrastructure repair, livelihood support, and service restoration may require higher upfront investment, they can significantly reduce the long-term need for costly emergency aid. For instance, a study by one NGO in Syria found that repairing local water infrastructure cost only half as much as providing a year's worth of water trucking to the same community.[70]

Longer-term, integrated projects that support sustainable recovery are also essential for the creation of durable solutions for returnees and IDPs. Although over one million Syrians have returned home since early December 2024, millions more remain displaced inside and outside the country. Various factors prevent the safe and dignified return of displaced persons (these include UXO contamination, housing, land and property rights issues, and lack of civil documentation). However, as recently highlighted in a movement intentions survey undertaken by REACH, in addition to destroyed and damaged shelters, IDPs' most cited barriers to return include a lack of essential services (e.g. water, electricity, health, education), and livelihoods opportunities in areas of origin. Only longer-term programming can adequately address these issues.[71] Moreover, to address the trauma and divisions caused by 14 years of war (that is, the social dimension of recovery), there is a need for interventions that operate in tandem with sustained social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts.[72]

Critical infrastructure and restoration of basic services needs overview

The impact of extensive damage to infrastructure and housing limits the availability of basic services and prevents many displaced individuals from returning to their homes. Addressing these issues is critical for enabling both the safe return of internally displaced and refugee households who wish to return and restoring an acceptable standard of living for non-displaced populations. Efforts to support this transition will require action on the following matters:

Landmine and UXO clearance: Syria remains one of the most UXO-contaminated countries in the world, which poses severe risks to civilians across the country, and hampers efforts toward Syria's recovery. The Mine Action Area of Responsibility in Syria has reported 629 casualties from UXOs since December 2024.[73] Without systematic UXO clearance, entire communities remain inaccessible, preventing infrastructure restoration and endangering civilian lives.

Shelter repair and rehabilitation: Approximately one third of Syria's housing stock has sustained damage, while 328,000 homes have been completely destroyed.[74] The Syria Humanitarian Response Priorities January-March 2025 appeal estimated 7 million people were in need of shelter, and 6.6 million in need of non-food items (NFIs).[75] The high number of IDPs has intensified severe overcrowding in displacement sites, increasing the urgent need for emergency shelters and the repair and rehabilitation of existing shelters. A needs assessment conducted by REACH in December 2024 indicates that shelter was the first-priority need of assessed communities, in which most people are living in unfinished or abandoned houses, damaged buildings, or tents.[76]

The lack of funding and building materials and difficulty in ascertaining legal ownership complicate these efforts. Many displaced individuals lack the necessary documentation to prove property ownership, which can impede reconstruction initiatives. Many displaced families choose to remain in camps, which offer better basic services than their home communities.[77]

Water and sanitation systems repair. More than half of Syria's population lacks access to basic water, sanitation, and hygiene services, with the national water supply having reduced by 40% since the beginning of the conflict.[78] Over half of the nation's water treatment plans and sewage systems are damaged or not functioning at all. These impacts are compounded by the effects of climate change, with parts of Syria having experienced historic droughts in recent years. These factors also have knock-on effects in relation to the spread of pollution, waterborne diseases, and agricultural productivity. This results in both immediate life-threatening impacts and longer-term ones. Supporting the repair and rehabilitation of water systems will be essential for facilitating the transition toward recovery in Syria.

Power and energy access restoration. Energy production has been severely impeded since the start of the conflict: power plants have sustained extensive damage, and the capacity of the national electricity grid has dropped by 75%.[79] On average, many areas experience two to six hours of electricity daily, while some areas report no available electricity. Power stations must be repaired and electricity restored to essential services such as hospitals and water facilities.

Rehabilitation of roads. Many roads remain blocked or damaged, preventing access to basic services and delaying reconstruction efforts. Reopening roads and repairing key infrastructure will facilitate economic recovery and access to essential services.

Healthcare system rehabilitation. The collapse of healthcare services, exacerbated by US funding cuts that have caused many hospitals to cease operations in Northern Syria, is harming people's health. While many organisations in NWS continue to provide good-quality and free healthcare services, the overall sector remains critically underfunded.[80]

SHIFT 5: INCREASED DIFFICULTY ASSESSING AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE AND AT-RISK GROUPS

> **The biggest challenge was the large number of people in need and the cessation of most state institutions from working, as it became clear that many people not only needed food but also many other services." (INGO representative)**[81]

Access to accurate and timely data is an essential component of designing effective humanitarian programming that ensures limited resources prioritise and target those most in need. However, as highlighted by interview participants, large information gaps persist across the Syria response, and the rapidly shifting context means that updated baseline data across sectors is urgently required to ensure aid reaches those who most need it. More in-depth research is also critical to understand the complex, overlapping needs of particularly marginalised and at-risk groups and tailor interventions accordingly. For example, interview participants reported major information gaps related to vulnerable women and girls, such as female survivors released from detention, whose needs remain poorly understood limiting response design. Other participants also mentioned the importance of assessments based on community needs, rather than donor funding priorities.

Many organisations do not have the capacity to carry out their own assessments, often forcing them to rely on outdated data. Reductions in funding have also severely impacted dedicated assessment and analysis actors, which several interview participants highlighted as a significant factor limiting overall response capacity and flexibility.[82] For example, WFP's Vulnerability Analysis Unit (VAM) is currently downsizing due to recent funding cuts, and other organisations such as iMMAP, have stopped operating in Syria altogether in recent years.

Access constraints (such as those related to security and approvals) and outdated population data also pose challenges for comprehensive assessments, particularly country-wide, household-level multi-sector needs assessments

(MSNA), which are the basis for the OCHA-led Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and HRP processes. For the past two years, no MSNA data collection has taken place in areas formerly under the control of the Assad government, leaving a huge information gap. OCHA has recently announced that a country-wide MSNA will take place in June 2025[83].

Primary data collection was extraordinarily difficult under the Assad regime, with strict redlines and government involvement making independent data collection all but impossible without major risks. In areas outside of Assad government control, the permissions situation was markedly better vis-a-vis local authorities, although collecting data on sensitive topics (e.g. sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child recruitment) remained challenging. The extent to which the new government will create an enabling environment for critically important data collection and assessment work remains to be seen. Initial confusion around the permissions process has led to the delay or postponement of several important assessments in recent months. Updated guidelines for INGOs and LNGOs, announced by the government in March 2025, stated that INGO data collection requests will be first reviewed by the 'national partner' before submission to HAC to determine whether the project is "necessary" and does not duplicate any existing efforts.[84] It also says that if, in the government's view, the data already exists, they will share with the requesting partner from a "needs bank." LNGOs submit requests directly to HAC.[85]

Beyond access to timely data and assessments, several other challenges inhibit the ability of response actors to adequately meet the needs of vulnerable and at-risk groups. Challenges with coordination can lead to duplication in some areas and critical gaps in others. For example, multiple organisations might provide overlapping services in one location, such as food distribution in a city, but neglect rural and hard-to-reach areas.[86] These gaps also leave vulnerable groups

Torn Syrian flag. iStock.com / TexBr

without consistent referral pathways for critical support, particularly IDPs with political, ethnic or religious backgrounds that engender distrust or administrative barriers when seeking assistance.[87] More generally, participants reported issues with the response being centralised around major cities at the expense of rural and hinterland areas, where needs are often highest. There are concerns that a rush to centralise operations in Damascus by many organisations and expand to newly accessible areas, combined with shifts in funding priorities, may lead to decreased programming in regions formerly outside of government control where needs remain critical.

As discussed previously, the suspension of USAID funding has significantly reduced the operational flexibility of many organisations, leading to widespread layoffs and service disruptions. While the impacts have been felt across all levels of the response, they have impacted the protection sector particularly severely. The end of a wide range of gender, protection, and inclusion programs is expected to have dangerous consequences for vulnerable groups. An increasing number of people released from detention are approaching protection partners for various forms of support, including mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and legal support. The protection sector is currently working with partners to map available expert service providers, but is extremely constrained by the funding situation.[88] The dire economic situation and lack of social services create heightened protection risks, particularly for vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, children, elderly, women and girls, and persons without civil documentation.[89] There is also a critical need to enhance SGBV essential service availability and accessibility at a time when related programming is being vastly reduced.[90]

> " We are working under the principle that even a small contribution has an impact. Of course, we cannot save all of Syria, but we can lay the foundation for rebuilding the country by working together." (Syrian NGO representative)[91]

Interview participants further highlighted alarming gaps in healthcare and humanitarian outreach due to access constraints, funding shortages and logistical challenges. For example, Hajin, a community of approximately 30,000 people, has no functioning hospital, and a primary healthcare centre had to close due to the US funding freeze.[92] Many other communities in NES lack access to healthcare or protection services.[93] In southern Syria, particularly in rural areas of Daraa, communities often remain beyond the reach of humanitarian organisations due to access restrictions and funding limitations. For many organisations, the logistical costs of reaching these areas are prohibitively high, further limiting the ability of aid organisations to provide consistent and meaningful support.[94]

Furthermore, while the fall of Assad has enabled voluntary return of IDPs, many have no home to return to and are in desperate need of continued support and services. According to the Response Coordination Group, a local NGO that reports on humanitarian needs in northern Syria, more than 90% of IDPs in camps lack access to basic services such as clean water, education and healthcare.[95] The US funding freeze will cause these overwhelmed services to deteriorate further and may contribute to a breakdown in camp coordination and management, leading to increased security risks.[96]

SHIFT 6: COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES STRAINING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

> " What we have seen is that some international organisations have entered with a competitive approach rather than a supportive one. Instead of strengthening localisation efforts, they focus on negotiating with authorities and implementing projects directly, sidelining local initiatives." (Local expert)[97]

Drastic contextual changes are straining relationships between humanitarian actors. The relationships between local and international NGOs in Syria are increasingly shaped by competition over resources, evolving funding strategies, and localisation efforts. Tensions exist between local and international actors and among INGOs. and UN agencies as funding constraints and donor priorities influence geographic access and operational control. As international actors and intermediaries receive reduced funding from donors, it is anticipated that even less will trickle down to local organisations. Many implementing partners and CSOs have already shut down after the halt in US funding.[98]

Some representatives of LNGOs and CSOs voiced concerns that localisation is being undermined. They are worried that INGO and UN scoping missions, often justified by the need for improved efficiency and stronger oversight of aid delivery, signal a shift away from relying on local partners. Local organisations claimed that by using their own resources to gather information, assess needs, and implement projects, international organisations reduce their reliance on established local partners for contextual knowledge, logistics, and community engagement. Some participants reported that they are consulted less frequently by international organisations than before, heightening concerns about being sidelined. This alleged shift not only restricts funding opportunities for local NGOs but diminishes their critical role in the humanitarian response.[99]

The Assad government's control over the aid sector in Syria meant that the UN and INGOs developed a complex relationship with the government in Damascus, as they were forced to compromise neutrality to preserve access to affected communities. This has significantly undermined the UN and INGOs' reputation among Syrian communities and local actors and can act as a barrier to stronger partnerships.[100] Additionally, perceived power imbalances, whereby local actors often feel sidelined or disregarded in decision-making processes, while international actors may perceive local organisations as lacking capacity or the ability to manage large-scale programs, further undermines relationships.[101]

Local organisations reported that INGOs are recruiting their most qualified staff, leaving them with large capacity gaps. This trend is particularly detrimental because many of these professionals have spent years building relationships with communities, understanding local dynamics, and gaining invaluable contextual knowledge. Their departure not only weakens the institutional capacity of local organisations but also undermines the very objective of localisation – to strengthen and empower national humanitarian actors.[102]

Participants also highlighted competition between NGOs operating in different regions of Syria. For example, there is a risk of organisations from NWS being marginalised because INGOs operating in GoS-controlled areas may prefer working with their previous partners, who are already experienced in compliance and due diligence.[103]

> " There is already sensitivity and negative competition between organisations in Northwest Syria and those in government-controlled areas. This divide is further exacerbated by the way donors and international organisations dictate where organisations should operate – for instance, keeping Northwest-based organisations confined to that region while maintaining the same approach for organisations in Damascus and beyond. Such restrictions will only deepen the divide and worsen the situation." (Syrian CSO representative)[104]

Another area of tension identified by stakeholders was between community-based organisations (CBOs) and larger local and national organisations that are expanding into areas formerly under Assad government control. CBOs are deeply embedded in their communities but were previously banned from accessing international funding. As national organisations – many of which were initially based in NWS or neighbouring countries – seek to expand into GoS-controlled areas, tensions are surfacing. These actors, some of whom were originally established in opposition-held territories, are now registering in Damascus and attempting to operate across multiple regions. While this expansion is driven by access to funding and the changing operational environment, it raises concerns about legitimacy and competition for resources. When NGOs expand into areas where they lack historical presence, communities may perceive them as outsiders – akin to international organisations – raising scepticism about their motives and effectiveness.[105]

" Expanding NGOs will often struggle with local acceptance, as trust is built through historical presence, cultural ties, and long-term engagement. Organisations from Idlib, Aleppo, or Homs may face challenges gaining trust in regions like the Syrian coast or Deir ez Zor, where they lack deep-rooted relationships. Even with local offices and staff, their community connection remains weaker than that of long-established organisations." (Local expert)[106]

Celebrations following the fall of the Assad government, London. Alex Ward.

SECTION 3: NAVIGATING THE SHIFTS

The transition in Syria has significant implications for the operations of humanitarian actors. The end of Assad's rule, and the severe restrictions on aid delivery that characterised it, presents an opportunity to reform and improve the humanitarian system, including rebuilding trust and accountability with affected populations and communities across Syria.

> " For years, we have seen aid distribution being influenced by political affiliations rather than humanitarian needs. With the new governance structure, there is an opportunity to rebuild trust in the humanitarian system by ensuring that aid reaches those most in need, regardless of political or sectarian alignment." (Syrian CBO representative)[107]

This section outlines the specific opportunities emerging in response to the shifts in Syria's humanitarian landscape. Interview participants discussed being in crisis response mode, unable to plan for sustained intervention due to the dynamic landscape and dire funding outlook. However, humanitarian actors have several options for making better use of available resources and enhancing their support to communities in need.

ACTION 1: SUPPORT UNIMPEDED, NEEDS-BASED ACCESS ACROSS SYRIA

The transition in Syria has fundamentally upended long-standing humanitarian access dynamics and created new ones.[108] Active hostilities and armed attacks have erupted in previously stable areas, such as Tartous and Lattakia governates, while old frontline areas have quietened. While in power, the Assad government severely restricted the movement and access of humanitarian actors and selectively determined which populations received aid based on political affiliations. At present, humanitarian organisations are able to reach previously underserved and neglected communities as they expand their geographic scope and adjust to new operational realities. The breakdown of former zones of control has allowed humanitarian actors to expand their programming to newly accessible regions, as evidenced by the quick expansion of many NWS-based organisations, particularly LNGOs, to other parts of the country. Hundreds of humanitarian workers who have worked on the Syria response for years are currently able to travel to Damascus and elsewhere.

Despite the complexity of the situation, dramatic contextual changes wrought by the transition have generated hopes for a more enabling environment for humanitarian actors. Whether and to what extent this comes to pass will depend on emerging government policy. To date, many involved in the response have expressed concerns about aspects of the new humanitarian governance framework. Although several international organisations have recently registered in Damascus, others have elected to wait until the situation becomes clearer. Due to uncertainty regarding the ongoing negotiations between the AANES and the Damascus-based government, it is also currently unclear if, when, and how new humanitarian governance frameworks will expand to NES. Sustained advocacy and engagement are needed to ensure that some of the access constraints that hindered aid delivery under the Assad government are not repeated. However, the new government has also displayed an inclination for pragmatism, and a technocratic approach to staffing, in addition to public statements on supporting aid operations. This provides a basis for cautious optimism about humanitarian governance and improved access.

✅ RECOMMENDATIONS

🇺🇳 UN/OCHA

- ✓ **Strengthen engagement and relationship-building efforts with relevant government authorities** to ensure emerging regulatory frameworks do not impose unnecessary constraints that impact the independence and access of humanitarian operations.

- ✓ **Advocate for positions among the INGO/LNGO community** when engaging and negotiating with government authorities about evolving humanitarian governance framework and access constraints.

- ✓ **Disseminate detailed and timely updates to all humanitarian actors regarding changes to rules and regulations** for registrations, permissions, and access through established, centralised communications channels.

🏛 INGOS/LNGOs

- ✓ **Continue sustained consultations via well-established NGO coordination bodies** such as the Syrian Regional NGO Forum, NES Forum, and Syria NGO Alliance to formulate clear collective advocacy positions around emerging humanitarian governance and access.

- ✓ **Collaborate through NGO coordination bodies to create a detailed 'living' document with comprehensive practical information** about the shared resource on the new registration and permission processes, communications mediums and contact details, as well as engagement dynamics with authorities at different administrative levels across regions, based on experiences and lessons learned..

- ✓ **Engage, build trust and establish constructive relationships with new authorities at the local level**, based on ethical and equitable distribution of resources, to facilitate access to affected populations and needs-based aid delivery.

- ✓ **Maintain up-to-date situational awareness to inform decision-making while the security situation in Syria remains dynamic,** including participation of appropriate focal points in existing area-based humanitarian access working groups/coordination bodies. This is especially important for organisations expanding operations to newly accessible areas.

- ✓ **Register with established information actors** (e.g. International NGO Safety Organisation, Mercy Corps Crisis Analysis) to receive regular security incident reports and context updates and attend organised roundtable discussions.

- ✓ **Strengthen and forge new partnerships with local Syrian actors** and community leaders to gather near real-time security and access updates.

💰 Donors

- ✓ **Emphasise the need for a governance framework that ensures impartial, needs-based, , and efficient aid distribution across the country** without unnecessary delays or interference when engaging with relevant Syrian government entities.

ACTION 2: SUPPORT A SYRIAN-LED RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

The rapid proliferation of Syrian humanitarian organisations was part of a wider flourishing Syrian civil society post-2011, both inside the country (in areas outside government-control) and among the diaspora in neighbouring countries and beyond. They have played a central role in the humanitarian response throughout the crisis, although region-specific dynamics have shaped capacities. Time and again, such as during the February 2023 earthquake and later as the Assad government collapsed, local organisations have demonstrated more agility than their international counterparts to quickly mobilise for emergency response.

Many began as small grassroots initiatives at the forefront of providing emergency aid to conflict-affected communities. Subsequently, driven by international actors' reliance on local organisations for access to opposition-held areas, a large number have grown into highly capable NGOs with hundreds of staff and multi-million-dollar operating budgets. For example, the Elaf for Relief and Development network emerged from the collaboration of 14 community-based organisations, and has since grown through partnerships with OCHA, AFNS and others to deliver assistance to more than 600,000 people across Syria and Türkiye.[109] With Assad's removal from power, the experience, capacities, and knowledge of Syrian NGOs formerly confined to areas outside of government control can now play a pivotal role within the national-level response. The end of Assad's rule, which supressed localisation progress in the Damascus-based response, is a significant window of opportunity for donors, the UN, and international organisations to take meaningful action on their commitment to supporting Syrian actors in taking the lead. Participants from international organisations emphasised that the new circumstances would enable partnerships with local actors that were unthinkable under the previous government.[110]

Localisation has made the greatest gains by far in the Gaziantep-based NWS response. For example, 62% of the UN-managed Syrian Cross border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) was directly allocated to 27 LNGOs in 2024, although direct funding from institutional donors remains much more limited.[111] LNGOs operating in NWS have also experienced increased representation within coordination, such as taking on working group hosting responsibilities.[112] However, a 2023 report exploring the perspectives of LNGOs on localisation in NWS highlighted that, while advances have been made, fundamental challenges and frustrations remain.[113] Foremost among these were the ongoing power imbalances underlying LNGOs' relationships with their international partners that perpetuate the exclusion of Syrian voices from higher level decision-making processes.[114] Beyond dedicated, tailored capacity building and reducing barriers to direct funding, both of which are critically important, international actors must take concrete steps to ensure Syrians have a prominent and influential voice within the most consequential decision-making bodies of the response. This should be advanced through adopting explicit and measurable targets to track progress and ensure accountability.

International actors can further strengthen a Syrian-led response by reinforcing equitable partnerships and accelerating the transition of INGOs from direct service providers to enablers of local and national organisations at the country-wide level. This is especially relevant as INGOs experience new access opportunities while funding becomes more competitive, potentially influencing decision-making around the need for local partners. Drawing from models successfully implemented in Jordan and Egypt, where authorities have legally mandated international organisations to work through local partners, INGOs should prioritise technical, financial, and capacity-building support instead of competing for direct implementation.[115] By enforcing such regulations, authorities can ensure that aid delivery remains locally driven, contextually appropriate, and sustainable. This approach not only strengthens local ownership and national response mechanisms, but also institutionalises the localisation agenda within the humanitarian system. While highly dependent on the new government demonstrating a firm commitment to humanitarian principles and the independence

Destroyed Homs center, Syria during Syrian Civil War. iStock.com / Goran Safarek

of humanitarian actors, in contrast to the Assad era, implementing similar legal frameworks in Syria has the potential to create a more structured and balanced aid architecture, ensuring international engagement supports, rather than supplants, national and local capacities.

The new context also presents significant opportunities for existing and emergent smaller CSOs and CBOs, particularly in areas formerly controlled by the Assad government. This includes new partnerships to both implement programming and build capacity. As larger Syrian NGOs from the Gaziantep-based response expand, they can make a major contribution to strengthening the grassroots Syrian response in other parts of the country. For example, well-established NGOs such as Syria Relief have implemented successful organisational development initiatives in NWS with local actors for many years, with the transfer of skills, experiences, and best practices to CBOs as a core strategic objective.[116] For international organisations facing low community acceptance, especially those tainted by Assad's control over the humanitarian sector, meaningful partnerships with local organisations with deep community ties represents a key pathway to bridge this divide. This partnership building involves recognising

local agency, respecting local knowledge, and creating sustainable pathways for community-led recovery rooted in Syrian expertise and leadership. In NES, although there is a vibrant landscape of well-established local organisations, a lack of cross border access and related difficulties in securing direct funding has hindered organisational and technical development.[117] Changing access dynamics may also enable these organisations to forge partnerships and build capacity in ways that were previously unattainable.

As funding cuts escalate and the impacts of the USAID freeze becomes more apparent, it is critical that both donors and INGOs take steps to mitigate the effects on Syrian organisations, many of whom have strengthened their organisational capacity for well over a decade. These organisations are an invaluable asset to the humanitarian system and provide a firm foundation for the transition to a Syrian-led response moving forward. There are also strong business and programmatic cases for accelerating this transition. Syrian organisations have significantly lower overheads and staffing costs than their international counterparts, while a growing body of research highlights that their access, flexibility, deep contextual understanding, and community ties often leads to more effective programming.[118]

✔️ RECOMMENDATIONS

💰🏛️ Donors & UN

- ✓ **Scale up pooled funds nationally to develop LNGOs and reduce competition between humanitarian actors,** building on and replicating the success of pooled funds in NWS that directly fund Syrian NGOs (e.g. SCHF and AFNS)

- ✓ **Explore direct funding options to LNGOs** rather than channelling through intermediaries (e.g. through INGOs) to bring about a more locally led response that better aligns aid delivery with community needs.

- ✓ **Increase representation of Syrian-led actors in strategic and operational decision-making processes and entities** through explicit, measurable commitments (e.g. quotas), including across humanitarian coordination and in key forums, to ensure Syrian voices inform and shape the direction of the response at the highest levels.

🌐 International humanitarian actors

- ✓ **Reinforce and sustain partnerships with local and national organizations to leverage their operational expertise, while strengthening trust through equitable models**–such as joint decision-making and fair inclusion of indirect costs. Prioritise local leadership to address power imbalances and advance a truly Syrian-led response.

⭐ Syrian humanitarian actors

- ✓ **Strengthen existing and new strategic coalitions and alliances to advocate for greater access to direct funding, more equitable partnerships with response actors, and increased representation in key decision-making bodies** (e.g. humanitarian coordination, donor advisory boards). This includes the articulation of unified positions and targeted goals in the form of advocacy briefs, press releases, and detailed proposals outlining actionable steps that can be taken by both Syrian and international actors.

- ✓ **Further increase efforts to localise capacity strengthening** to localise the response, by supporting medium and small organisations with organisational and technical development.

- ✓ **Establish dedicated spaces to foster dialogue between previously divided Syrian organisations**, both to exchange knowledge for enhanced response capacity as well as address and mitigate emerging tensions that can stymie meaningful collaboration and partnership.

Celebrations following the fall of the Assad government, London. Alex Ward.

ACTION 3: ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE, INCLUSIVE, AND COHERENT COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

The coordination of humanitarian responses is inherently complex and challenging, requiring diverse stakeholders to make difficult decisions based on imperfect information with limited resources, often in highly insecure and dynamic contexts. The Syria response embodies these challenges. Until recently, long-established zones of control and political constraints divided the response across three autonomous hubs (NWS, NES, GoS) under a wider WoS mechanism. This fragmentation has caused several issues, such as overly bureaucratic decision-making processes, duplication of efforts, tensions stemming from different operational cultures, and a lack of cross-hub knowledge sharing. The upcoming shift (scheduled to become fully operational in June 2025) to a centralized response under the standard IASC framework, centered in Damascus and spanning seven subnational hubs, has the potential to address many of these problems. It offers opportunities to streamline decision-making, information sharing, and programmatic coordination across regions.

While the proposed new structure is an ambitious overhaul, there are concerns among humanitarian actors about how it will translate into reality, especially as many of the specific details remain unclear. This includes uncertainties around funding availability for core coordination and IM positions across the proposed subnational framework. Compressed transition timelines have also raised concerns about rushed handover processed, particularly in NES. Reconciling the operational cultures of the three hubs within the new structure is also sensitive. Ideally, this process should be undertaken in a way that ensures best practices and approaches from hub-specific experiences are integrated where appropriate, rather than discarded. Failure to do so will amplify existing fears about the new structure being Damascus-centric and UN-dominated and may disrupt the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance on the ground. Furthermore, to align with stated localisation objectives and meaningfully prioritise Syrian participation and leadership, HCT should take concrete steps to replicate and further advance the localisation successes of the Gaziantep-based response at the national level, capitalising on the extensive capacity and experience of the many large Syrian-led organisations from NWS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OCHA/UN agencies/clusters

✓ **Ensure decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive while transitioning to a country-wide IASC-coordination model**, taking additional care not to marginalise either international or Syrian NGOs, or hub-specific concerns, in order to secure buy-in from the wider response.

✓ **Commit to a phased transition that minimises disruption to aid delivery and incorporates feedback from Syrian and international stakeholders across all three hubs.** Where possible, preserve effective coordination mechanisms–particularly in NES–to avoid unnecessary changes and ensure continuity.

✓ **Ensure strong representation of NGOs–particularly Syrian-led and community-based organizations–across leadership and coordination structures** through formal quotas or mandates (e.g. co-chair roles, strategic advisory groups). Building on existing LNGO leadership in NWS and establishing inclusive, practical mechanisms to support the meaningful participation of diverse Syrian civil society actors across all areas of operation.

🏛️ OCHA/UN agencies/clusters cont.

✓ **Design the new coordination structure in line with a realistic assessment of available resources so plans can be actualised in practice and the minimum coordination and IM functions performed across clusters/sectors**. This includes avoiding 'double-hatting' arrangements where coordination focal points assume more than one role, limiting their ability to fulfil ToRs, and seeking ways to enhance efficiency, such as reducing meeting frequency and streamlining reporting channels.

✓ **Co-design, share and socialise a detailed roadmap for the transition**, in tandem with, and informed by, inclusive mechanisms highlighted above.

✓ **Update standardised processes for exchanging humanitarian data**, ensuring confidentiality is protected and all actors have access to reliable and up-to-date information. This has historically been a major issue due to the siloed nature of the response.

🏛️🏢 UN agencies/INGOs/LNGOs

✓ **Capitalise on increased engagement during the transition among coordination bodies, including clusters and working groups**, by creating dedicated space to exchange hub-specific best practices and lessons learned for coordination mechanisms that can be adopted into country-wide structures.

⚙️🏃 ACTION 4: ENSURE HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING IS ETHICAL, DATA-DRIVEN, AND REACHES THOSE MOST IN NEED

As the situation in Syria evolves rapidly, robust evidence and analysis is needed to inform humanitarian decision-making around planning and prioritisation, both to address the immediate needs of Syrians and to support the country's transition to recovery and stabilisation. Major funding shortfalls heighten the importance of ensuring limited resources are used efficiently and effectively. The new coordination structure, which fosters greater engagement and information-sharing across the three former hubs, offers an opportunity to review and update cluster-level programmatic guidance. This is particularly important given the rapidly evolving context across the country and the need to enhance the effectiveness of aid delivery. Furthermore, the expansion of many international and Syrian organisations' geographic access is a major opportunity to channel their expertise and resources to previously neglected communities.

However, in doing so, it is essential that careful steps are taken to avoid causing harm and understand local dynamics so as to not marginalise existing community-based actors. A principled approach to the equitable distribution of aid regardless of sect, religion, or political affiliation across regions is also essential to help reverse the reputational damage suffered by UN agencies and INGOs during the Assad era, when aid delivery was regularly coopted to serve political interests.

✔ RECOMMENDATIONS

🏛️ UN agencies & INGOs/LNGOs

✓ **Collaborate to support country-wide assessments, including the planned household-level MSNA in June, in addition to sector-specific and area-based assessments as needed.** With dramatic shifts in context, there is an urgent need for updated baseline data across all sectors. These efforts are critical for identifying the scope, scale, and severity of needs. More in-depth research is also needed to understand the complex needs of especially vulnerable groups, such as former detainees.

✓ **Collaborate to harmonise humanitarian data and information management (IM) capacity strengthening initiatives through coordination bodies** (i.e. working groups, sub-working groups) covering research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting), with a primary focus on enhancing the IM capacity of local actors. This needs to be undertaken by established actors, both international and Syrian (e.g. REACH, Assistance Coordination Unit, International Organization for Migration (IOM)).

✓ **Explore opportunities to increase and improve the pooling of resources and carrying out joint research** (not limited to data collection support). Ways of working could include one organisation to lead on design, another on data collection, and a third on data visualisation and reporting, based on available capacity. This is particularly relevant given the decrease in dedicated funding for IM actors.

✓ **Ensure Syrians have the leading voice in defining their needs and priorities.** Now more than ever, humanitarian actors must take meaningful steps to center community perspectives in program design and implementation, ensuring all initiatives are responsive and accountable to affected populations.

✓ **Prioritise conflict-sensitive programming, underpinned by rigorous analysis and in-depth understanding of community dynamics, to avoid causing unintended harms that can increase inter-group tensions and reduce humanitarian access.** There is a particular opportunity to implement this ass former frontlines dissolve and humanitarian actors expand their operations to newly accessible areas.

✓ **Openly address historic distrust and grievances against humanitarian actors through organised community dialogues and clear statements**, aiming to increase community acceptance and mitigate tensions. This is particularly relevant to UN agencies and INGOs, specifically those that were based in Damascus during the Assad era.

🎯 Humanitarian coordination

✓ **Capitalise on the newly established Whole of Syria Assessment and Analysis Working Group (AAWG)**, intended to spearhead collaborative efforts to address critical information gaps in the response and quickly mobilise stakeholders in the event of an emergency (e.g. conflict escalation). Ensuring the AAWG is operational and effective as soon as possible, especially given the scale of information needs, should be a top priority. Depending on capacity, sector-specific AAWG's could also be established, such as has been the case previously with the FSL Cluster in NWS.

✓ **Tailor approaches to expanding operations in recognition of different operational contexts across formerly divided areas.** The major shifts related to the transition – including population movements, government policy changes, economic dynamics, and emerging security challenges – mean previous programmatic approaches may require reconsideration. This includes cluster/sector coordination actors reviewing and updating programmatic guidance for partners, exploring opportunities to harmonise across former hubs where feasible, or making clear area-specific recommendations if relevant.

🔆 Humanitarian coordination cont.

- ✓ **Continue to iteratively map the impacts of the USAID funding cuts** to identify critical gaps in service provision. Actors should also coordinate with partners to assess if reallocation of resources is possible to cover some of the most pressing needs.

- ✓ **Implement a clear and principled framework to guide determining needs and response planning.** This should reflect serious concerns raised within the NGO community that the people in need (PiN) calculation for Syria has not followed OCHA guidelines and been overly influenced by funding cuts rather than a realistic assessment of needs.

💰 Donors

- ✓ **Ensure at least the minimum level of funding for critical assessments is in place to inform response-wide prioritisation.** Accurate data, especially representative household-level data, is even more important for response prioritisation in the context of dwindling funding to ensure limited resources are used effectively and efficiently to support those most in need.

⚙️🏃 ACTION 5: INVEST IN LONG-TERM STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

> **Before the fall of Assad, organisations were largely constrained by donor-driven project designs, which were primarily short-term in focus. Today, it is essential to shift toward early recovery and prioritise long-term impact on communities and broader systems — including food chains, markets, and the agricultural sector. The focus must move from emergency aid and dependency to supporting people's autonomy and economic self-reliance. Clear strategies are needed to facilitate the transition of displaced populations from camps back to their areas of origin. While continuing to provide support in camps, we must also start investing in new areas by ensuring the provision of basic services and assistance to enable dignified and voluntary return." (LNGO representative)[119]**

The evolving political landscape in Syria has renewed calls to better balance lifesaving humanitarian aid with expanded, integrated early recovery programming. Such programming aims to address underlying drivers of humanitarian need - including damaged infrastructure, lack of services and technical capacity, and disruptions to supply chains and market functionality - across all levels of the response. Interview participants, especially those from Syrian organisations, consistently expressed exasperation with the limitations imposed by short-term funding cycles that largely focus on emergency relief, undermining their ability to implement programs that lead to sustainable outcomes.

While there is an extensive catalogue of complementary activities encompassed by early recovery, evidence highlights that contextualised and area-based approaches are often the most successful at building community resilience and achieving sustainable outcomes.[120] Area-based approaches are highly participatory and place communities and local stakeholders at the center of program design and implementation, with projects grounded in a careful understanding of local needs and capacities in relation to the underlying social, economic, and geographic characteristics of a specific area.

The political transition also opens the possibility for much greater direct collaboration with local governance actors (e.g. authorities responsible for service provision), which has previously been inhibited by donor restrictions and political considerations. Reflecting this, many representatives of Syrian organisations emphasised their desire to provide technical support and build the capacity of local government, with the intention to identify entry points for development action. In addition, effectively leveraging the technical expertise and skills of Syria's returning diaspora has the potential to make a significant contribution to Syrian-led early recovery activities

✅ RECOMMENDATIONS

💰 Donors

✓ **Provide more flexible, multi-year funding for early recovery and nexus-linked activities.** This is essential to reduce aid dependency and act as a bridge to sustainable development opportunities. While emergency aid is still a critical need, long-term investment is required to strengthen the resilience of Syrian communities and support durable, cost-effective solutions for IDPs and returnees.

Senior humanitarian coordination (HCT/ISCCG)

✓ **Adopt and expand contextualised and area-based approaches that bridge the humanitarian-development divide.** This should be led by senior HCT leadership in coordination with donors be operationalised through the Inter-Sector Cluster Coordination Group (ISCCG). While the current system is not designed to fully operationalise these approaches at scale, they have demonstrated significant success in securing sustainable outcomes for affected communities, allowing local stakeholders define their own priorities and modality preferences and leverage existing local capacities.

International & Syrian humanitarian actors

✓ **Begin systematising links between humanitarian and development action across the response.** While few development actors are working at scale in Syria, best practices and approaches can be identified from other country contexts where these links are more established. Dedicated platforms (e.g. 'nexus' working groups) can be used to strategise, plan, and coordinate related actions.

✓ **Map gaps in critical service provision, and where feasible, engage with local authorities to explore entry points for sustainable interventions.** This can be supported by advocacy towards local authorities about enacting or reforming policies and approaches to enable more effective collaboration with humanitarian actors.

✓ **Design and implement projects that support sustainable livelihoods (e.g. business grants, vocational training, agricultural inputs) and the restoration of basic services (e.g. water, electricity, health, education),** using area-based approaches where possible. Humanitarian actors should also enhance efforts to increase complementarity between projects at the area-level.

✓ **Actively engage the Syrian diaspora and returnees through formalised mechanisms** to identify where technical skillsets and capacities can best support recovery efforts in localised contexts. Syrian organisations are particularly well placed to do this.

✓ **Increase the evidence base for early recovery interventions in coordination with information management and analysis actors.** This includes by conducting area-based assessments, value chain and market systems studies, and long-term outcome monitoring.

✓ **Identify opportunities to engage, coordinate, and partner with established peacebuilding actors** to ensure programming aligns with 'social' recovery efforts.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

The breadth and complexity of the transformative shifts currently impacting the humanitarian landscape in Syria cannot be understated. Interviews with humanitarian actors, Syrian and international at all levels of the response, revealed an overarching and shared sentiment of deep uncertainty, making both immediate decision-making and long-term planning complex. Syria's nascent transition is at a critical juncture navigating this crossroads in history, intertwined with a complex confluence of factors at the local, national, regional, and global levels. The situation could change rapidly and radically, once again altering the reality on the ground affecting humanitarian needs and response operations. Nonetheless, participants emphasised humanitarian actors are eager to seize Syria's pivotal moment to work in new, previously impossible ways – offering a chance to strengthen both the sector and the response.

Long-standing access barriers have dissipated, allowing millions of Syrians to travel freely for the first time in many years, although it should be noted that many currently remain displaced. Likewise, humanitarian actors, emerging from the constraints imposed by territorial division and Assad's restrictions, are expanding operations to new areas of the country. With Syrian-led organisations leading the process, humanitarians can now reach previously inaccessible and underserved communities.

However, interview participants recognised Assad's corrosive legacy on the humanitarian sector and aid economy, which has bred distrust among many communities toward certain humanitarian actors, as well as tensions within the humanitarian response (e.g. between Gaziantep-based and Damascus-based actors), needs to be reconciled and sensitively addressed. Expanding humanitarian operations to new areas also necessitates a carefully considered effort to understand complex community dynamics and engage local actors, including existing humanitarian organisations, to leverage new opportunities and avoid unintended harms.

Much depends on how the new government's approach to engaging with and enabling humanitarian work and actors. To date, signals from the new government have evoked cautious optimism, but notable concerns remain around aspects of the emerging regulatory framework, delaying many international organisations from setting up in Damascus until the situation becomes clearer. The evolution of the UN's relationship with the new government will be pivotal in the coming months – shaping whether changes to the coordination structure lead to more needs-based, effective aid delivery across regions. With funding cuts intensifying the need for prioritisation, ensuring assistance reaches those most in need is more critical than ever.

Transitioning to a country-wide IASC-coordination model offers a chance to remedy many of the problems that have long plagued the Syria response due to the forced division of operational hubs. To gain broad support from both international and Syrian humanitarian actors across all regions, the transition must be transparent, inclusive, and responsibly managed – aligning with available resources and avoiding unnecessary disruption to operations. It also must ensure the internal diversity of the Syria response is adequately reflected at all levels of the new structure, including a demonstrable commitment to Syrian actors taking the lead. Ultimately, as Syria reaches a critical crossroads, bold action from international actors is essential to support a Syrian-led recovery that tackles the root causes of humanitarian needs – not just their symptoms.

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