



Evaluation of OCHA response to the Syria crisis

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Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

The contents and conclusions of this evaluation report reflect strictly the opinion of the authors and in no way those of the UN, OCHA or donors.

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Executive Summary

The Syria crisis has been arguably the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century so far. Over 200,000 people have died in fighting during the five-year conflict and over half the country's population is displaced. In August 2015, the number of refugees passed 4 million.

The response to the Syria crisis has been one of the largest in living memory, with appeals routinely in the billions of dollars. Delivering aid inside Syria has proven highly challenging, with fighting parties obstructing aid and civilians under constant attack.

This evaluation of the response of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to the Syria crisis is part of a wider initiative by the UN and humanitarian partners to take stock of the work to date. It is also part of a recent corporate commitment to evaluation under the OCHA 2014-17 Strategic Plan. It examines the period from the middle of 2011, when the conflict started, to August 2015, when the evaluation took place.

The following sections present findings in four key areas of inquiry: OCHA's role in global and country-level leadership, strategy setting, OCHA's role in enabling the humanitarian system's response, and management.

LEADERSHIP

The Syria conflict has been characterized by deep divisions within the Security Council, leading to paralysis in attempts to resolve or contain the fighting. The split has constrained the UN's ability to act and meant that, at times, humanitarian aid has substituted political action.

Against this highly challenging backdrop, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), supported by OCHA, has sought to exercise global leadership. As the crisis progressed, the quality of this leadership improved, with bold advocacy on behalf of people trapped by the fighting.

The ERC sought to mobilize the humanitarian system to respond in Syria, with partial success. At times, the system has been slow and overly cautious. Its fault lines and fragmented nature have been sharply exposed by the highly contested nature of the geopolitics. The fact that the ERC struggled at times to bring the agencies with her should cause serious reflection within the global humanitarian leadership body, most notably the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

Probably the area where OCHA's global leadership had the greatest impact was in humanitarian access. The series of Security Council resolutions on access, particularly resolution 2165, opened up new legal avenues for aid to enter areas previously difficult to reach. Importantly, they have also created the potential for a unified response, drawing together a number of disparate aid operations. This is a notable success and a credit to the hard work of the ERC and OCHA. However, the access resolutions and new system have yet to result in a step change in the volume of aid transfer through this new system. It also took far too long to achieve, although this is a failure of international politics rather than the aid system.

OCHA and the ERC worked hard to ensure the best humanitarian leadership was deployed to Syria and the region. This was complicated by the Syrian Government and differences of opinion with UNDP. Despite this, there have been a series of excellent humanitarian leaders in Syria, continuing with the incumbent. The determination to find good leaders should be recognized, but it took a long time following the Level 3 (L3) emergency to get the right people in place. Tools such as the L3 pool need revision in light of the Syria experience.

Leadership has been less smooth in the surrounding countries, where UNHCR contested the role of Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs). Despite a relatively amicable relationship at the start of the crisis, the perceived expansion of OCHA's role and the IASC in refugee-hosting countries led to disharmony. This has not helped in the efficient management of the response.

The Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (RHC) role has also been difficult to get right. With little formal authority within the system and potential overlap with the role of country-based HCs, the role was difficult to establish. This was hampered by regional-level disagreement with agencies over the Comprehensive Regional Strategic Framework (CRSF) and subsequently with New York. The current incumbent has been well received and has a clearer role in the Whole of Syria (WoS) process. Despite this, the structural weaknesses remain. To ensure maximum effectiveness, there is an urgent need to update reporting and resourcing arrangements for this post.

STRATEGY

OCHA's strategy has been closely intertwined with that of the overall response. The IASC has been the global forum for strategic discussions around the response, and it has set the direction through various meetings of the principals and the emergency directors. Broadly, four big strategic themes have dominated the overall response

during the crisis: scaling up the response, gaining access to populations in need, dealing with the refugee crisis and its effect on neighbouring countries and unifying the disparate elements of the humanitarian operation.

This evaluation has concluded that these were the correct areas to concentrate on, perhaps with the exception of the protection of civilians, which could have received more strategic attention. However, the evaluation also notes that the lack of underlying analysis, especially in the first two years of the crisis, left the UN vulnerable to manipulation. A more detailed understanding of the needs, the politics, the conduct of the war, the social and economic systems and the impact of the conflict might have produced a better strategy earlier. At times, the system appeared in denial, producing an early recovery strategy as tens of thousands of people were pouring across borders seeking sanctuary.

OCHA has been less in charge of country-based strategies, partly due to its role being contested within each of the country-based contexts. In Syria, the Government has sought to impose itself on all aspects of the response, refusing to acknowledge OCHA's role as coordinator of humanitarian assistance. In the neighbouring countries, UNHCR has de facto set strategy through its control of resources (through its lead on the regional response plans).

The approval of the Security Council's access resolutions and the increase in ownership and capacity by neighbouring Governments have given OCHA a renewed role in the Syria crisis at country and regional levels. The WoS process is seen as important by all to bring together cross-border operations with those from Damascus, creating a nationwide picture of needs and the response.

OCHA's internal strategy has mostly been about supporting country-based leadership through its traditional functions, as well as advancing these big themes of scale up, access and coherence. An initial strategy for the Syria Country Office was followed with a series of formal country-based strategies for the neighbouring countries in 2014, under the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan process. With hindsight, this process could have started earlier, although the fluidity of the situation has required a degree of flexibility.

ENABLING THE SYSTEM

OCHA defines its mission as 'mobilizing humanitarian assistance for all people in need'. To do this, it enables the system to deliver assistance through several core functions, including coordination, advocacy, resource mobilization, policy and information management.¹

The Syria crisis was the first activation of the then new L3 protocol. A key part of the Transformative Agenda, the L3 had been agreed by the IASC principals as a way to prioritize a response. The L3 was activated in January 2013, primarily to force the pace of the response inside Syria that had failed to reach an adequate scale throughout 2012. This was also the beginning of major refugee flows. It did partly achieve the goal of changing the pace of scale-up, but many of the agreed actions for an L3 activation did not take place. Only empowered leadership and an enlarged Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocation were reliably delivered after the L3 activation, and even the scale-up was patchy, raising questions about how OCHA and the IASC can ensure that this important tool is strengthened.

OCHA also struggled to fulfil its traditional coordination function in the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Inside Syria, the Government did not accept OCHA as a coordinating entity of humanitarian aid, wishing to retain control and to preserve the dominant position of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). OCHA pushed the boundaries of response in its convening of cross-line convoys, but coordination has been challenging. In Turkey, OCHA was unable to establish itself formally until the passing of resolution 2165 (despite early deployment in 2012) for fears this would compromise UN access via Damascus. As a result, it took two years for OCHA to establish a normal presence in Turkey. In the meantime, the NGO community working cross-border established its own coordination functions, limiting the space for OCHA to work in this area once it could. In Lebanon and Jordan, UNHCR led the refugee response from the beginning. Despite the early designation of HCs, UNHCR's control of resources made it the de facto coordinator (in Jordan, the UNHCR representative was made the acting HC). With the advent of resolution 2165 and the WoS approach, OCHA's coordination role has grown, especially in Turkey where there are now officially clusters. However, significant issues remain in the relationship with UNHCR. This needs to be resolved for future situations.

Overall, OCHA's relationship with its partners has been less straightforward than in other contexts. Partners have tended to be more critical than usual during the evaluation, perhaps reflecting OCHA's struggle to find a consistent field-based role. This may also be a result of the stronger-than-usual global leadership role OCHA has occupied and its more assertive posture.

¹ This section of the evaluation deals principally with coordination, resource mobilization and information management, as policy and advocacy are dealt with extensively in previous sections on leadership and strategy.

One area where the system (and OCHA) did not deliver was in assessing needs. Over five years into the conflict, there is still not an accurate picture of needs. Since 2012, the Syrian Government has effectively blocked attempts to do proper needs assessments, and access and security constraints have been huge. At various times, OCHA tried to get inter-agency needs assessments under way. Nevertheless, the fact that the first unified assessment was only produced in 2014 indicates that more commitment and resources were required.

Conversely, OCHA has done well in mobilizing resources. The first Syria Humanitarian Action Response Plan (SHARP) was produced in 2012. Since then, it has raised approximately \$3.2 billion for response inside Syria. Until the 2015 Strategic Response Plan (SRP), this did not include cross-border response. OCHA also supported and played a major role in the three Kuwait fundraising conferences, which have been particularly successful. For the Syria and regional response, these conferences have raised a staggering \$7 billion. Together with the Secretary-General's Special Envoy and regional Governments, OCHA has been innovative and worked hard to support resources for the overall response.

Similarly, OCHA's financing instruments appear to have performed well in the Syria humanitarian crisis. CERF had released almost \$200 million by early 2015, supporting key moments such as the L3 activation or filling gaps through its underfunded window. OCHA also managed a regional Emergency Response Fund (ERF) that was later split into several country funds. While modest in size compared with the overall resources, the funds appear to have been used strategically, e.g., for capacity-building and supporting the work of Syrian NGOs.

OCHA also performed well in information management, making a key contribution to securing Security Council resolutions on access. A sizeable and sophisticated operation in Amman, in support of Syria, has produced new and innovative products on humanitarian access, and besieged and hard-to-reach populations—an area where lessons can be learned for future work. In more traditional areas of information management, OCHA has not played the same vital role, constrained by many of the larger operational factors. The mistrust between OCHA and its partners has led to the withholding of information in Turkey, making standard products such as 'Who is doing what where' hard to compile countrywide. More work is also needed on adapting to the sophistication of the Syrian information landscape, where peer-to-peer technologies predominate. This leaves traditional tools updated monthly looking rather dated, with a need for more real-time, risk-qualified data and analytical information products.

MANAGEMENT

The OCHA Syria response has been managed tightly within OCHA's Coordination and Response Division (CRD), with the Director playing a significant role and the ERC highly active where the global advocacy work was concerned. The high-profile and fast decision-making has largely been a bonus, enabling successes such as the access resolutions. However, it has also caused disquiet within the organization and a sense for some, at times, of capacities underused.

In September 2012, the Syria crisis was declared an OCHA corporate emergency, essentially making CRD unequivocally in charge and implementing a fast-track prioritization imperative. This led to reinforced authority for CRD management and enabled a certain degree of fast decision-making. It did not particularly activate a series of emergency protocols, something that should be reconsidered now that a new emergency policy has been approved internally, as of July 2015.

The scale and intensity of the Syria crisis put significant burdens on OCHA. In the words of one senior manager, the crisis was "testing it to its limits". OCHA has survived, but it is somewhat bruised. Human resources were, and continue to be, a huge challenge. During the response, the surge facility has provided a significant number of staff, showing the challenge of finding people and the flux in managerial requirements. The surge facility is a proven mechanism and it added value in the Syria crisis. However, it is expensive and hard to maintain. It has also contributed to the unsettled nature of teams, testing coherence. New ways should be found to recruit for crises such as Syria to ensure continuity and sufficient global capacity.

The high-stress and high-pressure environment was also a challenge. Staff inside Syria in particular were under physical threat and emotional and mental pressure at times. Largely this has been handled, but the flux and uncertainty at times has led to low staff morale and a higher-than-average attrition rate. This situation has not been helped by variable management in the field during the response. The fact that morale is much improved over the last year demonstrates the value of having stability in the field. The best use of national staff and their career progression are other issues that OCHA should consider. This evaluation encountered many highly competent OCHA national staff—a significant resource given the evident constraints of finding the right profiles.

Overall, the Syria response has drawn on the talents and capacities of most of OCHA during the five years. But at times, the organization has been challenged to manage these optimally. All of the offices have reported to New York since early in the crisis, creating a silo effect that has not been helpful, and increasing the managerial load at HQ. The Syria Crisis Regional Office in Amman has struggled for purpose at times, not reporting to the RHC but

neither active in the management of the country operations. The MENA Regional Office similarly has acted mostly as a “body shop”.

More broadly within other sections of OCHA, there is a feeling that they are a resource to be used by CRD as needed, rather than a group of peers that can help shape policy and practice. There is clearly value in a simple chain of command in emergencies; previous evaluations have critiqued OCHA for being overly participatory. There is a balance to be struck somewhere in the middle, between direct and authoritative management, and a participatory approach that draws out the best in all of OCHA’s rich talent. Better internal communication may be a part of this formula, although it creates additional workload. Clearly there is also a need to have adequate resources within the CRD team; at times, the workload has been exhausting for all involved. Finding good, “light touch” structures and routines for emergencies of this size and complexity will also help, drawing on best practices from the Syria experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

URGENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation	Responsibility	Timeliness
The OCHA Syria Crisis Regional Office in Amman should be restructured so that a significant component supports and directly reports to the RHC.		< 6 months
The new ERC must tackle the divisions within the organization that have been exacerbated by (and highlighted through) the Syria crisis. A more inclusive form of crisis management is needed within OCHA, without eroding the necessary chain of command that allows for swift decision-making.		< 6 months
OCHA and UNHCR must develop a sensible division of labour in refugee crises, codify this through the IASC (globally) and move on from the current impasse. Seconding capacity from OCHA to UNHCR and nominating UNHCR reps as HCs can work, especially if UNHCR is willing to give space to OCHA’s legitimate role within such a formula.		< 6 months
Greater concentration is required on needs assessments in Syria. This should be a priority for the WoS process, particularly for OCHA Damascus. The governorate profiles are a significant improvement on the previous situation, but better information is required. More generally, needs assessments should receive central attention at the beginning of response.		< 6 months

IMPORTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation	Responsibility	Timeliness
The IASC principals should convene an ad hoc meeting on Syria once all evaluations under the Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) initiative have been delivered to examine how the system responds to complex political emergencies such as Syria. The ERC’s role, as set out in 46/182, should be reconfirmed by the IASC as part of this process.		< 1 year
OCHA should do further work on codifying the concept of arbitrary denial and build on the access work it has achieved around Syria through a body of work. A permanent capacity at HQ to analyse access and undertake humanitarian access negotiations should be considered.		< 6 months
OCHA should propose amendments to the L3 system to strengthen it considerably. Donors should be mobilized to ensure agencies buy in to a better system for the collective good.		< 1 year
OCHA can learn several lessons from the Syria experience. First, its coordination role is crucial for many other facets of its work, and it must work creatively to deliver this. Having more than one model is essential, including making sure the cluster system does not become a straitjacket. Second, having posts such as the Deputy HC in complex geographically dispersed crises works well. Third, capacity-building of local NGOs through the ERF should become a standard part of the toolbox.		< 1 year
OCHA should put new offices in place at the beginning of a crisis (where one doesn’t exist) on a “no regrets” basis.		Immediate
OCHA should consider creating more robust emergency response capacity: more standing emergency response positions, more office-in-a-box type equipment, pre-approved cost plans and other preparedness measures that will allow it to convert early intent into early, robust presence.		< 1 year
The activation of the corporate emergency response should be accompanied by a set of		< 1 year

organization-wide protocols. The new emergency policy sets out many of these. Activating regular emergency task force meetings will help with internal communications, even if they are not well attended at times.		
OCHA should develop new ways of recruiting essential profiles for crises such as Syria to avoid overreliance on surge and an already stretched global cadre of response personnel. This might include rolling recruitment for high-volume positions.		< 1 year
OCHA should find ways to offer progression to the best-performing national staff. This will increase the talent pool and incentivize people. Allowing them to gain international experience through surge is a good mechanism.		< 1 year

DESIRABLE IMPROVEMENTS

Recommendation	Responsibility	Timeliness
The L3 pool should be scrapped and replaced with a system that works.		< 1 year
OCHA needs to develop a set of analytical tools to underpin its strategy development for response in complex emergencies. Strategic documents informing IASC discussions should be sufficiently detailed and analytical to promote contextualized strategy rather than generic aid objectives.		< 2 years
OCHA should develop a light-touch emergency strategy format to enable flexible strategy development early in a response. CRD should adopt this as a useful tool rather than see it as onerous bureaucracy.		< 2 years
OCHA needs a better system to understand partners' concerns. Ultimately it is a consensual system and there is a need to carry partners with you. The partner survey is an excellent tool that can be supplemented with other forms of feedback, allowing for course corrections when needed.		
OCHA has already learned from Syria that Kuwait-style conferences are a good fundraising tool. This should be explored further with Member States by region in the search for similarly effective innovations.		
OCHA should explore further how the use of CERF and the ERF can be used to support cross-border-type operations, creatively expanding humanitarian space even in the absence of formal access agreements.		
More sensitive feedback mechanisms are required to ensure there is not a build-up of frustration and tiredness in highly challenging contexts. This should be independent from line managers.		
OCHA must further delegate responsibility within the Syria field office structure, perhaps also considering a managerial role for Amman.		

Table of Contents

Copyright.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Disclaimer	ii
Evaluation Management.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
Leadership	iii
Strategy.....	iii
Enabling the System	iv
Management.....	v
Recommendations	vi
Urgent recommendations	vi
Important recommendations	vi
Desirable improvements	vii
Table of Contents.....	viii
Abbreviations	x
Introduction	1
Purpose and objectives	1
Methodology	2
Evaluation team	5
Constraints.....	5
Structure of the report.....	5
Context and timeline	7
Phase 1: From civil unrest to civil war. 2011-2012	7
International political efforts	7
Phase 2: Syria disintegrates: humanitarian crisis 2013 – 2014.....	8
Phase 3: Protracted conflict. Consolidation: 2014 – 2015.....	8
Findings	11
Leadership of the Syria response.....	11
Political and institutional context.....	11
Global leadership	11
Humanitarian diplomacy and access.....	13
Country leadership in Syria and neighbouring countries.....	16
Regional leadership	18
Strategy.....	19
Evolution of the overall strategy.....	19
Protection of civilians	25
OCHA internal strategy.....	27
Enabling the response	28
Major features of the L3 activation.....	28
IASC architecture.....	30

Coordination in Syria.....	30
Coordination in Turkey.....	31
Coordination in Jordan and Lebanon, working with UNHCR	33
The Inter-Agency Standing Committee and partnerships.....	35
Needs assessments.....	36
Resource mobilization.....	38
Humanitarian financing – CERF and ERF	39
Information Management.....	42
Management of the Syria crisis	43
Timeliness of designation and deployment	43
Operational and decision-making protocols and response systems	44
Human resources management	45
Finance and administration.....	46
Management structure	47
Internal communication.....	48
Conclusions	50
List of Annexes	51

Abbreviations

ACU	Assistance Coordination Unit (of the Syrian Opposition)
AOG	Armed Opposition Groups
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CRD	Coordination and Response Division (of OCHA)
CRSF	Comprehensive Regional Strategic Framework
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
ECHO	European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
EDG	Emergency Directors Group (of the IASC)
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator
ERF	Emergency Response Fund
ERTF/ETF	Emergency Response Task Force/Emergency Task Force
EU	European Union
GA	General Assembly (of the UN)
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
GoS	Government of Syria
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IARRM	Inter-Agency Rapid Response Mechanism
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IM	Information Management
L3	Level 3 emergency (the highest designation)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSNA	Multi-Sector Needs Analysis
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
RC	United Nations Resident Coordinator
RHC	Regional Humanitarian Coordinator
RRP/3RP	Regional Refugee Response Plan/Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SC	Security Council
SHARP	Syria Humanitarian Action and Response Plan
SNGO	Syrian Non-Governmental Organization
SPEGS	Strategic Planning, Evaluation and Guidance Section
SRP	Strategic Response Plan
TOR	Terms of Reference
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WoS	Whole of Syria

Introduction

The Syrian civil war has triggered the largest humanitarian crisis in two decades. After five years of unrelenting conflict, almost half of the country's population has been displaced and more than 4 million people² have fled the country. More than 210,000 people have been killed directly by the violence, many more indirectly as services have broken down and medical care eroded.

In response to the immense need, the United Nations, the Red Cross Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have mounted one of the largest ever humanitarian responses. Billions of dollars' worth of aid has been distributed to refugees in neighbouring countries and displaced people in Syria. The aid operation has also been one of the most complex, involving four separate country operations that on their own rank among the largest globally.

The aid operation has taken place against the backdrop of fractured global politics surrounding the Syria conflict and a fragmented landscape of warring parties. Gaining access to civilians caught up in the conflict has been one of the principal challenges, whether due to Government restrictions or rebel brutality.

Coordinating the aid operation across four separate countries (and latterly five, with Iraq drawn into the crisis), and with only limited consent from the warring factions, has been an immense challenge. OCHA declared Syria a corporate emergency in September 2012, soon after street protests turned into armed resistance. The crisis has consumed much of its time since. The ERC, charged with leading the system supported by OCHA, has been an outspoken advocate on humanitarian issues in Syria.

This evaluation looks at OCHA's work since the inception of the Syria crisis to early 2015, which is when the data gathering was carried out. It takes a broad view of the response, predicated on its organization-wide nature. With the ERC post also being the head of OCHA, the evaluation looks at leadership of the overall response and considers systemic elements due to the intertwined nature of OCHA's role.

Under the new OCHA 2014-2017 Strategic Plan and associated Monitoring and Evaluation Plan, OCHA is committed to examine its performance in emergency response settings at least once a year between 2014 and 2017. The evaluation of OCHA's response to the Syria crisis is the first of such learning-focused evaluations under the new Strategic Plan.

This evaluation also satisfies the CALL initiative. This was established in October 2013 by the Steering Group for Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHE)³ to ensure coordination of evaluative efforts on the Syria crisis. Under this initiative, member organizations have agreed to carry out their own internal evaluations, which would eventually be drawn together to provide an overview of the system response, complemented by a number of common initiatives, such as a context analysis of the Syria crisis and an online portal.⁴

The evaluation took place from October 2014 to August 2015. It has been timed to coincide with other agency evaluations, and it took place at the same time as an operational peer review of the Syria and Iraq humanitarian operations under the auspices of the IASC Emergency Directors Group (May/June 2015).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The Syria crisis is an L3 emergency. It was declared a "corporate emergency" for OCHA, requiring a whole-of-organization effort. As a result, the evaluation looked at the response within Syria, as well as the support provided at all levels of the organization, including headquarters, and regional and country offices in neighbouring countries.

In line with OCHA's evaluation policy, the purpose of the evaluation was to ensure accountability and promote learning to achieve the following objectives:

- To build evidence on OCHA's added value in the Syria crisis as the response has evolved over time (enabling the system).
- Meet the needs of management for improved response and decision-making (enabling the system, coordination, strategy and planning, management).
- To assist the organization to further develop its learning and strategy on how to respond to corporate and L3 emergencies (leadership, enabling the system, management).
- To strengthen OCHA's internal evaluation culture (accountability).

² As of 6 September 2015, UNHCR has registered 4,088,099 persons of concern. Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

³ The Steering Group for IAHE is composed of heads of evaluation offices of IASC member organizations.

⁴ The 2014 Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis and Syria Learning Portal are accessible at www.syrialearning.org

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data as well as a large literature review. Primary data collection was exclusively qualitative, using key informant interviews and some group interviews. Secondary data collection was mostly via literature/document review, although there was also analysis of the 2014 OCHA's partner survey data. The period covered is 2011 to August 2015.

Table 1: Summary of data-collection methods

Key stakeholder interviews	The evaluation was mostly based on interviews with key stakeholders in Syria, surrounding countries, regional offices and OCHA headquarters in New York and Geneva. In addition to OCHA staff, UN agencies, donors, NGOs, Governments and civil-society organizations were interviewed. Interviews were conducted at all levels, from the ERC to those responsible for delivery.
Literature review	The literature review concentrated largely on internal documents and key texts, such as Security Council statements or minutes of IASC meetings. In addition, the evaluation drew on the Syria CALL Common Context Analysis, evaluations from other agencies and general academic analysis relating to the humanitarian response.
Review of secondary data	The evaluation drew on the 2014 OCHA partner-satisfaction surveys and financial data, such as FTS, CERF and ERF.
Focus-group discussions	Focus-group discussions were carried out with groups of OCHA staff and partners.
Workshop	The evaluation undertook a validation workshop in New York to discuss and validate preliminary findings.

The evaluation conducted more than 245 interviews across HQ, country operations and a wide cross-section of OCHA and partners. Figure 1 shows the distribution of interviews by location. Sampling was purposive, aiming for a cross-section of HQ, region, country-based, donor, UN, NGO, affected Government and local organization, and within OCHA to cover a representative sample of departments and key individuals. Respondents were selected iteratively, meaning that in many cases key individuals were recommended to the evaluation team during interviews, which was then followed up.

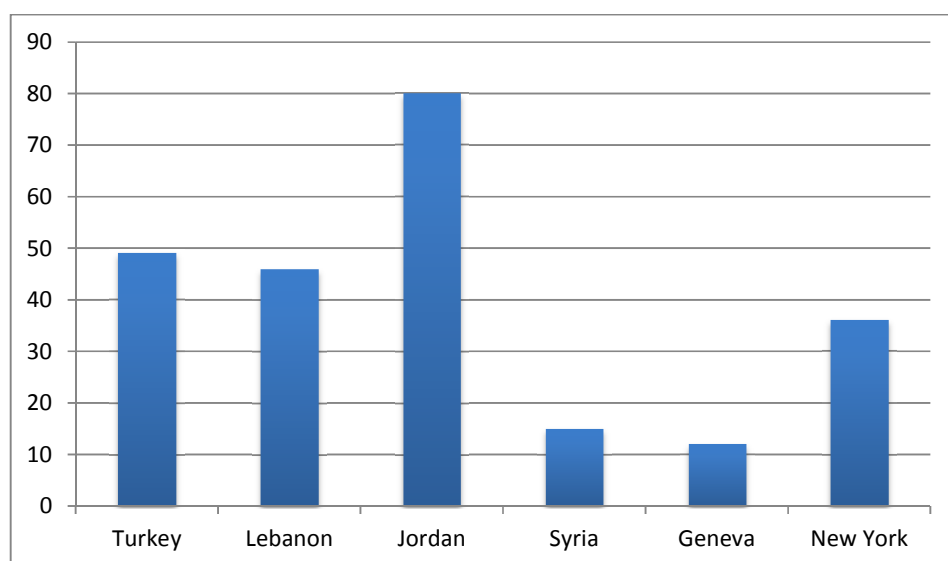


Figure 1: Numbers of interviews by location

Figure 2 shows the distribution of interviews by type of organization.

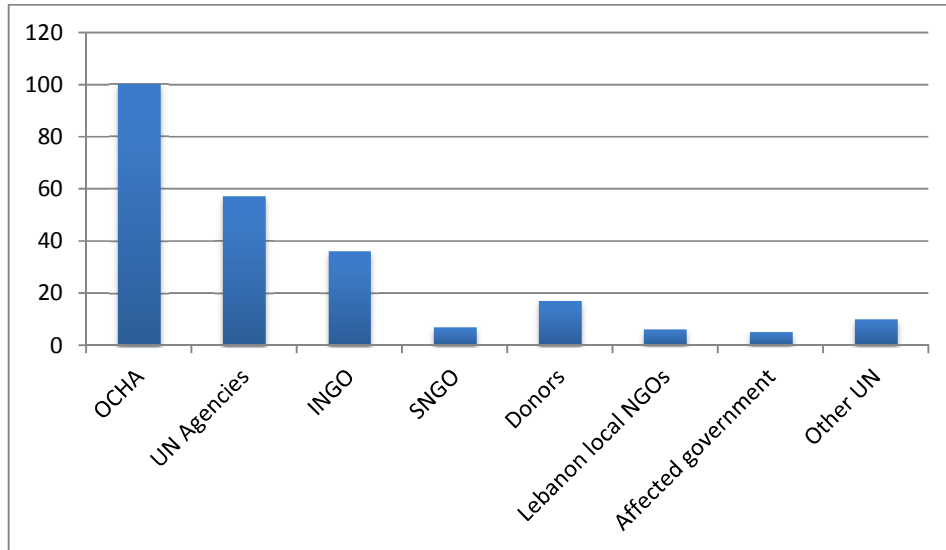


Figure 2: Numbers of interviews by type of organization

The evaluation had originally intended to undertake a limited number of interviews with affected people. Given the time and difficulty in accessing people (especially in Syria) it was judged that this was not a good use of resources. To have interviewed a representative sample and make the logical connections with the evaluation questions seemed too costly and unlikely to achieve, given the degree of methodological rigour necessary.

The evaluation similarly had intended to carry out many more interviews inside Syria. A consultant was hired for this purpose. However, due to visa restrictions, this was not possible. As a result, the evaluation relied on interviewing Syria-based staff in Beirut and by Skype, necessarily restricting this aspect to some extent.

Approximately 720 documents were gathered and reviewed. Figure 3 provides an overview of the documents reviewed.

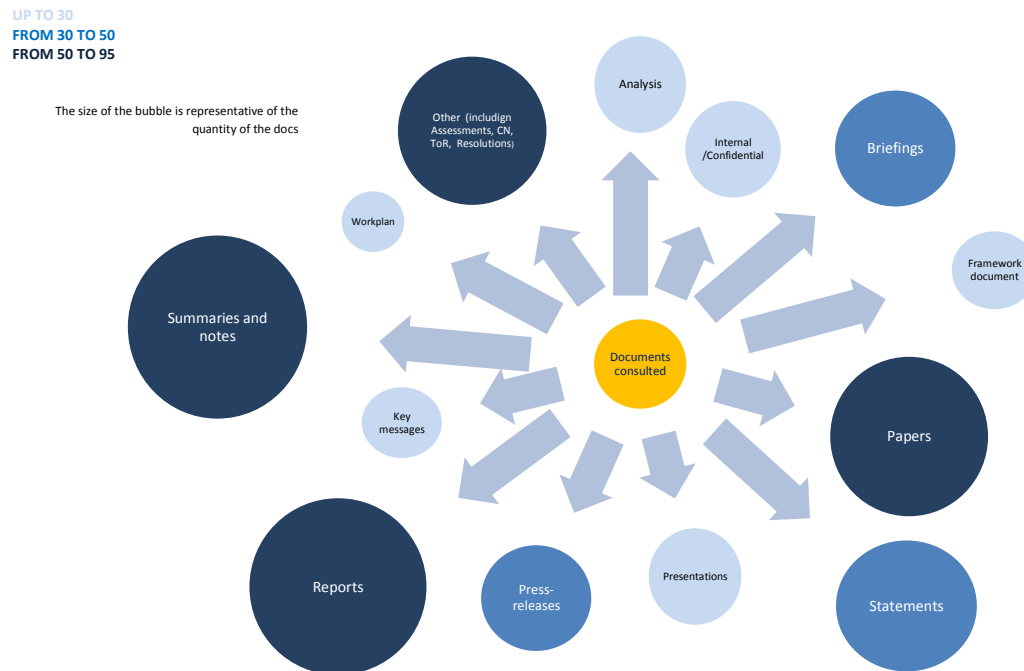


Figure 3: Documents reviewed by type

The evaluation used a basic framework to structure the enquiry, derived from a theory of change constructed during the inception phase. The inception phase took place during late 2014 and into 2015, and it defined the scope and ambition of the evaluation. During the scoping phase, a separate study on information management commissioned by the OCHA Regional Office for the Syria crisis in Amman was absorbed into the evaluation. Section 4.3 looks at some aspects arising from their findings.

Four key areas of enquiry were derived from the basic theory of change (TOC). They were then developed into an evaluation matrix, found in table 2. A number of sub-questions are used to inform the areas of enquiry, and these largely form the structure of this report. A full evaluation matrix and the TOC are in annex 3.

All evidence was triangulated using interviews and documentary evidence. A validation workshop was held with key internal stakeholders in June 2015.

Table 2: Key areas of enquiry and main sub-questions

Key area of enquiry 1: Leadership of the Syria response
What were the political and institutional constraints to the provision of humanitarian assistance? How was humanitarian diplomacy deployed to secure access to populations in need? How effectively was global leadership exercised? How effective was leadership "public face" advocacy? Given the regional nature of the Syrian crisis, how did structures put in place work? How effective was the deployment and support of country-level leadership?
Key area of enquiry 2: Enabling the system
What were the major features of L3 activation, and how did this facilitate timely humanitarian operations? Did the system deliver effective support to affected populations? How did the elements of IASC humanitarian architecture function in the Syria crisis? What did the UNHCR-led refugee response in neighbouring countries mean for OCHA, and what lessons can be learned for future such responses? How was needs assessment supported and facilitated, and how was assistance prioritized? Were different groups equally well served by gender, age and other considerations? How well did information management and reporting products serve the need of the overall Syria operation, and in particular key decision-making and coordination internal and external to OCHA? Did OCHA's "public face" advocacy enable the system to operate more effectively? Was the resource mobilization strategy successful, and what are the lessons to be learned from the various approaches?
Key area of enquiry 3: Strategy, planning and operations
How did the strategy evolve towards the crisis? What was the role of OCHA in the Syria crisis, both within the country and in the neighbouring, affected States and at global level? What is the optimal 'footprint' of an OCHA office in a complex emergency such as Syria? What combination of regional and country-based offices works well? Was the designation of Syria as a crisis, and subsequent deployment, timely? Were operational protocols and systems for response effective? Were information and decision-making protocols effective for response?
Key area of enquiry 4: Management
How effectively were human resources managed, including staff recruitment, use of surge, staff welfare, national staff, staff security and learning and development? How did finance and administration support operations, including the role of UNDP as service provider? How well did internal communication and operational information sharing work, especially given the sensitivity of some operational information? How well did internal management structures perform between departments, between offices, and in support of leadership and principal OCHA stakeholders?

Table 3 shows how the areas of enquiry loosely map onto OCHA's strategic priorities 2014 – 2017 and to the OECD DAC criteria for evaluation.

Table 3: Matching the areas of enquiry to strategic goals and OECD DAC

Areas of enquiry	OCHA strategic goals 2014-17.	OECD DAC evaluation criteria
Leadership	Leadership	Relevance/ appropriateness, impact, sustainability
Enabling	Coordination Resource mobilisation Humanitarian Financing Information management	Effectiveness, impact
Strategy	Protection and access to assistance. Assessment Planning and Monitoring.	Relevance/ Appropriateness, effectiveness

	Advocacy.	
Management	People management. Resources, structure and management.	Efficiency

An advisory group composed of OCHA senior managers has overseen the evaluation. The group helped to develop the initial terms of reference and managed the scoping-and-inception process. It has also been instrumental in the validation and oversight of the evidence. The evaluation is managed by the Strategic Planning, Evaluation and Guidance Section (SPEGS), reporting to OCHA’s Assistant Secretary-General (ASG).

EVALUATION TEAM

The evaluation was led by Lewis Sida, a humanitarian evaluation consultant with substantial experience in this area. Dr. Lorenzo Trombetta conducted many of the interviews and provided expert advice on the context, as well as sharing the analysis. Veronica Panero worked as a Research Analyst. Dr. Martina Comes and Dr. Bartel Van De Walle undertook the information management research and analysis.

CONSTRAINTS

The evaluation experienced a number of significant constraints. Fieldwork was not possible in Syria, despite a consultant with excellent credentials being hired specifically for this portion of the work. He was unable to secure a visa, despite carrying the passport of a friendly nation. As a result, interviews with the UNCT in Syria were either carried out in Beirut or over Skype. The team was unable to travel into northern Syria from Turkey as security was not considered to be conducive.

The evaluation also experienced difficulty in securing access to key internal documentation. Despite repeated requests, much material has not been forthcoming, diminishing to some extent the reliability of the evidence and, therefore, the findings. In particular, internal situation reports, normally a key source of evidence for evaluations, were not made available despite several requests. Table 4 shows the evaluation team’s confidence in the evidence against the key areas of enquiry.

Table 4: Strength of evidence for key areas of enquiry

Area of enquiry	Data source	Analysis	Strength of evidence
Leadership	Stakeholder interviews Internal reports Literature	Strong evidence from USG statements, Security Council reports, advocacy statements, and reports and interviews.	Strong
Strategy	Stakeholder interviews Internal reports Literature	Adequate evidence from EDG minutes (principally) and interviews.	Adequate
Enabling	Stakeholder interviews Internal reports Literature IM review	Strong evidence from interviews, evaluations, reports and products.	Strong
Management	Interviews	Some written evidence and internal documentation was provided, substantial interview data.	Adequate

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report follows as closely as possible the evaluation matrix and sub-questions as outlined in table 2. For the purpose of evaluative logic, the strategy section—closely related to leadership—follows the leadership section instead of coming late, as set out in the matrix. Several of the questions relating to the timeliness of OCHA decision-making and operational protocols have also been moved from strategy to the management section.

The report’s first three sections are essentially descriptive. The purpose of this is to put the OCHA response in context, allowing the reader to understand how key actions by OCHA correspond to key moments in the crisis and the response.

- Section 1 introduces the evaluation and the purpose.

- Section 2 describes the method used and is linked to annexes describing the terms of reference and method in detail.
- Section 3 is a brief overview of the Syria conflict and its evolution to the present day.

The findings section, section 4, is arranged according to the key areas of enquiry, as explained above. Within each of the four sections, there are sub-sections that follow closely the sub-questions in the evaluation matrix.

- The section on leadership deals with global advocacy, global stewardship of the response, regional leadership and country-based leadership. It includes a substantial section on humanitarian access.
- The section on strategy looks at global strategy, how it evolved and how it was developed; country-based strategy setting and various regional and sub-regional strategies; and OCHA internal strategy.
- The section on enabling the system considers the L3 activation, coordination, partnerships, needs assessment, resource mobilization, humanitarian financing and information management.
- The section on management concentrates on timeliness, human resources, finance and admin, structure and internal communication.

Following each of these sub-sections, the key points are summarized as findings, and the findings are further collated at the end of each substantive section as conclusions. Where there are lessons identified, these are highlighted in separate boxes. At the end of each section, recommendations are developed building on the findings and conclusions.

The final section is conclusions and recommendations.

Context and timeline

PHASE 1: FROM CIVIL UNREST TO CIVIL WAR. 2011-2012

The first 250 Syrians escaping violence in their country arrived in Turkey at the end of April 2011, only one month after the conventional date of the beginning of the unrest and the consequent military repression. In June, the presence of more than 2,000 refugees was documented in northern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley. These refugees were mainly coming from the Homs region. At the same time, about 10,000 refugees reached southern Turkey from the embattled Idlib region.

By autumn 2011, the revolt became militarized and the pro-Western opposition groups supported the attempt of a few Syrian defected officers to bring together the emerging brigades of defectors and armed civilians under one coordinated umbrella called Free Syrian Army (FSA). This can be seen as the moment when Syria's internal unrest became an armed conflict.

By the end of 2011, up to 2,000 Syrians had fled to northern Jordan from Daraa and its surroundings. By January 2012, about 3,000 refugees had been registered in Jordan's Hashemite Kingdom.

In summer 2012, there were more than 70,000 Syrians registered as refugees in the neighbouring countries (Turkey: 26,000; Jordan: 24,000; Lebanon: 19,000; Iraq: 4,500). However, local authorities affirmed that there were many more unregistered Syrians, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon. In June 2012, UN figures stated that about 300,000 Syrians were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in other regions of the country. According to OCHA, in the first quarter of 2012, about 1 million Syrians needed humanitarian assistance.⁵

In December 2012, more than half a million Syrians were refugees. Among them, 408,000 had been registered: 135,000 refugees were in Turkey; 181,614 were new arrivals from Syria in Jordan; 129,337 Syrians were registered as refugees in Jordan; 150,000 in Lebanon (110,000 registered and 40,000 still not registered); more than 60,000 in Iraq between Kurdistan (54,000) and the other Iraqi regions. About 12,000 Syrians were also hosted in Egypt. In December, almost 2.5 million Syrians were IDPs, most of them in Raqqa (500,000), Homs (250,000) and the Damascus countryside (135,000).⁶ According to OCHA, in December 2012, about 4 million Syrians needed humanitarian assistance.⁷

INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL EFFORTS

It took almost a year, from March 2011 until February 2012, for the international community to take concrete political action. Almost 24 hours before the opening of the first Friends of Syria meeting in Tunisia, the Arab League and the UN appointed Kofi Annan as Special Envoy to Syria. The Friends of Syria group was conceived as a Western, Arab Gulf and Turkish initiative in favour of the fragmented and exiled Syrian opposition, trying to counterbalance the Russian-Chinese-Iranian axis supporting the Government of Syria.

In March 2012, Annan presented to the UN Security Council his six-point peace plan, calling on the Syrian authorities to cease military repression and the use of heavy weapons in populated areas. Annan guaranteed he would seek similar commitments from the armed opposition groups to "bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties". The plan also demanded a "provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting", the "release of arbitrarily detained persons and those "involved in peaceful activities", "ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists", and respect the right of Syrians to "demonstrate peacefully".

At the end of June 2012, Annan initiated an international conference in Geneva (later known as Geneva-1), which was attended by top diplomatic representatives from China, Russia, the UK and the US. The final communiqué, later known as the Geneva communiqué, basically agreed on the need for a "transitional government body with full executive powers that could include members of the Syrian government and the opposition and should be formed on the basis of mutual consent", "review of the constitutional order and the legal system", and "free and fair multi-party elections".

Between April and August 2012, Annan made great efforts to broker a ceasefire and prepare the ground for the deployment of an international UN unarmed force inside the country. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) was set up under the command of Norwegian General Robert Mood under DPKO. The failure of the ceasefire and the subsequent inability of UNSMIS to implement its mandate on the ground contributed in

⁵ www.unocha.org/syria.

⁶ http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria_conflict_december_2012_0.pdf.

⁷ www.unocha.org/syria

pushing Annan to resign in August. The Annan initiative and Mood's mission could be considered as the moment when the UN actually operationalized inside Syria its efforts to help end the conflict.

In August, against the backdrop of the violent crackdown of massive and unprecedented peaceful sit-ins in Hama, Annan announced the failure of his mission and resigned. Two weeks later, Algerian veteran diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed as the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria. In October 2012, the new envoy attempted to convince the warring parties to implement a ceasefire.

PHASE 2: SYRIA DISINTEGRATES: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS 2013 – 2014

Following the failure of the autumn 2012 ceasefire agreement negotiated by Brahimi, new insurgents' offensives pushed Syrian forces out of Dayr az Zor, Raqqqa and part of Hasaka region. Non-State armed groups (NSAGs) strengthened their positions along the Damascus-Homs route, in and around Aleppo and in some key peripheral neighbourhoods in Damascus, such as the Yarmouk Palestinian camp.

By the end of these various offensives, Government of Syria (GoS) forces remained in control of no more than 30 per cent of the Syrian territory and 60 per cent of the Syrian population.⁸

Between spring and summer 2013, the conflict dynamic gradually changed in favour of GoS and its regional and international allies. The rising of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in eastern and northern Syria significantly weakened local NSAGs in those regions. GoS forces supported by Lebanese Hezbollah militiamen also succeeded in retaking control of strategic cities along the Damascus-Homs route and along the Orontes valley in central Syria. Simultaneously, they began pushing insurgents southwards in the Daraa region neighbouring with Jordan.

The heavy fighting, indiscriminate aerial bombardment and disregard for civilian casualties resulted in mass displacement. By April 2013, the number of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries had reached 1 million, and by August 2013 the IDP population was estimated to be 4.5 million.⁹

In May 2013, the US and Russia agreed to revive the Geneva communiqué and try to “bring both sides to the table”. Brahimi was already working on this track, but the diplomatic initiative was not resumed before late August. At that time, the political international and regional tensions reached another peak due to the chemical attack against thousands of civilians in the opposition-held areas around Damascus.

In this context, the FSA de facto collapsed, especially in northern Syria, in front of the fragmentation of the Armed Opposition Groups (AOG) platforms and the growing Islamic radicalization of the various anti-Government groups. Islamist and jihadist factions, often supported by regional powers, gained momentum and took the lead in fighting GoS forces and their allies. In the meantime, an increasing number of warlords, struggling for local political and economic power, emerged in loyalist and opposition camps, boosting the war economy as one of the main driving forces of the conflict.

From 2013 onwards, parts of the country have been subject to prolonged medieval sieges laid mainly by GoS forces and, in a few cases, by NSAGs. This has included some parts of Damascus, such as the Yarmouk camp and other neighbourhoods, the Eastern Damascus countryside, the Old City of Homs and a few villages in the Idlib and Aleppo northern regions. The “starve or surrender” tactic included cutting electricity and communications, which prevented food, medicine and aid workers from reaching civilians in need. The urgency of addressing the problem of how to reach those areas became particularly evident to the international community with the advent of ISIS in large parts of eastern and north-eastern Syria between April 2013 and May 2014.

In December 2013, OCHA reported 6.5 million IDPs (at least 32 per cent of the population). UNRWA reported 270,000 Palestinian refugees forced into secondary displacement. UNHCR reported 2.3 million refugees (between those registered and those awaiting registration) in neighbouring countries (842,000 Lebanon; 567,000 Jordan; 539,000 Turkey; 207,000 Iraq; 129,000 Egypt).

PHASE 3: PROTRACTED CONFLICT. CONSOLIDATION: 2014 – 2015

After months of negotiations and postponements, the Geneva-2 conference was held in Switzerland during January and February 2014. For the first time, representatives of GoS and the Syrian National Coalition (founded in November 2012) met officially and talked to each other through the mediation of the UN-Arab League envoy. However, the Geneva-2 conference did not bring any concrete results, and Brahimi resigned in May 2014. During this same period, under the supervision of UN personnel and in the framework of an international agreement

⁸ See for instance: http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/69928000/gif_69928349_syria_control_20.09.13_624map.gif or www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/syria.html

⁹ www.unocha.org/syria.

brokered by Iran, the last opposition militiamen left the besieged and semi-destroyed old city of Homs. GoS announced the restoration of control over what, in 2011, was the third largest city in Syria and the country's main industrial hub.

Meanwhile, refugee flows continued unabated, from 2.3 million in January 2014 to 3.9 million in May 2015.¹⁰ This was especially the case in Lebanon (from 842,000 to 1,090,000) and Turkey (from 539,000 to 765,000)—countries closer to the Syrian regions where the conflict was the most violent at that time. There were an estimated 7.6 million IDPs through this period, meaning that by the beginning of 2015, perhaps half the entire population of Syria had been displaced at some point.

In May 2014, Staffan de Mistura had replaced Lakhdar Brahimi as the UN Envoy for Syria. In November, he announced a plan to 'freeze' the conflict in Syria, starting from Aleppo. The aim was to reach small-scale, local ceasefires and create the conditions for delivering humanitarian aid to civilians. However, his proposal to freeze the conflict in the Aleppean neighbourhood of Sayf ad Dawla was rebuffed by both sides. Efforts are now focusing on assessing the possible willingness of the parties, Iran included, in engaging in indirect talks.

Since summer 2014, four different Syrias have emerged: a Syria under the control of GoS forces and various Syrian and foreign militias associated with Damascus; another dominated by ISIS and its local allies; one that is in the hands of a plethora of armed groups who call themselves part of the opposition; and one under the hegemony of the Kurdish militias.

For some, aspects of the Syrian war now resemble the Lebanese conflict (1975-1990). For more than a decade, international, regional, national and local factors had interacted together, creating an intricate pattern of several small wars waged by super-Powers and proxies in a continuously shifting game of rivalries and alliances. As nobody is capable of winning in the short and midterm, none of the involved actors is willing to make serious concessions to its rivals.

¹⁰ www.unocha.org/syria.

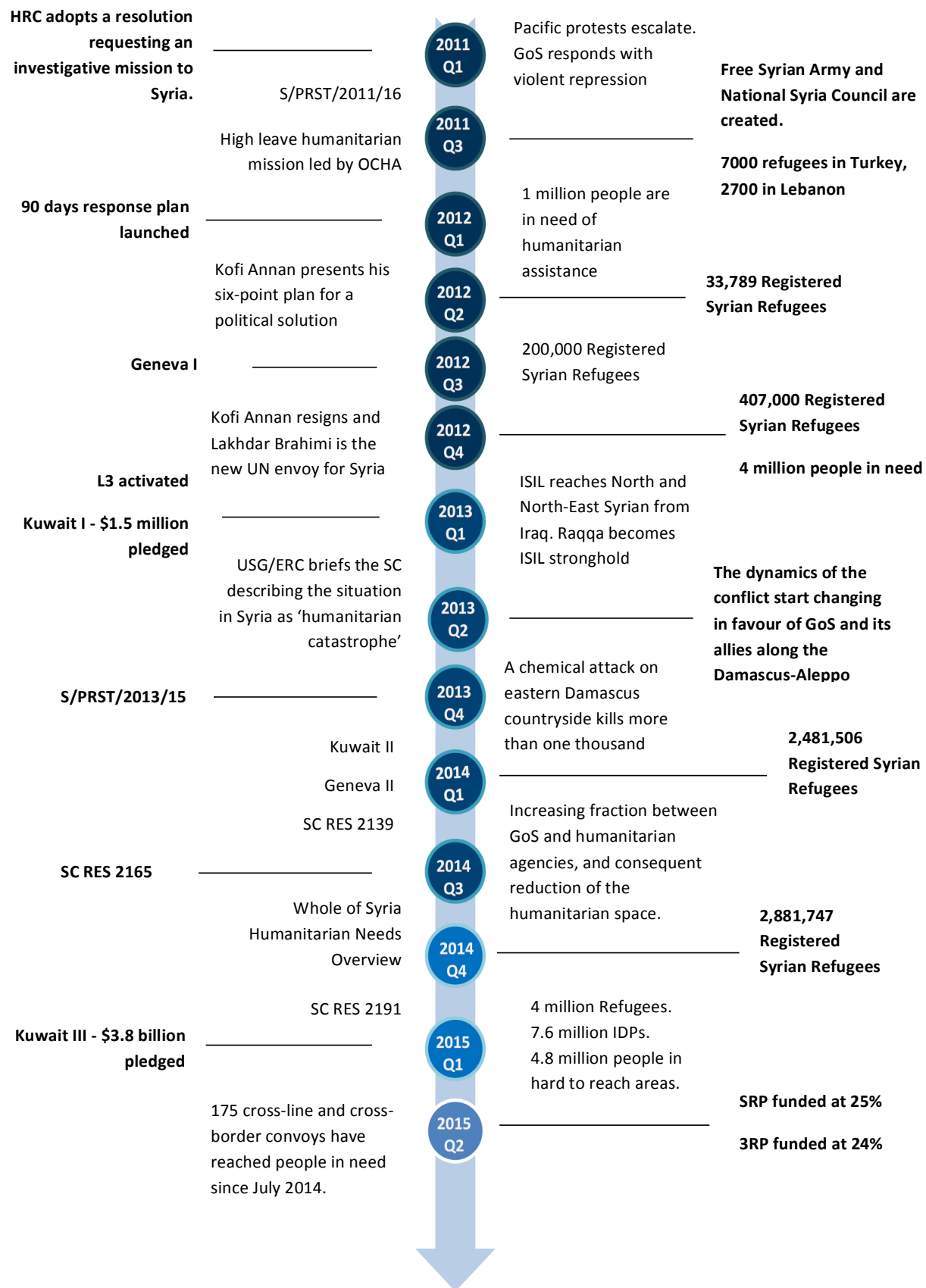


Figure 4: Timeline of the Syria crisis and key moments in the response

Findings

LEADERSHIP OF THE SYRIA RESPONSE

This section deals with global leadership, humanitarian diplomacy and access, regional leadership and country-based leadership.

POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Syria response has been among the most difficult humanitarian operations of recent times. The context in which it has taken place has made it hugely challenging, particularly for the UN family. Some have described the situation as akin to Rwanda, where humanitarian action had substituted for political will.¹¹

For the UN, the division in the Security Council has constrained its ability to operate.¹² This has been especially the case on the political front, but it has also impacted the ability of UN humanitarian organizations to reach people in need.¹³

As the situation in Syria began to deteriorate from late 2011 onwards, humanitarian operations and goods were subject to limitations and disruptions from both sides in the conflict. The GoS was initially reluctant to acknowledge there were areas outside of its control, and it insisted that humanitarian assistance went through Syrian institutions, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Furthermore, the GoS restricted the flow of medical goods into areas outside its control, and it has been accused of directly targeting medical facilities through aerial bombardment. The increasing use of siege has been another feature of the conflict, such as the siege of Homs old town throughout 2013.

From the early days of the conflict, the Syrian opposition has also appeared to want to use humanitarian assistance as part of its military strategy. Early statements by the opposition linked the supply of aid with winning support from the population. Jihadist groups targeted foreign aid workers and fought for control of aid flows with the ‘moderate’ opposition.

The UN humanitarian organizations found themselves in the unenviable position of having to navigate this complex landscape.¹⁴ With Syria still maintaining its seat at the United Nations, and backed by Russia and China, UN agencies did not consider it possible that they could violate sovereignty. On the other side of this equation, the other three permanent members of the Security Council—France, the US and the UK—were openly backing the opposition to Assad and covertly financing aid across the borders into opposition areas. With the US, the UK and the EU accounting for over half of the official aid flows into the UN humanitarian system, the political pressures were intense.

Findings

- The split in the Security Council constrained the UN’s ability to operate.
- Humanitarian action has been used to substitute for political action.
- UN humanitarian organizations have had to navigate an almost impossible political landscape to deliver protection and assistance.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

The world has failed Syria. Almost five years into the war, with millions of people displaced inside and outside Syria’s borders and no sign of the conflict being resolved, it is difficult to argue otherwise.

There are strong arguments to say that the humanitarian system has also failed Syria, at least for periods of the last five years. For almost two years, there was an unbalanced concentration on providing aid to one part of the country. Medical supplies have been routinely removed from humanitarian shipments, medical facilities and other

¹¹ Dallaire, Romeo (2014): *Shake Hands with the Devil*.

¹² Russia and China have vetoed 4 Security Council draft resolutions to date: S/2014/348, 22 May 2014; S/2012/538, 19 July 2012; S/2012/77, 4 February 2012; S/2011/612, 4 October 2011.

¹³ Quote from SC briefings.

¹⁴ In a 2013 meeting of the IASC principals, the Director of OCHA’s Coordination and Response Division put it thus: “He highlighted some key concerns in addressing the Syria crisis including: the political challenges of working with a Government that wrongly believed the UN was an instrument of Western powers interested in deposing the current Government; the Security Council paralysis in finding a political solution to the crisis; and the approach taken by the Assistance Coordination Unit, backed by some Member States, to instrumentalize humanitarian assistance for political gains, i.e., to win the hearts and minds of the population.”

exclusively civilian centres targeted by combatants, especially the GoS. At times, the criticism of these abuses has seemed muted, presumably in a judgment about access over advocacy.

Against this backdrop, the ERC's position became critical but also highly challenging. The ERC made the first statements on humanitarian need and access in May 2011. They have been a constant feature since. As early as August 2011, the ERC was briefing the Council that the Government had "systematically denied the UN humanitarian access to affected areas."¹⁵

Throughout the conflict, the ERC has made high-level representations to the Security Council, delivered public statements, organized conferences, convened Member States, undertaken private diplomacy with key States and parties to the conflict, visited Syria and the region as often as was possible, and convened the key humanitarian agencies throughout. The office of the ERC and OCHA have consistently pushed the humanitarian system to do more and better in the Syria crisis, first by triggering the L3 mechanism and later through a series of strategic initiatives. In terms of global advocacy, the ERC's statements became more frequent and more detailed as the conflict progressed through 2012 and into 2013 (when they became monthly). The ERC has been the most outspoken UN official, along with the High Commissioner for Refugees, on the Syria crisis, often representing the moral authority of the organization.

OCHA's senior leadership has also tried to push the humanitarian effort. The OCHA Geneva Director led one of the first high-level humanitarian missions to Syria in mid-2011. Later, at the beginning of 2013, the OCHA CRD Director led the Emergency Directors Group in the first cross-lines convoy and attempted to access northern Syria cross border.

The impact of this activity has been mixed. There have been some notable successes, particularly the Security Council resolution on cross-border access. This legitimized work that was already largely under way through NGOs, and it began a path towards coherence that has been lacking to this point. But for many it came very late—two years after it was clear that Syria was a massive humanitarian crisis. To date, it has not resulted in a step change in the volume of assistance being delivered.

The ERC has also struggled, at times, to take the humanitarian agencies—both UN and NGOs—with her. Throughout the first half of 2012, the OCHA leadership and in-country leadership lobbied the agencies for a faster scale-up. Across the sphere of operations, it has not been straightforward to establish OCHA's coordination mandate. The reasons for this need careful analysis. Lessons for OCHA and the wider system are set out throughout later sections of this evaluation.

The interaction of the UN's political and peacemaking efforts with the humanitarian operation has been complex. At the onset of the conflict, it could be argued that high-level advocacy efforts were geared more towards a political solution. Over time, as political efforts have faltered, the emphasis has shifted more towards humanitarian efforts as the only viable action. The role and profile of the ERC, supported by OCHA, has changed with this shift.

This has also been reflected in efforts to bring together key Member States. While the Geneva peace talks were being initiated, OCHA and the EU established the Syria Humanitarian Forum (also based in Geneva). This brought the GoS and key Member States together to discuss humanitarian issues, co-chaired by the head of ECHO and the ERC. It later evolved into the High-Level Group. This constitutes 22 Member States, chaired by the ERC, and it is used to build consensus around key humanitarian advocacy issues. Initially, this was somewhat of a sideshow compared with higher-profile political efforts. However, today it is arguably one of the few forums left for dialogue on the Syria conflict.

Despite these efforts, many humanitarian agencies felt that advocacy and action on humanitarian issues by the UN and the ERC did not come early enough. Many felt that in trying to walk the line between the interests of powerful Member States, the humanitarian imperative had been somewhat lost, and that emerging pockets of need were being overlooked. In particular, many operational NGOs have felt that the UN did not do enough to challenge the GoS during this period or to push the boundaries, and that by taking a somewhat legalistic approach to securing humanitarian access (taking advice from the UN Office for Legal Affairs, waiting for a resolution), more direct routes to delivering aid were neglected.

The cautiousness with regard to the GoS, the amount of time it took to secure meaningful access to opposition areas and the inability of the UN humanitarian agencies to scale up inside Syria for many months should be seen as the system underperforming, as should the fragmentation of the effort across the region and the discord, at times, between the IASC principals.

However, it is also true that a fine line has had to be navigated throughout. The ERC's bold statements and the L3 declaration effectively led to OCHA's senior leadership being excluded from Syria. With large numbers of people

¹⁵ Update of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Situation in Syria, delivered by Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos, New York, 18 August 2011.

dependent on UN and international assistance inside Government-controlled areas of Syria, there was a strong imperative to preserve what access there was. OCHA did not want to compromise UN operations, but increasingly the ERC found herself having to speak out on civilian suffering.

The ERC and OCHA have sought to assume responsibility for global humanitarian leadership throughout the Syria crisis. This has not always been easy. It is challenging to convene a system that is largely consensual and often drives in different directions as a result of funding competition or mandate differences. The fault lines in the system are sharply exposed in highly contested geopolitical crises such as Syria.

Many of the choices made on strategy and focus have inevitably been contested or subject to scrutiny. This will no doubt continue to be the case for years to come. This evaluation has found that efforts by the ERC and OCHA to lead were decisive and on the whole well judged. The vast majority of respondents have appreciated this leadership. Without such efforts, the response would arguably have been more difficult and perhaps also diminished.

Findings

- The humanitarian system has failed Syria at times. The response was initially too slow and too cautious.
- The ERC, supported by OCHA, sought to exercise global humanitarian leadership from early in the Syria crisis. Much of this leadership has been decisive and well judged and improved as the crisis progressed.
- At times, the ERC and OCHA have struggled to bring the agencies with them. The reasons for this are largely systemic and should cause serious reflection with the UN at a leadership level.
- The slow and fragmented humanitarian effort should be seen as the system underperforming, despite the constraints.
- The fault lines in the current humanitarian system are sharply exposed in highly contested geopolitical crises such as Syria.

Recommendation

- The IASC principals should convene an ad hoc meeting on Syria once all evaluations under the CALL initiative have been delivered to examine how the system responds to complex political emergencies such as Syria. The role of the ERC, as set out in GA resolution 46/182, should be reconfirmed by the IASC as part of this process.
-

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY AND ACCESS

Probably the most significant outcome of OCHA and the ERC's global leadership has been the series of Security Council resolutions on humanitarian access.

From the beginning of the response, OCHA and in-country leadership were pushing for greater access. As early as mid-2011, the UN was asking the GoS for greater access to people in need, and through that year and the first half of 2012 it made a number of demarches. The ERC began a series of visits to Damascus early in 2012 (eventually making 21 visits during her tenure), repeatedly raising issues of access and the protection of civilians.

By late 2012, it was becoming clear that many people were trapped in areas that could not be reached through existing humanitarian aid channels, and that gross violations of international humanitarian law were occurring. These included deliberate targeting of civilians, medical facilities and civilian infrastructure, such as bakeries.

It was equally becoming clear that the Government was hindering the establishment of a proper humanitarian operation from quite early in the crisis. In a note to the Secretary-General in April 2012, the ERC documented "delaying tactics" on the part of the Government and the "lack of urgency and commitment on the part of the Government to respond to the humanitarian situation."

Towards the end of 2012, OCHA was leading the development of various access frameworks, with the aim of persuading the Government to allow an expansion of UN operations. This was also contingent on the UN having the capacity to expand as access became available. However, the RHC noted in November 2012 that this was not the case.

Part of the Government's limitations on humanitarian operations involved restricting visas for workers and the entry of new humanitarian organizations into the country. In response, some international NGOs were beginning to work covertly cross border into areas outside of Government control.

Ahead of the first Kuwait fundraising conference in January 2013, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) issued a statement calling for more aid into opposition-controlled areas.¹⁶ It suggested that most aid was going to Government-controlled areas.

Initially, the UN was reluctant to take up this cause. What resources it had were focused in Damascus, and getting that part of the operation right was proving challenging. The Government had made it very clear that cross-border operations were a “red line”, violating sovereignty. There was a feeling within OCHA that the Syrian opposition was a political creation, promoted by Western powers, and that there was a risk of aid being politicized by overtly backing cross-border efforts. Senior decision makers told the evaluation that the creation of the Syria Humanitarian Forum was explicitly in part to counter the influence of the Friends of Syria group, and to take the discussion on humanitarian issues out of the political arena. In this respect, the conflict in Syria during that period was almost certainly seen through the lens of Libya and the ‘war on terror’ conflicts of the previous decade.

In early 2013, in the run up to the Kuwait conference, this began to change. The Syrian opposition had created a new Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) that began to lobby for recognition of need in opposition areas. A campaign against the UN began on social media, forcing OCHA leadership to address issues in the north in a separate side meeting in Kuwait.

Initially, OCHA continued to push for access from Damascus, emphasizing the need to prevent the operation fragmenting. Inter-agency convoys were a main focus for a new, practical way of expanding access (and UN capacity), and hubs were established outside of Damascus (initially in Homs and Tartous).

By June 2013, OCHA analysis was beginning to reflect the limits of this strategy, with the ERC’s briefing of the Security Council on the situation in Muadhmiyah, where an estimated 25,000 people were trapped. This was the beginning of a narrative around people who were either besieged or hard to reach.

After a series of visits and discussions with the GoS through 2013 and regular briefings to the Security Council, a Presidential Statement was issued in October 2013 on humanitarian issues. It urged all sides to respect their obligation in international humanitarian law, and in particular it urged the GoS to act on several practical and access measures. There is evidence at this time of the ERC engaging in humanitarian diplomacy with Member States who were either backing or sympathetic to belligerent parties to the conflict. This focused on urging these States to use their influence for securing humanitarian access and protecting civilians.

The fact that it took a year to get the Presidential Statement, and that this did not secure access (only highlighting the issue), demonstrates the toxic nature of Security Council politics and UN impotence. During this time, there was a heavy emphasis on cross-lines and demonstrating that assistance via Damascus was not just going to Government-held areas. Donors were demanding greater action on reaching areas outside of Government control; WFP calculated during this period that more than 40 per cent of its assistance was getting to areas that were either disputed or outside of Government control.

Three weeks after the Presidential Statement, the ERC was reporting that an estimated 2.5 million people were trapped in hard-to-reach or besieged areas, including the old town of Homs. By February 2014, this had led to the first resolution on humanitarian access, resolution 2139, which calls for the lifting of the siege of Homs (and other areas) as well as increased humanitarian access, including cross-border access.

In July 2014, eight months after the PRST and 18 months after the MSF letter, the Security Council adopted resolution 2165, which explicitly mandates the UN to use four border crossings¹⁷ to bring aid into areas outside Government control. The resolution also introduced a monitoring mechanism, administratively supported by OCHA.

The period between the PRST and resolution 2165 was one of intense activity for OCHA. Technically, the resolutions are drafted and passed by Member States, but it was OCHA and the ERC who did a lot of the work. They supplied information in never-before seen levels of detail to prove GoS obstruction, and they tirelessly made the case for greater humanitarian access.

A critical piece in the argumentation was the concept of arbitrary denial. This concept exists in relation to common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, whereby it is understood that States are not allowed to withhold consent for “arbitrary or capricious” reasons. The interpretation of this has inevitably been subject to quite wide difference. However, through internal think pieces and a series of expert conferences, OCHA began to increasingly focus on using this as a way to force the issue of access. The interpretation of how GA resolution 46/182 and international humanitarian law applied to the Syria situation had been a critical part of the analysis around access and how to go about gaining consent. It was clear that to go ahead without some form of consent was dangerous on two fronts: in terms of security (a convoy could easily have been attacked) and in terms of compromising access from Damascus

¹⁶ “If the Syrian Government remains the main channel for the overwhelming majority of international humanitarian aid, millions of people will continue to be deprived of adequate assistance,” warned Dr Joanne Liu, MSF’s International President. MSF Press Release 18 December 2013.

¹⁷ Specifically Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha. This permission was extended until 10 January 2016 through the adoption of resolution 2191 (2014).

(the very real threat that the Government would have shut the operations of any UN agency seen to be acting “illegally”).

Initially, OCHA deferred to the ICRC position, which was effectively that as a sovereign State, the Government could determine which border crossings could be used to import goods. Over the period of time from the PRST to first resolution 2139 and then resolution 2165, OCHA combined detailed and accurate information about denial of access with the legal concept of arbitrary denial to persuade the council of the need to override the GoS. The council authorizing the use of border crossings without the obvious consent of the Syrian authorities was significant in two ways: first, because it has the legal authority to do so and, therefore, the UN agencies and their partners can legitimately use these routes, and second, because the agreement of Russia, as one of the Syrian Government’s main backers, meant in practice consent had been given (although implicitly rather than explicitly).

This is a significant point of learning for OCHA. The development of the arbitrary-denial argument was not everything, but it was certainly significant. It helped convince the Security Council, together with the mountain of evidence collected, that this was in fact the case: the resolution was needed. Could the resolution have come earlier if the framework had been developed earlier? This lies in the realm of conjecture, but it is certainly the case that OCHA did not become convinced this route could be used until later in the crisis. It is also the case, however, that it was necessary to try many other routes first before such an argument could be convincing. A key lesson from Syria is that OCHA can and should lead on high-level access negotiations and strategizing. Syria can provide a good template—a set of systematic steps that can be followed and options explored.

Another inevitable question is whether the Security Council route was the only one available. Two decades earlier, Jim Grant from UNICEF famously negotiated the tri-partite agreement in Sudan, allowing the UN access to the South in what became Operational Lifeline Sudan (OLS). This was done with strong support from the US.¹⁸

Could the UN have done something similar to this? Could it have used its strong position as a provider of aid to millions to secure better access faster?

Initially, much hope was pinned on the cross-lines effort. OCHA invested a great deal of time and energy in organizing these from Damascus as a way of trying to expand access without having to revert to cross-border. WFP was reporting that much of its assistance was finding its way into non-Government-held areas. It took time before it became clear that the Government would never let the cross-lines convoys get to scale, and arguably this option had to be pursued before other avenues would be countenanced (ironically, when resolution 2165 was approved, the Government allowed more convoys in an attempt to keep the UN from using the new border crossings). And UN agencies were simply not willing to jeopardise their operations in Syria by taking a tougher stance with the Government. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this evaluation, but they will surely be scrutinised unfavourably at a later point.

The OLS context was entirely different to Syria in that it did not divide the Security Council powers in the same way. And had the UN played a high-stakes game and had its bluff called, it could have led to greater denial of access. There is clearly now an issue of precedent, with humanitarian access determined by this political body, but it is equally clear that this route ultimately proved effective.

Despite all the hard work and the undoubted achievement, it is also the case that these resolutions came over two years into the conflict. For much of that time, people found themselves trapped in non-Government areas with only limited access to humanitarian assistance and little if no protection (a situation that continues today). Clearly the responsibility for this lies primarily with the belligerents and then with the Security Council. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on the UN and OCHA to ask the question if this could have been achieved faster or in a different way.

Interestingly, OCHA’s UN humanitarian partners did not always share the sense of urgency increasingly demonstrated by OCHA in its advocacy. Damascus-based UN humanitarian agencies have been slow to take advantage of the cross-border routes opened up by resolution 2165, and throughout they have been protective of their relationship with the GoS. The cross-border opportunity has yet to result in a step change in the scale and reach of the humanitarian operation inside Syria. The ERC’s advocacy for access to hard-to-reach and besieged areas has had little open backing by other UN humanitarian leaders. This has made the pursuit of this goal all the more difficult.

Findings

- The Security Council resolution on humanitarian access (2165) is a significant achievement that will, in time, result in meaningful humanitarian impact. OCHA has been instrumental in striving for expanded humanitarian access and has led on these efforts.

¹⁸ See for instance Natsios, A. (1997): Humanitarian relief in complex emergencies.

- The breakthrough on access came late. There are good reasons for this, but it still took three years from the beginning of the crisis to the point where the UN could access both sides of the conflict. There is a need to capture the experience of Syria and use it more effectively for faster action in any future conflict.
- The concept of arbitrary denial is an important one and was an important breakthrough. It has wider implications for the limits of State power. Further work is needed to encode this more widely.
- UN agencies were protective of their relationship with the GoS. This is understandable in terms of preserving what little access they had, but they were slow to support the ERC's efforts.
- The cross-border opportunity has yet to result in a step change in the scale and reach of the humanitarian operation inside Syria.

Recommendations

- OCHA should do further work on codifying the concept of arbitrary denial and build on the access work it has achieved around Syria through a body of work.¹⁹ It should consider a permanent capacity to analyse access and undertake humanitarian access negotiations.
- OCHA should produce an analysis of the various humanitarian cross-border operations and use this to convene a conversation within the humanitarian sector about best practice.

COUNTRY LEADERSHIP IN SYRIA AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

In January 2013, the ERC formally declared the Syria crisis an L3 emergency. As outlined above, it had become increasingly clear that Syria was becoming a massive humanitarian crisis and that worse was likely to come.

In early 2012, the IASC had approved a new system for multilateral response, whereby a major crisis could be designated an L3 emergency. This would trigger certain automatic protocols, including enhanced leadership.

Syria was the first L3, and in many ways it was not representative of the type of emergency envisaged when the protocol was agreed. The language of the L3 activation is geared towards rapid response—perhaps a large-scale natural disaster—talking about rapid deployment of teams.

Interviews for this evaluation suggest that the L3 declaration in the case of Syria was primarily about enhancing country-based leadership and “forcing the pace” of what had, until that point, been a poor UN response. Documentary evidence is scarce in this regard, but interviews suggest that the leadership within OCHA regarded the country team in place as too “developmental”, with UN Country Team meetings of the time discussing early recovery, even as the conflict intensified and death and displacement were rising exponentially. The L3 declaration was needed to speed up and scale up the response and put better country leadership in place, including in key agencies. There was also a degree of pressure from donors who felt that the UN had been slow to respond at scale.

RC/HC Syria	From	To
Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed (RC)	2008	2011
Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed (RC/HC)	August 2011	April 2012
Adam Abdelmoula (RC)	May 2012	July 2013
Yacoub El Hillo (RC/HC)	August 2013	Ongoing
RC/HC Lebanon		
Robert Watkins	RC from December 2010. HC starting 2012	February 2014
Ross Mountain	February 2014	April 2015
Philippe Lazzarini	April 2015	Ongoing
RC/HC Jordan		
Andrew Harper	May 2012	Feb 2014
Eddie Kallon	February 2014	Ongoing
RHC		
Radhouane Nouicer (also HC a.i.)	March 2012	June 2013
Nigel Fisher	September 2013	August 2014
Raul Rosende (Deputy RHC)	July 2014	Ongoing
Kevin Kennedy	January 2015	Ongoing

Table 5: Country and regional leadership for the Syria crisis

¹⁹ A good starting point is the roundtable undertaken by the Global Protection Cluster that looked at lessons learned from Biafra, Cambodia, Eritrea, Sudan (Nuba Mountains) and Syria.

Certainly it is the case that OCHA and the ERC paid significant attention to trying to get regional and country leadership right. In 2011, the then United Nations Resident Coordinator (RC) in Syria was made Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). Following his departure, UNDP appointed an RC who was not made HC. The reasons for this are not clear to the evaluation, but interviews suggest there was not confidence in the RC's humanitarian experience.

As the GoS would not countenance a stand-alone HC, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (RHC) post was created to be nominally in charge of the region, but in fact based mostly in Syria. The postholder was the previous head of the MENA region for UNHCR, bringing a wealth of emergency, refugee and conflict experience.

By the middle of 2013, when Radhouane Nouicer had served his term as the RHC, the refugee crisis had intensified, with close to 2 million in the neighbouring countries. Partly in recognition of this, but also partly because the RC had moved on, OCHA and UNDP recruited an HC to be permanently based in Syria and an RHC based in Amman. Two highly experienced humanitarian leaders were recruited to these positions.

Recruiting these individuals took some time. The Government has to approve the appointment of any RC/HC position, and it would not accept several nationalities. When a suitable candidate was identified, it took time to get them approved in the system.

Getting the right profile (of leader) in a timely way proved difficult. The differences between UNDP and OCHA were unhelpful. The L3 pool of HCs wasn't used, despite it being created for this purpose. It is unclear to the evaluation exactly what aspects of the empowered leadership model were activated. There are lessons for OCHA on the continuing work of securing and deploying the best and most appropriate leadership.

In the neighbouring countries too, OCHA and UNDP (and UNHCR, as the largest operational agency) were active in promoting and supporting humanitarian leadership. In Jordan, the Head of UNHCR also became the HC—an arrangement that continued into early 2014. In Lebanon, the RC was made HC.

In 2014, further changes to leadership arrangements were made with highly experienced HCs being brought in to Lebanon and Jordan. These appointments appear to have been made following the Comprehensive Regional Strategic Framework (CRSF) process.

The appointments were welcomed and questioned in equal parts. Donors and NGOs had been lobbying for some time to broaden the UNHCR-centric coordination model in these countries. However, the appointment of HCs in a context of overwhelming UNHCR dominance led to significant friction. A letter in April 2014 jointly issued by the High Commissioner and the ERC did little to resolve this, effectively leading to two conflicting centres of leadership in Jordan and Lebanon (the HC vs. UNHCR). This was probably more acute in Jordan than in Lebanon, but it was unhelpful in both places and continued to be an issue at the time of the evaluation.

Later in that year, following the approval of resolution 2165, a deputy RHC was also appointed for the cross-border operation, based in Gaziantep. This has proven successful, with the postholder being well received by operational agencies working cross-border. This has helped bring coherence to the Turkey-based operation and to join it with other hubs inside and outside Syria.

In interviews for this evaluation, the vast majority of respondents have appreciated the quality of the country-based leadership. There is a widespread sentiment that many of the system's best leaders have been deployed to the Syria crisis, an indication of how seriously it has been taken. This was in stark contrast to the Haiti earthquake, where the internal evaluation of the OCHA response concluded that there had been a failure of strategic leadership and a failure to deploy experienced leaders.²⁰

However, despite a clear and concerted effort to get the leadership right, significant issues remain. First, the UN took too long—by its own admission—to mount a humanitarian operation of the requisite scale and reach. Even now in 2015, interviewees for this evaluation contend that some of the agency leadership remains weak in the Country Team in Syria. Second, there continue to be issues in the refugee-hosting countries as to how this leadership can be exercised in practice, with the HC positions in Lebanon and Jordan contested to some degree by UNHCR. This is explored further in the section on enabling the system (below). Leadership continues to be difficult to exercise in complex humanitarian crises because the system is consensual, with few penalties for non-compliance.

Findings

- OCHA and the ERC have worked hard to ensure the best humanitarian leadership available was deployed to Syria and the region. This has almost certainly resulted in better humanitarian operations.

²⁰ Battacharjee, A. and Lossio, R. (2011): Evaluation of OCHA response to the Haiti earthquake: Final report. New York: United Nations.

- The L3 declaration achieved its principal aim of forcing the pace of the response, albeit at some cost to OCHA, whose relationship with the GoS soured as a result.
- The recruitment system for senior humanitarian leaders is still a work in progress. It took time to recruit the right person for the HC position in Syria. The L3 pool does not seem to be working optimally due to delays in deploying people and availability of people with adequate experience and qualifications.
- Leadership has been contested in Lebanon and Jordan due to differences with UNHCR. This has been unhelpful to the smooth and efficient running of the response.

Recommendation

- The L3 pool should be scrapped and replaced with a system that works.
-

REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Syrian crisis took on regional dimensions almost immediately, as refugees spilled over the border to Turkey in 2011 and into Lebanon and Jordan soon afterwards. Humanitarian agencies tackled this managerially in different ways, with the majority of the operational UN agencies establishing regional leadership to oversee the different country components. By 2013, Amman, Jordan, had become the de facto regional hub for Syria humanitarian operations. For many, this was a natural evolution from earlier regional configurations dealing with the Iraq crisis.

OCHA initially ran its Syria operation from its regional office in Cairo. Later, when the crisis became more severe, it was run from New York. This continues to be the case.

In early 2012, an RHC was appointed for Syria. This was nominally about the crisis being of regional dimensions, but in interviews for this evaluation, it is clear that it was also about the appointment of the RC in Syria. There appears to have been a difference of opinion about whether the RC could become an HC, and as the GoS would not countenance a separate HC, the RHC formulation was a workable compromise. This served its purpose, but it had the unfortunate side effect of rather neglecting the regional dimension, at least from the overall leadership side (as the RHC actually spent the majority of time in Syria). By the time the leadership arrangements in Syria had changed and a new RHC had been appointed in Amman in September 2013, the agencies had already established firm structures. This arguably made it more difficult for the RHC to establish a role, and, as is explained more fully in the strategy section below, the comprehensive regional strategic framework process further undermined this position. This eventually led to the postholder leaving.

From the beginning of this new period with the RHC position in Amman, the role was unclear. It was even less clear in terms of authority. None of the country-based HCs reported to the RHC (and the Syria HC allegedly did not even talk to the RHC). Furthermore, once there was a difference of opinion with the leadership in New York, the position became untenable and the postholder left in August 2014.

After a gap of some months, a new RHC was appointed in January 2015. Despite earlier difficulties, the new RHC appears to be universally welcomed. The evaluation team noted a significant difference in the agency rhetoric around this function between the scoping mission (when the new RHC wasn't yet in place) and the evaluation interviews. The OCHA Donor Support Group's recent mission in April 2015 made similar conclusions.

This is extremely encouraging. The RHC position is a difficult one to establish, sitting uneasily between country leadership and global HQs. The current WoS process appears to have led to a new lease of life – giving the RHC a role. In fact, the RHC has been essential in driving this forward. He has quickly managed to establish trust and key relationships, partly bolstered by the new authority that resolution 2165 bestows. There has also been a tactical decision not to be involved in refugee issues, meaning the conflict with agencies experienced during the CRSF has not afflicted the current postholder.

Nevertheless, there is more work to be done before regional leadership is got right. Despite a new TOR, unclear lines of accountability remain between the HC in Syria and the RHC based in Amman. Currently, this is being resolved by the right personalities, but this may not always be the case. Still it is the case that virtually no one in the structure reports to the RHC, and this office has few levers of formal authority. This seems quite peculiar—a very high-level post with almost no formal authority and a support team with no formal reporting lines.

It is also the case that the vision for what this post can achieve remains contested, or at least subject to different interpretations. The regional aspect of the role is diminished by not being involved in refugee-hosting countries particularly, and the focus on WoS, while relevant for now, could easily become irrelevant, with a senior Syria HC running coordination in all of the hubs.

These issues must be resolved to guarantee success. The issue of role needs further clarification, and as a matter of urgency the reporting lines of the OCHA regional office should be rearranged. There are also wider lessons that should be learned about how to deploy RHCs.

- The RHC post is a difficult one to get right. As it is not connected to the normal country-based processes, it can be much harder to establish a clear role.
- The CRSF process was too much too quickly, and it used up what little political capital the RHC had. His position became untenable.
- The new RHC has been well received and has already made a major impact in advancing the WoS process. There are lessons to take from this about the sorts of role an RHC can credibly be asked to champion.
- Structural weaknesses remain with the current RHC set-up. There is an urgent need to restructure the reporting and resourcing arrangements.

Recommendation

- OCHA's Syria Crisis Regional Office in Amman should be restructured so that a significant component supports and directly reports to the RHC.

STRATEGY

Strategy setting for the overall Syria response has resided in a number of different places and at multiple levels throughout the crisis. This reflects the multipolar nature of the humanitarian system and its diverse, multi-stakeholder constituency.

To the extent it is possible within the system, globally OCHA has led the Syria strategy. The combined leadership of the ERC, within the IASC, and the Emergency Directors Group (EDG), chaired by the Director of CRD, has set the main strategic themes that have occupied the system throughout the Syria crisis. At times, there has also been strong input into strategy-setting by donors, especially through the EDG. UNHCR has led the refugee response. Lobbying and advocacy has inevitably also played a role.²¹

There has been limited written Syria strategy, although OCHA did develop an initial strategy in March 2012 (and latterly in 2014). This has made evaluating the strategy challenging, as there are gaps. To the extent that an overall picture exists, it can be traced through minutes of IASC meetings, through various L3 documents and through the ERC's public statements.

Broadly, the response can be seen as having of the following key strategic concerns over the evolution of the crisis, changing as circumstances changed: 1) scaling up and increasing the system's capacity, 2) reaching the people who needed assistance the most (access), 3) working out medium-term solutions for refugees and refugee-hosting countries and 4) unifying the various aspects of the Syria response. No doubt additional strategic concerns will arise as the crisis continues to unfold.

At a country level, strategy has not been the exclusive domain of OCHA. In Syria, the Government has dominated, and in the refugee-hosting countries it is UNHCR that has set the priorities and led day-to-day operations (and increasingly now the host Governments). As ever, the context has framed these realities, leading to something quite different to the 'normal' model seen in recent complex emergencies.

This section examines these global strategic themes, their evolution and how OCHA strategy has been inter-twined with these. They are by no means the exclusive work of OCHA, but they did consume a large part of OCHA's efforts in the Syria response. In this sense, they constitute much of the work and the leadership outlined above. Disentangling what is 'OCHA' and what is 'the system' is challenging at times as a result, as it is the system that OCHA concentrated on strategically.

For OCHA internally, strategy was mostly determined by the broader strategic themes and the need to support leadership. In this respect, OCHA proved flexible and innovative at times. The fast-moving pace of the response meant that OCHA was continually adapting to changing circumstances. The downside of this flexibility was that OCHA was constantly in flux, arguably not always delivering on what its partner agencies have come to see as its core functions.

EVOLUTION OF THE OVERALL STRATEGY

For the UN, the Syria crisis was initially characterized as a crisis of human rights. In early 2011, with violent clampdowns on student protests, this is what it was; primarily a crisis of State abuse of power, arbitrary detentions, torture and extrajudicial killing. In August 2011, the Security Council issued its first Presidential Statement on Syria,

²¹ For instance, NGO letter of 17 April 2013 to Amos asking for greater action on cross-border. ahead of IASC principals meeting.

focusing primarily on rights abuses. The Secretary-General called on President Assad and the Syrian authorities to “immediately cease all violence against their people, to fully respect human rights, and implement reforms they have already announced.”²²

Another characteristic of the early Syria response, or rather framing concept, was the widespread belief that it would be over quickly. A ‘day after’ planning group was constituted within the Secretariat, chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General, to look at this contingency.

These two factors combined—a human rights crisis that could be over quickly—meant that the initial reaction to Syria was not a humanitarian one but more of a watching brief. Moreover, the Syria crisis unfolded as part of the wider Arab Spring, in which Governments from Cairo to Tripoli had fallen (or been toppled). This also meant the crisis was initially viewed through a political lens, with an understandable wariness by the UN system of being manipulated by external powers.

As the street protests and violent clampdown became armed insurrection, and with the establishment of the FSA as an identifiable armed opposition, the Syria crisis began to assume the characteristics of a civil war. As noted above, OCHA and UNDP nominated the RC as an HC. OCHA had deployed one P4 international staff over the summer of 2011 in recognition of the deteriorating situation, adding to a small Humanitarian Support Unit that had existed since 2008 (and consisted of one national staff reporting to the regional office in Cairo).

With the appointment of the HC, a 90-day response plan was developed and a request was made for CERF funding. Humanitarian coordination was also established, consisting of the UN Country Team. The 90-day response plan had four strategic objectives:

- **Obtain sustainable and safe humanitarian access** to all those in need of protection and humanitarian aid.
- **Provide immediate relief assistance to affected communities** in towns, cities and rural communities.
- **Provide immediate relief assistance** to families displaced by the conflict, especially to vulnerable groups.
- **Support the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and other national and local actors**, including national NGOs and community-based organizations, to enable them to effectively assist communities affected by the crisis.

In March 2012 meeting, the IASC principals decided to strengthen the UN Country Team/HCT and scale up coordination efforts. A number of priorities were identified including increased capacity, better planning, advocacy and access mechanisms, as well as developing needs assessments and mobilizing resources.

Following the IASC meeting, OCHA developed its own internal Syria strategy, largely in support of the action points agreed by the principals. The IASC action points and the OCHA internal strategy speak to the dual themes of scaling up and gaining access. OCHA’s internal strategy (see below for more details) was also about implementing normal OCHA functions, such as supporting sector coordination and information management.

The theme of a deteriorating humanitarian situation and a focus on increasing humanitarian capacity continued throughout 2012, and it was the principal strategic focus for OCHA. A June 2012 meeting of the Emergency Directors Group (EDG)²³ heard from the RHC that the “UN response capacity and set up remained inadequate.”²⁴ This was mirrored in an IASC principals meeting in November 2012, where there was further agreement to scale up and a commitment to internally raise the level of response by agencies. Within OCHA, there was increasing concern from September onwards at the slow pace of scale up.

The end of 2012 also saw the first Syria Humanitarian Action and Response Plan (SHARP), produced jointly with the Government (for 2013). Strategic priorities in the SHARP were:

- Prioritization of the humanitarian response to assist the most affected populations
- Expansion and diversification of partnerships
- Expansion of field presence and increased humanitarian access
- Improved capacity to mitigate security-related risks for humanitarian staff
- Effective resource mobilization
- Streamlining of administrative procedures
- Assessment of needs improved and harmonized
- Strengthening of coordination
- Mainstreaming of protection and gender as cross-cutting issues

²² Secretary-General’s statement on Syria, 3 August 2011. Found at www.un.org

²³ The IASC Emergency Directors support humanitarian operations by advising the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the IASC Principals; on operational issues of strategic concern, and by mobilizing agency resources to address operational challenges and gaps, in support of Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams.

²⁴ Minutes. Meeting of UN Emergency Directors on Syria. 15 June 2012.

In January 2013, as noted above, the principals agreed to the first L3 system-wide activation to further prioritize the Syria response.

The period leading from the onset of civil disturbance to the declaration of the L3 can be seen strategically as the scaling up period for the response. Throughout this time, OCHA and the ERC function were concentrated on implementing a more robust response capacity against a backdrop of a slow and weak response.

This included mobilizing resources, discussed below in the enabling section in more detail. Throughout this period, the ERC campaigned for greater resources for the response overall, including the refugee response, culminating in the first Kuwait conference (organized by OCHA).

Immediately following the L3 declaration, the EDG visited Syria and the region. They were led by the Director of CRD in OCHA, and they undertook the first formal cross-lines convoy into an opposition-held town. The group subsequently concluded that the “humanitarian footprint” should be increased throughout the country,²⁵ and that much more needed to be done on all fronts, particularly pushing the Government on access. The UN was seen as “being late, and not having the impact expected of it.”²⁶

By February, the EDG was reporting that while the L3 activation had resulted in some increased agency activity, a significant blockage remained in terms of deploying empowered leadership. This was only finally resolved with the recruitment of the Senior HC for Syria in June 2013 at the level of Assistant Secretary-General (ASG).

Following the L3 activation, the OCHA strategic focus began to shift, largely in response to circumstances evolving. A principal strategic concern at this point (and throughout the response) was pushing the system to deliver, but this is certainly a point at which the strategic focus also became delivering aid to people who were difficult to reach. Initially, this was about reaching people cross-lines, meaning convoys crossing the front line between Government-held areas and opposition areas. In a December 2012 visit of the ERC to Damascus, the Government made it perfectly clear to the ERC that bringing aid across borders it did not control constituted a “red line”. This left the UN in somewhat of a conundrum, both legally (whether it could violate sovereignty) and practically (whether going against a Government’s wishes would close what little access it had). There was also the issue of whether neighbouring States would accede to a formal cross-border operation without some form of legal authorization.

The leadership section above has already analysed in some detail the efforts to expand and secure humanitarian access. Access was a concern from the very beginning of the response and became much more of an issue from 2013 onwards. In 2014, the series of Security Council resolutions were secured (most notably 2165 in July), and towards the end of July a formal cross-border operation was established.

There is no doubt that the issues of greater humanitarian capacity and greater access were important strategically. Getting help to people required both of these things to be in place, and this evaluation finds that it was right to focus on these two issues.

It is also the case, however, that the excerpts from the planning documents reproduced above show the strategic limits of the system, as currently configured. These strategic themes, with some very minor modifications, could have been plucked from any of the SRPs worldwide in most of the last decade. Access is always an issue in conflicts, prioritizing the delivery of assistance a ‘no brainer’. Most of the strategic issues in the 2013 SHARP were at best partially achieved. Assessment did not take place, procedures weren’t relaxed, partnerships weren’t expanded and protection was certainly not given to the civilian population.

The fact that the underlying analysis was so weak is worrying. The UN has been mostly powerless throughout this crisis, as is set out in the context section of leadership at the start of this findings section. As so often happens, the UN is a scapegoat for the inaction of powerful States. But within the confines afforded the UN, it consistently failed to make use of what space it has. The generic strategy of ‘expand operations, raise resources’ is a default; but to what end? The UN did not know what much of the need was or where it was.²⁷ Worse, it was extremely challenging to monitor the aid that was delivered. In the face of a brutal, sophisticated and manipulative Government and a fragmented and increasingly criminal opposition, the strategy appeared to be ‘continue as we always have done (but more)’.

As the drive for access became more urgent, the analysis did become more sophisticated. OCHA began to understand in detail the number and nature of the opposition groups and which fighting faction controlled which territory. Arguably, however, there is still only a limited understanding of what humanitarian need is overall. There is still no systematic and scientific data-gathering on needs within Government territory, nor of the impact of the work done to date, or even, arguably, where the majority of assistance has gone. Is it possible to build a sophisticated

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ To make this point, an internal memo in November 2012 quoted ICRC President Peter Maurer: “We have a lot of blank spots, we know that no aid has been there and I can’t tell you what the situation is.”

strategy on such limited understanding? Or is the system's fragmentation, and the drive by donors to be seen to be doing more, simply too great to allow for anything but the most basic approach?

In mid-2013, another strategic issue that began to take shape was the huge burden of the refugee presence in neighbouring countries. As the number of refugees hit 2 million and the prospect of an early resolution to the crisis had begun to recede (and therefore the prospect of early return), the refugee crisis began to take on dimensions beyond essential life-saving concerns. Realizing the large resource implications of this reality, donors began to ask strategic questions of the UN system. Host Governments, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon, began to change their initially hands-off position.

In November 2013, the EDG meeting introduced the idea of a CRSF that would start to look at these issues. This was effectively handed to the new RHC, freshly in post, as his first priority to deliver on.

Up until this point, the coordination of the refugee response had been almost exclusively handled by UNHCR, as the mandated agency. The CRSF process drew in others, including host Governments, UNDP and the World Bank. UNICEF and UNHCR presented a joint collaboration on the Lost Generation initiative to ensure schooling for Syrian children, and the RHC presented a new set of principles around supporting national leadership and joint working.

The CRSF proved controversial. UNHCR saw it as an attempt to insert OCHA into the coordination of the refugee response that it had hitherto dominated.

This came to a head with the circulation of a first draft of the CRSF that was rejected by the regional heads of UN agencies in Amman in December 2013, shortly before an EDG meeting in Geneva where it was supposed to be presented. A compromise was reached but in turn rejected by OCHA in New York, leading to an erosion of trust between the leadership within OCHA and the then RHC.

The partial failure of the CRSF may have been partly due to the fact that its purpose was unclear. For donors—principally ECHO and DFID—the CRSF was about an overview of all the various elements at play in the response, with a view to forging efficiencies. OCHA was a logical lead on such an effort, but it also placed the organization in a central position it had not formally occupied.

The CRSF was eventually produced but largely ignored by the operational agencies. UNDP and UNHCR formed a partnership to create a regional resilience and refugee plan, effectively taking on many of the new elements envisaged by the CRSF. The role envisaged within the CRSF for the RHC at the apex of the response machinery in the region did not come to pass.

However, the CRSF did produce some concrete outcomes. First and foremost among these was the principle of national leadership being embedded. Following the CRSF, Jordan and Lebanon produced their own planning documents in processes that were jointly led by the Governments and the RC/HC. Secondly, the UNHCR/UNDP partnership came about in response to the CRSF framework. The modality of delivering a changed response was not envisaged, but the change towards greater concentration on hosting communities (and local capacities) as well as refugees has happened.

The final strategic shift came with the approval of the three Security Council resolutions, particularly 2165 authorizing cross-border. The legalization of the cross-border operations allowed OCHA to have a formal role in coordinating these activities, something that had been extremely difficult up to that point. With that formal role came the opportunity to begin joining what had been two separate and mutually exclusive operations, namely the WoS process.

Humanitarian operations in opposition-controlled areas of Syria started almost as soon as these enclaves were formed. Initially they were run by activist networks of Syrians supported by diaspora groups and neighbours. Quite quickly, however, as the situation deteriorated, humanitarian NGOs also started operations. These ranged from supporting groups of surgeons with medical supplies to establishing field hospitals and, later, food and non-food aid.

During 2012 and 2013, these operations became substantial, rivalling the UN operations from Damascus in scale and budget. Perceptions (of the other) in both operations became characterised by mistrust and suspicion, partly fuelled by separation and partly by the dynamics of the conflict. This led to a uniquely fragmented operation where even the basics were missing. For example, there was no serious estimate of numbers and profile of need across Syria until mid-2014.

The WoS approach in the second half of 2014 has been OCHA's attempt to overcome this division. This started with the appointment of a Deputy RHC based in Turkey, primarily with responsibility for the cross-border operation. It then progressed to meetings between the various hubs, including cross-border operations from Jordan and the Country Team from Syria. It is convened and jointly led by the RHC and the HC from Syria. So far, WoS has implemented a structure of coordination and yielded the first overview of needs across the country and the first Strategic Response Plan (2015).

The coordination structure builds on three operational hubs (Syria, Turkey, Jordan) and the regional offices. A WoS coordination structure sits on top of the hub coordination structures, loosely based on the cluster system. This has WoS sectors, fed from the hub sectors and clusters. Figure 5 shows a draft outline of how the WoS works.

The WoS is not without its critics. The first meetings in the process were very large and unwieldy (although this is now improving). Over 100 people attended from across the hubs, and a complex set up of cluster and sector working groups has been established. There was some discontent about how the leadership of these groups was established. The suspicion and mistrust noted elsewhere in this report between Damascus and cross-border played into this. Should WoS collapse in acrimony, it is likely to damage the overall humanitarian operation, currently benefiting from an emerging sense of coherence. Turkey, in particular, is likely to suffer setbacks in coordination, given the legacy of distrust between the UN and NGOs, which has been gradually improving after much hard work from the OCHA Turkey office.

COORDINATION ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE WHOLE OF SYRIA

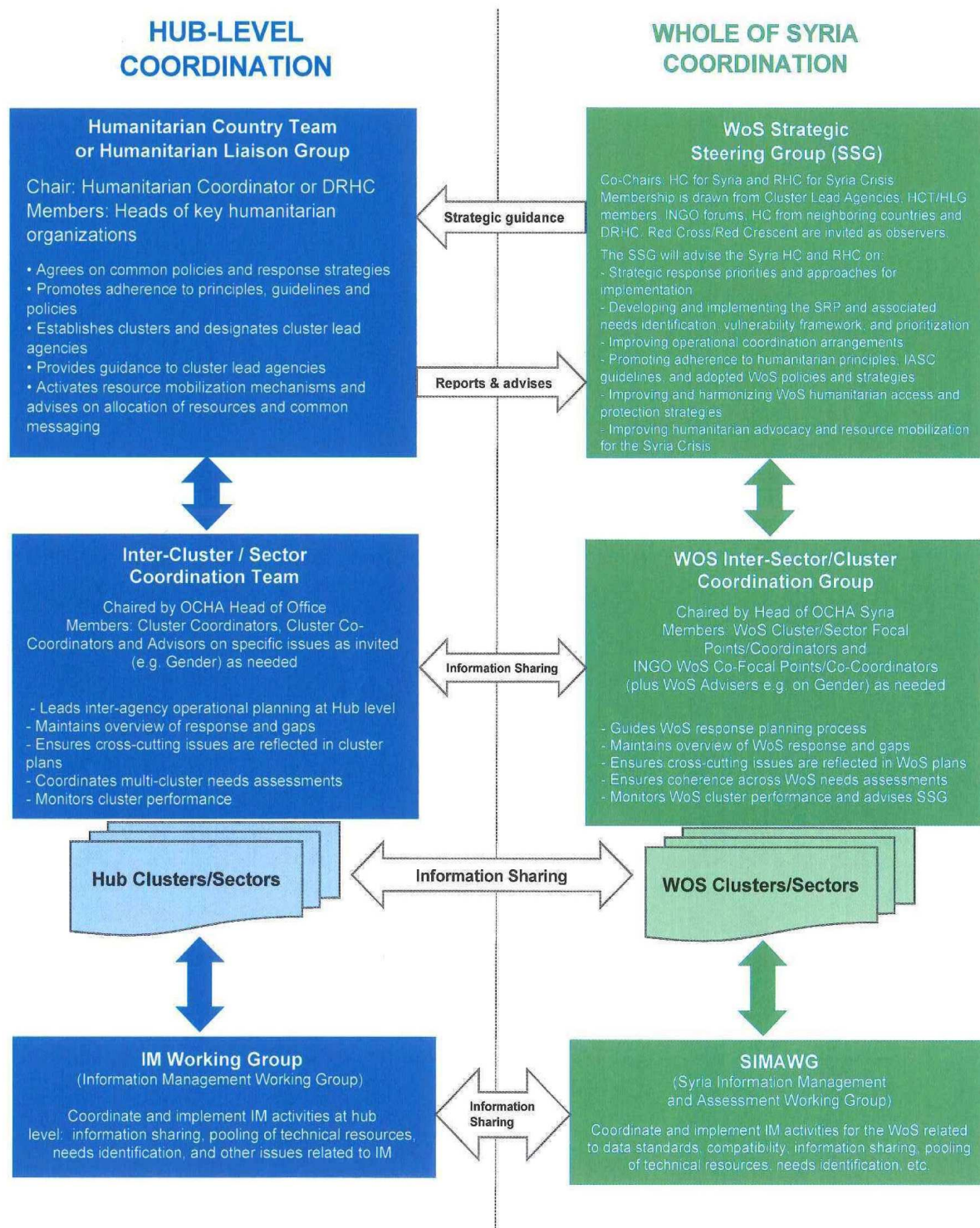


Figure 5: The Whole of Syria (WoS) approach

There are also lessons that can be learned about why WoS was necessary in the first place. It is strange that after almost four years of a multi-billion-dollar aid operation, a process is needed to join up various parts of the same response. There are, of course, extenuating circumstances—the fact that the Turkey operation was not sanctioned

by the GoS is principal among these. But questions remain about why a concerted effort to join up the operations earlier could not have been attempted. An important lesson from the Syria crisis is that communication flows are important very early when separate hubs are forming in an operation, otherwise suspicion and mistrust build up that can be difficult to overcome.

Despite this observation, the overwhelming majority of respondents interviewed for this evaluation agreed that it is vital to make WoS work. The division between the various operations has hampered effective response.

Findings

- OCHA has set the global strategy on the Syria humanitarian response within the scope of what is possible in a consensual system.
- The key strategic themes that have concerned OCHA over the four years of the response (scaling up, humanitarian access, durable solutions to displacement and unifying the response) appear to have been the right ones. In this sense, OCHA strategy-setting has been well judged.
- The global strategy has been quite basic, if not generic. There was an initial worrying lack of sophisticated analysis.
- OCHA has been less influential on day-to-day operational strategy-setting and prioritization, which has fallen to UNHCR outside of Syria and other actors within.
- The CRSF process was flawed and only partly delivered. It led to a breakdown in relations between the RHC and NY, and a trust deficit in the region that is only now being repaired.
- The WoS initiative is extremely important and overdue. The passing of resolution 2165 has made this possible.

Recommendations

- OCHA needs to develop a set of analytical tools to underpin its strategy development for response in complex emergencies. Strategic documents informing IASC discussions should be sufficiently detailed and analytical to promote contextualized strategy rather than generic aid objectives.
- OCHA should re-visit the terms of reference for the RHC to ensure there is a clear and distinct role, building on the WoS. This should set out clear responsibilities for this position and lines of accountability.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is the result of the bitter internal conflict. This much is obvious and much repeated in the introductions to reports such as these. Therefore, it is equally obvious to say that without the fighting, the direct attacks on civilians, the degrading of civilian infrastructure, and the disruption to the economy and normal life that war brings, people would not be suffering (at least not more than 'normal').

This has led many to argue that the Syria crisis is a crisis of 'protection'. The IASC defines protection thus:

*All activities, aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. human rights, humanitarian and refugee law). Human rights and humanitarian actors shall conduct these activities impartially and not on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, language or gender.*²⁸

The Secretary General identifies five core challenges in his 2009 protection of civilians report:

- Enhancing compliance of parties to the conflict with their obligations under international law, in particular the conduct of hostilities
- Engagement with non-State armed groups (NSAGs)
- Protecting civilians through UN peacekeeping and other relevant missions
- Humanitarian access
- Enhancing accountability for violations

OCHA has drafted the Secretary-General's biennial report on protection of civilians since 1999, and it was involved in the drafting of the 2009 report. In 2013, the IASC released a statement on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action, following on from the Secretary-General's Human Rights up Front initiative. As well as

²⁸ This IASC definition of protection is endorsed from a series of ICRC-convened seminars in 1996-1999. There is also a Security Council definition of protection of civilians, as set out in resolution 1894 (2009), "all measures that aim at limiting the effects of hostilities on non-combatants and non-military objects in situations of armed conflict, notably through promoting and ensuring respect for IHL, applicable human rights law, and refugee law."

emphasizing their collective commitment to protection, the principals also suggest a number of practical measures that HCs and HCTs should take. These are broadly:

- Identify who is at risk
- Produce a comprehensive protection strategy
- Prioritize the collection of data on protection violations

In the Syria response, OCHA has been relatively outspoken on protection issues from an early stage. The ERC has talked about the protection of civilians from the outset and always included protection as a central issue, whether in public statements, reports to the Secretary-General and the SC, or in private diplomacy with belligerents and their backers.

This evaluation report uses the qualifier ‘relative’ because the statements in the main part tend to be rather diplomatic affairs, talking about abuses on both sides and couched in rather general language. In August 2012, as an example, the ERC said this after a visit to Syria:

“I am also extremely concerned that all parties to the conflict are failing to comply with international humanitarian law which sets out clear rules on the protection of civilians. This conflict has taken on a particularly brutal and violent character. We have all seen distressing images on our television screens and it is ordinary women, men and children who are caught in the midst of it. I repeat my call to all those engaged in the conflict to respect civilians and abide by international humanitarian law.”

As things continued to get worse, and as the protagonists continued to ignore all pleas to protect civilians, the language became more pointed (although still quite ‘neutral’). An example from April 2014, following a car bombing in Homs, shows the evolution:

“The use of car bombs, barrel bombs, aerial bombardment and mortars in residential areas, with no distinction between military targets and civilians, are violations of International Humanitarian Law. The use of siege as a weapon of war, the recruitment of children for combat, and the subjection of women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence are abhorrent and must end immediately.

“This is a war, but even wars have rules. All parties to the conflict need to commit now to upholding international humanitarian law.”

As well as pointedly raising human rights abuses and condemning the warring parties for their conduct, the ERC and OCHA were expending ever-larger amounts of energy and political capital on the access issue. This is documented at length above and elsewhere in this report, but it is worth re-emphasizing here, as it is a key part of protecting civilians. Gaining access to civilian populations can be a protective measure on its own; relieving sieges and preventing starvation certainly is.

OCHA did well on raising the issue of civilian protection, trying hard to keep it on the political agenda. However, it did not do so well in practical and planning terms. Despite the 2013 statement on making protection central, there has only very recently been a protection strategy. The GoS (not surprisingly) was against putting protection into the SHARP from the beginning of that process in 2012. It did find its way into the 2013 version and is more prominent in 2014. Along the way—and with the benefit of hindsight—a strategy for the protection of civilians should have been developed earlier. This is also true of human resources: prior to this evaluation, there were only two short-term ProCap secondments and a GenCap Adviser in the regional office.²⁹

Nor has the Protection Cluster or sector in Syria appeared to have done much better. It is led by UNHCR, and the impression has been of an agenda narrowly focused on refugee issues or on standardized themes, such as SGBV or child protection. The evaluation is not suggesting that refugee protection (and, of course, Palestinians in Syria who are uniquely in peril as a population) or gender-based violence is unimportant, or that children should not be protected. It is merely saying that by retreating into a comfort zone of acronyms and cookie-cutter programmes, it is easy to avoid the big, challenging, career-threatening choices. The Whole of System Protection Review puts it thus:

“Under these conditions, current leadership practice and support has not better positioned the system to avoid a systemic failure as occurred in Sri Lanka. There are limited incentives for the HC or HCT to take bold decisions. When you step out of the mould and “irritate a government or a major agency, and if you do not have a lot of experience, then you are putting your whole career on the line.” Similar concerns, combined with the lack of consensus within the IASC and the challenge of parallel coordination mechanisms, are inhibiting bolder, collective, and proactive leadership in the Syrian crisis today.”

²⁹ Several ProCap and GenCap advisers have been deployed following the evaluation field work in early 2015.

- OCHA and the ERC have consistently raised issues of civilian protection and worked hard to secure access. They have done less well in supporting the evolution of a protection strategy, identifying those at most risk or the systematic collection of data, as set out by the IASC Principals.

OCHA INTERNAL STRATEGY

The internal strategy for Syria has tended to closely mirror the global strategic preoccupations. OCHA spent the first year of the crisis building its own presence primarily in support of operations inside Syria. A draft strategy from early 2012³⁰ sets out an expanded office requirement to:

- Support the strengthening of the UNCT capacity in Syria to address the crisis, including through the establishment of more robust humanitarian coordination mechanisms.
- Under the leadership of the HC, support the UNCT in defining a coordinated approach with regards to access.
- Coordinate the UNCT efforts to create an environment more conducive to the protection of civilians and respect of international humanitarian law.
- Coordinate humanitarian assessments.
- Support the HC and the UNCT in defining a response strategy and monitor its implementation.
- Provide humanitarian organizations in Syria with necessary information management services (GIS services, 3W, virtual portal, etc.).
- Provide the humanitarian community in Syria with rapid and flexible funding (CERF/ERF).
- Help the HC and the UNCT define security arrangements that allow for the timely provision of humanitarian assistance (“stay and deliver”).

The strategy envisaged an office of some 10 international staff, headed by a D1, with a similar number of national staff. At the same time (March 2012), a cost plan for this office was approved and a note submitted to the USG setting out plans for scaling up. The RHC post was also approved in this cost plan, as were two international staff to support the RC/HC in Lebanon. The strategy was finalized for the Syria Country Office at the end of 2012, running up to the beginning of 2014.

In 2013, OCHA began building its presence in the neighbouring countries. The detail is set out in the enabling section below, but this too was evolutionary in response to the changing circumstances. New elements were introduced to the operation as the situation deteriorated, as new problems came to the fore and as opportunities presented themselves.

The first proper country office strategies for these neighbouring countries were developed at the beginning of 2014. Between mid-2012 and the beginning of 2014, the OCHA strategy closely followed the themes outlined above for the general response. Initially, the Syria office dealt with trying to expand and scale up the overall UN effort through a variety of means including an L3 declaration, inter-agency convoys and establishing hubs. Later, this became about accessing hard-to-reach and besieged areas, the strand of work that culminated in the Security Council resolutions.

Overall, the OCHA strategy was highly adaptive and, at times, reactive. As this report makes quite clear, Syria was an entirely non-traditional coordination context, especially for OCHA. Establishing a clear workplan at the outset was simply not possible—there was a need for flexible and adaptive working. Later, as operations became better established, there was a definite need for clear, written strategy. This is useful for clarifying goals, prioritizing and communicating intent to others. Probably this came later than was absolutely ideal, although the evaluation acknowledges that this is a matter of judgement. A light-touch strategic document for Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey might have served as an interim solution, rather like the March 2012 draft strategy.

Findings

- The internal strategy for OCHA closely followed that of the overall strategic themes.
- A Syria Country Office strategy was developed in 2012, but there were no formal, written country office strategies for the neighbouring countries until late in the response (beginning 2014). These could have been developed sooner, perhaps with an interim light-touch strategy as a solution.

Recommendation

³⁰ Country strategy draft, submitted 2012.

- OCHA should develop a light-touch emergency strategy format to enable flexible strategy development early in a response. CRD should adopt this as a useful tool rather than see it as onerous bureaucracy.

ENABLING THE RESPONSE

OCHA defines its mission as ‘mobilizing humanitarian assistance for all people in need’. It is in this context that its core functions take place, namely coordination, advocacy, resource mobilization, policy and information management. This section of the evaluation looks at how the core functions performed in the Syria crisis under the collective banner of ‘enabling the system’. This section focuses on coordination, resource mobilization and information management. Advocacy and policy are discussed extensively in sections above on leadership and strategy.

MAJOR FEATURES OF THE L3 ACTIVATION

The Syria crisis was the first activation of the new L3 protocol in January 2013 in a conflict-affected context. The L3 had been agreed as part of the Transformative Agenda in early 2012.

The Syria activation was intended to 1) establish an HCT, 2) put in place the most senior humanitarian leadership possible, 3) empower that leadership with a set of specific measures, 4) deploy agency response staff (the IARRM), 5) activate clusters, 6) trigger a rapid needs assessment, 7) trigger a strategic plan and 8) trigger a CERF allocation.³¹

In the event, only the leadership elements happened, i.e., the CERF allocation and the strategic plan.³² The establishment of the HCT and clusters was resisted by the Government, and although agencies did boost their capacity somewhat, arguably this was not to the level required. The MIRA (needs assessment) did not take place, primarily because of security constraints. The SHARP was developed (in reality just ahead of the L3 trigger), setting out the strategic focus of the response.

The L3 activation was first suggested during an IASC Emergency Directors meeting in September 2012. At that meeting, there was consensus that an IASC system-wide emergency should not be activated. FAO, WHO and UNICEF were reported as being the most reluctant. An internal memo to the ERC following this meeting suggested she raise the issue of L3 with the principals as a way of “bringing a sense of urgency at local, regional but also at HQ level” for the agencies.³³ Internal analysis at that time was that the system was “totally unprepared”. In November 2012, the RHC wrote in a confidential internal memo: “We are not doing enough today and we are poorly if at all prepared for a worse scenario. If we are to do better and to prevent failure, we need to change course now.” At the EDG meeting of 21 December, it was agreed to recommend to the principals that an L3 be declared, which then took place on 4 January 2013.

The L3 declaration arguably changed the tone and, to some extent, the scale and pace of the response. It highlighted beyond doubt the seriousness of the crisis (if this was ever in doubt). It put further pressure on Damascus-based UN agencies to reorient their capacities towards a humanitarian stance.

Nevertheless, there were significant gaps. The needs assessment did not take place properly for over a year. The agencies have not universally ensured their teams are reinforced with experienced conflict and emergency leadership (even now), and the UN has struggled to conduct a transparent and accountable humanitarian operation. This may simply be impossible in the circumstances, but the UN agencies’ inability to properly monitor where their aid was going has led to perceptions that they could not always preserve their independence from the GoS.³⁴

The L3 did trigger the recruitment of a senior HC, but even this took time (as outlined above). Basically, it took time to get the right person in place, partly due to Government involvement in the process, and partly because of the need to find an Arabic speaker of the right level of experience and seniority. A candidate was eventually found who has been universally perceived to have done an excellent job in challenging circumstances.

The L3 declaration also had downsides. The GoS warned OCHA in advance that it would resist the L3, and once declared it went out of its way to make life difficult for OCHA. Senior leadership has not been able to secure visas to travel, and the remaining OCHA staff in Syria have had to cope with significant hostility from the Government at times. In this context, OCHA’s role in enabling the system was understandably constrained.

³¹ See “Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures”. IASC TA reference documents, 13 April, 2012.

PR/1204/4078/7, and “Basis for Declaration of a Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Response “L3” Syria crisis”, IASC, January, 2013.

³² A CERF allocation of \$20 million was made in March 2013 for Syrian IDPs.

³³ Internal memo to the ERC, September 2012.

³⁴ See, for instance, Drummond, J et al (2015). “An evaluation of WFP’s regional response to the Syrian crisis, 2011 – 2014”, commissioned by the WFP Office of Evaluation. ODI, London.

In the surrounding countries too, it is unclear precisely what the L3 declaration meant. UNHCR was running the response in Lebanon and Jordan, and the UN was unable to work from Turkey because of its fear that Damascus would close its operations should it be seen helping the other side. Moreover, the L3 declaration did not even appear to mark a change in OCHA's operations; planned increases in office staffing relate more to the earlier corporate emergency declaration.

Given the limited impact of the L3 activation, it is legitimate to ask what purpose it served, or rather whether it was the right tool. The protocol for L3 activation states that it is for a period of three months, yet it has remained in place since (over two years now). Symbolically, it feels right that a crisis of Syria's magnitude should have the highest designation within the system; practically, the declaration seems to have resulted in minimal change (or rather it does not seem to have given the system or the leadership any additional tools or capacity beyond that it could have had anyway).

In late 2014, the IASC EDG looked at the issue of protracted and slow-onset L3 declarations, with particular reference to Syria.³⁵ The note did not conclude what might change, but it acknowledged that such situations were substantively differently to the rapid-onset crisis, for which the L3 was originally envisaged.

At the heart of the issue is how HCs, the ERC and OCHA in support can mobilize faster and better humanitarian response. The Transformative Agenda was partly a response to failures in Haiti; the first round of humanitarian reform was in response to failures in Darfur. In Syria, the system appears to have responded just as sluggishly, and the L3 was one of the few tools in the toolbox available to leadership to force the change.

Subsequently, the Iraq crisis was also designated an L3, closely linked to Syria. Iraq has a refugee response running in parallel with an IDP response, and there have been issues in marrying the two. This is beyond the remit of this evaluation, but it certainly signals that there are lessons that can be extracted from the Syria experience of use to other contexts.

There is sometimes a tendency with the UN (and all large bureaucracies) to focus on the detail rather than the big picture—whether the correct protocols were enacted rather than whether the intent was achieved. This is akin to hitting the target but missing the point. If the L3 designation is about mobilizing the system, then this should be its explicit focus. Perhaps a range of measures—a 'menu'-is more appropriate than a tick list, depending on the situation.

There are also accountability issues within the L3 protocols: what recourse do the ERC and OCHA have if agencies do not change their leadership as agreed? And how can OCHA ensure that important technical initiatives, such as needs assessments, go ahead, even where access is constrained?

Clearly, in the Syria context, the L3 protocols were not the same as in a rapid-onset crisis. Using the highest designation to join up various disparate response elements and tackle access constraints without the Security Council resolution might have been more useful. A context analysis and a set of recommendations on how to best use L3 activation might have been more appropriate in these circumstances, especially where time wasn't such a significant factor. This could also have encompassed refugee elements. Ultimately, the L3 declaration is about taking the response to a new level in recognition of its seriousness. In Syria, it was used in this way, but when "the big red button" was pushed, not much really happened. Fixing this would be a major step forward for the UN system.

Findings

- The L3 declaration partly had the desired effect of galvanizing the response and bringing in the best leadership, but it did not deliver on several other critical aspects.
- The L3 protocols for situations such as Syria need to be amended. They should be less about standardized activation and more about making the system deliver.
- The accountabilities within the L3 system should be strengthened so that it is clear when agencies do not mobilize their best emergency capacity in a timely fashion.
- The UN is still unable to reliably "push the big red button" when there is an emergency, despite 10 years of humanitarian reform.

Recommendation

- OCHA should propose amendments to the L3 system to strengthen it considerably. Donors should be mobilized to ensure agencies buy in to a better system for the collective good.
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³⁵ "DRAFT Protracted/Slow-onset level 3 crises: outline of considerations", 13 October 2014. Emergency Directors Group.

IASC ARCHITECTURE

The IASC architecture that has come to be seen as standard since the cluster system was introduced in 2007 was not applied in any of the operational contexts in the Syria crisis.

The cluster system has now been partially introduced in Turkey and in the WoS structure, but it has not been implemented in Syria, Lebanon or Jordan. HCs were appointed in three of the four countries, but they have struggled to find a role either because of the Government (Syria) or because of UNHCR's refugee-coordinating role (Lebanon and Jordan). As a result, OCHA has also struggled to find a role, only latterly finding purpose in the cross-border operation (following resolution 2165 in July 2014). In fact, OCHA's traditional coordination role has been either contested (Syria, Lebanon) or only partly accepted (Jordan, Turkey). Neither had the introduction of an RHC (separate from the Syria HC post) given OCHA's additional purchase in coordinating operations, until arguably quite recently with the WoS push.

There are contextual reasons in each country for this. These are explored below.

COORDINATION IN SYRIA

From the beginning of the crisis, the UN's role in Syria has been constrained. The Government has kept tight control on all aid operations, insisting that all implementation is through SARC or nominated local NGOs. This has applied equally to coordination where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has overseen all movements, personnel and documentation of the UN system. An environment of harassment and intimidation has reinforced this. Security services routinely monitor all movements of UN personnel, and individuals are often made aware of this scrutiny.

As a result, OCHA found it difficult to establish a role and a position from early on, as the Government had an "ambiguous attitude".³⁶ The Government accepted OCHA's coordinating role in pulling together the response plan, but it did not want them to occupy a substantive role in coordinating aid, preferring instead a "de facto presence"³⁷ through the UNDP umbrella as the office for the regional RC.

Throughout 2012, OCHA struggled to introduce its core functions. Clusters were not accepted, an HCT was not allowed and conducting any analysis was challenging. Negotiations over the content of the SHARP in 2013 are a good example. Those involved talk about Government negotiating the substance line by line, "Soviet style". This type of scrutiny, pressure and control seems to have been routine throughout the operation. A needs assessment was only permitted on one occasion in 2012 jointly with the Government, and since then it has been practically impossible (from Damascus). Maintaining a presence and meaningful operation became even more challenging following the L3 declaration, which the Government opposed, and the ERC's increasingly outspoken stance.

Against this highly challenging backdrop, OCHA gradually increased its footprint from one national staff member pre-crisis to a rotation of internationals through 2012 and then a permanent office structure. A significant issue was obtaining visas for staff members, which hampered the effective deployment of personnel. Currently, there are some 12 international staff and twice the number of national staff.

Despite this, OCHA attempted to push the boundaries of the response. In November 2012, the then RHC concluded in an internal memo that the system was not doing enough, fast enough. The UN needed to move more fully into emergency mode. OCHA leadership took up this challenge, resulting in the L3 declaration and shortly afterwards a visit from the EDG led by the CRD Director. This resulted in two major initiatives that framed much of OCHA's work through 2013. The first of these was cross-lines convoys, and the second was the expansion of the UN presence beyond Damascus.

During 2013, OCHA organized 44 inter-agency convoys into hard-to-reach areas, with a similar number in 2014. In 2015, the number of cross-lines convoys diminished to eight for the first six months as Government restrictions and conflict made the situation challenging.³⁸

Organizing cross-lines convoys took a lot of OCHA's time, but the convoys were also a major part of the humanitarian effort. Typically, they included UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, WHO and IOM goods, or some combination of these. They were rarely smooth, encountering significant bureaucratic and security hurdles, and they often were looted, blocked or had goods removed. Nevertheless, the convoys afforded an opportunity for UN agencies to reach areas that were difficult and in some cases also establish follow-on activities or presence. OCHA's role in organizing and securing permissions was vital and certainly helped expand UN reach. It was also a key part of the access strategy, pushing the system to expand and testing the Government's willingness to allow this expansion.

³⁶ Mission summary, CRD Deputy Director, March 2012.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Whole of Syria Humanitarian Bulletin 2. June 2015.

The establishment of UN hubs outside of Damascus was a similar attempt to move the system. Initially, these hubs were in Tartous and Homs, followed by Qamishly and Aleppo. OCHA played a key role in setting up the hubs.

The cluster system has not been formally activated, but Syria has effectively followed this template using sectors. OCHA has played as close to a normal role as it was able, establishing an inter-sector role and providing support to the sectors. This has included significant information management support (based out of Amman), as well as linking this into the production of the response plan.

The WoS process has further enhanced this coordination role. Interviewees for this evaluation report that people no longer “bypass the mechanism” and that “now everything is more joined up”. Over time, with good support from the RC/HC, the coordination function has improved, and OCHA has developed a good relationship with all the Damascus-based stakeholders (except MOFA).

At the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, OCHA was able to put a needs-assessment process in place, something that had lagged since 2012 (see more below on this).

The improved OCHA coordination systems have had a positive effect on sector coordination. OCHA is seen to facilitate networking among stakeholders and is also seen as the only actor that has access to all humanitarian information. Inevitably there is still work to be done to improve coordination and implementation of coordination mechanisms. Procedures could be clearer and the roles and responsibilities better communicated.

Some respondents also see OCHA as more focused on Damascus-centred coordination. This is seen to affect negatively the activities of local hubs in peripheral regions. The coordination should envisage an approach that takes into consideration the pivotal role of the other hubs in Syria.

OCHA has also played a key role in the development of the SHARP—the one area where the Government has not opposed its role. This has continued with the adoption of the SRP, with technical support deployed frequently in support of the process.

The appointment of a new ERC offers opportunities for OCHA to rebuild its relationship with the GoS. The previous ERC has made consistently strong statements on the abuses committed by the Government and the denials of humanitarian access and services. The various Security Council resolutions have understandably irritated the Government, leading to a loss of some control. A delicate judgement is required about what can be achieved through better relations versus ensuring that the UN remains impartial and speaks out on abuses and violations of international and human rights law.

COORDINATION IN TURKEY

OCHA found it difficult to establish its coordination function in Turkey for a different set of reasons. In Turkey, humanitarian NGOs established cross-border operations in early 2012, with more and more activity throughout that year.

In mid-late 2012, OCHA deployed two Turkish-speaking international staff to understand the emerging NGO operation and make links with the authorities and UN agencies. This resulted in a semi-permanent presence by early 2013 but without a mandate to engage in coordination.

The lack of coordination mandate stemmed from the implacable opposition of the GoS in Damascus to cross-border operations. The UN had been told explicitly that this was a red line, and that dealing with opposition groups would lead to sanctions on the operations out of Damascus. As a result, OCHA ensured it was separate and distinct from the emerging cross-border work. While perfectly understandable in terms of the context at the time, it caused OCHA considerable difficulty further down the line. A different position in terms of tone, if not in substance, might have saved a lot of hard work later on.

With little other option available, a group of international NGOs established their own coordination forum, complete with its own secretariat. The secretariat included an information capability, and in many ways it replicated the functions that OCHA would normally fulfil. This was further complicated by the presence of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) of the Syrian Coalition (the ‘formal’ political opposition), which was conducting needs assessments and seeking to coordinate aid efforts in IDP camps along the border. The ACU was also conducting needs assessments in opposition-held areas, working with the NGOs in the coordination forum.

Early in 2013, OCHA senior leadership made contact with the Syrian opposition ACU immediately following the EDG mission to Damascus. Initially, there had been a plan for OCHA to cross the border into opposition territory, but the Turkish authorities refused permission. This resulted in an attempt to try and “join up” cross-lines convoys. The plan was to organize convoys of aid from Government-held areas to the IDP camps near to the Turkish border, nominally under the control of opposition groups. Several convoys of this nature did happen, but the system proved unworkable due to mistrust between the two sides. When the convoys arrived in the IDP camps, they were held for some time by activists who claimed to recognize Government sympathisers among SARC personnel. SARC organizers accused the opposition of trying to sabotage the convoys.

The same was true of mistrust between the NGO community operating in opposition areas and the UN system operating from Damascus. NGOs felt that by sharing their operational information with the UN (OCHA), they might compromise the safety of their staff, should the information leak to Syrian security services. For the UN in Damascus, the danger of being seen to do business with “terrorists” was equally problematic, in their eyes potentially compromising their operations in Government-controlled areas.

By mid-2013, despite the difficulties, OCHA had begun to establish a more permanent presence in southern Turkey and to have some involvement in the cross-border operation. An office was formally established and a Head of Office appointed.

Initially, however, it was difficult for OCHA to take over as coordinator. First, it still did not have the formal mandate to engage in cross-border operations. Second, the NGO coordination structure was well established and continued to mistrust anything UN, with its perceived closeness to the Government in Damascus. As a result, OCHA concentrated more on building relationships with local Syrian NGOs and collecting information for New York advocacy. There was also an interest in the needs assessment being carried out by NGOs and the ACU cross-border, with an initial secondment and later the effort in early 2014 that led to the production of the Syrian Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA).

Over time, the capacity-building efforts with Syrian NGOs proved to be a wise investment, as they saw OCHA as a counterweight to the bigger established international NGOs. This was helped by the existence of the regional ERF that could provide small grants for local NGOs.

Following the adoption of resolution 2165 and the introduction of the monitoring mechanism (UMM), OCHA gained in strength considerably. The Deputy RHC’s office was established, and over the latter half of 2014 the SRP was developed. Following the ERC’s visit shortly afterwards, the cluster system was also formally introduced in southern Turkey, subsequently proving a sound base for integration in the WoS structure. This meant that by early 2015, the Turkey office was unique in the region as being the only operation where OCHA was implementing something close to a normal programme. With the movement to country-based pooled funds (from the regional ERF), the role and authority of the Turkey office was further reinforced, as was the staffing. There was also some innovative local access work being quietly advanced through the Turkey office, getting combatants to sign up to minimum humanitarian commitments.

The Turkey office is now potentially the office with the clearest mandate and role. However, the legacy of the mistrust between the UN and NGOs continues in current operations. NGO data on “who does what where” (one of OCHA’s key coordination tools) is anonymised, apparently for security reasons. UN agencies fall under OCHA coordination, and the majority of international and Syrian NGOs engage with OCHA, but the handful of major aid providers (big international NGOs) continue to largely conduct their own operations. They coordinate first through the NGO forum and only second through the OCHA structures.

Findings

- OCHA has been challenged to provide its core coordination functions in all of the different contexts and countries involved in the Syria crisis.
- In Syria, OCHA was instrumental in pushing the system to respond at greater scale, including through the use of cross-lines convoys and the establishment of hubs outside of Damascus.
- The Government in Syria was ambiguous about OCHA from the beginning and has consistently constrained its role. This became more acute as the ERC’s statements became more explicit following the L3 declaration.
- Capacity-building efforts for Syrian NGOs from Turkey, helped by the ERF, proved a wise investment for OCHA and is good practice for future contexts.
- The establishment of the Deputy RHC position in Turkey has had a positive impact and is another good practice that can be replicated.
- Despite much positive improvement in OCHA’s role and position in Turkey, the legacy of mistrust continues with the biggest humanitarian NGOs. A decision to open the office in Turkey (formally) earlier and assume the coordination role would have prevented this.
- The WoS approach has enhanced OCHA’s position in Syria and Turkey, leading to better cluster/sector coordination.

Recommendations

- OCHA can learn several lessons from the Syria experience. First, its coordination role is crucial for many other facets of its work, and it must work creatively to deliver this. Having more than one model is essential including making sure the cluster system does not become a straight-jacket. Second, having posts such as the Deputy HC in complex, geographically dispersed crises works well. Third, the capacity-building of local NGOs through the ERF should become a standard part of the toolbox.
- OCHA should establish an office at the beginning of a crisis on a “no regrets” basis.

COORDINATION IN JORDAN AND LEBANON, WORKING WITH UNHCR

Humanitarian coordination in Jordan and Lebanon has largely been undertaken by UNHCR, as they are refugee crises. Since 2012 when the first refugees started to cross the borders, UNHCR mounted a rapid and effective response.³⁹ UNHCR has a long history of coordinating in refugee responses. As the crisis unfolded, UNHCR scaled up its coordination functions considerably in both countries, effectively leaving OCHA with little role.

From the beginning, the coordination arrangements regarding the refugee response were ambiguous. The IASC principals' ad hoc meeting of 27 March states: "Recognizing UNHCR's unique role as the coordinating agency for the refugee response outside of Syria, commit to support the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinators in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon in their joint efforts to ensure a coherent response to the humanitarian situation in Syria and in neighbouring countries."

Also in March 2012, OCHA was thinking internally about the wider consequences of the crisis in Lebanon and Jordan. An internal memo from the Deputy Director of CRD notes: "whilst the humanitarian situations in Jordan and Lebanon are mainly refugee situations, they raise a number of complex political and policy issues." The memo suggests that OCHA is well placed to respond to these in an independent and impartial way. The note recommends deploying two P5 senior humanitarian officers in support of the RHC and RCs (in the event, only P4 staff were sent).

In the first instance, OCHA tried to support UNHCR in its coordination efforts, at least in Jordan. The Head of UNHCR was designated HC, and two experienced OCHA staff were seconded to his office. In Lebanon, a staff member was seconded to support the RC, who was made into an HC.

By the middle of 2013, with the refugee flow relentless, donors began to put pressure on the UN system to address the situation in a comprehensive fashion. The strain on neighbouring countries risked tipping them into conflict, and it needed an effort by all aid actors, including the World Bank and bilateral donors, to ensure stability.⁴⁰

A July meeting of the EDG agreed that "a comprehensive regional approach was identified as essential to ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency in the support being provided to neighbouring countries". It was also agreed that the RHC would prioritize this task.

The Comprehensive Regional Strategy (CRS), or Comprehensive Regional Strategic Framework (CRSF) as it became known, was discussed in the section on strategy above. It was partially successful in that it shifted the centre of gravity in the neighbouring countries away from a purely refugee-focused response to one that looked at the whole system. However, the shift did not happen easily, creating tensions between OCHA and UNHCR.

Throughout 2013, OCHA had been gradually increasing its presence in Jordan and Lebanon. In early 2014, there was an OCHA-managed change of leadership in both countries, with new, experienced HCs put in place (and in Jordan combining the RC and HC positions once more). This coincided with the outcome of the CRSF process.

During the CRSF process, the relationship between UNHCR and OCHA became increasingly fraught. This was further exacerbated by the appointment of the new HCs, seen as an overt attempt to take over some of UNHCR's role. In Jordan, the UNHCR evaluation concludes: "nearly every relevant respondent, when asked about UNHCR's coordination role, commented negatively on how UNHCR, OCHA, HCT, and HC/RC coordinated at whatever level."⁴¹

In April 2014, responding in part to these tensions, OCHA and UNHCR leadership jointly issued a memorandum of understanding (MoU) setting out how coordination would work in "mixed" situations.⁴² Unfortunately, this did little to clear the air, as the MoU stated that in a situation dealing exclusively with refugees, there would be no IASC structure. In Lebanon and Jordan, the humanitarian caseload was, and is, almost exclusively refugee and there is an IASC structure.

The UNHCR evaluation summarizes it thus:

"Existing IASC coordination architecture sets out the requirements for an L3 emergency but does not take into account UNHCR's mandate. The UNHCR-OCHA agreement of 24 April 2014 works towards clarifying the responsibilities between OCHA and UNHCR, given its mandate. While this agreement clarifies roles—especially those related to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—it came late in the process and in the context of significant frustrations of the relevant parties on the ground.

³⁹ UNHCR (2015) Independent Programme Evaluation of UNHCR's response to the refugee influx in Lebanon and Jordan.

⁴⁰ EDG meeting, July 2013.

⁴¹ UNHCR (2015) Independent Programme Evaluation of UNHCR's response to the refugee influx in Lebanon and Jordan

⁴² MOU. OCHA and UNHCR.

Yet, frustrations persist. This is due to the fact that ambiguity over the role of HC and HCT remains. This needs to be resolved with more precision at the level of IASC. In particular, the role of HC and HCT in a refugee emergency needs clarification.”

In the end, the presence of RC/HCs, the devolution to national authorities set out in the CRSF, the wishes of major donors and the increasing assertiveness of national Governments has tipped the coordination balance in the IASC direction. Partners, too, have expressed strong reservations on the way that UNHCR coordinates, seeing it most often as coordination of the UNHCR programme rather than the overall response.

However, these same partners have reservations about OCHA. In fact, in Jordan and Lebanon to varying degrees, OCHA’s presence and role have been questioned. Some partners have been frustrated that OCHA has not played its traditional role; others question its relevance after several years of relative invisibility. Yet others maintain that the time has passed for purely humanitarian coordination, with the responses increasingly calling for hybrid humanitarian-stabilization-development efforts.

In Jordan, as in Turkey, the cross-border operation has created a niche for OCHA and a solid base from which the office can grow. On Jordan-related issues—refugee issues, in effect—the OCHA role is less clear, although the role in support of the RC/HC has been highly appreciated. As the Government of Jordan becomes more and more assertive, coordination on project approval and prioritization is now more the responsibility of the Ministry of Planning.

In Lebanon, the role of OCHA is probably the least clear of any office in the region. This was also the conclusion of the recent OCHA Donor Support Group mission to the region.⁴³ The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan integrates refugee and stabilization responses under the leadership of the RC/HC, with UNHCR and UNDP jointly leading inter-sector coordination. This is an evolution from a system where UNHCR has largely coordinated the humanitarian response alone. OCHA has played a valuable role in providing information and information management expertise, but largely as part of the collective effort rather than in its own right, or in some kind of leadership role. It is an open question as to whether there is any purpose to the Lebanon office.

The relationship between OCHA and UNHCR globally has never been an easy one. Following the Syria crisis, it has significantly deteriorated, with UNHCR now questioning the validity of the IASC structures in many contexts. The initial model of OCHA staff seconded into UNHCR—providing an opportunity to share experience and tools while preserving the UNHCR mandate—seemed a rational model. Appointing the UNHCR representatives as HCs also seemed a rational and pragmatic way of combining UNHCR’s mandate and the knowledge and relationships of OCHA and the IASC. That this did not work ultimately reflects badly on both parties, and it does a disservice to the people they are supposed to be helping and the donors who give the resources. The IASC policy guidance has not resolved the issue; it is surely incumbent on the leadership of both organizations to resolve these differences and come up with a workable model.

Findings

- Humanitarian coordination in Lebanon and Jordan was largely undertaken by UNHCR in the first two years of the response.
- In the first instance, OCHA tried to support UNHCR in its coordination efforts. This appeared to work well, and some adaptation of this model may be the most pragmatic way forward.
- From the beginning, the relationship between the IASC system and the UNHCR refugee coordinator system was ambiguous. This has yet to be resolved definitively, with the 2014 MoU doing little to clear the air.
- The relationship with UNHCR has affected OCHA’s coordination role in Lebanon and Jordan. This relationship has deteriorated over time, and the MoU has not resolved this situation. Partners would generally prefer OCHA coordination to UNHCR’s, but its lack of strength and presence has undermined legitimacy.

Recommendation

- OCHA and UNHCR must develop a sensible division of labour in refugee crises, codify this through the IASC (globally) and move on from the current impasse. Seconding capacity from OCHA to UNHCR and nominating UNHCR reps as HCs can work, especially if UNHCR is willing to give space to OCHA’s legitimate role within such a formula.

⁴³ The Syria Crisis – A Web of Complexities. ODSG Field Missions to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, 13-22 April 2015.

THE INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE AND PARTNERSHIPS

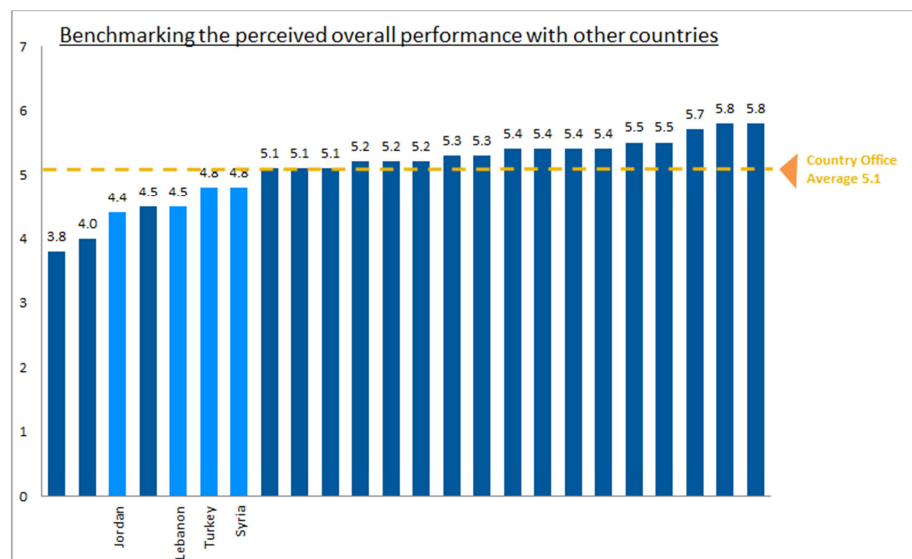
The IASC has been the main global humanitarian forum, as is customary, for discussing the Syria response. The EDG has been particularly active on Syria, meeting 12 times in 2013. The Principals have held four ad hoc meetings on Syria, and it featured on the agenda of many of the regular meetings over the past four years.

The IASC has given the Syria crisis a lot of attention, but the body has not always acted in harmony. In fact, the Syria crisis has challenged the IASC in a way that few others have in modern times. The differences between OCHA and UNHCR are the most obvious areas where the IASC has been tested, but it is also the case that other key agencies have been happy to bypass agreed protocols. It took some months for the IASC to agree to the designation of Syria as an L3 in 2012/3, as an example.

The differing coordination arrangements around the region, and the tensions between the various hubs working on Syria, have often strained OCHA's relationships with its partners.

It is a consistent feature of this evaluation that the big, operational UN agencies have been quite critical of OCHA. This is often the case anyway and might be explained by the 'normal' inter-UN rivalries, but it is also the case that NGOs—traditionally more supportive of OCHA—have also been critical. In some cases this has included donors.

Figure 6: Partner surveys benchmarking of Syria crisis offices compared with global average



OCHA has recently started conducting an annual partner survey. It asks partners to rate the organization against a fairly lengthy set of indicators, derived from the 2014–17 Strategic Plan.

The partner satisfaction ratings were in the bottom quarter globally for all of the countries in the region, including Syria. The method is still new, but this is a consistent pattern. Interestingly, the areas where OCHA scored less well in the Syria crisis are also consistent across the offices (for instance, on 'advising you on protection and international humanitarian law'), suggesting this is a good proxy measure.

This general low level of satisfaction with the OCHA response is replicated in interviews.

The reasons for this seem complex. For some, there is a "competitive" edge to the negativity. This is certainly the case with UNHCR, which feels that OCHA has tried to exercise control in areas it sees as its own jurisdiction, i.e., refugee responses. For others, it is a sense that they were forced to implement their own coordination arrangements early in the response, and there is not much point in changing what works fine (NGOs in Turkey). For yet others—UN agencies either in Syria or in the region—there is a sense that OCHA complicates their life without giving very much back.

Running through these various narratives is a sense of OCHA playing a different, perhaps more assertive, role. Historically, OCHA has mostly "led from behind", gaining legitimacy through providing services that people wanted or needed. This included resource mobilization through appeals, providing information that others didn't have and interfacing with donors. In the Syria crisis, OCHA did not carry out this 'normal' role, instead quite often leading from the front. This is most obviously the case with the access-and-advocacy work, but also with initiatives such as the CRSF. This has certainly led to some UN agencies being nervous about OCHA, pushing back against a perceived new assertiveness.

It may also be the case that OCHA had to make trade-offs in terms of resources concentrated on global advocacy versus operational field coordination. Coordination has already been discussed at some length in the sections above. OCHA faced formidable constraints in all three differing contexts to carrying out its coordination mandate. However, what many inside and outside the organization contend is that for the longest time, OCHA concentrated most of its resources on achieving the access resolution and similar global priorities, sometimes at the expense of providing the normal operational coordination products to partners.

Like most issues of this nature, this cannot be black and white. OCHA made lots of effort to get people on the ground and to fulfil its mandate. However, it is also the case that there was continual pressure on those in the field to provide information to HQ in support of global advocacy efforts; information that had to be continually gathered by offices from partners who often saw little back immediately. The argument that it was for the collective good is certainly true, but it seems quite abstract to those concerned with more immediate day-to-day issues.

This theme of OCHA “sucking up” information, often quite sensitive information, was also coloured by the mistrust and suspicion characterized in earlier parts of this report. Against a backdrop of propaganda and mis-information, where “truth is the first casualty of war”, it is unsurprising that secret information-gathering would, at times, be viewed with suspicion, however noble the motives might be.

The WoS approach is beginning to change some of the mistrust and break down some of the barriers that have previously existed. Having stable offices and teams in some places is another factor in what appears to be a gradual improvement in relationships. This is most obviously the case in Turkey, but also in Jordan.

Findings

- The IASC has been tested during the Syria crisis. Many IASC protocols have not been used.
- OCHA has had an uneasy relationship with the majority of its humanitarian partners in the Syria crisis. This is particularly the case with UNHCR in refugee-hosting countries, but also with the NGOs involved in cross border.
- OCHA has adopted a more assertive profile during the Syria crisis, pushing the system to deliver and leading global advocacy and access efforts. This may have affected relationships.
- At times, OCHA may have used its limited resources more for global access work than for operational coordination. This may also have fed partner frustration.
- The WoS approach is having a positive impact on coordination and OCHA relationships with partners. It is seen as critical to delivering a better response and breaking down barriers between the various hubs. OCHA is recognized as being essential to this process.

Recommendation

- OCHA needs a better system to understand partners' concerns. Ultimately, it is a consensual system and there is a need to carry partners with you. The partner survey shows great promise as a tool that can supplement other forms of feedback, allowing for course corrections when needed.
-

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Needs assessments in the Syria crisis have been one of the most problematic areas of the entire response. 2014 was the first year when something approaching an overall needs assessment was compiled. Up to that point, assessments have been fragmented, delayed by security and politics.

The first needs assessment took place in March 2012. It was carried out jointly between the Government, the UN and the OIC. The assessment was able to reach some but not all of the conflict areas. It highlighted serious needs, but in a note to the Secretary-General, the ERC noted “strained relationships” with the Government team and “lengthy negotiations”. They suspected people had been coached on what to say or were afraid to speak.

The second needs assessment was due to take place in the autumn of 2012, but it was cancelled at the last minute when two of the largest UN agencies felt it was too insecure. OCHA and the HC had put a lot of time into organizing the assessment, and the Government had agreed. After this, there were no further needs assessments from Damascus until 2014.

The difficulty in conducting needs assessments from Damascus led OCHA to try a series of other initiatives. This included training SARC staff in the hope that this might be an alternative, and working with UNHCR on the idea of exit interviews. In the end, neither of these initiatives succeeded; in Syria, the Government wouldn't allow it, and in refugee contexts, UNHCR judged it too expensive.

In early 2013, there was the first of a series of needs assessments in opposition areas. This was organized through the Syrian Opposition Coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) with backing from DFID and USAID. It was done jointly with some of the international NGOs working cross-border, and it used professional needs-assessment

methods (drawing on expertise from ACAPs and Map Action). It found serious unmet needs, but many saw it as a political exercise and it therefore had a somewhat diminished impact. Throughout 2013, many more needs assessments were carried out in opposition areas by NGOs, building experience and capacities. In late 2013, this formed the basis of the Syria Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA), coordinated by OCHA, and in 2014 the Multi-Sector Needs Analysis (MSNA).

In November 2014, the first comprehensive humanitarian needs overview (HNO) was produced,⁴⁴ combining areas accessible from Government control and areas outside of Government control. This underpinned the 2015 Strategic Response Plan for Syria, which was also the first time the WoS was represented in a single appeal. The HNO combined the 2014 MSNA data with a set of governorate profiles compiled by OCHA Syria, drawing on exit interviews from refugees. The governorate profiles are essentially a needs estimate based on secondary data—as much as possible from other UN agencies.

The history of the needs-assessment process and challenges partly explains the reality that there is still only a limited understanding of real need inside Syria. The bureaucratic and security constraints cannot be underestimated. At the same time, it is unacceptable that the UN has so little real data on what the level of humanitarian need is four years into the emergency. The 2015 SHARP asks for \$2.9 billion, predicated on an estimate that almost 70 per cent of the population needs humanitarian assistance. Yet the MSNA—using primary data collection—gives a figure of +/-20 per cent in terms of accuracy, and the governorate profiles do not even attempt to guess how accurate their figures might be. If this figure alone is translated into the numbers in need, there are +/-2.5 million people.

The UN's inability to properly assess need in the Syria context is worrying. Large amounts of assistance are being delivered inside Syria, with very light independent monitoring based on incomplete or non-existent assessment analysis. There is no doubt there is great need—war and displacement will surely have led to this. But there is also little evidence of what the priorities for assistance might be. There are seemingly no proxy indicators in use to determine whether need is increasing or what the impact of the aid operation might be.

This evaluation is clear that this is not the responsibility of OCHA alone. It is a collective responsibility. Equally, this evaluation is clear that if the choice is between helping people without accurate data or withholding aid because we are not confident down to the last percentage point of need, then this is no choice: people should be helped even when the risks (of being wrong) are high.

Nevertheless, OCHA has been gaining ground in this area in recent years, refining its assessment methods and experience. A key part of making sound strategic decisions—including maintaining neutrality and independence—is having good information and analysis. OCHA has been able to gather quite accurate data about shifting frontlines and the status of the various belligerents in the conflict as part of its work to secure resolutions on access. This was not the case on needs, and needs assessment was not permanently resourced (relying on missions and surge) until 2015. It is hoped that new capacity can now be used to secure ever-more-accurate needs data.⁴⁵

The 2014 MSNA is a significant improvement on earlier needs assessments, albeit later than it could have been. This minimum level of accuracy needs to be aimed for in Government-held areas of Syria, even if innovative methods have to be deployed. A possible lesson from the Syria crisis is that this is one area where more could have been done earlier, regardless of the difficulties.

Finding

- Needs assessments have been poor and problematic throughout the crisis, undermined to a large extent by the politics of propaganda from the protagonists. Nevertheless, it is unacceptable that the first comprehensive needs assessment was only produced in 2014, and much of this is based on unreliable data.

Recommendation

- There is a need for greater concentration on needs assessments in Syria. This should be a priority for the WoS process, and particularly for OCHA Damascus. The governorate profiles are a significant improvement on the previous situation, but there is a need for better information. More generally, needs assessments should be given central attention at the beginning of the response.

⁴⁴ There had been earlier attempts at an HNO, notably in early 2013, which served as the basis of the first SHARP. These relied on secondary data and were partial at best.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that even when the SINA and MSNA process got going properly, local and diaspora actors familiar with the situation reported that the fast changing situation often left analysis obsolete by the time it had been published. Some form of dynamic monitoring system would be the gold standard to aim for in such situations, although clearly a long way off for now. See Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015.

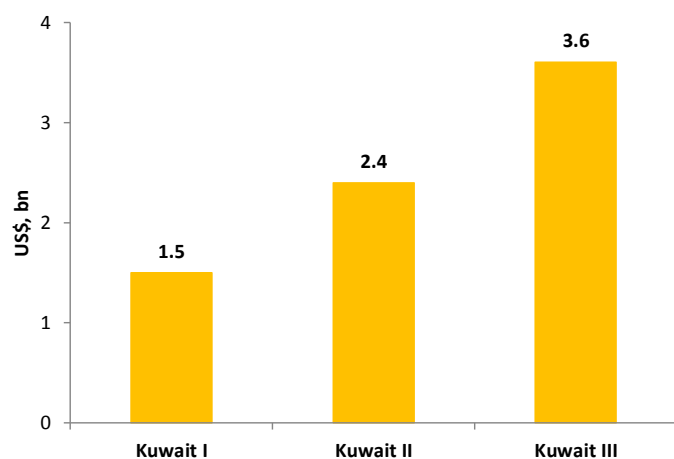
RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

The resources required for the humanitarian operation in the Syria crisis have been enormous. The scale of the tragedy, combined with the middle-income status of the countries affected, has seen humanitarian appeals larger than any in history. In 2015, the total humanitarian appeals figure is \$19.44 billion. The combined total of the SHARP and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) is \$7.42 billion, which is almost 40 per cent of the global need.

Furthermore, the Syria crisis to date has required and mobilized funds on an unprecedented scale. To date, some \$13.3 billion has been raised for the crisis in just four years,⁴⁶ and this is only the official amount reported through the UN Financial Tracking System (FTS). Almost certainly, this represents the most rapid mobilization of funds for a humanitarian crisis since the appeals system began. Despite this, there is also one of the largest real-terms funding gaps, highlighting the enormous need.

OCHA has been a key part of this successful resource mobilization effort, using traditional and innovative methods to bring donors on board. The series of Kuwait funding conferences has made a huge difference, bringing in \$7.5 billion in pledges since 2013 (with a very high commitment rate at 90 per cent).

Figure 7: Fundraising from the three Kuwait conferences



A large element in the success of these fundraising conferences involved the generosity and hard work of the Kuwait Government. The Secretary-General's Humanitarian Envoy, Dr. Al-Matouq, has been influential in liaising with the Amir of Kuwait. In this, it is possible to see the joined-up efforts of the UN and Member States.

After the second Kuwait conference, OCHA convened a top donors group to help advise on the humanitarian appeals in the Syria context. This has enabled frank discussions outside of the formal pledging conferences, deepening the trust between the UN and these major donors. The EDG of the IASC has also served this role partly, keeping donors informed and engaged in the major challenges and policy issues.

In addition to the active resource mobilization efforts, OCHA has played the more traditional role of putting appeals together, first in Syria and later to include cross-border operations. The SHARP was first developed for 2012, and in 2015 it became an SRP that included all aspects of the Syria response. It attracted over \$1 billion in 2014 and close to that in 2013. This represented only about half of what was asked for in 2014, but it represents a significant achievement.

For the first time, the SRP combines operations from Government-controlled areas and cross-border operations into opposition areas. As such, it represents one of the most significant outputs to date from the WoS approach. With a funding requirement of almost \$3 billion, it is also a sobering reminder of the increase in humanitarian need and the vast operation that is needed in hugely challenging circumstances.

⁴⁶ FTS.

- Resource mobilization has been a successful aspect of the Syria response, led competently by OCHA. Major funding gaps remain, but innovations such as the Kuwait conferences have led to some of the highest sums ever raised for humanitarian action over the period of the response to date.

Recommendation

- OCHA has already learned from Syria that Kuwait-style conferences are a good fundraising tool. This should be explored further with Member States by region in the search for similarly effective innovations.

HUMANITARIAN FINANCING – CERF AND ERF

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has been a significant contributor to the Syria response. Since 2011 and the start of the crisis, almost \$200 million has been allocated to Syria and surrounding countries, making the crisis the fifth largest expenditure for the fund since its (expanded) inception in 2006. In 2015, the Syria crisis is the largest for CERF, as it was in 2013. Table six summarizes the allocations to date.

The amount of CERF funding contributed to the Syria crisis is substantial and significant in relation to the fund. However, it represents only 1.5 per cent of the total humanitarian financing raised in the equivalent period. Thus, as is usual with CERF, the allocations and the financing need to be judged as much in terms of their strategic contribution as their actual financial impact. This is not to negate the latter, which is real and meaningful in its own right.

CERF funding has been used throughout the Syria crisis, but it has definitely also been used strategically. Crudely, its use can be characterized as for scaling up at the beginning of the crisis, to reinforce the L3 declaration and the further injection of capacity, and latterly to fill gaps as the level of underfunding has grown. This seems to be entirely commensurate with the intent and purpose of CERF. In this respect, the evaluation can conclude that CERF has been an essential and appropriate tool, adding value to the Syria crisis.

YEAR		Syria	Jordan	Lebanon	Egypt	Turkey	Total
2011	RR	\$ 3,664,730				\$ 3,500,000	\$ 7,164,730
	UFE						
2012	RR	\$ 29,493,103	\$ 3,994,809	\$ 3,978,910		\$ 2,000,000	\$ 39,466,822
	UFE	\$ 6,983,629					\$ 6,983,629
2013	RR	\$ 40,403,809	\$ 14,754,548	\$ 17,531,518			\$ 72,689,875
	UFE						
2014	RR						
	UFE						
2015	RR						
	UFE	\$ 30,000,000	\$ 9,000,000	\$ 18,000,000	\$ 3,500,000	\$ 9,000,000	\$ 69,500,000
Grand Total		\$ 110,545,271	\$ 27,749,357	\$ 39,510,428	\$ 3,500,000	\$ 14,500,000	\$ 195,805,056

Table 6: CERF allocations to the Syria crisis

This is not an evaluation of the use of CERF in the Syria crisis. Certainly, the timeliness of decision-making and disbursement seems appropriate from the evidence reviewed, and reporting seems standard. The RC/HC report from 2013 suggests that CERF added value in multiple ways. Apart from some over-enthusiastic reporting of beneficiary numbers, this seems credible.

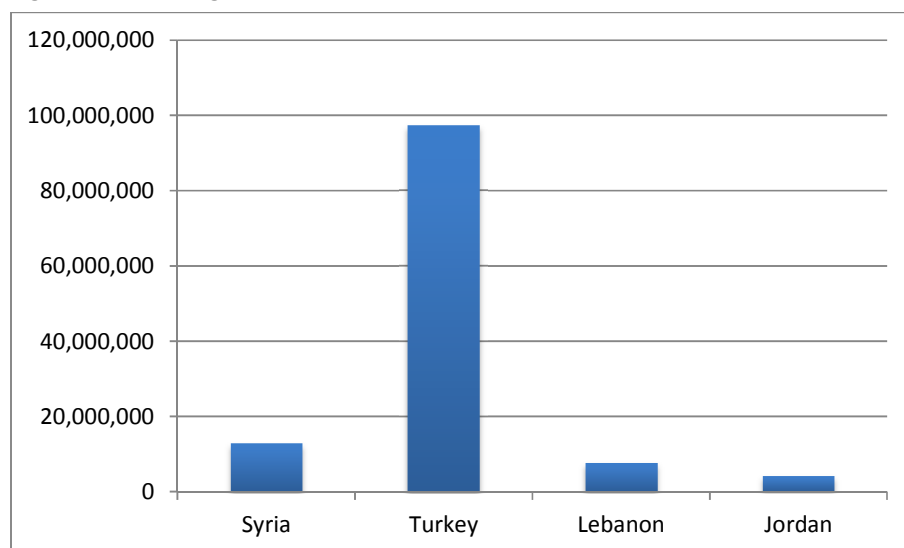
In addition to the CERF funding, OCHA has managed a number of humanitarian pooled funds in the Syria crisis. These started as a single, regional ERF, managed by the RHC. Later (in 2014), this fund was split into four separate, country-based funds.

An NGO-commissioned evaluation of ERFs concluded that the overall experience had been a positive one, and that the fund had filled critical gaps.⁴⁷ ERFs are seen as particularly useful for hard-to-fund activities, such as secondary displacement of Palestinians. ERFs were also seen as a critical source of funding for NGOs, particularly local NGOs. Not unusually, the evaluation found that the main constraints were the time it took to secure and disburse funding and the complicated process.

The split of the regional ERF into country-based funds was viewed with some consternation by those managing it and several of its key donors. They feared (rightly, as it transpired) that certain country-based funds would attract a far greater share of the funds than others. It was a regional fund, yet OCHA and the RHC were able to make decisions about where in the region funding could be directed. The counterargument, and one that prevailed, was that ERFs and humanitarian pooled funds were always designed as a country-based instrument, with a strong part of their rationale to reinforce the authority and scope for action of the HC.

Once again, it is difficult for the evaluation to be definitive on this front. The split in the fund has definitely led to an uneven distribution across the countries. Turkey has received the lion's share by almost a factor of 10, with almost \$100 million of funding, compared with \$12 million in Syria, \$7 million in Lebanon and only \$4 million in Jordan.

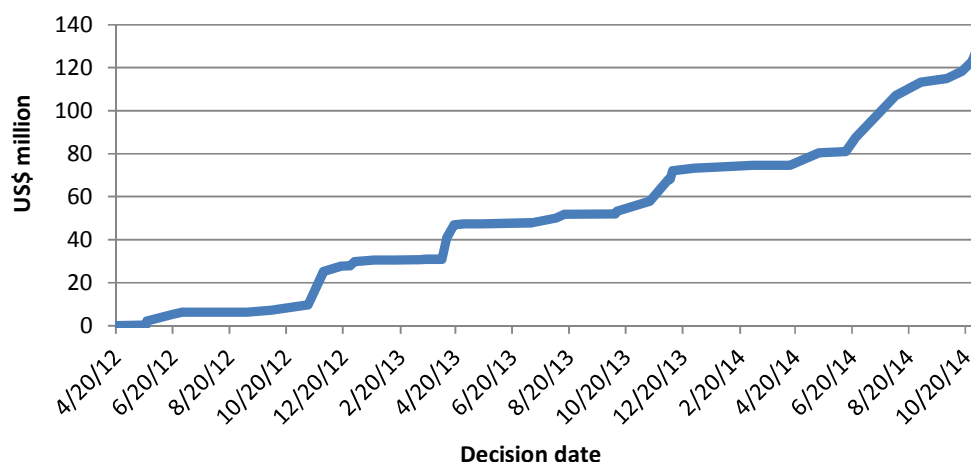
Figure 8: ERF funding across the four different countries



It is obviously the case that the split has led to an uneven distribution. However, it is also the case that the total amount the ERFs have attracted is greater than when it was regional. At the end of the third quarter of 2014 when they were split, the total 'pot' stood at roughly \$78 million. Combined, in mid-2015, this total pot stands at just over \$120 million, a 50 per cent increase (see figure 6 for increase).

⁴⁷ Stoianova, V. (2015): Review of NGOs' experience with the Syria-related pooled funds. ICVA, Geneva.

Figure 9: Rise in ERF funding from set up and through the split into country-based funds



Furthermore, there may be a quite logical donor rationale for the distribution. Turkey is still primarily an NGO operation, and in particular it has a lot of local (Syrian) NGOs implementing humanitarian projects. ERFs tend to be particularly useful for these types of organizations, as the above-quoted evaluation suggests. In Syria, it is primarily a UN- and SARC-implemented operation, and they are funded traditionally through larger grants direct from donors. In Lebanon and Jordan, UNHCR leads on the refugee response and manages the lion's share of the funding. Even so, the amounts available to the HCs are not terribly different to previous years' expenditure patterns.

	2012	2013	2014
Syria	4,474,847	17,175,482	16,551,287
Lebanon	1,490,901	9,157,792	4,650,770
Jordan	1,315,034	6,481,892	6,987,159

Table 7: ERF funding by year and country in US\$ million

One area where there might be potential concern, both with regard to the ERFs and CERF funding, is monitoring and evaluation. Agencies and OCHA partners have been developing remote monitoring systems, but many of these are yet to be completely developed.⁴⁸ The Turkish Red Crescent Society (Kizalayi), in conversations with the evaluation team, estimated a considerable percentage of its aid was being diverted. The managers of the ERF told the evaluation that diversion wasn't a problem and the monitoring systems were robust. In the evaluators' opinion, to be confident of this in such a fluid environment is at best optimistic.

[Finding](#)

- OCHA's humanitarian financing tools have been equally well managed and delivered within the context and the challenges presented. CERF has been used strategically and robustly, and the ERF continues to provide a much-needed niche service, even if there are some differences of opinion about whether it should have been split into separate country-based funds.

[Recommendation](#)

- OCHA should explore further how CERF and ERF can be used to support cross-border-type operations, creatively expanding humanitarian space, even in the absence of formal access agreements.

⁴⁸ The evaluation's team leader conducted several workshops with the UK-based DEC agencies and ALNAP, including operational UN agencies, around the subject of monitoring in Syria and has had access to a significant amount of detailed material on this. The material in question is confidential and cannot be cited.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Managing information has been a formidable task for OCHA in the Syria crisis, and it has been one of its key contributions. Information management (IM) is a core area of OCHA's work in humanitarian emergencies, and this has been no different in the Syria crisis. However, as with other aspects of the response, this role has not been straightforward and has called, at times, for different ways of working.

One of the most successful aspects of IM in the Syria crisis has been its use in securing resolutions on humanitarian access. For a period in late 2013 and early 2014, the volume and accuracy of information required were hugely significant, as Security Council members demanded evidence to back the need for cross-border operations. This led to some non-standard information products, particularly those looking at where hard-to-reach and besieged areas were. It also demanded very quick deadlines and turnaround times and a high degree of output. Much of this information was sensitive and needed to be handled cautiously.

The fact that OCHA managed to secure the humanitarian access resolutions was partly due to the successful IM work. Maps and graphics made the case in a way that reports may not have done.

The time-consuming nature of the IM work for securing the resolutions inevitably led to less-dedicated capacity for other IM work. This was part of the choice and tension noted elsewhere in this report between serving the global advocacy work and serving the operational needs of partners on the ground. As with other aspects of the response, this was further complicated by UNHCR's lead in the refugee-hosting countries, which meant it developed separate and often parallel systems of IM, reporting and financial tracking. As a result, OCHA concentrated its operational IM efforts more on Syria than on the neighbouring countries, although IM experts were loaned to UNHCR early in the response to help it develop its systems.

The Syria context, like most conflicts, proved challenging in terms of getting good, timely information to serve the response. Practically, one of the early constraints in delivering the IM function was the ability to get IM experts into Syria. Visa constraints, coupled with the sensitivity of information flows and the need for the latest IT equipment/services, led to OCHA establishing much of the Syria capacity in Jordan. Since 2013, the Syria IM team has been the largest part of the OCHA-combined Jordan regional and country offices. This team and its counterparts across the region have delivered a significant volume of analytical infographics, underpinning many of the critical decisions that the leadership of the humanitarian response in the region has had to make.

The contextual challenges to good IM have been similar to those experienced in the wider operation. Access and security constraints, coupled with a large number of actors, means that "no one owns real data". The mistrust between the UN system and the NGOs operating cross-border led to the anonymization of data. This remains the case, meaning that when NGOs share information on where people are working and what they are doing (the so-called 4Ws), the organizations' names are removed at the sub-district level.

This is still the case, but the environment has been slowly improving throughout 2014, first with the passing of resolution 2165, and then with the WoS approach. Unfortunately, it has not yet entirely broken down the barriers to comprehensive information sharing. This could partly be because sensitivity of information is still used as a rationale for non-sharing, although all interviewees confirmed that the critical locations (schools, hospitals, power plants, bakeries, water and sewage systems) are common knowledge among all relevant parties.

Information has (as always) a political dimension (power), and for some it has become convenient to keep the UN distant. Lack of transparency and open sharing may highlight gaps in the IM capabilities of the partner organizations (and the quality of the data). Mostly, however, partners still question the role of Damascus.

Information gathering and sharing in Syria is subject to a different set of challenges. As previously discussed, even humanitarian needs assessments have been practically impossible due to travel and security restrictions. Gaining reliable information from the Syrian State on a war footing has, not surprisingly, been challenging.

The rapidly changing pace of information technology and the relative sophistication of the Syrian population further exacerbate the challenges. It is commonplace in Syria for people to communicate by Skype, WhatsApp and other variations on peer-to-peer technologies. These innovations do not match the standardized information systems that are used in the UN system, causing friction and preventing adequate exchange, storing and processing of information. The emerging information landscape is agile, asynchronous, heterogeneous and distributed. This also poses challenges to established principles of humanitarian IM, such as timeliness, verifiability, impartiality and reciprocity.

A major issue is that the traditional IM tools and instruments are generic and have not been (re) designed for the specific setting of the Syria crisis. As such, their use and applicability are often limited to generic information provision, lacking specificity or even relevance. There is a catalogue of standard products that are regularly updated (most of them monthly or bimonthly, based on data and reports that are between four and eight weeks old).

The key information characteristics of the Syria crisis, namely accuracy, uncertainty, safety levels and risk, need to be dealt with. They should be integrated, into current information products rather than avoided. This also entails

statistical analysis of trends and patterns as well as real-time information updates, flashes and highlights tailored for specific critical decisions. Data-collection processes should be adapted to the remote nature of the operation, and lightweight, real-time automated data-collection processes (e.g., via swipe cards, IDs, tags) should complement the standard approaches and surveys.

Finding

- IM has been a major aspect of the OCHA response, underpinning much of the globally successful advocacy. In terms of facilitating response, there is much to learn from the way that new technologies distribute information in the Syria context and how IM tools need to adapt.

Recommendations

- OCHA should capture the innovative IM work from the Syria crisis and consider its applicability to other conflict contexts.
- There is a need to rethink some of the traditional IM approaches in fluid and fast-moving contexts such as Syria, focusing less on static products that become immediately outdated and more on networked products using social media and other new technologies.

MANAGEMENT OF THE SYRIA CRISIS

TIMELINESS OF DESIGNATION AND DEPLOYMENT

On 18 September 2012, the ERC designated the Syria crisis a corporate emergency. In a note to all staff, the ERC set out what this meant in practical terms, noting that all Syria-related matters should be fast tracked and prioritized.⁴⁹

The corporate emergency declaration followed a period of steady but significant scale up. OCHA had a small presence in Damascus prior to the civil war, working on contingency planning. Over the summer of 2011, the MENA office in Cairo rotated international humanitarian officers through Damascus in support of the small presence. In August, the mission of the Geneva Director led to the nomination of a HC and a shifting of the management to New York.⁵⁰

By early 2012, preparations for a much more significant expansion were under way. A memo from the Deputy Director of CRD to the ERC⁵¹ requested permission for a cost plan adjustment to implement a reasonable-sized office in Syria (effectively nine internationals with a D1 Head of Office) and deploy humanitarian affairs officers to Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. With the clear escalation of the conflict and the obvious humanitarian challenges this would entail, the proposed scale-up seemed appropriate and proportionate.

Following the ERC's approval of the cost plan in mid-March, it is hard for the evaluation team to get an accurate picture of how quickly and efficiently the recruitment and scale-up proceeded. Certainly people were deployed quite quickly to Amman while they waited to get visas for Syria. Visas proved to be a massive issue for OCHA and the other agencies, seriously hindering their operations.

However, there is also a view from some interviewed within CRD that this did not happen as quickly as possible, due to bureaucratic hurdles. This view was expressed several times in different contexts and so is likely to have some grounding. The scale and significance of these hurdles is impossible to quantify without further documentary evidence.

Certainly, the picture appears mixed with regard to timeliness. Despite the best intent, noted above, OCHA's presence remained quite tentative until very recently. The offices in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey only became fully fledged in 2014—some 2.5 years into the crisis. The reasons for this are partly explored above in the enabling section, but regardless of the constraints, the fluidity in staff appointments and movements was within OCHA's control. In practically all of the offices except Syria, there were acting heads during this period. Inside Syria, there was also some turnover, although this is more understandable given the environment.

⁴⁹ "Under the terms of a corporate emergency response, all offices, branches and sections are expected to provide their full support to the OCHA offices involved, through CRD, in responding to the situation in Syria and the region. All requests for support to this emergency must be prioritized and fast-tracked as far as possible."

⁵⁰ Interviews with staff from this period.

⁵¹ Scaling up OCHA operations in Syria. March 2012.

OCHA's inability to get robust, experienced leadership on the ground quickly is almost certainly a factor in the later inability to establish a clear role. Some experienced staff were deployed (the Head of the Field Coordination Support Section was deployed to Damascus for some time), but this did not add up to a critical mass.

Finding

- OCHA recognized the need to scale up in the Syria crisis early and planned for this appropriately. Somehow this was not evenly translated into practice until quite late on, with the majority of offices only being properly configured in 2014.

Recommendation

- OCHA needs to develop a larger cadre of experienced field leaders (both senior and at the midlevel) for deployment to crises such as Syria at the beginning of the emergency (or make better use of the ones it has). Mechanisms are also needed that deploy people for longer or find longer-term staff more efficiently.

OPERATIONAL AND DECISION-MAKING PROTOCOLS AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS

The declaration of the corporate emergency set forth the unequivocal leadership by the Director of CRD. This is also the policy, as set out in the draft Emergency Response Policy Instruction (2013),⁵² that states: "The CRD Director will manage the emergency response on behalf of the ERC, including chairing (or designating the chairing of) the ERTF, if activated".⁵³

The draft policy instruction (PI) also sets out the roles and responsibilities of the various other branches that might be involved. It is geared towards a rapid-onset emergency, arranging the various actions along an emergency timeline (first few hours, first few days and so on). However, the actions to be taken are similar to those needed in a complex emergency and thus would seem to be relevant.

The PI mandates that an Emergency Response Task Force (ERTF) should be activated within 24 hours of a corporate emergency being declared. In fact, it was not entirely clear to the evaluation which PI was in place at the time the corporate emergency was declared. The 2014 approved PI was in draft form in 2013, and therefore may have also been in draft in late 2012 (and thus the new system was activated). In 2011, the system involved an Emergency Task Force (ETF) in New York and an Operational Task Force (OTF) in Geneva.

Despite several requests for minutes of the ERTF (or ETF?) meetings by the evaluation, these have not been forthcoming. Nor has the evaluation been informed through interviews of the frequency, composition or utility of such meetings, although one reference suggests it may be as little as three. This leads the evaluation to conclude that while they almost certainly did take place, they were not perceived as useful and were either dropped or dropped off in frequency and participation.

What is clear is that these operational protocols and response systems were of limited, practical management benefit. The Syria operation has been run on a highly vertical basis, with the Director of CRD reporting to the USG on Syria matters, and all of the field offices reporting directly to the senior desk officer or the Director or Deputy Director of CRD.

This has enabled the response to be run extremely tightly. Highly sensitive information relating to the Security Council, or other high-level advocacy forums, has been appropriately safeguarded. Rapid decision-making has also been enabled through having short management lines and clear command-and-control structures. Similarly, this has enabled rapid turnaround of time-sensitive information.

Such tight management has not worked so well in using all parts of the organization. This may be a wider management issue and therefore beyond the scope of this evaluation. However, it is certainly worth noting, that in the case of Syria, the operational protocols that did exist did not appear particularly beneficial.

Moreover, as noted in the previous section, beyond enabling a certain type of tight management, the corporate emergency declaration did not appear to call forward any extra resources or capacity. The L3 protocol calls for agencies to deploy their A teams, but this did not happen in OCHA. This begs the question as to whether such capacity exists—if not deployed for Syria, then where? A critical lesson for OCHA is that activation of a corporate emergency should result in a whole series of additional *capacities and resources* being called forward, not just

⁵² Policy Instruction (draft of 2 June 2013). Emergency Response in OCHA.

⁵³ Ibid.

additional management authority. There should be pre-configured response packages—of people and kit—and experienced people to set these up. OCHA should have had functioning offices in Syria and all of the surrounding countries within three weeks of a corporate emergency being declared, not three years.

Finding

- The declaration of a corporate emergency did not appear to activate a system of response protocols so much as it reinforced the authority of the CRD Director. This enabled rapid decision-making and information flows, but may have affected the optimal use of all the organization's resources.

Recommendations

- The activation of the corporate emergency response should be accompanied by a set of organization-wide protocols. The new emergency policy sets out many of these. Activating regular ETF meetings will help with internal communications, even if they are not well attended at times.
- OCHA should consider creating more robust emergency response capacity: more standing emergency response positions, more 'office in a box' type equipment, pre-approved cost plans and other preparedness measures that will allow it to convert early intent into early, robust presence.

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

The Syria crisis has been among the largest, if not the largest, for OCHA in the time period in question. As a result, it has required significant use of human resources—in effect, OCHA's main activity during a crisis. It has required many different types of skill sets and input from across the organization touching on most technical areas.

As noted above, after an early recognition of the need to scale up, OCHA seems to have faltered somewhat in implementing permanent structures and staffing. The full staffing pattern over the four years has not been available to the evaluation team. However, the Syria crisis has seen the deployment of many of OCHA's best staff, and it has called on the skills of many more.

What is certain is that there was a high use of surge capacity. Between 2012 and 2014, there were 83 surge deployments to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt. Neither was this front-loaded, as might be expected. In 2014 there were 33 surge deployments, only two less than in 2013 and twice as many as in 2012. Nor were these particularly short-term deployments; for the majority, the duration is around six months, with many for a lot longer.⁵⁴ This suggests that a relatively high percentage of core staffing has been supplied through the surge mechanism throughout the response.

The use of surge suggests that this mechanism can ensure key posts are filled. This is a positive finding. Nevertheless, it is a costlier way of doing business than regular staffing and provides for less continuity. The ideal is that use of surge at volume is limited over time and replaced with more regular staffing. The evaluation recognizes that in a fast-moving emergency this is not always possible. The degree to which this was the major driver, or that there is a certain slowness in the regular recruitment system, has not been possible to ascertain without more documentation. What certainly appears to be the case was that there was less concentration on methodically developing the profiles that were needed and recruiting against these, and more of a reliance on people who were known and proven. Again, this seems appropriate in the earliest stages of response but a less sensible way of using resources as the operations matured.

The high intensity and exceptionally high volume of work that the crisis generated meant that staff worked long and irregular hours. This is quite normal for an emergency situation, and Syria—with the added political dimensions and the horrors of the situation—proved challenging for staff welfare. This was particularly the case in Damascus, where the intermittent shelling and the security necessity to live in the same hotel made taking time off challenging.

It is exceptionally difficult to get the balance right in terms of workload and stress in crises such as Syria. The overwhelming sense of being unable to stop the deterioration must take a significant toll on those involved. Coupled with difficult physical circumstances in places such as Damascus and little opportunity to get away from the crisis, it makes managing burnout significantly challenging.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there has been a higher-than-normal level of staff dissatisfaction at points during the Syria response. This is now changing for the better with stable leadership in the field, suggesting that the uncertainty and lack of a clear role was a significant factor in this low staff morale. This may have been exacerbated by a high level of demand from HQ, often leading to teams working very late or through the weekend. This is normal in the first few weeks following a major emergency, but it is less normal two years into a crisis. More

⁵⁴ Syria and surrounding countries, 2011 – 2014 Surge statistics.

importantly, it is also unsustainable. There is evidence that this high level of pressure and uncertainty has led to a higher level of attrition than is normal in such circumstances.

Some attrition is inevitable, but it is incumbent on the organization to ensure that people are supported in the best way possible. Ensuring that people do not stay in high-stress positions for too long is part of good management. It should also be acknowledged that this applies not just to the field but to HQ.

Why the stable leadership now in place did not materialize earlier is a mystery. As one respondent noted: “Just because it’s an emergency doesn’t mean it has to be managed like one.” After an initial build up (that is often frantic and chaotic with people working long hours), it is normal practice to transition to a stable and to some extent routine operation. This took over-long in the case of Syria.

This instability also had other negative consequences organizationally. There appears to be an overreliance on a few individuals. This means they are pulled from one crisis response to another, and as soon as one hole is covered another is exposed. It also led to a perception among some of the interim country managers that they were in competition with one another for permanent positions, something that did not enhance team building.

For national staff there is a different set of issues. Because of OCHA’s status as part of the Secretariat, it is never registered as a separate entity in the countries it works in. This means national staff are employed by UNDP on behalf of OCHA, usually on quite short-term contracts. This leads to a relative lack of job security, but more importantly, it means there is a tenuous connection with the organization. In effect, national staff do not feel part of the organization in the same way as international staff, at least in feedback to this evaluation. They feel there are few opportunities to progress beyond their immediate office (i.e., make the leap into international positions). This could be viewed as simply part of the set up, but it means that OCHA is potentially overlooking a significant talent pool. Some efforts have been made in this area, such as training courses and opportunities to surge from the Syria office. However, this should not rely on the initiatives of individuals. Senior national staff who have worked for the organization for some years are an asset, and it is worth investigating if more formal ways of exploiting this talent pool might be considered.

Findings

- Syria has made big and challenging demands on OCHA’s human resources. Largely the need has been met.
- The flux and uncertainty regarding the role and nature of the OCHA offices appears to have led to the high use of surge capacity, often for many months. This is costly and less than ideal for staff welfare.
- The high-stress and high-pressure environment seems to have led to quite low staff morale at times, and a higher-than-normal rate of attrition among staff. This is now changing, with new and stable leadership in place in the region.
- There is no clear career progression for national staff into international positions, limiting the use of a possible pool of talent.

Recommendations

- OCHA should develop new ways of recruiting essential profiles for crises such as Syria to avoid overreliance on surge and an already stretched global cadre of response personnel. This might include rolling recruitment for high-volume positions.
- OCHA should find ways to offer progression to the best-performing national staff. This will increase the talent pool and incentivize people. Allowing them to gain international experience through surge is a good mechanism.
- More sensitive feedback mechanisms are needed to ensure there is not a build up of frustration and tiredness in highly challenging contexts. This should be independent from line managers.

FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

OCHA has long struggled with finance and administration in its field operations, partly as a result of being part of the UN Secretariat. Because it has no legal status (as with the employment of national staff, above), it relies entirely on UNDP for everything financial and administrative. This ranges from the purchase of stationery, to the payment of staff, and to the hire of offices, vehicles and office set-up. Naturally, where UNDP is overwhelmed itself (as is often the case in emergencies), OCHA’s needs are not always prioritized.

The Syria crisis has not exposed any egregious examples of this issue. For the most part, UNDP has performed satisfactorily in this role. However, there are lots of small examples where things might have been done quicker or more efficiently. For example, offices that have been occupied for months without leases complete; vehicles

imported but not cleared. Luckily none of these issues has stopped OCHA from working, but clearly this system is far from ideal. On the most basic level, it is inefficient to employ administrative staff whose main role is to request other administrative staff to do tasks they themselves are quite capable of.

The contradiction inherent in the current system is stark. OCHA is supposed to be an emergency organization, able to mobilize at speed. However, it cannot establish even the minimum office set-up without help from UNDP, a development organization. The fact that many internally see UNDP as preferable to using the UN Secretariat procedures (or OCHA's own procedures) only shows how cumbersome the latter are.

OCHA is beginning to gain more control over its internal working (being less reliant on the Secretariat). In interviews for the evaluation, an impression has been created that this had added a layer of bureaucracy rather than simplifying matters.

One way of resolving many of these issues is to have pre-agreed procedures and pre-approved mechanisms. Currently, procedures within offices seem quite ad hoc, with administrative staff having to put rules in place as they go. In many instances, rules appear to rely on the prevailing system within UNDP or the RC/HC office, which of course makes sense if OCHA has to flex these to get things done.

Most organizations running emergency operations have systems that facilitate rapid deployment. This includes emergency staff on standby, support equipment ready to be shipped, and set administrative and financial procedures that are familiar, tried and tested. A pre-approved cost plan for establishing offices has been highlighted to the evaluation as one possible innovation that could speed deployment. Having emergency administration and finance rules and staff that can simply be rolled out would make sense too. Clearly delegating a far higher level of financial authority to the Head of Office would also make sense. The forthcoming approval of delegated authority to Heads of OCHA offices of \$4,000 highlights how restrictive the current set-up is.

Findings

- OCHA's reliance on UNDP for administration does not logically fit its profile as an emergency organization. However, the systems OCHA is developing by itself also do not seem to be fit for the purpose of swift and immediate action.
- The new, delegated financial authority to Heads of Office is welcome but still woefully inadequate.

Recommendations

- OCHA should develop new emergency administrative and deployment systems.
 - Delegated financial authority to Heads of Office should be raised much further.
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MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Throughout the Syria response, OCHA has struggled to meet its own internal expectations. In the words of one senior manager, the Syria crisis has "tested OCHA to its limits". That it has survived sets a basis for a tremendous set of improvements, but only if the lessons can be properly incorporated.

As noted elsewhere in this evaluation, OCHA has achieved notable success in the Syria response in terms of global leadership and strategy setting. This appears to have come at some cost, however, particularly in terms of internal cohesion and OCHA's own operations.

In contrast to its relative success in ensuring the best leadership at the most senior level, OCHA has struggled to get its own operations right. This now seems to be changing with a more stable structure and more permanent leadership.

At the beginning of 2012, as the civil war was deepening, OCHA appointed a D1 position to the Head of the Damascus office and deployed a sizeable team in support. This was the appropriate course of action, following lessons from previous crises where a sufficiently senior leader was needed to interact with the UN Country Team and to support the RC/HC. In practice, getting a stable team at the right size proved challenging due to visa problems and the extremely high-stress environment. However, this did not happen elsewhere in the region until much later (late 2014, early 2015).

A regional office was established in Amman, in part to house much of the IM capabilities that could not be placed in Syria due to obvious restrictions. However, the role of the regional office beyond this was not clear, and even in 2013 when the RHC was appointed, there was no direct reporting line.

In fact, throughout the Syria response, in contrast to all other UN organizations, each office in the region has reported directly to New York. This has had the effect of creating silos and limiting the amount that offices communicated with each other. Even now under the WoS approach, there is no clear link between the various

OCHA offices in the region, sometimes adding to the sense of mistrust that the environment brings. This is very low level due to the professionalism of those involved (and the RO plays a helpful, convening role), but it remains an issue.

This evaluation contends there were good reasons for keeping management tight at times. Having clear management direction is essential in an emergency. The Haiti evaluation found there was “a lack of decisive leadership from HQ at critical points of time,” that “cost OCHA dear”.

This was certainly not the case in the Syria crisis. There has been clear management direction throughout, if not micro-management and over control at times.

Clearly a happy medium between these two extremes would be the ideal scenario—a situation where there was clear leadership and management, without excessive over control. This requires a degree of delegation that appears to have been lacking at times in the Syria response.

Finding

- OCHA has struggled at times to manage its Syria operation optimally. Striking the right balance between control and delegated authority is critical. Having all offices report to the centre, with little horizontal linkage, has created silos. This needs to be amended in light of the ongoing WoS effort.

Recommendation

- OCHA must further delegate responsibility within the Syria field office structure, perhaps also considering a managerial role for Amman.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

One of the consistent issues internally has been a tension between the need to move fast and the need to bring the organization as a whole along. This has been further complicated by the highly sensitive nature of much of the information needed to secure the resolution on access.

In a geopolitical environment where the stakes were so high and the interests from Member States intense, putting erroneous information in the public domain could have serious consequences. In the worst-case scenario, this could compromise UN operations and therefore vital lifelines of assistance that those caught up in conflict depend on.

Nevertheless, it is also naïve to think that information protection measures at OCHA’s disposal can cope with determined enquiry from the most powerful Member States. At best, OCHA can protect against casual, unguarded slips in public. Those who want to know what the organization is doing and have the resources will find out.

The practical upshot of this tension has been that many people in the organization feel their capacities have not been best used in the Syria response. This may not seem terribly important when the stakes are so high in the Syria context—people dying from lack of medical care in a bitter internal conflict. However, at the very least it means that OCHA is not functioning at its optimal capability, and there are capacities that exist that may be overlooked or underutilized because of the structural or communications issues.

Interview evidence is clear that these internal communication issues exist and are real. However, the degree to which they are about communication and the degree to which they are about control is moot. There are no formal minutes of Senior Leadership Team meetings, so it is difficult to assess the tone of these. Certainly there were very few ERTF meetings—probably only three. And much of the information on OCHA.net around the Syria crisis has been password protected, meaning it has been difficult for those outside the immediate response to know more than is publically available.

The evaluation was provided with evidence of huge amounts of internal communication around Syria, touching on most aspects of the work of OCHA and most branches. However, much of this communication is of an extractive nature: “we need this capacity, please provide”, or “we have this urgent request, would you be able to help us draft X within the next 12 hours”. Clearly there is a need for someone to be in charge, but when involvement is mostly directed, it is understandable that people come to resent some of this over time.

In interviews for this evaluation, many OCHA staff contended that the previous system of emergency management within the organization had been too process driven and too unwieldy. This is confirmed by the Haiti evaluation in 2011, which concluded: “the ETF/OTF mechanism.... was sometimes too large and lacked clear focus and structure. There was no central point for coordinating... and this wasted a lot of time of the deployed staff causing frustrations.”

Arguably, Syria could be seen as the other extreme, with management carried out on a 'need to know/command and control' basis. There was a clear hierarchy, through New York and the Director of CRD to the ERC, and information—especially sensitive information—was well protected.

Somewhere in the middle is clearly the right place to be: a tight management line that enables swift decision-making that simultaneously brings the organization along with it.

Structures can help achieve this happy medium, as can well-rehearsed routines. Creating virtual emergency teams that span various departments is one of many practical solutions. This will never entirely ease tensions—and some tension is creative—but it can help to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding. Where structures can be created to share information and include the relevant parts of the organization without becoming chaotic, time consuming or overburdensome on busy field staff, this can certainly yield dividends.

[Finding](#)

- Internal communication has been a major issue throughout the response, leading to avoidable tensions within the organization. Arguably, it has meant that capacities and skills from the wider organization were not always used to best effect. The management systems for running a corporate emergency need an overhaul or at least to be delivered in a different way.

[Recommendation](#)

- The new ERC must tackle the divisions within the organization that have been exacerbated by (and highlighted during) the Syria crisis. There is a need to build a more inclusive form of crisis management within OCHA, without eroding the necessary chain of command that allows for swift decision-making.
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Conclusions

The Syria crisis has been one of the most troubling and testing of modern times. It has caused widespread human misery and continues to destabilize an entire region. Nor is it over, with a seemingly endless downward spiral of destruction and violence continuing.

Evaluating OCHA's work over the four years since the Syria crisis became a humanitarian emergency has been challenging. The breadth and scale of the response; the complexity of the politics, geopolitical and within the humanitarian sector; and the sheer volume of work covered have inevitably meant the evaluation is an overview rather than a detailed accounting. Neither is it appropriate to produce some form of simplistic judgement about the work—good, bad, indifferent and so on. The daily struggle to reach people in need, to find ways through the hatred and danger of violent conflict cannot be weighed easily.

Against this backdrop OCHA has achieved some notable successes. The long drawn-out struggle to gain access to people in need is far from over, but it is much enhanced by the Security Council resolutions approved in 2014. This was directly the work of OCHA and the campaigning work of the ERC.

OCHA has also struggled at times, notably in delivering on its coordination mandate that has been contested in all of the operational contexts at one time or another. The current trajectory is positive, as are attempts to unify the formerly fragmented response under the WoS initiative.

Since its modern inception, the humanitarian system has found itself manipulated by belligerent parties in conflict. This should be no surprise; the resources it commands are considerable. Biafra, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Liberia, Yugoslavia and many others show how the system can be bullied and co-opted to suit the needs of one side or the other. The UN struggles to acquit its humanitarian mandate faced with powerful States or determined adversaries.

The UN was slow to react to the scale of the crisis inside Syria, and it has been consistently accused of being too close to the Government. The humanitarian operation has operated under a cloud of secrecy and suspicion, whether operations from Damascus (largely through SARC) or cross-border (largely funded by opponents of the Government). 'Politicisation' is a word that has been used more than any other.

It is too early to say what the judgement of history will be. It may have taken time to speak out clearly against the systematic abuses of human rights and international law by the Syrian Government. However, the ERC did speak out and push for practical measures to secure humanitarian access. From the end of 2012 onwards, the ERC became more and more involved in all aspects of the Syria response—pushing the system to do more, lobbying Member States for resources and continually trying to find ways to unlock the access blockages.

Over time, the Syria response has caused a split within the UN humanitarian family. The main UN agencies and OCHA have been at odds often throughout the response; so too has the relationship with NGO partners fluctuated. UNHCR and OCHA have fallen out badly over who coordinates in the refugee-hosting contexts, a disagreement that is now affecting other contexts. OCHA has also clashed at times with other agencies over how to proceed within Syria—the majority of agencies taking a far more cautious line than the ERC. They can argue this has been about protecting access and maintaining relationships, but there are tough questions to be asked about whether they could have, and should have, done more.

The antagonisms around Syria have been greater than the usual background noise of UN family squabbling. The IASC has largely held together, but there are important questions about how much of the Transformative Agenda still pertains. The Syria L3 declaration was the first one and is still in place. Many of the provisions under the L3 were not enacted, and while it was intended to push agencies into a high level of emergency capability, this did not happen uniformly. Without further changes, this situation will stay the same: the UN will continue to 'push the big red button' only to see nothing (or very little) happen. The consensual nature of the system makes this hard to do, but the opportunity of a new ERC offers a small opening. Some bridge-building will inevitably also be necessary.

There are many important lessons for the organization to learn as a result of the Syria crisis and the response. Its capacity to mount a major advocacy push and simultaneously deliver its core functions across four countries was highly challenged (and arguably it did not manage both for quite some time). The internal systems for managing corporate emergencies are still not optimal—while there is more command and control than during Haiti, this has come at the expense of organization-wide working. And it is clear that when OCHA's coordination role is contested, it struggles to deliver its other core functions.

Many things worked well in Syria. Resource mobilization was a success, as was the use of the financing mechanisms, such as CERF and the ERF. IM was a huge activity and produced some interesting innovations. The combination of analysis, information, policy work and advocacy that led to the resolutions clearly worked well too.

There are also many lessons for the wider system where OCHA should take the lead. Further developing the access work—codifying the elements that worked—will benefit future responses. Further work on analytical tools to

make better strategy, or undertake needs assessments in closed environments will also be of use to all and are much needed. Better shaping the collective response when a crisis is deemed global must also be a priority.

The Syria crisis is not yet over and unfortunately has the potential to spread even further. The UN system faces a long and protracted emergency where resources are dwindling as world attention is drawn elsewhere. Current arrangements and capacities are much better than they were at the beginning of the crisis but can still be further improved. OCHA needs to review the current support to the RHC and ensure that there are adequate resources to make this role meaningful. The WoS approach needs streamlining and the issues about who leads clusters ironed out so that the structure is durable. The reshaping of purely refugee responses as nationally led should continue to be supported, while also preserving UNHCR's unique protection mandate. The leadership team in place for Syria and the region is encouraging and bringing much-needed stability to OCHA's operation. This should set the pattern for the future.

List of Annexes

Annex 1: Inception Report

Annex 2: Evaluation Matrix

Annex 3: Theory of Change

Annex 4: Information Management Preliminary Report

Annex 5: List of Interviewees

Annex 6: Bibliography