

THE POLITICS OF AID AND RECONSTRUCTION IN SYRIA

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Abstract: This paper examines the approaches to providing humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction in the Syrian civil war with a focus on Western states and Russia. It first demonstrates the divergent approaches to early recovery, resilience, and reconstruction, as epitomized in Russia's use of its veto power to end the UN cross-border aid program into Syria. It then assesses the impact these divergent approaches have had on program and project design. It argues that humanitarian organizations and agencies operating in Syria have become part of the power competition between Russia and the West, which concomitantly pushes them towards limited and conservative humanitarian and development strategies in the Syrian civil war.

Introduction

After a decade of war, humanitarian needs in Syria remain as critical as ever. According to the United Nations (UN), 13.4 million people need some form of humanitarian assistance in the country, an increase of 21 percent from 2020.¹ In the last opposition-held territory in Northwest Syria, more than 4 million people rely on the aid delivered through cross-border to survive. Of these, the majority are internally displaced people who live in camps and informal settlements within the Idlib governorate. Their needs are further exacerbated by a combination of economic sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the turmoil in Lebanon, which the Syrian economy is dependent on to keep business and commerce running.

When Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution that proposed to renew the mechanism on 20 December 2019, diverging perspectives and dissonance between the West and Russia on the fate of humanitarian aid assistance delivery in Syria became more evident. Russia expressed its willingness to shut down the cross-border aid operations completely, focusing on the balance of power shifting in favor of the Syrian regime. In 2019, at a UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting, Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, noted that since the Syrian authorities restored control over the greater part of their territory, cross-border assistance is no longer required.² Recently, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine with far-reaching political and economic consequences for the region, Nebenzia highlighted the situation on the ground and Russia's position to not renew the cross-border resolution in a UNSC meeting on the situation in the Middle East.³ In a similar vein, China also supported the cross-line mechanism as the dominant channel for humanitarian assistance delivery in Syria instead of the cross-border.

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In parallel with the threatened future of cross-border humanitarian aid as the Syrian war seems to be winding down, reconstruction has also emerged as the new battleground in the Syrian conflict between the West and Russia. European governments and the United States (US) have refused to fund reconstruction in post-war Syria as long as the Assad regime remains in power. France's Ambassador to the UN Francois Delattre made it clear at a Security Council meeting that France and the European Union (EU) "will not take part in the reconstruction of Syria without the effective implementation of a political transition."⁴ Reacting to the West's approach to the Syrian civil war, Russian President Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, called on Europe to contribute to Syria's reconstruction.⁵

As the one-year agreement that keeps the last cross-border aid lifeline to Northwest Syria open is set to expire in July 2022, this paper explores the current dynamics of relief and reconstruction efforts in Syria. In particular, it sheds light on the different conceptualizations of humanitarian action and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria between the West and Russia. In doing so, it demonstrates how humanitarian agencies have become part of the conflict as they have to juggle funding sources and shape their agenda in line with the preferences of international donors. This unequal power dynamic between donor states and agencies, as I argue, eventually shapes the early recovery and resilience programming and development processes in the civil war. In a broader context, this paper also aims to contribute to the study of humanitarianism with its focus on alternative approaches and conceptualization of humanitarian and development action.

The Western-Dominated International Aid Architecture and Emergency Relief

In 2014, the UNSC resolutions 2139, 2165, and 2191 authorized the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria through four border crossings, two from Turkey, one from Jordan, and one from Iraq. Resolution 2165 also established the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism to ensure the humanitarian nature of the relief consignments. The resolutions have enabled UN agencies and their implementing partners to use the border crossings at Bab al-Salama, Bab al-Hawa, Al-Ramtha, and Al-Yarubiyah to provide humanitarian assistance to people in need without the consent of the Syrian Government. Currently, the UN-led humanitarian response to the Syria crisis is run by the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator in Amman, the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator in Gaziantep, and the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in Damascus.

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TO THE FUND WERE GERMANY, THE
UNITED KINGDOM, AND FRANCE***

Following the resolutions, the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) was also established to enable organizations, primarily Syrian, to support the delivery of assistance across border and conflict lines. In 2021, the three largest donors to the fund were Germany, the United Kingdom, and France.⁶ Meanwhile, Western states, such as the United States, through USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), started to implement programs in Syria in 2013, primarily as in-kind assistance provided to local councils in opposition-held areas.⁷

On the other hand, as part of the Syrian Government's strategy to maintain control over aid, international relief actors operating in government-controlled areas are required to partner with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) or Syria Trust for Development to be registered in Damascus.⁸ Through this arrangement, the Syrian Government can guide the response strategies in the country in line with its interests and has been engaged in the planning and coordination processes since 2011.

On 20 December 2019, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution proposal to renew the mechanism established in Resolution 2165 that allowed UN cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance to Syria. As the members of the UNSC discussed the draft resolution, Russia's Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia, took note of the following.⁹

The draft resolution, which has been renewed year after year, is obsolete and does not take into account the changes that have occurred in Syria since 2014, when resolution 2165 (2014) was first adopted. At the time, the mechanism was established under urgent circumstances, when objectively speaking there were no other ways to deliver humanitarian assistance to areas of the Syrian Arab Republic that were not under Government control. The Syrian authorities have now restored control over the greater part of their territory, so cross-border assistance to those areas is no longer necessary.

Russia's rival draft resolution that would have approved the two Turkish crossing points for six months also failed to gain support. Then, the United Nations Security Council reached a last-minute deal on 10 January 2020. The council reduced the number of cross points for aid deliveries from four to two, the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings in Turkey, for a period of six months instead of twelve. In July 2020, following challenging negotiations

ACCORDING TO OCHA, RUSSIA CONTRIBUTED \$23 MILLION TO UN-LED COORDINATED AID IN SYRIA IN 2020, WHILE US AND EUROPEAN STATES' FUNDING EXCEEDED \$2 BILLION

and failed draft resolutions, the Security Council approved the delivery of United Nations aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing until 10 July 2021, adopting Resolution 2533 with China, Russia, and the Dominican Republic abstaining. On 9 July 2021, the UNSC, in a rare moment of unity, extended its previous authorization of the Bab al-Hawa crossing point with the expectation of renewal for another six months until 10 July 2022. Referring to Resolution 2585 (2021) as a turning point, Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations stated that "Council members thereby gave the green light for the cross-border mechanism to be gradually supplemented and then replaced by supplies across the contact lines."¹⁰

Russia's stance appears to be motivated by the changing dynamics of the conflict. In essence, though, it is driven by Russia's concept of state sovereignty that prevents any attempt "to belittle the role of a sovereign state as the fundamental element of international relations," as outlined in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation.

According to data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) financial tracking system, Russia contributed \$23 million to UN-led coordinated aid in Syria in 2020, while US and European states' funding exceeded \$2 billion.¹¹ Russia's contribution to the UN-led humanitarian response was limited from the very beginning compared to the US as the largest donor. As Russia's criticism of cross-border aid continued in the UNSC, Russia's direct funding to UN-led humanitarian assistance increased drastically. In 2018, Russia, for the first time, funded the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) emergency project to help conflict-affected farmers and herders in Aleppo after the Syrian Government took control of the city.¹² In 2020, in addition to the funding to the UN-coordinated inter-agency response plan, Russia also donated \$20 million to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).¹³

Apart from its limited integration into the UN-led humanitarian coordination system in Damascus, Russia provides aid directly in Syria through its own state institutions. In the first years of the conflict, the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies, and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disaster (EMERCOM of Russia) took the lead in humanitarian aid delivery. Then, the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Control Over the Movement of Refugees in Syria was

established in February 2016, with coordination of humanitarian aid delivery being one of its tasks. Accordingly, Russia coordinated with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to improve the humanitarian situation in the country.¹⁴

Early Recovery and Reconstruction: Diverging Approaches, Donors, and Limited Choices for Aid Organizations

In response to an urgent situation such as civil war, emergency relief aid aims to alleviate human suffering. In contrast to development assistance that aims to promote the long-term economic, social development, and welfare of a country, a key feature of emergency relief operations is that they are designed to save lives and meet urgent needs. The process is guided by humanitarian agencies according to humanitarian principles. In this regard, humanitarian assistance, including early recovery, differs from development assistance.

Since 2011, multi-sectoral humanitarian assistance and services have characterized the main response in the country. As per the appeal data in Syria's Humanitarian Response Plan in 2021, general food assistance (\$919 million) and emergency food security, and bakery support programs (\$71 million) were the two major programs in the country in terms of budget requirements in food security and agriculture cluster.¹⁵ As the leading agency, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) required only \$1 million for its "emergency livestock and agriculture-based livelihood assistance for the most crisis-impacted communities in Syria."¹⁶ As the vicious cycle of mass hunger continues in the country, aid organizations adapt their operations to the evolving complexity of the conflict and bureaucratic hurdles. Nonetheless, emergency food assistance continues to dominate the response after ten years of war in Syria, regardless of the scale of physical destruction in the country since 2011. Why then does the international community hesitate to invest in lasting solutions in the country, such as recovery programs to rehabilitate the country's main public and private infrastructure, instead of focusing on immediate aid distributions?

Western countries, as the leading donors of international aid, refrain from normalizing relations with the Syrian Government in an attempt to hold it accountable for the crimes it has committed over the past decade. Their objective is to reach vulnerable people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance in the country. This limited approach delineates the scale and scope of their response in the crisis. Thus, instead of giving the

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regime an opportunity to exploit international assistance for its own interests, Western donor states have made it clear that they will neither fund nor implement any kind of reconstruction and development programs that bring benefits to the Syrian Government and its allies. For instance, the Biden administration did not change Washington's stance on providing reconstruction aid to Syria and continued to impose sanctions to pressure the Assad regime.¹⁷ Then, on 21 November 2012, the US amended the Syrian Sanctions Regulations to facilitate humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. The amendment allowed NGOs to take part in early recovery-related humanitarian activities, "including humanitarian projects that meet basic human needs; democracy-building; education; non-commercial development projects directly benefitting the Syrian people; and the preservation and protection of cultural heritage sites."¹⁸

On the other hand, following the consolidation of power in the past few years, the Assad regime's reconstruction efforts gained momentum. The Government's strategy has been characterized by a form of demographic engineering which seeks to strengthen the Government's power and its networks. For instance, the Government's deliberate displacement strategy along sectarian lines in Homs aimed at consolidating its power base.¹⁹ It is "rewarding the loyalty of old and new elites through lucrative investment opportunities and compensating the regime's international supporters – first and foremost Russia and Iran – with access to Syria's resources."²⁰ The Prime Minister of Syria highlighted that "the priority of investments in Syria will be given to the businessmen from the friendly and brotherly countries which stood by Syria in its war against terrorism."²¹

In this regard, Iran and Russia, as the main allies of the Assad regime, appear to be best positioned to reap substantial economic benefits in Syria. Nonetheless, Moscow and Tehran have shown contending approaches to post-war reconstruction. While Moscow presents itself as a global power,²² Tehran aims to "establish influence beyond traditional state-level actors" in the country.²³

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***DESPITE THE RELATIVE DIVERSIFICATION OF
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China's humanitarian and development engagement in Syria, on the other hand, is driven by its global power status that makes use of both bilateral and multilateral channels. In 2017, China scaled up its humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced people in Syria with a commitment of \$30 million.²⁴ Beijing also donated \$1 million to the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), respectively, to improve food security and health conditions in Syria.²⁵ As a potential reconstruction partner for the Assad regime, China has constantly highlighted the need for early recovery and reconstruction in the war-torn country on multiple occasions.

Against the backdrop of the evolving dynamics of the conflict and the preferences of emerging and traditional donor states, humanitarian agencies competing for funding, in turn, develop relief programs and projects that have the potential to meet the pre-defined success criteria. Despite the relative diversification of government donors, aid organizations inherently focus on and design ad-hoc humanitarian aid projects funded by traditional western donors. Thus, as Alex de Waal suggested, competition to get funding among NGOs resulted in the increase of the emergency aid that set development aid aside.²⁶

Nonetheless, in view of the complex situation on the ground and evolving humanitarian imperatives, humanitarian organizations appear to develop and scale-up activities that do not exclusively distinguish humanitarian assistance from development assistance. For instance, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Director met with Foreign and Expatriates Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad to discuss the transition from emergency humanitarian assistance to recovery on 10 November 2021.²⁷

Conclusion

This paper showed the diverging priorities and perspectives between the West and Russia in early recovery and post-conflict reconstruction in the Syrian civil war. This has just become one of the fronts on which the West and Russia seem to be clashing in the conflict.

The power struggle and lack of consensus among global powers, in turn, impacts how UN agencies and international NGOs operate in the country. As the dynamics of the conflict require the distinction of humanitarian action from development, international humanitarian agencies consequently focus on relief programs and projects to obtain easy funding. This complex process, thus, not only drives aid dependency but also leads to donor fatigue in the civil war.

Furthermore, in light of the recent territorial gains made by the regime, Bashar al-Assad seeks to consolidate his power in the process of early recovery and reconstruction. Both Syrian allies and neighboring countries with conflicting interests want to take their share of the reconstruction pie. This process is very politicized and favors the interests of the Syrian Government and its patronage networks. As long as the Syrian Government's interventions guide the ensuing reconstruction process in Syria, it is doomed to fail and further exacerbate the existing grievances.

It is also noteworthy that the conflict in Ukraine will likely further reinforce existing divergences between Russia and the West and weaken multilateral cooperation in the area of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction even beyond the Syrian civil war.

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