

Evolve or Dissolve: Ask a Syrian

The last two decades have witnessed several humanitarian catastrophes (medical catastrophes like the 2013-2015 Ebola epidemic, natural disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the start and escalation of several armed conflicts) that required level one emergency response. Because the response from the international community, i.e. World leaders, UN agencies and INGOs, was often inadequate these events elucidated the need for dramatic change in the humanitarian system.

The situation in Syria is a flagrant case in point. The international community's failure to address the root causes of the Syrian problem and the absence of an orchestrated plan of action led to an overall increased level of violence that saw escalation into the use of weapons of mass destruction (chemical) and the indiscriminate use of force (barrel bombs). The failure to address root causes and the politicization of aid also led to an exponential worsening of the humanitarian situation. Reports about the situation in Syria list mounting death and injury tolls, also due to systematic starvation by siege, and massive displacement of the population.

The response to what is now called the worst humanitarian crisis of our time has been completely inadequate. The lack of coordination, vision, and, most importantly, political will has resulted in ad hoc interventions, paralysis of the system and a staggering amount of irregularities and inefficiencies in the day to day work of international actors. Moreover, the failure to empower CSOs and to engage the actors on the ground exacerbated the effects of the crisis.

Given the above we, Syrian CSOs, activists, and academics who are directly involved with the Syrian problem, are deeply concerned about the effects of the international community's failures on our people. We came together to call on world leaders to overhaul the foundational principles of humanitarian response and to scrutinize the inefficiencies in the system. We identify failures and make recommendations on the following three core principles:

1. Protection of civilians and non-military targets

- a) The international community is failing to intervene even though indiscriminate shelling and the deliberate targeting of medical and relief workers is rampant, therewith the international community is tacitly allowing the large-scale violation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols.
- b) The international community is failing to take action based on the conclusions of the OHCHR report on enforced disappearances, therewith ignoring the violation of the non-derogable state responsibility to prohibit forced disappearances and condoning the state's failure to disclose the fate of thousands of forcibly disappeared Syrians.
- c) The international community is failing to protect people seeking refuge by allowing domestic political concerns to lead to the de facto suspension of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Examples of this are the expulsion of refugees, standoffs between refugees and authorities on closed borders – including the use of military force against people seeking protection, and an unprecedented number of preventable deaths.
- d) The international community is failing to intervene even though it is clear that infrastructures and facilities that are non-military objects (such as hospitals, schools, and cultural heritage) are being targeted on a wide scale, therewith the international community is tacitly allowing the large-scale violation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols.

We urge world leaders to:

- ensure compliance with International Humanitarian Law by finding concrete ways to hold all involved actors accountable for the observance of the Geneva Conventions
- revise the Security Council voting system when it comes to humanitarian affairs and ensure the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, even if not issued under chapter 7, by insisting that they contain implementation and accountability measures

- establish a transparent and public mechanism to solve and end all cases of forced disappearance, based on the extensive data collected by The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
- find concrete ways to provide refugees with safe passage and to enforce and implement the non-derogable state obligation to provide people seeking protection with viable means to submit an individual claim

2. Humanitarian Access

- a) The international community has forfeited a needs-based strategy by choosing an access-based strategy. This led to the injection of a disproportional amount subsidies for the provision of services in certain warring parties' territories, therewith effectively making their funds available for their war efforts.
- b) The international community has failed to depoliticize access to conflict-ridden and besieged areas, this facilitates the use of starvation as a weapon of war.
- c) The international community has even failed to monitor and evaluate the potential collateral damage of one-sided humanitarian intervention.

We urge the UN to:

- set up a UNSC early warning system about areas that are under threat of besiegement and areas that are otherwise under threat of starvation on a large scale to ensure the UN's commitment to respond immediately by e.g. organizing air drops
- formally assess the impact of partial delivery of aid and seriously consider the possibility of halting operations if impartial delivery is not possible. In the interest of transparency and accountability their analysis and the basis for decision-making should be made public
- dissolve monitoring and implementation bodies and taskforces related to humanitarian access that are ineffective and unable to fulfill their mandate. A lack of transparency about the difficulties related to humanitarian work prevents concrete problem-solving and puts up smokescreens about the progress that is being made

3. Support of CSOs

- a) The international community has failed to strategically engage and empower local groups as vital actors in responding to the humanitarian crisis. This has led to a top-down approach - international community versus affected community - to problems that can only be fully tackled by recognizing the expertise of those on the ground as well as their specific, and often unique, capacity for tailored and immediate intervention.
- b) The international community has failed to build fair and equitable partnerships between international and local actors by focusing on creating partnerships centered on implementation instead of decision-making and implementation. This has led to a diminished efficiency in the design and implementation of programs that aim to provide customized humanitarian relief and effective development aid.
- c) The international community has failed to provide the necessary support for local organizations to overcome the challenges of counter-terrorism legislation, especially banking restrictions because they have a direct impact on local organizations' access to funds to implement programs in and around Syria. This leads to delays in implementation and has direct consequences for the viability of projects seeking to provide humanitarian relief and development aid.
- d) The international community has even failed to provide strategic solutions to the sustainability of the organizational capacity of local response actors – e.g. in the form of a reasonable investment in their overhead costs. This exposes local response actors to a high turnover in staff and difficulties in finding qualified staff. It also compromises their ability to do strategic

planning and take on long-term projects – which, in turn, compromises the implementation of projects aimed at customized humanitarian relief and effective development aid.

We urge World Leaders to:

- mandate the engagement of local emerging actors wherever this is feasible
- advance fair and equitable partnerships that ensure the engagement of local groups as key players at all levels
- create an accreditation body to facilitate and speed up the vetting of local humanitarian actors to overcome banks' risk aversion
- provide local actors with strategic support through long term, direct, core funding plans and tailored capacity building

Signatories:

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 Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
 Syrian Female Journalists' Network
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- o Big Heart foundation
- o Binaa for Development
- o Ghiras Al Nahda
- o Ghiras Syria
- o Hand in Hand for Syria
- o Human Appeal
- o Human Care
- o Ihsan for Relief and development
- o Masarrat foundation
- o Orient humanitarian foundation
- o Physicians across continents
- o Qatar red crescent
- o Sham Humanitarian foundation
- o Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)
- o Syria development international (SDI)
- o Syrian Expatriate medical association (SEMA)
- o Syria Relief
- o Union des organizations Syriennes de secours Medicaux (UOSSM)

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