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Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis Update

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Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations.....	iv
Preface.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Part one - Political developments.....	3
The situation in the summer of 2015	3
A shift in United Nations policy and international attitudes	4
From Brahimi to de Mistura	4
Reactions to the new United Nations approach	5
The Russian initiative	6
The United States strategy	7
The new threat posed by ISIL	8
The regional context.....	10
The supranational dimension of ISIL	10
ISIL advance has been slowed but continues	10
Saudi Arabia and Iran	12
Turkish and Israeli interests.....	13
The national context.....	14
Government of Syria.....	14
The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.....	16
Armed and political oppositions.....	17
The Syrian-Kurdish posture.....	18
Truces and local agreements	18
Civil society survives	19
Part two - Humanitarian developments.....	20
The impact of conflict	20
Violent death and injury	20
Deepening poverty	20
Persistent pattern of violations	20
Illegal conduct of war.....	21
Siege	21
Forced displacement.....	22
ISIL practices.....	22
Humanitarian needs and challenges	22
Needs in Syria.....	23
Needs in neighbouring countries, refugees.....	24
Organization of the response.....	27
Remote management.....	30
Cash transfer	31
Resilience programming.....	32
Conclusion	33

Acronyms and abbreviations

3RP	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
AOGs	Armed Opposition Groups
ANF	Al Nusra Front
CALL	Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learned
CCA	Common Context Analysis
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoS	Government of Syria
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	internally displaced persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
NLG	No Lost Generation (partnership)
NGO	non-governmental organization
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN COI	United Nations (Human Rights Council) Commission of Inquiry
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council resolution
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
RRP	Syria Regional Response Plan
SAR	Syrian Arab Republic
SHARP	Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan
SRP	Strategic Response Plan
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WoS	Whole of Syria
YPG	People's Protection Unit

Preface

The Syria crisis has entered its fifth year with still no end in sight. What began in March 2011 as civil unrest has turned into one of the worst crises of the twenty-first century. It is estimated that 250,000 people have died due to the fighting and over half of the country's population has been displaced. In August 2015 the number of refugees surpassed 4 million. The humanitarian response to the Syria crisis has been one of the largest in history, 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.

Despite the magnitude, severity and impact of this crisis, no system-wide evaluative effort has been triggered to date. To compensate for the absence of such an evaluative exercise, the inter-agency Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learned (CALL) initiative was launched in October 2013 with the aim of optimizing collective learning on the Syria crisis and contributing to evidenced-based decision making. The key components of the CALL initiative include: the [Syria Learning Portal](#); the [Common Context Analysis](#); a mapping exercise of evaluative studies; and a gap analysis paired with a synthesis report, to be completed by March 2016.

This report is an update to and should be read together with the Syria Common Context Analysis, published in June 2014. The Common Context Analysis was commissioned to provide a ready-to-use common understanding of the crisis in order to save time and resources when conducting evaluations and to avoid the duplication of efforts. This update covers the political events that took place between mid-2014 and mid-2015, and provides a brief overview of the humanitarian situation. While this update is by no means exhaustive, it offers an overall understanding of a humanitarian crisis that is deeply political. Developments from August 2015 onward are not captured in this update.

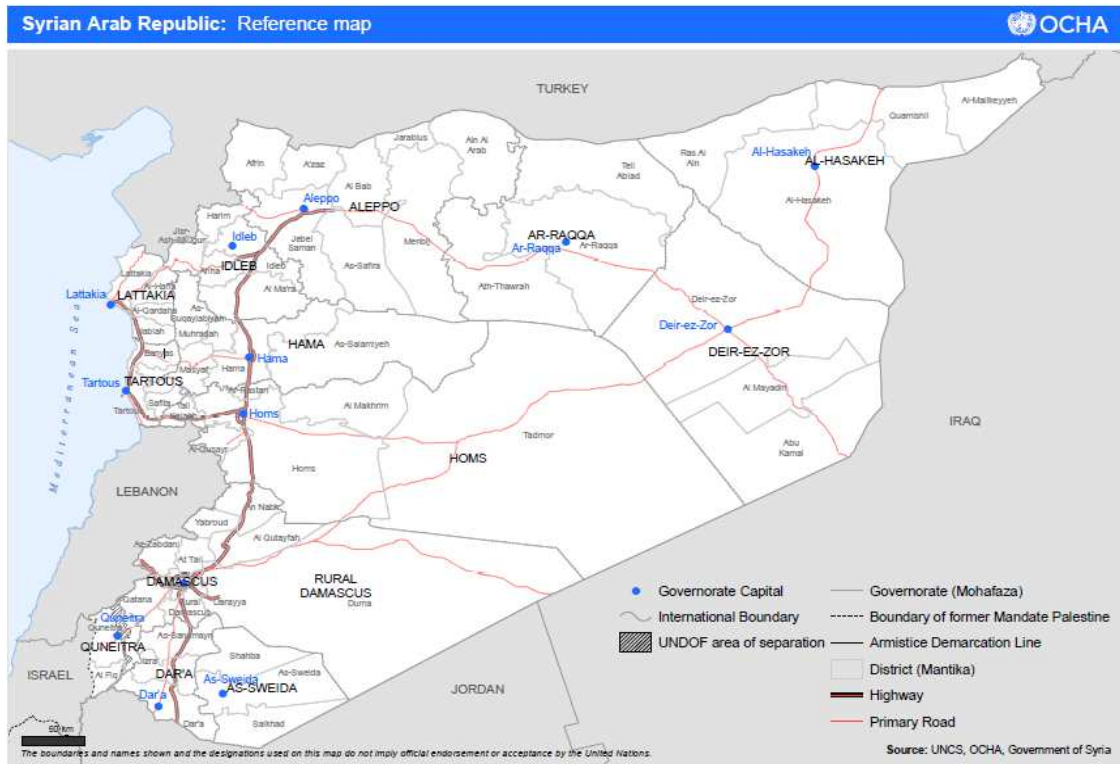
The management of the Syria CALL initiative represents a complex undertaking. This update was made possible through the effective coordination and teamwork of the Management Group. We would like to thank all those who contributed to this update, particularly the authors, Hugo Slim, Lorenzo Trombetta and Lewis Sida. It should be noted the contents and conclusions of this report reflect those of the authors and not those of the members of the Management Group, the agencies composing the Steering Group or the United Nations.

We look forward to partners making use of the tools and resources provided under the CALL initiative.

Steering Group for Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations ALNAP, FAO, IFRC, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.

Introduction

This update should be read as part of the much longer Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis of June 2014. It highlights the most significant political and humanitarian developments in the Syria crisis between June 2014 and September 2015. The first section covers political developments and the second section focuses on humanitarian response.



Part one - Political developments

The situation in the summer of 2015

The dynamics of the Syrian conflict are constantly changing, sometimes in regards to a particular area within Syria and sometimes in regards to the country as a whole. In addition, there has been a close relationship between the events taking place in Syria and in Iraq, both regarding the attitude of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the reactions of the United States-led coalition.

Although major developments have taken place on the local level, there has not been a decisive turning point at the national and regional levels. Between late spring and early summer 2015, for example, the conflict dynamic began to change in favour of the local, national and regional opposition platforms. However, this shift was not a sign that the end of the war was approaching.¹ In addition, a major obstacle to finding a political solution to the ongoing fighting was the growing number of local, national and regional actors that were benefiting economically from the war.

Syria has been effectively divided into zones of influence. In the north and south, Jordan and Turkey, supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, respectively, have created buffer zones near the borders. Similarly, Israel has protected the area of the Golan from any conflict-related spill over. Iran, Russia and Lebanese Hezbollah have provided protection to the corridor of Damascus-Hama and the coastal region, a stronghold of the clans that have been in power in Syria for half a century. Coalitions of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs), supported by Saudi Arabia and, in some cases, led by the Al Nusra Front (ANF), have established a potentate in the Idlib region. Aleppo city has continued to cause disputations between the Government of Syria (GoS) and various opposition armed groups, including ANF, and neither party has prevailed over the other. Central Syria has faced constant threats from ISIL. The Islamic State now extends from the eastern border of Iraq to the outskirts of Aleppo in the north, to the eastern Qalamun in the centre and to the deserted eastern districts of Suwayda region in the south.

Some of the armed actors that were successful in the first part of 2015, such as the People's Protection Unit (YPG), ISIL and the pro-Saudi/Qatari/Turkish AOG coalition in Idlib, have tried to consolidate their territorial gains and create buffer zones and outposts from which they launched raids against their direct rivals. These actors are fully aware that they cannot expand their control *ad libitum* and must cope with the limits imposed by geography and military strategies, as well as by sectarian, ethnic and socioeconomic factors. The ISIL attacks (May 2015) in the Palmyra region and ISIL's presence in the southern suburbs of Damascus, for instance, were not indicative that the jihadist group aims to establish permanent control in the capital or in the western side of Homs region.

Other actors, such as the GoS and some AOGs, continued to defend their positions, strengthening the main lines of entrenchment to avoid major losses. At the local level, this resulted in more complex interactions among actors to maintain or increase political and economic power in their areas of influence. In particular, the governmental forces and their allies strengthened their trenches to secure the capital from the threats from Daraa and Qunaytra and guarantee their territorial contiguity with the coastal region and Aleppo through Homs and Hama.

¹ Hallaj, Omar Abdulaziz, *The balance-sheet of the conflict. Criminal revenues and warlords in Syria*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, May 2015, <www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/Hallaj_NOREF_Clingendael_The%20balance-sheet%20of%20conflict_criminal%20revenues%20and%20warlords%20in%20Syria_Apr%202015_FINAL.pdf>, accessed 6 November 2015.

Despite the prolonged status of the war and the deterioration of humanitarian conditions, multifaceted civil society organizations continued the struggle to carry on their activities. In safer areas, civil activists widened the scope of their work on the ground. Due to the highly polarized context and shifting alliances, however, they encountered serious difficulties in expanding their networks across battle lines.

A shift in United Nations policy and international attitudes

The Syrian crisis has witnessed a shift in international positions and significant changes in United Nations policies. In particular, the rise of ISIL reframed the immediate crisis as one of “dangerous regional terrorism” requiring the new primary objective of defeating ISIL.

From Brahimi to de Mistura

On 13 May 2014, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the resignation of Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Envoy to Syria. In early November 2014, the new United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, proposed a ceasefire plan in Aleppo to prevent further escalation. According to de Mistura, by providing an approach that could be replicated in other locations, the ceasefire plan would serve as a first step towards a wider de-escalation of violence. The plan aimed to freeze fighting and create an environment enabling humanitarian aid to reach the population in Aleppo. It aimed to prove that the momentum on the ground could shift away from the military to the political.² According to the new envoy, “Aleppo provides the best example of where the conflict could be frozen locally: it is a place which is iconic; it is threatened by the war between the two sides, the Government and the opposition; and it’s now also threatened by ISIL.”³

De Mistura’s plan was vague but referred to two steps. At first, success would be limited to Aleppo with two objectives: to make the city “an area where we can provide some better life for citizens” and then to “focus on ISIL”. After this, the Aleppo model would be replicated in other embattled areas, and as a result, have a calming effect on the environment in Syria, therefore “leading to a political process”.⁴

During his first visit to Syria in mid-November, de Mistura identified the four main points of his action plan: 1) to focus on the threat of terrorism as defined by the United Nations Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs); 2) to reduce the violence; 3) to reach as many suffering people as possible in Syria and outside Syria; and 4) to use the reduction of violence as a building block in the direction of a political solution. In Damascus, the United Nations Special Envoy reaffirmed (in line with previous UNSCRs 2170 and 2178) that ISIL and ANF were both pursuing terrorism.⁵ However, a nuanced distinction between the two groups is of great importance. While ISIL has been considered hostile to the anti-Assad cause by most AOGs, ANF has enjoyed a certain level of legitimacy among local insurgents and has emerged in some key regions as the most powerful armed anti-GoS actor.

In the de Mistura plan, the United Nations seemed to be abandoning the top-down approach adopted with no success by the two previous envoys to Syria (Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi). The top-down approach was grounded in the Geneva communiqué of June 2012 (both talks took place in early 2014). The United Nations’ new aim was not to focus on

² ‘Syria: UN envoy proposes new plan to ‘freeze’ conflict, promote political solution’, *UN News Center*, 3 November 2014, <www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49241#.Vj1DEFzR9c0>, accessed 6 November 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ ‘Notes to correspondents: Transcript of a press encounter by Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy to Syria’, Damascus, 11 November 2014, <www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=3718>, accessed 6 November 2015.

conflict resolution, but to focus on local cessation of hostilities and creating momentum for humanitarian dialogue.

The pivotal idea that came out of the Geneva process was the creation of a transitional government with full executive power and mutual recognition by the GoS and the opposition as a prelude to regime change. Although Assad's departure was central to the discussions held in Switzerland, this was no longer the case. De Mistura's agenda appeared to be very similar to the GoS agenda, which was emphasised by Damascus in Geneva. The priority was then framed as the need to focus on terrorism. In other words, the key challenge was to wage war against ISIL and ANF. The United Nations Special Envoy's bottom-up approach never mentioned political transition and sidestepped the question of Assad's future.⁶

In February 2015, de Mistura faced criticism for announcing that President Assad was "part of the solution" and should therefore be involved in a diplomatic solution.⁷ This approach contrasted with the policy adopted by the United States, France, Turkey and their allies in Europe and the Gulf.

Some weeks later, the United Nations Special Envoy stressed the need to involve Russia in the diplomatic effort to solve the Syrian crisis. "Russia has influence on Damascus, and it's very important that they get involved. The two countries' relationship goes back to the time when Bashar al-Assad's father was in power. Therefore, the Russians do have knowledge of the system and the way they think."⁸

In the same interview, de Mistura admitted the partial failure of his plan due to a misreading of the situation on the ground, particularly ISIL's attitude. "When ISIL declared a 'caliphate' that included a large swathe of Syria last summer, I hoped this would act as a 'wake-up call' to a country that had reached political stalemate. I thought that maybe this outside threat might produce some common understanding between those who were unable to turn around the conflict. I was wrong."⁹

Reactions to the new United Nations approach

The de Mistura plan has not had a warm reception among rival Syrian actors. The Government has shown a willingness to explore a peaceful solution. It has expressed a "constructive interest" and given time to the action plan without making any formal commitment.¹⁰ Many loyalist circles unofficially expressed dissatisfaction with the United Nations Special Envoy's initiative as another temporary measure that will not support the GoS in crushing the AOGs in Aleppo and elsewhere and is ultimately bound to fail.¹¹ The main exiled opposition leaders and some of the AOGs in northern Syria have concentrated on the ambiguity of the proposal, particularly the emphases on freezing the conflict in Aleppo where Government forces hold the upper hand over a fragmented insurgency.

⁶ Bahout, Joseph, 'Russia and Iran Step Into Syria's Diplomatic Vacuum', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 December 2014 <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57621>, accessed 6 November 2015.

⁷ 'Bashar al-Assad 'part of the solution' in Syria, says UN envoy', *The Telegraph*, 14 February 2015, <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11412793/Bashar-al-Assad-part-of-the-solution-in-Syria-says-UN-envoy.html>, accessed 6 November 2015.

⁸ Halliburton, Rachel, 'Syria conflict: Listen to Russia to help resolve crisis, urges UN envoy', *The Independent*, 13 April 2015, <www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-listen-to-russia-to-help-resolve-crisis-urges-un-envoy-10171782.html>, accessed 6 November 2015.

⁹ De Mistura, as quoted by *The Independent*, 13 April 2015.

¹⁰ Transcript... cit. Idem. *Sana*, 11 November 2014.

¹¹ Dark, Edward, "'Conflict freeze' desperately needed in Aleppo", *The Monitor*, 20 November 2014, <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/aleppo-syria-conflict-freeze.html#>, accessed 6 November 2015.

Refocusing international policy on confrontation with ISIL and ANF has appeared to opponents of Damascus as a pro-Assad reading of events steering political and military momentum in the direction of Assad's choice.¹² In late December, ANF explicitly refused the United Nations plan, perceiving it as part of a wider "collaborationist" strategy to harm "Syrian vulnerable people".¹³ In mid-January, de Mistura confirmed the United Nations' "tactical shift", reminding parties of the significance of "new factors" such as the growth of the Islamic State.¹⁴

The New York Times noted that "the shifts reflect a longstanding view among United Nations officials in Syria that the West must adapt to the reality that the Syrian insurgents have failed to defeat Mr. Assad. Western diplomats are also back-peddling. Many who had long called for Mr. Assad's immediate resignation now say that while he must not control crucial institutions like the military, a more gradual transition may be worth considering. One Western diplomat at the United Nations said that while a 'post-Assad phase' must eventually come, 'the exact timing of that, we can discuss' as long as the medium term solution does not 'cement his position in power.'"¹⁵

The Russian initiative

In November 2014, the Russian Government made a proposal that appeared to provide the missing political link to the United Nations Special Envoy's approach, and which practically erased the principles of the Geneva process.¹⁶ For more than four decades, Moscow has been the main international partner of the GoS. Since the uprising began in 2011, the Russian authorities have continued to support their allies on military, political, diplomatic and economic levels.¹⁷

In stark contrast to the Geneva process, the Russian dialogue excludes wide international involvement. In November 2014, de Mistura clearly expressed his support for the Russian initiative as "complementary" to his own action plan: "if presented in a suitable fashion and supported by all parties, it could complete my efforts, since we are in need of a new initiative for political dialogue."¹⁸ The Russians were in "full cooperation" with the de Mistura plan.¹⁹

Two rounds of talks took place in Moscow at the end of January and the beginning of April 2015 without any foreign interference, aside from Russian involvement. The participants were asked not to impose any pre-conditions on the talks. For example, the opposition could

¹² Interviews in Gaziantep, Beirut and Amman with residents, activists, intellectuals, local politicians and militiamen from Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, Hama, Damascus and Daraa regions (November-December 2014).

¹³ *al Hayat*, Dec. 26, 2014 (<http://qoo.gl/OC77dn>).

¹⁴ 'UN to renew Syria talks, seeking Aleppo cease fire', *The New York Times*, 15 January 2015, <www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/world/middleeast/un-to-resume-cessate-fire-talks-with-syria.html?_r=1>, accessed 7 November 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 'حلب خطة وندعم جديداً جنيف لا: والمعلم بـتوتين لقاء بعد موسكو', *an Nahar*, 27 November 2014, <newspaper.annahar.com/article/193126-خطة-وندعم-جديدا-جنيف-لا-والمعلم-ب-توتين-لقاء-بعد-موسكو>, accessed 7 November 2015.

¹⁷ 'Russia holds firm on Syria', *The Monitor*, 3 November 2014, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/russia-no-change-position-syria-isis.html>>, accessed 7 November 2015. According to Yezid Sayigh ('The Assad Regime's Political "Achilles' Heel"', translated into English from its Arabic original version published by *al Hayat*, 3 December 2014, <carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/11/assad-regime-s-political-achilles-heel/hwdw>, accessed 7 November 2015) Moscow is reported to have refused a GoS request for a new US\$1 billion credit line, while still offering smaller amounts of aid and investment.

¹⁸ *al Hayat*, Dec 31, 2014.

¹⁹ The UN envoy was also invited to the second round of talks but he declined: "I felt that being on the outside was more useful to all involved" quoted in Halliburton.

not insist on the removal of Assad or demand that Assad refuse to run in the next presidential election. However, the exiled opposition refused these Moscow-imposed conditions and did not attend. Representatives of diverse but “tolerated” opposition groups in Damascus accepted the conditions and attended. Some groups very close to the GoS were involved.²⁰ There was also a small group of opponents with little bargaining power. The parties have not yet reached an agreement.

The negotiations have no defined roadmap. The Moscow talks will have an agenda for the transitional phase with very fixed parameters.²¹ The transitional phase is proposed to last for about two and a half years, during which a consensus government that includes carefully selected and pliable opponents will be formed. Real power (the army and the security apparatus) will remain under the control of the Assad family. Internationally monitored legislative elections will be held, after which a constituent commission will be charged with producing a new national charter. Assad will have the right to stand as a candidate at the eventual presidential elections.²²

To date, the failure of the Russian process can be attributed to the process architecture, which many perceive as exclusive and ambiguous, and which represents the interests of Moscow, Teheran and Damascus. Beyond the rhetoric, the Russian initiative has appeared to focus on three main objectives: 1) to re-legitimize Assad and offer him a political and diplomatic victory; 2) to bypass Washington quietly and make Syria’s peace talks a strictly Russian-Iranian affair; and 3) to further fragment the diverse opposition by playing soft-liners against rejectionists.²³

The United States strategy

Through early January 2015, the United States administration let Moscow run the Syrian diplomatic and political initiatives. For many weeks, the Russian-Iranian plan seemed to be the only international proposal on the table.²⁴ Nearing the end of his mandate, United States President Barack Obama appears to have decided to limit the scope of the American intervention in the Middle East to addressing the threats represented by ISIL, ANF and other jihadists and anti-Western armed groups operating in Iraq and Syria.

The major United States initiative was the creation of the International Coalition against ISIL in Iraq (8 August 2014) and Syria (23 September 2014). These actions were practically endorsed by UNSCRs 2170 (15 August 2014) and 2178 (24 September 2014). Iran and Russia have officially complained about the creation of a United States-led international coalition, but gave the initiative a de facto blessing in the common interest of defeating terrorism.

²⁰ See list of the invitees to the Moscow meeting in *as Safir*, 31 December 2014, <assaafir.com/Article/1/393259/SameChannel>, accessed 7 November 2015.

²¹ *al Hayat*, Dec. 31, 2014.

²² *al Akhbar*, Nov. 12, 2014, p.13; *al Hayat*, Dec 31, 2014.

²³ Pierret, Thomas, “Is Russia’s mediation re. Syria intended to complement or compete with the UN plan? Here is the answer I gave to a journalist friend: Russia’s plan is more ambitious than de Mistura’s: the latter is simply aimed at freezing the conflict, whereas Russia wants to offer Asad a major political and diplomatic victory. Russia’s mediation is aimed at shoring up Asad by complementing military operations at the diplomatic level. Russia is pushing for a government of national unity, including carefully selected (i.e. innocuous) opponents while leaving the regime as it is: in the hands of the Asad family, with a powerless government. By doing so, Moscow is willing: 1. To bury once and for all the principles of Geneva 1, which provide for a genuine political transition rather than a mere revamping of the Asad regime with the help of pliable “opponents” 2. To further fragment the opposition and in particular the National Coalition by playing softliners against rejectionists,” Facebook, 31 December 2014,

<www.facebook.com/thomas.pierret.581/posts/10152418889456371>, accessed 7 November 2015.

²⁴ Bahout, ‘Russia and Iran Step Into Syria’s Diplomatic Vacuum’, 30 December 2014.

Many observers in Syria and abroad have seen a contrast between the American policy of 2013-2014 and the much more assertive military strategy of 2015. President Obama's hesitation following the chemical attacks allegedly committed by the GoS against thousands of civilians in the Damascus suburbs in late August 2013 seemed ethically at odds with the more decisive American attitude against a jihadist enemy that came dangerously close to American economic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan. The public murder of the American journalist James Foley, who was beheaded in northern Syria by ISIL, might have also played a role in the changing posture of the American strategy. According to some critics, Washington has been inconsistent because "the Syrian question is directly linked to the growth of the Islamic State ... it is the Sunni-dominated uprising against Assad that has galvanized jihadi forces, bringing more recruits to al Qaeda-like groups, including the Islamic State, and further destabilizing the whole region. And so regional partners want the Syrian question to be addressed at its roots, and they are unlikely to devote themselves to solving the Islamic State problem unless the United States acknowledges their primary concern."²⁵

The new threat posed by ISIL

The potential reach of the Syrian conflict has also been dramatically reassessed in foreign capitals since the rise of ISIL. A major perception is that ISIL is "a threat to the United States and Europe and thus the world, whereas Assad is mainly a threat to his people and a destabilizing force in the region ... but not a true threat to the world."²⁶

The new shape of the American strategy towards Syria has become more evident since October 2014, when President Obama said the United States would "strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists." Since then, however, the programme's impact on the ground has been insignificant.

The Pentagon subsequently announced a US\$500 million training programme for as many as 5,000 "moderate Syrian opponents" a year. Pro-American rebels have allegedly been recruited in refugee communities in Jordan, Turkey and other countries. Originally, the United States administration was focused on three goals: fight ISIS, defend the areas controlled by the "moderate" opposition, and push towards a political solution in Syria. The "moderate Syrian opponents" would be flown to Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, trained for eight weeks and then sent to the small enclaves of Syria already controlled by the anti-ISIL AOGs. The first units were to be deployed in April 2015. By the end of March 2015, however, the Turkish Government had announced that Washington was delayed.²⁷

Before this policy turnaround, President Obama had defined "moderate opposition" as composed of "farmers or dentists or maybe some radio reporters who didn't have a lot of experience fighting." Obama affirmed that creating an effective army of moderate Syrian

²⁵ Omar, Manal, 'Wanted: A Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State and Assad', *Foreign Policy*, 8 October 2014, <foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/08/wanted-a-coalition-to-defeat-the-islamic-state-and-assad/>, accessed 7 November 2015.

²⁶ Ibid. See also: Traub, James, 'Bashar al-Assad and the Devil's Bargain', *Foreign Policy*, 22 November 2014, <foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/14/bashar-al-assad-and-the-devils-bargain/>, accessed 7 November 2015; Naumkin, Vitaly, 'In latest peace plans for Syria, Assad can stay', *al Monitor*, 1 December 2014, <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/syria-ceasefires-plan-russia-somalia-assad.html#>, 7 November 2015.

²⁷ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv, 'Syrians to be trained to defend territory, not take ground from jihadists, officials say', *The Washington Post*, 22 October 2014, <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrians-to-be-trained-to-defend-territory-not-take-ground-from-jihadists-officials-say/2014/10/22/8ca13cf2-5a17-11e4-bd61-346aee66ba29_story.html?hpid=z1>, accessed 7 November 2015; Pamuk, Humeyra, 'Turkey says U.S.-led campaign to train Syria rebels delayed by Washington', *Reuters*, 27 March 2015, <uk.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/uk-mideast-crisis-training-turkey-idUKKBN0MN0NO20150327>, 7 November 2015.

rebels would take “more time than I think many people would like.”²⁸ At that time, many analysts stressed the fact that there is no guarantee that the weapons given by the United States to the so-called moderate rebels would remain in their hands. In December, several security and media reports noted ANF’s use of United States-made anti-tank missiles, which most likely had been previously given to “moderate” AOGs by the Pentagon.²⁹

In mid-January 2015, United States Secretary of State John Kerry shed light on the Washington policy shift: “It is time for President Assad, the Assad regime, to put their people first and to think about the consequences of their actions, which are attracting more and more terrorists to Syria, basically because of their efforts to remove Assad.”³⁰ Kerry declared that the United States welcomed the Russian initiative and the de Mistura plan. In particular, he made no call for Assad’s resignation, a notable omission for Kerry, who had in the past insisted on this in public remarks. Instead, he spoke of Mr. Assad as a leader who needed to change his policies.³¹

According to Western diplomatic sources quoted by Western and Arab media in late June, about 6,000 fighters applied to join the Pentagon programme in parallel with a secret Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) programme to train and equip opposition fighters. About 2,500 fighters were said to have passed the first phase of testing, with only 1,500 of them chosen to continue training. The sources noted that about 200 fighters arrived in two training camps in Jordan and Turkey, “but only around 50 of them remained in the program after the rest refused to sign a paper containing a pledge not to fight regime forces.”³²

In early July 2015, United States Defence Secretary Ashton Carter acknowledged publicly for the first time that the programme had slowed and only included about 60 participating fighters. Pentagon sources, quoted by American media, said that none of the trained fighters had completed the programme. On the same day, United States General Joseph Dunford, the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, affirmed that the low number of trained Syrian fighters was related to the programme’s intense vetting process. He added that there would need to be a change in United States policy before such forces were also able to take on the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.³³

Moreover, according to media reports and first-hand accounts from inside Syria, each trainee was receiving a US stipend of between US\$250 and US\$400 per month,³⁴ while an ANF fighter was receiving US\$500 and an ISIL low-rank member about US\$600.³⁵ In addition, the first US-led coalition aerial raids in Syria simultaneously targeted the positions of ISIL, ANF and other Qaeda groups in northern Syria. Although ISIL and ANF are enemies

²⁸ ‘Transcript and Audio: President Obama’s Full NPR Interview’, *National Public Radio*, 29 May 2014, <www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/05/29/316475458/transcript-and-audio-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>, accessed 7 November 2015.

²⁹ Susli, Maram, ‘Military Aid to Terrorists: US Supplied Al Qaeda Rebels Syria with TOW Anti-Tank Missiles’, *INSO report 11, Global Research*, 27 December 2014, <www.globalresearch.ca/military-aid-to-terrorists-us-supplied-al-qaeda-rebels-in-syria-with-tow-anti-tank-missiles/5421688>, accessed 7 November 2015.

³⁰ Gordon, Michael R. and Anne Barbard, ‘Kerry Supports Syrian Peace Talks’, *The New York Times*, 14 January 2015, <www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/middleeast/kerry-backs-syrian-peace-talks-in-russia.html>, accessed 7 November 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Al Hayat*, June 22, 2015

³³ Crawford, Jamie, ‘Joint Chiefs nominee: Russia greatest threat to U.S.’, *CNN*, 10 July 2015, <edition.cnn.com/2015/07/09/politics/joseph-dunford-russia-greatest-threat>, accessed 7 November 2015.

³⁴ Burns, Robert, ‘Sputtering start to US training of Syrian rebels’, *Associated Press*, 30 June 2015.

³⁵ Author interviews in Beirut and Gaziantep between February and May 2015 with Syrian journalists coming from ISIL- and ANF-controlled areas.

fighting against each other in several battlegrounds, the coalition was treating them as a single enemy. Not surprisingly, jihadists described the attacks against them as waged by “new crusaders”, even though Arab Gulf States forces were conducting the majority of air attacks.

One of the first collateral effects of the US-led coalition bombings in Syria was the growing feelings among “moderate” Syrian circles of sympathy and solidarity for ISIL, ANF and other jihadist local militias. Paradoxically, the radical jihadi groups found themselves united under the bombs of the US-led international alliance. Many now perceive the coalition as a hostile military entity that indirectly favours GoS forces on the ground. This perception was reinforced when the loyalist government air force started bombing (with even more intensity) the same areas hit by the coalition in Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr regions (see below). It has finally become clear that the US-led coalition strategy should limit ISIL expansion in Syria and Iraq regardless of the outcomes on the ground. When the coalition attacked ISIL positions in north-eastern Aleppo in early 2015, this helped local fighters repel the jihadists’ offensive.³⁶ In June, coalition air strikes hit ISIL convoys in north Aleppo, where jihadists were attacking ANF positions. On that occasion, the US-led coalition targeted ‘terrorists’ (ISIL) and supported other ‘terrorists’ (ANF).

The regional context

The regional context of the crisis has also evolved as neighbouring countries react to the rise of ISIL and its implications for their various allies and interests.

The supranational dimension of ISIL

Stretched between Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria), ISIL is attempting to play the unprecedented role of the key major supranational actor in the Middle East. For the first time, a new administrative entity called the Euphrates Province (*Wilayat al Furat*) was created by ISIL across eastern Syria (Mayadin town) and western Iraq (Qa’im town). In December, the jihadist group opened a recruitment centre for new fighters in this ‘province’.³⁷

According to media reports, private support continues to fund ISIL in the Gulf area. To date, there is no irrefutable proof of this assertion, however. Analysts and Western officials affirm that in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, some informal actors working as charitable organizations and private religious institutions have also emerged as important donors to ISIL.³⁸ This report alleged that international support may temper ISIL as it tries to balance its use of brutal force and its deep knowledge of tribal mechanisms across the Iraqi-Syrian border regions to develop a new regional polity that may also suit its backers as a Sunni buffer.

ISIL advance has been slowed but continues

The initially rapid ISIL attacks along the Syrian side of the Euphrates (between spring 2013 and summer 2014) and into the Iraqi provinces of al Anbar, Salaheddin and Ninive (between

³⁶ ‘حلب قرب «داعش» ضد المعارضة تساند التحالف غارات’, *al Hayat*, 22 December 2014,

<www.alhayat.com/Articles/6393283/حلب-قرب-داعش-ضد-المعارضة-تساند-التحالف-غارات>, accessed 7 November 2015.

³⁷ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 26 December 2014,

<www.syriahr.com/2014/12/المكتب-يفتح-الإسلامية-الدولة-تنظيم>, accessed 7 November 2015.

³⁸ Windrem, Robert, ‘Who’s Funding ISIS? Wealthy Gulf “Angel Investors,” Officials Say’, *NBC*, 21 September 2014, <www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/whos-funding-isis-wealthy-gulf-angel-investors-officials-say-n208006>, accessed 7 November 2015; Taylor, Guy, ‘Qatar Allows Money to Flow to Islamic State and other Terrorists’, *Washington Times*, 10 December 2014, <www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/10/qatar-allows-money-flow-isis-other-terrorists-repo/?page=all>, accessed 7 November 2015.

January 2014 and summer 2014) were slowed and contained through a combination of military and socioeconomic factors, until spring 2015. The coalition's bombing and the fiercely organized resistance by the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish militias supported by some AOGs have also stalled ISIL.

These military obstacles were coupled with the political difficulties that ISIL has faced in expanding its authority beyond the rural and depressed Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. These territories had long been exposed to increasing violence and a deep lack of basic services, security and stability. For decades, they also shared deep-rooted anti-Iranian and anti-Western feelings. As a result, they were more responsive to ISIL than to other favoured areas. The business of government is proving to be challenging, however. At the end of 2014, ISIL was "facing the economic strain of sustaining its caliphate [...]. For over a year, ISIL has operated as a semi-state, imposing its vision of governance on territories under its control. In some ways, it has been successful in others it has not."³⁹

There were also signs of rising local discontent towards the ISIL authority. "Despite the successful consolidation of the judiciary in areas under its control, harsh ISIL policies may eventually backfire and provoke a local response. Its rigid rules have paralyzed a healthcare system already in tatters and dependent on government funding. ISIL has shown resilience through winning some hearts and minds and exploiting Sunni resentment against central governments whether in Syria or Iraq. Disenfranchised Sunnis may have welcomed ISIL, but it remains alien to those societies that do not necessarily advocate the organization's radical views, especially to Mosul, which unlike Raqqa has a large population, is culturally more open and thus more difficult to govern."⁴⁰

Periodically, violence erupted between ISIL and local tribes. In most cases, the clashes occurred due to contrasts in the management of local power and the right to exploit energy resources, such as oil, gas and water.⁴¹

Despite failing to conquer Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, Syria, in January 2015 and being defeated in Tikrit, Iraq, in April 2015, ISIL advanced towards Palmyra in central Syria, and in Ramadi in western Iraq in May. Between June and July, the jihadist group posed new threats to Hasake in north-western Syria and exerted military pressures on the contested Iraqi city of Kirkuk and on the eastern flank of the Hama-Homs-Damascus-Daraa route.

³⁹ Alami, Mona, 'ISIS's Governance Crisis (Part I): Economic Governance', *Atlantic Council*, 19 December 2014, <www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-s-governance-crisis-part-i-economic-governance>, accessed 7 November 2015.

⁴⁰ Alami, Mona, 'ISIS's Governance Crisis (Part II): Social Services', *Atlantic Council*, 24 December 2014, <www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-s-governance-crisis-part-ii-social-services>, accessed 7 November 2015.

⁴¹ Some relevant cases: On 2 January 2014, ISIL kidnapped about 160 members of the Jabbour tribe in the Kirkuk province, Iraq. According to *al Arabi al Jadid* newspaper (see <www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/1/3/يختطف-داعش-160-عشيرة-من-فردا-160-يختطف-داعش>), the jihadists assaulted Sharja village, south of Kirkuk, took 160 male members of the tribe and took them to an unknown place. In August, hundreds of Shaytat's members were reportedly massacred by ISIL in the Dayr az Zawr Syrian Eastern region. In October, the massacre of the Abu Nimr tribe came after they had fought against the extremists of the Islamic State for weeks. In Iraq's vast western province of al Anbar, the tribesmen had been driven from their stronghold in the city of Hit in early October. On 3 January 2015, again in the Dayr az Zawr province, clashes took place between two local tribes - the Radfan and the Akidat - and ISIL. Amer ar Rafdan initiated this offensive in a bid to ask for local power, following ISIL's refusal to appoint Rafdan as the new emir of Dayr az Zawr State. Rafdan used to be Dayr az Zawr's *wali* (governor) before moving to Iraq due to disputes with ISIL, which pushed ISIL to appoint a Tunisian emir instead. The Tunisian emir died last month in the attack on Dayr az Zawr military airbase, after which ISIL replaced him with an Egyptian emir, to the dissatisfaction of Rafdan, leading him to take up arms against ISIL.

Without a massive coordinated ground offense led by the US, ISIL will continue to rule large parts of north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq. ISIL is not a force of foreign occupation. In Syria and Iraq, it enjoys a relatively wide consensus by the political, military and security local elite in the areas under its control. There is the risk that for the next few decades, ISIL will be not only a military force, but also a political, ideological and cultural force. "By entrenching itself within these societies, influencing the younger generation, and promoting adherence to its ideology, ISIL will play the long game that will make it harder to uproot over time."⁴²

Saudi Arabia and Iran

For more than four decades, Iran has been the main regional ally of the GoS, and in the past year Damascus has become increasingly reliant on Teheran.⁴³ Since 2013, Syria's imports of oil products have been almost entirely financed by an Iranian credit line worth US\$3.6 billion, and another US\$1 billion was granted for non-oil products. Iran also deposited between US\$500 million and US\$750 million into the Central Bank of Syria more than a year ago, which the authorities used to help stabilize the lira.⁴⁴ However, the drop in oil prices now makes Iran a more vulnerable donor. Quoted in June 2015 by Western media, the Office of the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria affirmed that Iran was spending some US\$6 billion annually to support the GoS.⁴⁵ According to other media reports, overall Teheran aid to Damascus is between US\$15 and US\$20 billion per year.

In terms of military contributions, Iran has sent weapons and hundreds of 'advisers' from its elite Revolutionary Guard Corps into Syria and Iraq. Iran has also sent thousands of fighters from the Shi'a militias that it has fostered, armed, trained and funded in Lebanon and Iraq. More than 1,000 Shi'a militiamen and three Iranian generals have been killed in Syria since 2012.⁴⁶ In June 2015, media reports affirmed that Iran sent about 15,000 soldiers to Syria; the GoS and Teheran repeatedly denied such news.⁴⁷ Iran's support to the GoS has been based on self-interest; its involvement in Syria has strengthened Iran's position in negotiations with the West on the nuclear issue.⁴⁸ Iran will not abandon Syria and Teheran intends to safeguard its control over the Iraq-Syria-Lebanon corridor from Central Asia to the Mediterranean.

On the other side of the Gulf, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the historical enemy of the Islamic Republic, is trying to act as a counterweight to Iranian influence in Syria and the Middle East. Along with Ankara and Doha, Riyadh continues to be the main financial,

⁴² Alami, 'ISIS Governance Crisis (Part II), 24 December 2014.

⁴³ Syria Report, Dec. 22, 2014 (<http://goo.gl/wQJYLc>); "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has relied on oil-producing Iran to help him fight a nearly four-year-old civil war and also prop under a currency under pressure" ([Reuters](#), Dec.19).

⁴⁴ *Reuters*, Dec. 19, 2014.

⁴⁵ Lake, Eli, 'Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad', *Bloomberg*, 9 June 2015, <www.bloombergtv.com/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>, accessed 8 9 November 2015; Philips, Matthew and Julian Lee, 'How Iranian Oil Tankers Keep Syria's War Machine Alive', *Bloomberg*, 24 June 2015, <www.bloombergtv.com/news/articles/2015-06-24/how-iranian-oil-tankers-keep-syria-s-war-machine-alive>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁴⁶ 'Death of a general', *The Economist*, 3 January 2015, <www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21637416-wars-syria-and-iraq-are-sucking-iran-ever-more-tangled-conflicts-death>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁴⁷ 'Iran sends 15,000 fighters to Syria', *The Daily Star*, 4 June 2015, <www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-04/300520-iran-sends-15000-fighters-to-syria.ashx>, accessed 9 November 2015; 'Assad: There are no Iranian troops in Syria', *Aljazeera English*, 20 April 2015, <www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/assad-iranian-troops-syria-150420221544222.html>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁴⁸ Bahout, 'Russia and Iran Step Into Syria's Diplomatic Vacuum', 30 December 2014.

political and diplomatic sponsor of the Istanbul-based coalition of exiled Syrian opposition groups. Militarily, Saudi institutions are on the frontline. They are supporting various AOGs, participating in the US-led international coalition against ISIL and providing logistics and human resources for the American training programme for 'moderate' Syrian rebels in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey.

In the first quarter of 2015, while Iranian nuclear negotiations with the United States were proceeding constructively, there was a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's position towards Iranian interests in both Yemen and Syria. In January, King Abdallah of Saudi died and was succeeded by his half-brother Salman. A few weeks later in Yemen, pro-Iranian Houthi militias seized the capital, Sana'a, and threatened the southern harbour of Aden. This move provoked a Saudi-led military intervention. Regarding Syria, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyep Erdogan, visited Riyadh in March, and the two countries agreed to increase their respective support to the Syrian opposition. According to media reports and first-hand accounts collected from sources on the ground, a direct outcome of this agreement was an unprecedented AOG coalition led by ANF that seized Idlib city and other key places in north-western Syria. Within days, Saudi-, US- and Jordanian-backed AOGs defeated GoS forces in southern Syria, taking control of Nassib, the commercial border crossing point between Syria and Jordan.⁴⁹

Turkish and Israeli interests

The Turkish strategy towards Syria has a very similar rationale as the strategies of the other regional actors: to protect its own political, security and economic interests by establishing a de facto area of influence and exerting direct or indirect pressures over the rival warring parties so that no single entity prevails over the other.

Economically, Ankara seems to be aiming to re-establish its commercial influence over northern Syria through the traditional hub of Aleppo. In 2013, bilateral trade between Syria and Turkey doubled on an annual basis, although it remained well below pre-2011 levels. Data from the Turkish statistical bureau indicate that Turkish exports to Syria doubled to US\$1 billion in 2013 from US\$497 million in 2012.⁵⁰

The Turkish Government has tried unsuccessfully to push the United States and its allies into creating a no-fly zone in the Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa and Hasake regions.⁵¹ In 2014, Ankara agreed to participate in the training of anti-ISIL 'moderate' rebels under the American programme.⁵² Previously, Turkish authorities had played an ambiguous role for at least two years, allowing the infiltration of many aspiring jihadist fighters from all around the world into Syria through their border. In February 2015, hundreds of Turkish forces in armoured vehicles entered northern Syria to evacuate troops guarding a historic tomb in an area very close to ISIL territory. During that operation, jihadists did not attack Turkish forces.⁵³

While the Turkish Government enjoys good political and economic ties with the Iraqi-Kurdistan Government in Erbil, Ankara does not want to see the creation of a strong Kurdish political authority over its southern border and thus has tried to exert its influence on the

⁴⁹ Lund, Aron, 'Are Saudi Arabia and Turkey about to intervene in Syria?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 24 April 2015, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59904>, accessed 9 November 2015.; author Skype interviews with Syrian sources in Idlib and Daraa regions between March and April 2015.

⁵⁰ Syria Report, Apr 28 2014 (<http://goo.gl/oNJKq6>).

⁵¹ Al Monitor, Mar 3 2015.

⁵² 'US says Turkey will train moderate Syrian rebels but presses for details', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2014, <www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/11/us-says-turkey-will-train-moderate-syrian-rebels-but-presses-for-details>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁵³ *BBC*, February 22, 2015.

semi-autonomous Kurdish entity in north-eastern Syria. In this context, in October 2014, Turkey agreed to let 150 Iraqi-Kurdish fighters enter besieged Ayn al-Arab/Kobane through the Turkish corridor. In June 2015, the Kurdish militias seized the Tall Abyad border crossing point from ISIL and moved towards the south. Finally, by assuring territorial contiguity between the Hasake region and the Kobani canton, the Turkish Government amassed troops along the frontier and threatened to intervene militarily in northern Syria.

Israel has maintained a consistent policy towards Syria. Its priorities are to undermine the capacity of its main regional enemy, Hezbollah, and to enhance security along its provisional border with Syria on the Golan Heights. Since the violence began in March 2011, direct Israeli military involvement has occurred on very few cases, and all of these occasions have been related to the alleged presence of missile stocks destined for the Lebanese pro-Iranian and anti-Israeli militia.⁵⁴ On the occupied Golan Heights, Israel is trying to maintain a buffer zone with the support of local militias that are deployed almost all along the 1974 armistice line. Even if the presence of extremist armed groups has increased in the Qunaytra region since 2014, neither ANF- nor local ISIL-affiliated groups expressed the intention to target Israeli positions on the Golan Heights. Instead, what worries Israel is the growing presence of Hezbollah fighters and Iranian Pasdaran officers not far from the 1974 armistice line.

The national context

Government of Syria

In June 2014, after the formal confirmation of the leadership of Bashar al-Assad at the presidential elections, the GoS intended to demonstrate, for the benefit of domestic public opinion and foreign policymakers, that it represented the only viable alternative to ISIL and the AOGs. Damascus announced that it was ready to participate in the Moscow talks at the end of January⁵⁵ and it had previously expressed its “constructive interest” in the de Mistura plan. Meanwhile the fracture between the regime-controlled areas and the rest of the country deepened, mainly along sectarian and political lines.

The Government continued its military sieges and its aerial and artillery bombings against the rebel-held towns and cities. This reinforced the commonly-held idea among many sectors of the population that, with the exception of the ISIL territories, a minimum of security and stability is only guaranteed in Government-controlled areas. In the regions under its control (for example in Homs, Hama, Damascus and Western Aleppo), the authorities continued to shape the communal landscape in favour of its traditional clients, namely members of some Alawite clans and those enrolled in the security apparatus, the army and loyalist militias.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The last raid occurred on 7 December 2014. Previous raids included on 31 January 2013, at a facility of Syria's main research centre on biological and chemical weapons (Lodono, Ernesto and Joby Warrick, 'Destruction of anti-aircraft missiles destined for Hezbollah and collateral damage to nearby research centre on biological and chemical weapons', *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2013); 3-5 May 2013 at the Damascus Airport and at the same research centre in Jamraya town north-west of Damascus, which destroyed a munitions depot and stopped transfer of weapons to Hezbollah; alleged Israeli involvement in the 5 July 2013 explosion near Latakia against a deposit of anti-ship cruise missiles; 26 January 2014 attack in Latakia region against alleged S-300 missiles depot; 24 February 2014 along the Lebanese-Syrian border against an alleged Hezbollah base (Kais, Roi, 'Report: Hezbollah militants killed in Israeli strike', *Ynet News*, 24 February 2014).

⁵⁵ *Sana*, Dec. 27, 2014 (<http://goo.gl/QTeKje>).

⁵⁶ Homs new residential “reconstruction” projects. The Syrian Government approved the sale of 383 square meters in the Hama countryside to the regime-controlled Military Housing Establishment to build a housing project on it ('Cabinet ratifies cooperation agreement with Russia', *Sana*, 23 December 2014, <sana.sy/en/?p=22769>, accessed 9 November 2015; 'Iranians settle in Aleppo', *Siraj Press*, 23 December 2014. The article was translated into English and published by *Syrian*

Militarily, the Government has taken advantage of the coalition's raids against ISIL. As the United States and its allied jets fly freely over towns and cities in northern Syria that are under the control of extremists, the Government army has scaled back its air activity over areas of ISIL control, doing as little as possible to avoid confrontation. Instead, Assad's troops have focused their energies on Damascus and Aleppo, which are considered more crucial to the survival of his Government, and on the route linking Syria's two largest cities.

It seems that there is a tacit alliance between the American and Syrian militaries; after almost one year of coalition activity, the Syrian military operations did not come into conflict or friction with any American or allied aircraft.⁵⁷ On the ground, and despite the crucial Iranian and Russian military and logistical support, the Government and its allies appear more distressed in rural battle grounds, such as southern Idlib, northern Daraa, north-western Qunaytra and eastern Homs. During spring 2015, a joint massive attack by various AOGs in the north-western region led to the fall of the city of Idlib. In the short term, this could have little impact on the Government's ability to control the main routes that link Damascus to Aleppo. However, in the longer term, if AOG's range in the Idlib region were to grow, the dynamics of the conflict in central and northern Syria could be significantly altered. In response to these difficulties, the Syrian authorities have called up reservists, and arrested many young men in the coastal regions and the capital in order to enrol them in the army and loyalist militias. It has also banned men who are eligible to fight from foreign travel.⁵⁸ In May, GoS forces withdrew from Palmyra (Tadmur) city and its surroundings, losing its access to the gas and phosphate facilities in the area and creating a net loss for the Government, which relies heavily on gas for electricity generation.

Economically, the drop in oil prices has impacted Iranian support for Syria. The GoS has to face the challenge posed by the growing difficulties of its Iranian ally and the continued deterioration in its own economic indicators. "The Iranian credit line is now believed to have been exhausted, creating the rising shortages of gasoline and heating oil witnessed in Damascus and other Syrian cities in recent weeks".⁵⁹ A consequence of this trend is the Government's decision to liberalize its oil sector, ending the State's monopoly, which dates back to the 1960s:

Three and a half years after the beginning of the uprising, the challenges faced by the Government in the oil industry include: low budget revenues; the devaluation of the Syrian pound relative to the dollar, which increases the cost of imports and the differential between the buying and selling prices of subsidised oil products; Western sanctions on the transport of petroleum products to Syria; and the end of the Iranian credit line that funded most oil imports in the last year. As a consequence, since the beginning of October, the government has taken several measures to liberalize the oil

Observer (<http://goo.gl/SSM2cj>). The Syrian Government will be allocating 50 per cent of all new positions in the public sector to the families of the soldiers who have fallen fighting on its side in the last four years (*Syria Report*, 29 December 2014, <http://goo.gl/XXCCZP>). "If the measure is approved, it will likely increase the number of Alawites employed by the State as many of them fight in the armed forces. Given that this community is already believed to be overrepresented in the public sector – official statistics do not provide a breakdown of the population on a sectarian basis – and that unemployment is estimated at over 50 per cent of the working force, the move is likely to create more resentment towards the Government among supporters of the opposition." (*Syria Report*)

⁵⁷ Karam, Zeina, 'Assad is Exploiting Obama's Syria Strategy', *Associated Press*, 22 October 2014, <www.businessinsider.com/assad-is-exploiting-obamas-syria-strategy-2014-10#ixzz3NfRTXOMp>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁵⁸ Personal sources, Autumn 2014; 'جديد مجندين عن بحث: السوري الساحل في الاعتقال حملات', *al Arabi al Jadid*, 15 December 2014, <www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2014/12/15/الاعتقال-حملات-السوري-الساحل-في-الاعتقال-حملات>, accessed 9 November 2015; 'Syrian Government forbids to release passports to male citizens', *Sana*, 19 December 2014.

⁵⁹ *Syria Report*, 22 December 2014; *Reuters*, 19 December 2014.

sector (...), selecting traders that will be allowed to import and, therefore, to favour regime cronies. (...) For decades, control over the energy sector was perceived as a guarantee of national independence, as a means to encourage the development of a powerful industrial sector, and, through subsidies, as part of a policy to ensure social justice. All of this is now crumbling, bit by bit, as the State relies more and more on regime cronies to support it.⁶⁰

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

ISIL has filled the void left by the Government in Syria's Sunni-dominated rural regions. After it was expelled from north-west Syria, ISIL expanded its domains along the Euphrates River from the eastern countryside of Aleppo to the Iraqi borders, and tried to conquer strategic gas fields in central Syria. In spring 2015, ISIL tried to expand its influence towards the eastern Hama countryside, mainly inhabited by the Shi'a Ismaili sect. ISIL subsequently attacked villages in the eastern hinterland of Suwayda with predominantly Druze populations. Around the same time, in early April 2015, ISIL succeeded in entering Yarmouk, the Palestinian refugee camp in southern Damascus, posing a direct threat to the GoS and its local Palestinian rivals, namely the armed wing of Hamas based in Yarmouk.

ISIL's military posture in 2014 confirmed the impression that the jihadist organization and the GoS "have embraced the clever strategy of ignoring each other while focusing on attacking more moderate opposition groups".⁶¹ During 2014, just 6 per cent of 982 Government operations targeted ISIL, and only 13 per cent of 923 ISIL attacks in Syria targeted Government forces. "Assad is trying to downplay the Syrian revolution narrative and instead portray it as an Islamist insurgency against his government. This way, he can crack down on it with the indirect support of the West."⁶²

ISIL appears interested in creating a scenario in which it is the sole opponent of the GoS. Its main focus has been on marginalising moderate groups to the extent that these groups' fighters are 'asked' to join the Islamic State⁶³ and it has proven its ability to attract Syrian insurgents from the ranks of ANF and AOGs. ISIL also seems able to expand its control in Daraa, Qunaytra, eastern Damascus, Qalamun and the eastern countryside of Homs and Hama.

During the first half of 2015, ISIL heightened its military activity against GoS forces in north-eastern and central Syria. Simultaneously, there has been a significant rise in the number of GoS aerial strikes against ISIL positions in these areas. In May, ISIL conquered Palmyra (Tadmur) in central Syria, known for its UNESCO World Heritage Site. The strategic importance of the area is due to the presence of gas fields and phosphate mines and its important geographical position between the eastern region of Dayr az Zor, neighbouring Iraq and the Damascus-Homs axis. Confirmed reports indicated that the GoS had emptied Palmyra hospital and the infamous prison approximately one week before ISIL began to attack the outskirts of the city. ISIL's seizure of the Palmyra-Dayr az Zor road also had direct consequences on the siege imposed by ISIL on the GoS forces entrenched around the Dayr az Zor military airport.

It is noteworthy that ISIL's growing influence in rural Syria (as well as in some Iraqi regions) seems to be not only political and military, but also cultural and ideological. As mentioned, its approach to domination combines the provision of basic services with terror practices, all

⁶⁰ *Syria Report*, 25 December 2014.

⁶¹ Henman, Matthew, 'Syrian military and ISIS have been "ignoring" each other on the battlefield', *IHS Jane's 360*, 10 December 2014, <www.janes.com/article/46898/syrian-military-and-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-on-the-battlefield>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

financed by exploiting energy resources and local labour. ISIL shows flexibility and harshness in dealing with traditional local powers,⁶⁴ offering stability and protection in exchange for loyalty and subjection in areas where anti-Western and anti-Shi'a rhetoric sounds very familiar.⁶⁵

Armed and political oppositions

While foreign agendas continued to heavily influence the exiled opposition, the influence of the Damascus-based 'tolerated' opposition and the Istanbul-based coalition has waned. Today these groups only play marginal roles in shaping the political orientations of Syrians inside and outside the country, and have lost credibility with the emerging Syrian civil society.

The insurgent landscape continues to be dominated by fragmentation, lack of local and nationwide coordination, and the scarcity of effective networking among different AOGs. In addition, as localism influences the attitude of the armed actors, their representation is uneven and they are not able to maintain the same characteristics in all regions.

For example, in some contexts, ANF has emerged as the major armed group of the anti-Assad front. It has widened its area of operations for fighting against Syrian insurgents in Aleppo and Idlib. In particular, in early January 2015, ANF conducted a fierce offensive against the US-backed Hazm movement in the Idlib countryside. In a few weeks, the latter was wiped off the ground.⁶⁶

Some local sources affirm that ANF is aiming to create an emirate in north-western Syria.⁶⁷ ANF is considered a terrorist organization by Australia, Canada, France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. It is therefore almost impossible that ANF would be involved in any negotiations, yet ANF is gaining popularity and legitimacy among local populations in rebel-held areas in the north and north-west. The exclusion of ANF from any rounds of formal or informal talks would contribute to deepening the group's radical approach, already evident in its explicit refusal of the de Mistura initiative.⁶⁸

In the Daraa region, ANF, which controls less than one third of the AOG-held territory, is described as one of the actors on the ground, but not the most powerful one. In Idlib and Aleppo, ANF has chosen to be an ally of local AOGs against ISIL, while in the countryside, to the east and south of Damascus, ANF decided to fight together with ISIL. More than before, all of these militias seem to be the hostages of their various foreign donors and agendas. As a result, they cannot represent a valid interlocutor in any eventual reconciliation

⁶⁴ Dukhan, Haian, 'Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising', in Dukhan, Haian and Dawn Chatti (eds.), *Tribes and Neighborhoods: The Dynamics of Subtlety*, Syria Studies, vol.6, no. 2, 2014, <ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/897/746>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁶⁵ INSO report.

⁶⁶ Khatib, Lina, 'The Rise of Jabhat al-Nusra', 7 April 2015, <carnegie-mec.org/2015/04/07/rise-of-jabhat-al-nusra/i5x8>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁶⁷ According to JAN, the Jihad will continue and not stop until Syria becomes an Islamic State. A commander said that the rejection of that aim "will never happen (...) Syria is an Islamic country and people love Islam. They're fed up of secular regimes. It's impossible that they would reject Sharia." ('Islamic State crisis: The rise of jihadists in Iraq and Syria', *BBC*, 3 October 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29445063>, accessed 9 November 2015.) Other rebel groups, mostly from the nationalistic groups, sided with JAN in that struggle ('Islamist rebels in Syria reject National Coalition', *BBC*, 23 September 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24239779>, accessed 9 November 2015.) Those groups and JAN issued a clear statement that they were fighting for the Islamic law and not democracy.

⁶⁸ *al Hayat*, p.4, 27 December 2014 (<http://goo.gl/Opt4mw>).

initiatives because their regional supporters are not interested in finding any real political compromise.

Between May and July 2015, AOGs, including ANF, succeeded in forming wide coalitions allegedly backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey that launched major and coordinated offensives in the Idlib region and the city of Aleppo. It is too early to weigh eventual changes on the ground, but these developments confirm the close link between local and regional dynamics, and they demonstrate the ability of AOGs and their allies to challenge the GoS-Iranian-Russian axis.

The Syrian-Kurdish posture

Tens of thousands of Kurdish fighters under the umbrella of the People's Protection Units (YPG) have defended a portion of territory in north-eastern Syria and in some small Kurdish-dominated pockets in the north and north-western regions of the country. In this semi-autonomous entity, also known as *Rojava*, ("Western Kurdistan" in Kurdish), which is surrounded by Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan and the Islamic State, there are a small number of Government enclaves, mainly in Qamishli and Hasake.

The Kurdish administration has successfully proven its ability to provide stability, safety and services to the local community and to a huge number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the embattled neighbouring regions. The Ayn al-Arab/Kobane siege and the subsequent counterattack by Kurdish forces in the Iraqi region of Sinjar in December 2014 suggested that the intervention of Kurdish ground troops, supported by the US-led coalition and backed by a foreign-coordinated political and military initiative, could be an effective and perhaps a decisive action to push back ISIL in local pockets.

After repelling ISIL's assault on Ayn al-Arab/Kobane in January 2015, YPG succeeded in gradually widening the area under its control in the Tall Abyad border-crossing point and its surroundings (June 2015). Since May 2015, YPG has joined forces with US-led coalition forces and the GoS to resist ISIL pressures against Hasake city. A few weeks earlier, some violent incidents occurred in Hasake and Qamishli areas between the GoS and YPG. This confirmed that alliances in the Syrian war are decided less often on an ideological basis than on a tactical basis, and are linked to local circumstances and the changing dynamics of the conflict.

Truces and local agreements

There has been a growing number of local truces in the last year that could have a positive humanitarian and political impact. However, in the present Syrian scenario, it is very important to distinguish between symmetrical deals reached between two sides whose powers are relatively balanced and asymmetrical agreements obtained through the imposition of long-term sieges.⁶⁹

In December 2014, the GoS reiterated its commitment to "national reconciliations".⁷⁰ But in Daraya, Muaddamiya, the Old City of Homs, and the Yarmouk camp, a military siege imposed by GoS forces and other loyalist militias that literally sealed off the areas from the outside world forced local inhabitants and fighters to surrender.⁷¹ In the last part of 2014, in the suburbs of Damascus, Syrian authorities reached other types of agreements with local communities that were fed up with living under siege and being harassed by criminal gangs

⁶⁹ Trombetta, L., 'Siria', Mondadori, Milano, 2013.

⁷⁰ Sana, 22 December 2014 (<http://goo.gl/OdOVF8>).

⁷¹ 'Camps without water. Humanitarian report on water crisis in the Palestinian camps of Yarmouk and Daraa', *The Palestinian League for Human Rights – Syria*, December 2014 (<http://goo.gl/ZIM1Te>).

operating as so-called rebels.⁷² Agreements can be coercive or consensual, but there are now many of them. “Locally initiated attempts to make peace in Syria are being conducted by people across the country every day. Local peace deals, if properly supported and observed, could be the best hope for alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people by reducing levels of violence, providing safe havens within Syria, and offering access to humanitarian assistance.”⁷³

Several factors have contributed to a local ceasefire with positive humanitarian or political impact. These include: pressure from civilians and the existence of civil society or civilian structures; provision of services (electricity, water, medical aid, vaccination campaigns, etc.); military stalemates that force rivals into negotiation; access to strategic resources; and exchange of prisoners or kidnapped people. It is noteworthy that in a few but remarkable instances, and as was the case in the countryside of Damascus (Zabadani) and the Idlib region, local committees composed of women activists played a pivotal role in negotiating truces or prisoner swaps. On the other hand, many obstacles can also prevent the achievement of such agreements: military tactics; lack of trust; refusal of a win-lose formula; regional interference; war economies (checkpoints, kidnapping, illicit trades); absence of independent trusted mediators; and a lack of independent monitors.⁷⁴

Civil society survives

The emerging local civil society in Syria has demonstrated a tremendous capacity to adapt to the constraints imposed by the military and security contexts and, at the same time, seize the opportunities offered by the temporary and local de-escalation of violence. Despite the prolonged status of war, the physical barriers erected inside their geographical contexts and the difficulties of regularly accessing communications, many Syrian activists have shown a high degree of resilience, continuity and perseverance in continuing their planned projects, campaigns and activities. They have managed to identify the weak aspects of their approaches and adapt accordingly. They have grasped the primacy of building a nationwide network over establishing single local civic powers.

The activists in Syria are from various backgrounds and contexts. They derive from both suburban and rural areas, as well as different sectarian and ethnic backgrounds. Some operate in areas under full or partial Government control, while others work in areas under military siege, in rebel-held areas dominated by burgeoning local warlords or under the rule of the Islamic State. Their activities are wide ranging, from documenting crimes to promoting

⁷² Namely in Duma at the end of December (*Sana*, 29 December 2014, <http://goo.gl/6cXcEX>; local activists confirmed the news to *AFP*) and Qadam in August (*Sana*, 21 August 2014, <http://goo.gl/yjbrh4>).

⁷³ Turkmani, Rim et al., *Hungry for peace: Positives and pitfalls of local truces and ceasefires in Syria*, London School of Economics, October 2014, p. 44.

⁷⁴ In Wadi Barada, a rural area close to Damascus, the truce stated that GoS forces stop targeting Wadi Barada villages in return for the continuation of the Ayn al Fije water supply to Damascus. GoS forces' withdrawal towards Ashrafiyat al Wadi was one of the clauses of the truce, which collapsed after the last clashes in Basima village. (*Qasiyoun News*, 25 November 2014, <http://goo.gl/ycl3T6>; 'مقابل-المعتقلات-السوري-النظام-مع-التفاوض-تكتيكك', *al 'Arabi al Jadid*, 20 December 2014, <www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2014/12/19/مقابل-المعتقلات-السوري-النظام-مع-التفاوض-تكتيكك>, accessed 9 November 2015; *al Hayat*, 12 December 2014, p.4). In late December, ANF re-opened the roads into Idlib and Aleppo cities and reactivated power and water support to the GoS-controlled areas. This happened after an announcement by ANF of Idlib that GoS released a number of the female detainees. ANF had pressured the GoS for over seven days, including by cutting electricity, among other tactics. In retaliation, for seven days, the GoS cut off electricity from AOG-controlled areas. This was the second time ANF pressured the GoS to release prisoners by cutting roads, electricity and the water supply to GoS-controlled cities. The resolution of this situation showed that ANF's pressure method was successful and will most likely be used again, at least for as long as AOGs are in control of water and electricity supplies for GoS-controlled areas (*INSO* report).

health-care campaigns. They are involved in citizenship-awareness campaigns, tolerance and human rights, efforts to support children and empower women, media activism, and networking with local stakeholders and external actors.

Part two - Humanitarian developments

The impact of conflict

The humanitarian impact of the conflict in Syria has been devastating. Syria is now the site of the world's largest displacement crisis, and the numbers of people killed, injured or in need of aid continue to rise. By August 2015, 12.2 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria. More than 7.6 million of those people were internally displaced. An estimated 4.6 million people in hard-to-reach areas were in need humanitarian assistance, including 422,000 people in besieged locations. The number of registered Syrian refugees has soared to over 4 million.⁷⁵

Violent death and injury

In 2015, the ongoing pattern of suffering imposed on the civilian population by warring parties has continued, unabated. The brutal military policies advanced by all sides have led to an ever-increasing death toll and the continuous escalation in human suffering.

By August 2015, the United Nations estimated that more than 250,000 people had been killed in the conflict and more than 1 million people injured.⁷⁶ In April 2015, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that more than 100,000 of those killed were civilians, including more than 11,000 children. A total of 6,000 people were killed in May, which is estimated to be the deadliest month of the conflict so far.⁷⁷ On the last day of August alone, 112 people were killed.⁷⁸

Deepening poverty

Due to the destruction of the Syrian economy and infrastructure, poverty has become more entrenched across Syrian society. This is true both within the country and within the new Syrian refugee diaspora across the region. The fourth socioeconomic report of the Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates a total economic loss of US\$202.6 billion in Syria by the end of 2014, and that private consumption has contracted by 41.7 per cent in the four years since 2010. The result is that four out of five Syrians now live in poverty. If there is a vibrant part of the economy today, it is the "flourishing economy of violence", which has stimulated a rising trade in weapons, an expanding black market, humanitarian aid and criminality.⁷⁹

Persistent pattern of violations

In its eighth report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry catalogued the persistent pattern of armed conflict that continues to "cause civilians immeasurable suffering". The conflict continues to feature the same broad range of violations of human rights and

⁷⁵ OCHA Humanitarian Bulletin Syria, June 2015; OCHA global emergency overview, 31 August 2015.

⁷⁶ Statement to the Security Council on Syria. New York, 27 August 2015.

⁷⁷ '310,000 people killed since the beginning of the Syrian revolution', Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 16 April 2015, <www.syriaahr.com/en/2015/04/310000-people-killed-since-the-beginning-of-the-syrian-revolution/>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁷⁸ '112 people killed yesterday 31/08/2015', Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 1 September 2015, <www.syriaahr.com/en/2015/09/112-killed-yesterday-31082015/>, accessed 9 November 2015.

⁷⁹ Syrian Centre for Policy Research, *Syria: Alienation and Violence – Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014*, Damascus, March 2015.

international humanitarian law that have consistently characterized the conduct of Government forces and non-State armed groups throughout the crisis.

In the second half of 2014, civilians continued to be directly targeted in massacres, unlawful killings, hostage-taking, enforced disappearance, detention, torture and ill-treatment, sexual and gender-based violence and violations of children's rights. The conduct of hostilities by all sides continued to involve the deliberate targeting of civilians by unlawful attacks, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the use of illegal weapons, denial of social, economic and cultural rights and basic freedoms, and arbitrary and forced displacement.⁸⁰

All of these violations continued as major features of the conflict throughout 2014. Some specific violations became particularly pronounced during the period. This first update to the Common Context Analysis focuses on these violations and their effects on civilians.

Illegal conduct of war

For both sides, area bombardment remains a central tactic in the conflict. Government forces have increased the routine use of barrel bombs, and there is evidence that they have made use of chlorine gas as a weapon in a number of these incidents.⁸¹ On 12 and 16 August 2015, Government air strikes hit a marketplace in Douma, killing over 100 people and injuring many more. According to reports, since mid-August, approximately 200 people have been killed and 400 injured in eastern Ghouta. The shelling of Damascus has also continued, reportedly killing more than 30 people on 23 and 24 August 2015. In early July 2015, barrel bombs reportedly hit a shelter in el Hawash village in Hama, killing five civilians. In the Aleppo Governorate, an alliance of armed groups, including designated terrorist group ANF, launched attacks on Government-controlled areas of Aleppo city, reportedly killing more than 30 civilians.⁸² These examples exemplify a callous disregard for civilian life and are clearly illegal under international humanitarian law.

The use of cluster munitions also continued in 2014 and 2015.⁸³ These weapons are indiscriminate and disproportionately kill and wound civilians in the close-quarter urban settings in which they are used. Another worrying trend is the targeting of civilian infrastructure by AOGs. In Aleppo and Dar'a, the water supply was cut in July and August, representing another clear contravention of international humanitarian law.

Siege

Sieges by all parties continue to be "imposed in a coordinated manner" to deliberately restrict people's social, economic and cultural rights. Siege strategies are causing starvation and disease by deliberately confiscating food supplies, denying humanitarian assistance, cutting off water and electricity, and preventing movement to healthcare facilities and safe spaces.⁸⁴ The United Nations estimates that 422,000 people remained besieged in July 2015.⁸⁵ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry recognized the increasing number of local truces agreed to in areas besieged by government forces as "a measure of the success of the Government's "starvation or submission" strategy."⁸⁶ In April, the situation in Yarmouk became critical as the siege intensified, eventually leading to an ISIL infiltration and a partial easing of the blockade. Some 163,500 people remain besieged by government

⁸⁰ Independent International Commission of Inquiry Eighth Report, 13 August 2014.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 115-118.

⁸² USG Statement to the Security Council, 27 August, 2015.

⁸³ Regional Analysis Syria (RAS), Q3 2014, 13 October 2014, paragraph 2.1.4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 119-129; Amnesty International, 'Updated Briefing on Siege Across Syria', June 2014.

⁸⁵ OCHA Syria Arab Republic: Humanitarian Snapshot, 2 April 2015.

⁸⁶ Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 September 2014.

forces in eastern Ghouta and 4,000 people in Darayya. In Nubul and Zahra, AOGs have besieged some 26,500 people, and in Deir ez-Zor some 228,000 people are under siege by ISIL. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent and International Committee of the Red Cross are undertaking emergency airlifts into these areas.⁸⁷

Sieges and the ongoing activities of warring parties continue to hinder the free passage of medical supplies. Attacks on medical facilities, ambulances and medical personnel continued during the first half of 2015, and access to medical supplies and equipment was severely constrained in some areas.

Forced displacement

In addition to siege and entrapment, forced displacement continued to be the most significant dynamic of civilian suffering to result from the Syrian conflict. Many people were repeatedly displaced on multiple occasions. If people are not entrapped by siege, they are moving repeatedly to avoid the fast-changing front lines.

Displacement levels continued to climb throughout 2015. From 2014 to 2015, the number of displaced people rose from 6.3 million to 7.6 million, with 1.3 million newly displaced people.⁸⁸ The number of registered refugees throughout the region increased from fewer than 3 million in September 2014 to more than 4 million as of August 2015.⁸⁹

Palestinian refugees also continued to be displaced throughout 2014 and 2015. On 1 April 2015, ISIL and the ANF infiltrated the Yarmouk camp. Some 18,000 people were trapped in the camp. Today, many people remained trapped despite much movement into adjacent areas.

ISIL practices

ISIL emerged as a major military actor in the second half of 2014 and brought with it new patterns of violation and fear for communities under its control. In a special report on ISIL, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry⁹⁰ referred to a particular “rule of terror” organized by the group. This was characterized by arbitrary beatings of men and women, public executions of men and women (shooting, beheading and stoning), the display of executed bodies, amputations, forced conversions, the destruction of religious property and “a relentless assault on basic freedoms”. Men have been massacred. Women have been forcibly married and sold into sexual slavery as the spoils of war.

Many of these violations are carried out by the Al-Hisbah Morality Police, which constantly patrols the streets and makes a point of forcing children to watch executions, report family members and imbibe ISIL indoctrination. As ISIL has come under increasing air attacks, its forces have taken to concealing themselves within civilian houses and objects. All of these actions have created “constant fear” across civilian populations living under its rule.⁹¹

Humanitarian needs and challenges

The Syrian crisis has become the largest and most complex single operation ever experienced by the modern international humanitarian system. It is also the most expensive modern emergency, with funding appeals routinely reaching billions of dollars.

⁸⁷ Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), S/2015/368, May 2015.

⁸⁸ OCHA figures for September 2015.

⁸⁹ OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Snapshot, 31 August 2015.

⁹⁰ Independent International Commission of Inquiry, ‘Special Report: Living Under ISIS in Syria’, 14 November 2014.

⁹¹ Ibid.

The crisis is expanding and remains spread over six countries in the Middle East region, namely Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The number of refugees from Syria trying to reach Europe has continued to increase despite the risks of the journey by sea. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is still no international political consensus on how best to respond to the crisis, and the armed conflict has remained highly internationalized with regional and major powers taking multiple sides. The expansion of ISIL from Syria into Iraq rapidly and dramatically spread the armed conflict beyond Syrian borders, creating further regional instability and humanitarian distress.

Needs in Syria

Since the conflict began, humanitarian needs in Syria have increased rapidly due to the combination of massive displacement, the breakdown of services, the collapsed economy and the conduct of the war.

Assessing humanitarian needs has been one of the greatest challenges for the humanitarian response due to the intensity of the fighting and the lack of access. Population movements have been constant, adding to the complexity of building an accurate picture.

In late 2014, the United Nations and its partners carried out the first Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). The HNO aims to offer a comprehensive picture of need at the moment it is carried out. It is usually an inter-agency exercise drawing on primary and secondary data that looks at the humanitarian situation and identifies the affected population's needs. The HNO is the source for the figures quoted above (12.2 million in need). It is based on the analytical framework of a Multi-sector Needs Assessment,⁹² which was carried out cross-border from Turkey and Jordan, with governorate profiles compiled inside Syria.

Multi-sector Needs Assessment overview of key findings:

- Population displacement is a key challenge that affects all sectors, but there is limited information about displacement trends and movement dynamics. The vulnerabilities specific to displaced populations remain difficult to assess. □
- Access to cash is also an issue reported across all sectors, and further research should be conducted to inform appropriate cash-based assistance. Insecurity and access are hampering markets and the transportation of available products. This has to be added to the conflict-induced inflation and the currency depreciation. □
- Key informants identified protection as one of the top priorities for men and women in urban settings. □
- In education, the major issue is the lack of supplies (books, pens, pencils, etc.) and children participating in their household's income-generating activities. □
- In health, the latest measles and polio campaigns have had a positive impact (no epidemic declared despite high risks). □
- Women's needs for reproductive-health support have been highlighted. □

The HNO found that 6.8 million people were severely food insecure and 11.6 million people required urgent access to water and sanitation. Only 43 per cent of hospitals were found to be fully functioning. In addition, 24.5 per cent of schools have been damaged or destroyed or are used as shelters, leaving almost 2 million children out of school. A total of 2.4 million children under age 5 are at risk of undernutrition and 12.2 million people require livelihood support.⁹³

⁹² Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment, October 2014.

⁹³ 2015 HNO Syrian Arab Republic, November 2014.

The most acute needs are related to health,⁹⁴ with war casualties estimated to be over 1 million. This is exacerbated by the routine targeting of medical facilities and withholding of medical care. Since 2011, the HNO has reported that primary, secondary and tertiary health-care services have deteriorated due to damages to facilities, power outages and shortages of critical medicines, medical supplies and qualified healthcare professionals. Access to medical supplies and equipment continues to be restricted by parties to the conflict.

Although food has been the most significant dimension of the humanitarian response, overarching assessments of the food security situation have been rare.⁹⁵ Although population displacement is a key challenge that affects all sectors, with limited information about displacement trends and movement dynamics, the vulnerabilities specific to displaced populations remain difficult to assess. With such large-scale displacement, the provision of shelter and security are clearly also pressing humanitarian needs. Paying rent is a major issue in places of displacement, as is patching up abandoned and destroyed buildings where people are taking refuge. Other urgent issues include education, with half of school-age children now estimated to be out of school.

Needs in neighbouring countries, refugees

In July 2015, the number of refugees seeking asylum outside of Syria surpassed 4 million. This makes Syria by far the largest refugee crisis in decades, certainly since the Afghan war in the late 1970s and larger than the Rwanda crisis of the mid-1990s.

The refugee crisis has been marked by the remarkable solidarity of neighbouring countries. In the three largest refugee-hosting countries, there has been an outpouring of assistance, and even five years into the crisis there is remarkable tolerance towards the newcomers. To a large extent, there is freedom of movement, access to services and, to varying degrees, a right to certain forms of work.

Due to the generous hosting policies of neighbouring countries and the massive international response, the needs of Syrian refugees have been less acute than in other similar refugee situations. This may be connected to the relatively high level of income and assets that many Syrians brought with them. This situation may also be changing, as the current refugee crisis in Europe demonstrates.

A 2014 nutritional study on the Syrian refugee population in Jordan is a good example of the relative well-being (in humanitarian terms) of the refugee population. In a sample of camp and non-camp refugees, UNHCR found that nutrition levels were similar to those of the Jordanian population (although there were unacceptable levels of micro-nutrients and dietary diversity). The study also found that 70 per cent of households were relying on the WFP food voucher as a principal source of income,⁹⁶ potentially highlighting the underlying fragility of the population.

Although the policies of host states and the response of UNHCR and its partners have largely contained the needs, the situation has been gradually deteriorating as people's assets are progressively eroded. In early 2014, UNICEF warned of a "silent threat" emerging in Lebanon's Bekaa valley after identifying a rise in the acute malnutrition rate.

Refugee restrictions at border crossings

There has also been a gradual deterioration of states' willingness to accept ever-increasing numbers of refugees. Throughout 2014, clear evidence has emerged of changing border

⁹⁴ Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment, October 2014.

⁹⁵ Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment, October 2014.

⁹⁶ UNHCR, 'Technical fact sheet: Nutrition situation – Syrian refugees response in Jordan, October 2014.

policies to reduce refugee flows into regional host countries. Lebanon, Jordan and, to a lesser extent, Turkey have imposed severe restrictions on the entry of Syrians, especially men. It seems “the hospitality of countries bordering Syria is at a breaking point” for a variety of clear security, social and economic reasons.⁹⁷ In January, the Lebanese Government announced new visa requirements for Syrians, and UNHCR has now been instructed to cease registering new arrivals. There are also increasing reports of possible refoulement, with Lebanon increasing the number of departure orders and refusing refugee status, in particular to Palestinian refugees.⁹⁸ These new restrictions mean that hundreds of thousands of people have been unable to seek refugee status and flee new fighting.⁹⁹

Refugee resettlement and the ‘migrant’ crisis in Europe

The first half of 2015 witnessed a doubling of the number of Syrian refugees trying to make their way to Europe in highly perilous circumstances. According to UNHCR, 428,735 refugees had applied for asylum across the EU by the end of July 2015, compared with 138,016 for the whole of 2014.¹⁰⁰ The overwhelming majority of these people are from Syria.

The flow of people seeking refuge in Europe has created a highly lucrative human-smuggling trade. The situation has also led to a huge increase in deaths, as people take to dilapidated boats and cram into lorries to be smuggled across borders. IOM estimates that as of August 2015, 2,500 people have died trying to make the crossing from Libya to Italy, and many high-profile tragedies in which people in trucks have suffocated to death have created a political crisis in Europe.

In response, Germany has pledged to take up to 1 million Syrians in 2015 and has called on its European partners to dramatically increase their own hosting efforts. It appears likely that events will raise the current European resettlement pledges for 120,000 third-country places for Syrian refugees in 2015.¹⁰¹ To date, many European countries have offered only a few places to Syrians. Russia and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have offered zero places.¹⁰²

Education and the ‘No Lost Generation’ initiative

The risks to children from the conflict have continued to receive significant attention. A strong new policy focus developed during 2014 that intended to ensure there was no lost generation (NLG) from the Syrian crisis. The NLG partnership was launched in October 2013 and operates as both a strategic funding group and a public campaign. The partnership includes United Nations agencies, governments and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Its priority is to protect the futures of Syrian children by enabling “strategic investment” in their education and protection to ensure their learning and skills and restore their psychological health.¹⁰³ The NLG initiative aligns closely with the policy of regional host governments, which are also prioritizing the education of refugee children. An example is the Lebanese Government’s policy of Reach All Children with Education.

⁹⁷ Norwegian Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee, *No Escape: Civilians in Syria Struggle to Find Safety Across Borders*, 13 November 2014, p.4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁹⁹ Amnesty International, *Left Out in the Cold: Syrian Refugees Abandoned by the International Community*, December 2014, p 7.

¹⁰⁰ UNHCR, ‘Syria Regional Refugee Response’, <data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁰¹ UNHCR, ‘UNHCR calls on international community to resettle 130,000 Syrian refugees’, 9 December 2014, <www.unhcr.org.uk/news-and-views/news-list/news-detail/article/unhcr-calls-on-international-community-to-resettle-130000-syrian-refugees.html>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁰² Amnesty International, *Left Out in the Cold*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ No Lost Generation, ‘About #NoLostGeneration’, <nolostgeneration.org/about>, accessed 9 November 2015.

The NLG initiative has gathered funding and momentum throughout 2014 and 2015. Even though an estimated 5.6 million children have been directly affected by the crisis,¹⁰⁴ NLG achievements have been considerable. For example, in its first year, the initiative reached 1,027,894 children with educational support and 659,681 children with psychological support.¹⁰⁵ However, like many humanitarian initiatives in the Syrian crisis, the project has faced the twin constraints of underfunding and restricted access in continuously deteriorating conditions. Of its US\$885 million appeal, NLG has so far received US\$301 million, leaving a deficit of US\$584 million.¹⁰⁶

Despite the work of the NLG initiative, the fate of children's education, remains extremely precarious. Within Syria, 24 per cent of schools have been damaged, destroyed or used as shelters, resulting in 2 million children not attending school or attending school irregularly.¹⁰⁷ According to 2015 estimations by UNICEF, of the total 12.2 million affected people in Syria.¹⁰⁸ The Overseas Development Institute's latest report is highly critical of current levels of funding and enrolment for refugee children. This is especially true in Lebanon, where the school system is unable to cope and one in five refugee children is still not enrolled. Across the region, on average, 62 per cent of Syrian children are out of school: 78 per cent in Lebanon, 65 per cent in Iraq, 56 per cent in Turkey, 48 per cent in Jordan and 22 per cent in Egypt. Tragically, these rates compare to a pre-crisis enrolment rate of 91 per cent in Syria.¹⁰⁹

Given the reality of 500,000 Syrian refugee children still out of school and 2.5 million children out of school inside Syria, there are serious concerns about dangerous increases in child labour and early marriages across the region. According to Save the Children, rates of child marriage for girls have almost doubled to nearly 25 per cent in refugee settings in Jordan. While this likely addresses concerns about protection, poverty and refugee status for young men, who stand a better chance of asylum if they are married, early marriage increases risks of domestic and sexual violence, early pregnancy, and greatly reduces educational and life chances for girls.¹¹⁰

Women alone

In July 2014, UNHCR reported that four out of five people that have fled Syria since the crisis began are women and children and women head 24 per cent of the refugee families (145,000 households).¹¹¹

Safety and livelihoods are a constant concern for these women and their families. Childcare obligations make paid work difficult and only 9 per cent of female-headed households have paid work, compared to 26 per cent of male-headed households.¹¹² Although many

¹⁰⁴ UNICEF, 'Humanitarian Action for Children: Syrian Arab Republic', <www.unicef.org/appeals/syria.html>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁰⁵ *No Lost Generation Initiative: Protecting the Futures of Children Affected by the Syria Crisis*, One Year Report, September 2014, p 12.

¹⁰⁶ No Lost Generation, 'No Lost Generation: Situation Today', <nolostgeneration.org/situationtoday>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁰⁷ UNICEF, 'Humanitarian Action for Children: Syrian Arab Republic', <www.unicef.org/appeals/files/Final_2015_HAC_Syria.pdf>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Watkins, Kevin and Steven A. Zyck, *Living on Hope, Hoping for Education: The Failed Response the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, Overseas Development Institution, London, September 2014.

¹¹⁰ Save the Children, *Too Young to Wed: The Growing Problem of Early Marriage Among Syrian Girls in Jordan*, Save the Children, London, 2014.

¹¹¹ UNHCR, *Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria's Refugee Women*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, July 2014, p. 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Lebanese landlords protect women very responsibly and many women report extraordinary generosity from host communities, a minority of women face significant harassment. Generally, women that are alone report a mixed experience of life in exile, with some experiencing more freedom than in Syria and others less.

In September 2014, a report by the International Rescue Committee on all women affected by the crisis was more alarming, raising three consistent challenges faced by women and girls: sexual exploitation and harassment, increasing domestic violence and early marriage.¹¹³ In the International Rescue Committee report, one in three women expressed fears about leaving her home.¹¹⁴ Within Syrian homes, pre-conflict levels of domestic violence against women were already high at 67 per cent.¹¹⁵

Organization of the response

The United Nations response to the Syrian crisis continues to be organized in two major initiatives. Led by OCHA, the Strategic Response Plan (SRP), previously named the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan, appeals for and coordinates the in-country response. Led by UNHCR, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) focuses on the five neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees.

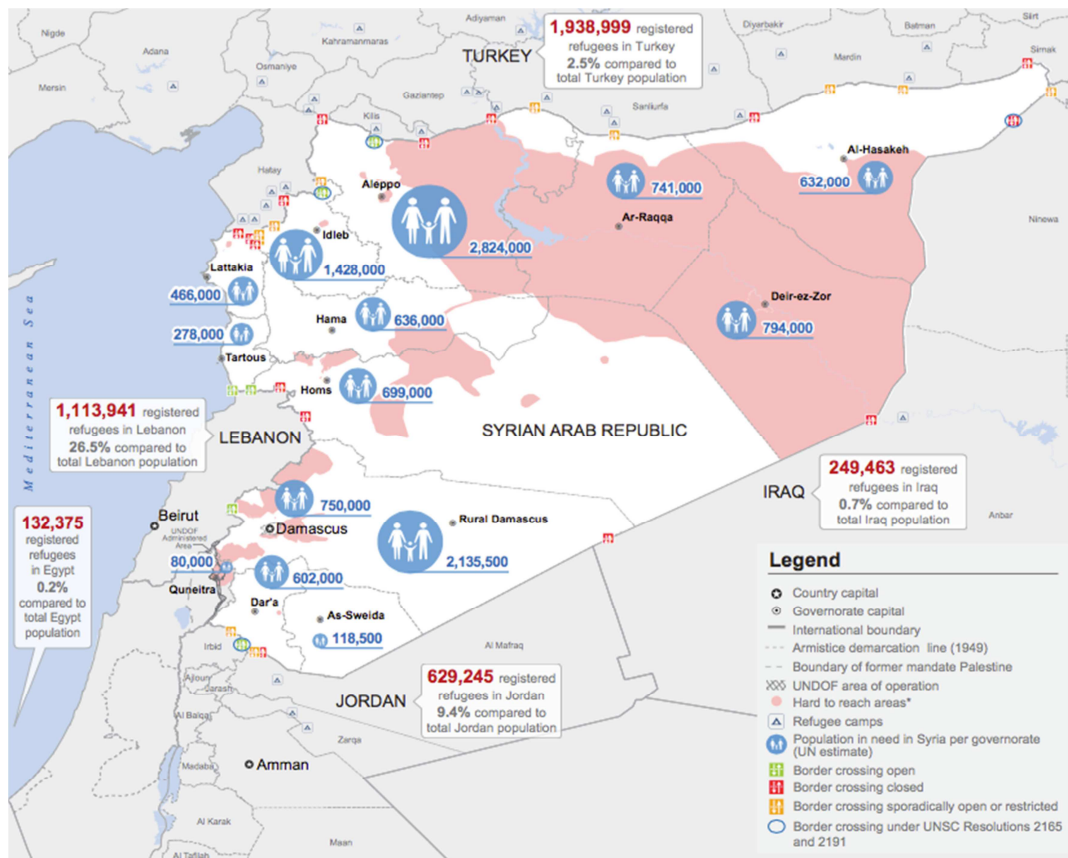
In 2015, the 3RP appealed for US\$4.5 billion for regional needs (for United Nations agencies) and the SRP appealed for US\$2.9 billion.

Together, the 3RP and SRP operations are attempting to reach nearly 18 million people in 2015. They are appealing for a combined annual budget of US\$8.4 billion (if government requirements are added), representing an unprecedented appeal level in modern humanitarian action.

¹¹³ IRC, *Are We Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syria Conflict*, International Rescue Committee, September 2014, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ UNHCR, *Woman Alone*, p. 30.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9, citing UNIFEM 2005.



Within Syria, the main humanitarian responders are the United Nations agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. There are a limited number of international NGOs and local Syrian NGOs. SARC is responsible for the majority of humanitarian aid distribution. This is partly because SARC has the most extensive network and partly because the Government has designated it as the lead agency.

A Senior Humanitarian Coordinator leads the response on behalf of the agencies and the international community. WFP has the largest operation, delivering food to almost 4 million people on a monthly basis in 2015. UNICEF, UNHCR, WHO, IOM, FAO, UNFPA and others provide medicines, water supplies, relief items and specialised care. UNRWA continues to provide support to 480,000 Palestinians throughout Syria and to those displaced in Lebanon and Jordan.

This is complemented by a growing cross-border operation (see below). The two operations – from Government-held territory and across the border from Turkey and Jordan – are brought together in a coordinated structure called Whole of Syria (WoS). The Regional Humanitarian Coordinator based in Amman, Jordan and the Senior Humanitarian Coordinator based in Syria chair the WoS structure, bringing together operations from ‘hubs’ inside Syria, Turkey, Jordan and the regional operation. The WoS structure has developed a series of clusters (sector-based working groups) combining the hubs to work on technical issues across the various operations. WoS essentially became feasible following the UNSCRs on humanitarian access, allowing the United Nations family to coordinate the cross-border operations that had built up during previous years. The Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator based in Turkey provides leadership to humanitarian operations there. Turkey also has a strong international NGO coordination group and a vibrant and important Syrian NGO sector.

Access

The number of people inside Syria deemed 'hard-to-reach' has almost doubled, from 2.5 million people in 2014 to 4.6 million people in August 2015. The need for greater humanitarian access has been a major priority for the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the United Nations Security Council since the first quarter of 2014, when cross-border operations from Turkey were deemed by many to be urgently needed to complement cross-line aid flows.

After several false starts, on 14 July 2014, the Security Council agreed to UNSCR 2165, which authorized 180 days of relief delivery across borders from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. A monitoring mechanism monitored the loading of supplies at warehouses and the subsequent opening of relief supplies at border customs posts.¹¹⁶ UNSCR 2165 also required that all Syrian parties enable the "immediate and unhindered delivery" of humanitarian aid and rely on the assessments of United Nations agencies and their implementing partners.¹¹⁷ The use of cross-border routes was extended for an additional 12 months, through 10 January 2016, by UNSCR 2191 (December 2014). United Nations cross-border assistance complements that of international NGOs and Syrian NGOs.

As of July 2015, 117 shipments from Turkey and Jordan have reached Syria.¹¹⁸ These shipments have included food assistance for almost 1.8 million people; non-food items for about 1.4 million people; water and sanitation supplies for over 900,000 people; and medical supplies and treatments for 2.2 million people.¹¹⁹

Since the adoption of UNSCR 2165, cross-border supply shipments have slowly increased. As of August 2015, United Nations agencies and partners have reached 30 of the 127 hard-to-reach locations on average per month (24 per cent of locations).¹²⁰ Food, non-food items, medical supplies and surgical equipment for tens of thousands of people all crossed the border and reached their objectives. However, senior United Nations officials still criticized the GoS and armed groups for continuing to hinder cross-border operations.

Cross-border NGO operations have been described as more effective than United Nations cross-border operations. The Turkish Red Crescent facilitated 297 trucks to cross the border in two weeks in November.¹²¹ Mercy Corps has sent 688 trucks across the border since July. Syrian NGOs supported by international NGOs still seem to be the largest channel of cross-border operations, and are reluctant to join the United Nations process unless it delivers real benefits, including greater security, transport subsidies and quicker access.¹²² Several commentators are still suggesting that United Nations agencies are being deliberately cautious in their cross-border operations for fear of risking their core relationship with the GoS and their much larger access from Damascus.¹²³

However, United Nations cross-border flows from Turkey and Jordan, particularly those of WFP, gathered momentum in 2015. Considering that some cross-border operations may be

¹¹⁶ UNSCR 2165, 14 July 2014, paragraphs 2 and 3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., paragraph 6.

¹¹⁸ Secretary General's report S/2015/264 of August 2015, paragraph 28

¹¹⁹ Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), S/2015/651, August 2015.

¹²⁰ Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), S/2015/698, 10 September 2015.

¹²¹ Syrian American Medical Society, 'White Paper: Implementing UN Cross-Border Aid to Syria under Resolution 2165', December 2014.

¹²² Ibid., p 9.

¹²³ Lynch, Colum, 'UN's Fear of Angering Assad Leaves Gap in Syria Aid Effort', *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2014, <foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/u-n-s-fear-of-angering-assad-leaves-gap-in-syria-aid-effort>, accessed 9 November 2015.

up to 10 times more expensive than aid delivered cross-line inside Syria, enthusiasm for cross-border operations must be tempered by value-for-money concerns, however.¹²⁴ At the same time, cross-line operations continue to encounter significant delays and problems. As of 31 July 2015, the United Nations had requested 81 inter-agency convoys, of which only nine had been completed and one partially completed.¹²⁵

Remote management

Lack of access has meant that remote management deploys a high proportion of international humanitarian responses within Syria, especially in cross-border operations. Many international NGOs and Syrian NGOs are continuing to leverage local community networks to assess, deliver and monitor aid. WFP has maintained a physical presence in six Governorates and has sought to avoid remote management practice.

This response model is a potentially very good practice and may often and appropriately enable and empower local first responders, thereby contributing to the localization of humanitarian action. However, remote management is also high risk. Humanitarian aid devolved to local actors may not be delivered neutrally and impartially according to humanitarian principles. Its effectiveness is not easily monitored, and it may be politically manipulated to give inappropriate political power and legitimacy to armed groups and local governance structures.

As yet, security considerations make it difficult to find and share precise information about the modalities, successes and lessons learned in remote management inside Syria. However, as with cash transfer models, learning about remote management is likely to emerge from the Syrian crisis as a significant benefit that will widely inform and improve the global humanitarian sector.

Non-camp assistance models

One of the striking new elements of the Syrian crisis response has been the overwhelming policy of hosting neighbouring states allowing refugees freedom of movement. Of the 4 million refugees from the crisis, only some 15 per cent are in camps.

Non-camp humanitarian response has long been the policy preference of refugees themselves and refugee experts in humanitarian studies. The Syria crisis has, therefore, provided an unprecedented opportunity for new models of refugee protection and support to be developed, albeit on a sudden and massive scale.

One of the major issues to arise from the non-camp policy concerns the rights and needs of affected host communities. To what extent can host communities that are also poor and disadvantaged or negatively affected by refugee influx become part of the humanitarian concern of the Syria response? If these groups can be considered legitimate communities of concern, then how can they be helped in a way that is equitable and leverages mutual gains for refugees and hosts alike? The new 2015 Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP) responds creatively to this important ethical challenge as part of its new inter-agency focus on resilience.

Another significant operational challenge is how best to deliver assistance and protection. In camp-style situations, providing refugees with assistance is relatively straightforward. Doing so with in-kind goods makes sense because these situations are often remote and securitised. In the Syrian refugee response, refugees' ability to access functioning (in fact

¹²⁴ Personal communication with WFP policy adviser.

¹²⁵ Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), S/2015/651, August 2015.

highly developed) markets has provided an opportunity and a challenge to UNHCR and its partners in the response. Much of this effort has focused on the use of cash transfers.

Cash transfer

Cash transfer aid models have taken off in the Syrian crisis as never before and have become the norm for Syrian refugees. During the second half of 2014 and to date in 2015, the use of cash transfers has continued to expand and develop. Cash has replaced a wide variety of in-kind aid. It is being used to replace food aid and general rations, and to enable access to shelter, health care, heating supplies and enhanced livelihood initiatives. As these approaches have unfolded, cash transfers have reached new levels of coverage and sophistication, including bank cards and iris-scanning-recognition ATMs.

At the same time, there has been increasing analysis of the operational advantages and risks of cash transfers. Nuanced targeting remains problematic, and crowd control can be as much of a problem in cash distributions as in commodity-based deliveries. Although the Syrian crisis is expected to produce a wealth of lessons on cash transfer response, it has already demonstrated cash to be a highly effective intervention when there are functioning markets to support it. The rapid and widespread use of cash across the crisis is raising some strategic policy questions for global humanitarian response. First, can current levels of cash donations be sustained despite the fact that donors often prefer to pass on subsidized gifts in kind, or will much greater targeting be the norm in 2015? Second, the crisis is suggesting that there is likely a need for strategic standard setting and coordination of cash transfers, perhaps around a new cash cluster and new Sphere standards for cash transfers.¹²⁶

Underfunding

Funding deficits remained extremely problematic in 2015. The Syria appeals have been the largest ever appeals for humanitarian assistance, accounting for almost 40 per cent of all global appeals by April 2015.¹²⁷ United Nations appeals for the SRP and RRP have been huge compared to other emergencies in 2014 and 2015, and increased overall humanitarian spending by 24 per cent during the 2013-2014 period. These appeals also increased per capita spending from the global average of US\$168 per head in 2013 to US\$204 per head by mid-2014.¹²⁸

Neither the SRP nor the 3RP appeals have been comprehensively met. At the beginning of May 2015, the SRP and the 3RP had raised only 33 per cent of the anticipated annual budget.¹²⁹ The Food Cluster had to make a series of reductions to food baskets throughout 2014 and 2015.¹³⁰ Due to a dramatic shortfall in donor support, WFP had to cut food voucher support in December to 1.7 million of the 1.9 million Syrian refugees who depend on these. This was fortunately reversed within a few days.

The relatively low level of actual funding has meant that all agencies have been continuously working with a lower budget than planned and so juggling their plans and priorities throughout 2014.

¹²⁶ Dolan Carmel, Marie McGrath and Jeremy Shoham, 'ENN's Perspective on the Nutrition Response in the Syria Crisis', *Field Exchange*, Programming Experiences and Learning from the Nutrition Response to the Syrian Crisis, Issue 48, Emergency Nutrition Network, November 2014, p. 7.

¹²⁷ Global Humanitarian Appeal 2015, OCHA

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²⁹ UNDP, 'Consequences of underfunding the Response to the Syria crisis' 25 June 2015, <www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/ourperspective/ourperspectivearticles/2015/06/25/consequences-of-underfunding-the-response-to-the-syria-crisis.html>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹³⁰ Whole of Syria Food Cluster/Sector, Progress to Date, October 2014, p. 2.

Protraction, cost and business model

The year 2015 confirmed that the Syrian crisis will be one of the great protracted conflicts and emergencies of the next decade. The dramatic numbers involved, the regional spread of the crisis, the lack of international consensus to resolve the conflict and the destruction and deepening poverty that it has involved have made certain the longevity of the crisis. The spread and entrenchment of the crisis have meant that high costs will continue in the years ahead.

The evident reluctance of donors to meet budget requirements in 2014 continued in 2015, posing hard questions in regards to the business model of humanitarian operations in the Syrian crisis. Value for money will appropriately become a critical factor in humanitarian planning and operations. This will involve hard questions, particularly about the logic of continuing to deploy “24 United Nations agencies and 100 international NGOs ... and maintaining the current sectoral structure and the various working groups and task teams. All these structures are populated with high cost international personnel.”¹³¹

This experience suggests that new approaches will need to be identified to meet protracted needs in more streamlined, cost-effective, innovative and localized ways.

Development finance

The parallel needs of affected host communities and refugees have become more salient as non-camp operations develop and the increasing socioeconomic stress from the refugee burden is felt across host societies. These pressures can be summarized as Lebanese and Jordanian citizens in particular experiencing “higher rents and declining public service availability, or health and education infrastructure that it is stretched beyond its limits.”¹³²

The recognition that development spending is now essential to bolstering host and refugee communities has gathered momentum. In Lebanon, UNHCR support to host community projects rose from US\$13.5 million to US\$25.5 million between 2013 and 2014. UNHCR’s inputs are still relatively small mitigation grants for public services used jointly by Lebanese and refugee communities that provide investments such as classroom repair, additional health equipment and generators.¹³³ In Jordan, UNDP has continued to develop a small pilot phase of its Host Communities Project, which combines a joint focus on quick wins and durable solutions but remains small in scale.¹³⁴

The enormous additional needs in both countries demand much deeper structural investments in infrastructure, services and economic development. This recognition has resulted in UNHCR’s new resilience-based approach to its 2015 strategy, discussed below. Even so, much larger and more strategic development investments in host countries will likely be required over a multi-year framework as the crisis extends to a minimal 10-year view.

Resilience programming

The most significant strategic innovation to emerge in 2015 is the United Nations’ new 3RP, as well as the new national plans in neighbouring countries. The 3RP is a collaboration

¹³¹ Little, Simon, ‘Towards a Twenty First Century Response Model to the Refugee Crisis in the Lebanon’, *Field Exchange*, Issue 48, Emergency Nutrition Network, November 2014, p. 60.

¹³² Dahi, Omar, ‘The Refugee Crisis in Lebanon and Jordan: The Need for Economic Development Spending’, *Forced Migration Review*, September 2014, <www.fmreview.org/syria/dahi>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹³³ UNHCR, *Lebanese Communities in Focus: Supporting Communities Protecting Refugees*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Beirut, September 2014.

¹³⁴ Host Communities, ‘Strategy’, <www.hostcommunities-jo.org/strategy/>, accessed 9 November 2015.

between UNDP and UNHCR. It marks a strategic shift in perspective and programming for the United Nations system, its government partners in the region and the 200 other agencies and NGOs involved in the Plan.¹³⁵ The approach combines a response to immediate needs for refugees with a deeper coordinated response with national governments to build the structural resilience of refugees, affected host communities and states. As such, 3RP aims to combine humanitarian and development capacities in a single plan that is “nationally led and regionally coherent” and addresses the vulnerabilities of host societies and refugees. In designing resilience investments, the Plan is also sensitive to reaching indirect beneficiaries as well as direct beneficiaries.

The Governments of Jordan and Lebanon have also initiated major shifts in the way that refugee programmes are financed and managed. In Jordan, the National Resilience Plan is basically the country chapter of the 3RP – owned, managed and developed by the Government of Jordan. Not only does it seek to rebalance or integrate the emphasis between refugee and host-community services, it also introduces a system of project management and approval that is primarily rooted in the normal mechanisms of government service delivery. All projects under the National Resilience Plan/3RP must be submitted to the Ministry of Planning through the relevant line ministry for approval.

In Lebanon, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan aims to combine elements of stabilization work with the refugee response. It broadens the scope of the response as well as the range of stakeholders who are involved. For example, in Lebanon and Jordan, there are elements of World Bank programming with line ministries that support the overall response.

The 3RP aims to respond to the two big lessons learned in 2014 and from the RRP6. These were identified as “the inadequate support to national and local service delivery systems, and the need to increase livelihoods and employment opportunities”, especially at a time when refugees had sold most of their assets. Alongside resilience investments in specific sectors, such as protection, food security, health, education and livelihoods, there is a particular emphasis on “social cohesion” that aims to create shared resilience between refugees and local “impacted communities”.¹³⁶

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has continued to worsen over the 18 months since the common context analysis was produced. Fighting has intensified, resulting in more casualties, displaced people and refugees. Services such as health care, waste disposal and even piped water have become non-existent in many parts of the country. The economy has continued to slide, leading to widespread poverty. Life has become intolerable for many.

The conduct of the war in Syria has been brutal. Bombardments of civilian areas through the use of barrel bombs, missiles and mortars have killed tens of thousands of people, including 18,000 civilians killed through Government air strikes.¹³⁷ Shooting, mass killing, artillery and rocket attacks have become a part of daily life. People flee one conflict only to find the front line has shifted and they are forced to move again. Since the context analysis was published, ISIL has gained major territory, imposing a rule of terror that includes stoning and public execution.

¹³⁵ ‘Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015-2016 in Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview’, <www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/3RP-Report-Overview.pdf>, accessed 9 November 2015.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

¹³⁷ Samaan, Maher and Anne Barbard, ‘For Those Who Remain in Syria, Daily Life is a Nightmare’, *The New York Times*, 15 September 2015.

The impact of the ever-deteriorating situation has forced so many more people to seek refuge. With neighbouring countries Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan already generously hosting more than 4 million refugees, a steady trickle of people seeking sanctuary in Europe has become a flood. Daily news headlines document the struggle of thousands to find their way to Germany and Sweden, which have generously opened their doors.

Meanwhile, a political solution seems even further away. The Geneva formula of peace talks has completely broken down and the attempts of the latest United Nations Special Envoy to pursue local ceasefires have been equally futile. The permanent members of the Security Council remain divided, backing opposing sides of the conflict. Regional powers have also aligned themselves on both sides, turning the war into a regional proxy conflict.

Humanitarian action has found itself overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the crisis. The combined resources required for the response inside and outside Syria have made the crisis the most expensive ever and more than 40 per cent of the total global appeal. Refugee-hosting countries, such as Turkey, have seen themselves become top-five global humanitarian donors overnight due to their generosity in hosting people fleeing the war.

Humanitarian agencies have been massively challenged to protect and assist people. Access to people in need has been one of the most formidable challenges. Despite a breakthrough UNSCR authorising cross-border operations, many thousands remain trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The fact that most refugees are not living in camps is hugely beneficial, but has also made the task of organizing relief operations more complex. Cash transfers have played a significant role as a result.

With no end to the conflict in sight, the humanitarian operation in Syria appears poised to continue. Recent coordination improvements have created a more coherent response, and continual innovations combined with the increased use of national solutions in refugee-hosting countries have led to a more efficient response. However, without a political solution, the challenge will last for decades. The response now requires combined humanitarian and development efforts supported by significant multi-year investments that focus on immediate relief and wider resilience-building.