



APRIL 2024

## How the Aid Fund for Northern Syria can upgrade humanitarian aid and EU geopolitical engagement

UN bureaucratic inertia, weak leadership, Stockholm syndrome and a laissez-faire attitude by donors have allowed structural problems with humanitarian aid delivery in Syria to persist for too long. These problems include regime capture of aid, dependency on Damascus to deliver aid cross-border and, more recently, too much focus on lifesaving aid. The coming humanitarian funding crunch demands that these problems are finally addressed at pain of a rapid increase in the misery of millions of Syrians. This will have consequences both in terms of local predation and international migration. The Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) could be the vehicle to break existing molds due to its more diverse governance structure, independence of both Damascus and the UN, greater focus on Early Recovery and an innovative, if emergent, localisation strategy. As a bonus, it can support a pragmatic conflict management strategy for northern Syria based on the 'safe, calm and neutral environment' concept of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254. Donors should consider the practical actions proposed in this brief to put their money where their mouths are.

### 1. Introduction

On 30 April and 27 May 2024, the European Union hosts the eighth Brussels Conference on Syria. The conference is a litmus test for humanitarian actors as funding is becoming increasingly scarce. Major donors have already signalled funding cuts due to demands arising from Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza. At the end of 2023, donors had only covered about one-third of the budget that the UN estimated as needed to meet the Syrian population's basic needs.<sup>1</sup> This was the lowest level of coverage of the humanitarian

response plan since 2011.<sup>2</sup> More worryingly, there is no end in sight for humanitarian needs in Syria because there is no end in sight to Syria's 13-year civil war. Simply put, limiting engagement in a protracted conflict to the provision of life-saving humanitarian assistance means having to foot a recurring annual bill. This is the 'Sisyphean task' that the Brussels conferences desperately try to keep up with. An additional problem to the imminent decrease in funding is the fact that humanitarian aid delivery in Syria has long been characterised by major problems that reduce its (cost) effectiveness.

1 The 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria was budgeted at US\$5.41 billion (it was substantially higher than previous years due to the earthquake): <https://humanitarianaction.info/overview/2023> (accessed 26 April 2024).

2 See: <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1114/summary> (accessed 20 April 2024).

The situation is problematic because the UN estimates that 16.7 million Syrians remain dependent on humanitarian assistance.<sup>34</sup> To make a bad situation worse, the humanitarian situation in Syria also affects the politics of the conflict. Aid helps prevent further human misery and economic crisis that would enable even greater predation by the Assad regime and other de facto authorities, and hence enable their survival. It also keeps the door ajar for local reconciliation, which dampens the risk of future (regional) conflict and limits outbound migration. If Syria falls off the international humanitarian agenda, it is likely to disappear from the EU's geopolitical radar as well – until it returns with a vengeance. For these reasons, reducing EU humanitarian involvement would be a mistake.

In an attempt to forestall this eventuality, the brief addresses an audience of international humanitarian and Syria-oriented policy-makers by exploring the design and operations of the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS), a multi-donor pooled fund established by the UK in December 2022.<sup>5</sup> AFNS design and operations have features that can help resolve longstanding problems with the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria, make it more (cost) effective and enable continued EU humanitarian involvement despite shrinking aid budgets. As a bonus, the AFNS' greater focus on Early Recovery<sup>6</sup> can

contribute to creating a 'safe, calm and neutral environment' (SCNE) – an innovative approach to local conflict management that can help stabilise northern Syria in the socioeconomic sense.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the AFNS might offer a pathway for more cost-effective delivery of humanitarian aid and act as a vehicle for geopolitical involvement that ultimately aims to implement UNSCR 2254.

## 2. Longstanding problems with humanitarian aid in Syria

A common model for the provision of humanitarian aid in conflict situations is UN country-based pooled funds. Donors hand their contributions over to the UN, which they trust as a responsible and capable multilateral entity. The UN subsequently has the freedom to disburse these funds as it sees fit while upholding humanitarian principles. It is useful to add that usually donors are not involved in the decision-making processes by which humanitarian aid is allocated from such funds. On paper, the benefits are impartiality, speed and needs-based coverage. However, for a variety of reasons that include bureaucratic inertia, personalities, weak leadership and donor neglect, three major problems have plagued this setup in Syria – and hence the effective provision of humanitarian aid – since the early days of the conflict: 1) regime appropriation of aid; 2) the need to negotiate the provision of cross-border aid to opposition-held areas with the regime and Russia; and 3) more recently, a focus on lifesaving aid over early recovery work.

---

3 See: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-situation-report-15-mar-2024> (accessed 20 April 2024).

4 See: <https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/unprecedented-number-of-syrians-in-need-of-aid-after-13-years-of-war.html> (accessed 20 April 2024).

5 The brief builds on 15 confidential interviews. Four of them were with Syrian NGOs, two with INGO staff, two with humanitarian coordinators and seven with diplomatic sources. In addition, it involved an interview with the Independent Chair of the AFNS Steering Board. Publicly accessible operational manuals, handbooks and strategy papers of the multi-donor pooled funds operating in Syria were also reviewed.

6 Early Recovery assistance is a term for humanitarian assistance that goes beyond life-saving aid but does not amount to reconstruction. Early Recovery activities range from essential services (rehabilitation of water pumping stations and renovating health centres) to building governance capacity and reintegrating displaced populations. Note that there is no standard UN definition

---

of Early Recovery, which means that the lines between lifesaving emergency aid, Early Recovery, stabilisation and reconstruction remain blurry. Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *Early Recovery Assistance in Syria: Balancing Political and Humanitarian Goals*, 2023, [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2024).

7 Abdeh, M. and Hauch, L., *A new conflict management strategy for Syria: Creating a safe, calm and neutral environment*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2022.

## Problem 1: Regime appropriation of aid

The Assad regime has strategically instrumentalised humanitarian access and aid delivery since the beginning of the conflict, deeply compromising humanitarian principles in the process. Regime involvement in the distribution of humanitarian aid has included putting a regime-friendly organisation in charge of aid coordination, imposing regime-linked contractors, designating de facto preferential disbursement areas, obliging international aid NGOs to partner with regime-linked NGOs and claiming credit for aid distributed.<sup>8</sup> Such practices have persisted despite the fact that regime capture of humanitarian aid was reported as early as 2015 and recognised by the UN itself.<sup>9</sup> The UN has never been able or willing to orchestrate stronger pushback against such aid capture, thus failing to mobilise leverage arising from the fact that its humanitarian aid acts as a social safety net for millions of Syrians. Instead, for PR and legitimacy reasons, the Assad regime takes credit for its existence. Since donors have only an advisory role regarding decision making about humanitarian aid allocation and distribution modalities in the relevant UN pooled funds, they have been relatively powerless to intervene beyond pulling the plug on humanitarian aid altogether, which none have dared do so far.<sup>10</sup> On balance, the UN can be considered as suffering from a degree of the

‘Stockholm syndrome’ while donors have so far tolerated a deeply flawed modus operandi of humanitarian assistance. One result is that tens of millions of dollars in US and EU taxpayers’ money have benefited human rights abusers, war profiteers, sanctioned individuals, and other brokers connected to Assad’s inner circle.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in a brazen act of bad faith, the regime siphoned off around US\$100 million from aid allocations through currency manipulation in 2019 and 2020 alone.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these issues, the UN and some other humanitarian organisations continue to view a greater role for donors in decision-making processes about humanitarian aid allocation and disbursement as intrusive. The outgoing head of UN OCHA, Martin Griffiths, basically told donors in a recent interview to back off and let humanitarians do their work, including increased engagement ‘with the political’ (code for dealing with e.g. the Assad regime).<sup>13</sup> The bottom line is that there are efficiency gains to reap in humanitarian aid provision in Syria by reducing aid lost to diversion, corruption and appropriation. This requires careful recalibration of donor involvement in decision-making processes that protects the UN Country Team from regime abuse and limits regime appropriation of humanitarian aid. As a bonus, donors will stop indirectly funding the Assad regime.

## Problem 2: Negotiating aid delivery across borders

Eight months have passed since July 2023 when the UN Security Council (UNSC) failed to reauthorise the cross-border mechanism that allowed the flow of UN aid from Turkey into northwest Syria without the consent of the Assad

- 
- 8 See, for example: Haid, H., *Principled Aid in Syria: A Framework for International Agencies*, London: Chatham House, 2019; Hall, N., *Rescuing aid in Syria*, Washington: CSIS, 2021.
- 9 In 2015, UN headquarters in New York recognised the troubled state of their Syria operations and initiated a review process culminating in the ‘Parameters and Principles of UN Assistance in Syria’. This document emphasised the need for human rights due diligence, the conditional nature of reconstruction (contingent on full implementation of UNSCR 2254), the imperative of securing reliable cross-border delivery of aid, equitable assistance across all areas of control, zero tolerance for aid diversion, and a focus on the most critical humanitarian needs. However, neither the remedial actions nor the monitoring mechanisms stipulated by the document were implemented.
- 10 Interview with humanitarian coordinator, 30 March 2024, phone. See also e.g.: <https://opnews.com/article/who-syria-bce4ad6714a8b9e29b15c4db39f66720> (accessed 20 April 2024).

- 
- 11 SLDP, Obsalytics, *UN Procurement Contracts in Syria: A ‘few’ Bad Apples?*, 2022, online (accessed 21 April 2024).
- 12 Hall, N., Shaar, K., Agha, M., *How the Assad Regime Systematically Diverts Tens of Millions in Aid*, 2021, online (accessed 20 April 2024).
- 13 See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/interview/2022/1/28/UN-aid-chief-seeks-focused-inclusive-humanitarian-efforts> (accessed 21 April 2024).

regime.<sup>14</sup> In preceding years, these extensions had been subject to brinkmanship in the UNSC, with Russia voicing the Assad regime's desire to limit such aid flows since it cannot control them. The originally authorised four cross-border points were ultimately closed one by one and during each round of negotiations concessions had to be made for diminishing returns. In August 2023, the now-blocked UN cross-border mechanism for humanitarian aid delivery was substituted by a consent agreement between the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Assad regime. Its details remain undisclosed. Although many international legal experts argue that regime consent is not necessary for the UN to deliver humanitarian aid to civilians in need, OCHA has nevertheless continued to seek the Assad regime's approval.<sup>15</sup> As part of the consent agreement, on 6 August 2023 the Assad regime authorised UN access via the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Idlib for six months. This authorisation was extended for another six months in January 2024.<sup>16</sup> Authorisations for the Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai crossings, issued by the Assad regime after the February 2023 earthquake, were also renewed in February 2024, but only for three months.<sup>17</sup> For humanitarians operating in northwest Syria, the uncertainty resulting from three to six month authorisation cycles is deeply problematic as it prevents adequate planning and proper implementation of humanitarian assistance in general and Early Recovery projects in particular (since these have longer lead and implementation timeframes).<sup>18</sup> In brief, while cross-border aid delivery used to be dependent

on Russian consent, it is now directly hostage to the Assad regime and any demands the regime cares to make of the UN.<sup>19</sup>

### **Problem 3: A focus on lifesaving aid over Early Recovery work**

Another limitation of the current humanitarian funding mechanisms in Syria is their almost exclusive focus on saving lives. The Humanitarian Response Plans for 2021, 2022 and 2023 indicate that lifesaving support accounted for 94-99 per cent of all humanitarian aid. Early Recovery assistance makes up the remainder. While this is worthwhile, it is not sustainable. There is a growing consensus among donors and humanitarians that more 'Early Recovery assistance' can empower Syrian communities to become less aid dependent and more resilient.

Western donors actually agreed to increase Early Recovery assistance at the Sixth Brussels Conference in May 2022, but funding has remained low due to donor fatigue, diverging political views on Early Recovery, and policy reservations stemming from the lack of a clear distinction between Early Recovery and reconstruction.<sup>20</sup> As to diverging political views, Russia used to condition its consent to the annual renewal of UN resolutions authorising cross-border humanitarian aid on Western commitment to finance more Early Recovery assistance. In their turn, Western donors viewed any increase in Early Recovery as quid pro quo for the Assad regime re-energising the stalled political process outlined in UNSCR 2254.<sup>21</sup> Neither happened. As to policy reservations, the absence of agreement over the scale and scope of Early Recovery has played a significant role in keeping budgets limited, even though the principle has been accepted among donors and humanitarians. For example, where does

---

14 See: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15348.doc.htm> (accessed 20 April 2024).

15 See: <https://jfl.ngo/en/cross-border-aid-into-syria-is-legal/> (accessed 20 April 2024); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/28/no-legal-barrier-un-cross-border-syria> (accessed 21 April 2024).

16 See: <https://apnews.com/article/syria-turkey-aid-united-nations-border-a16380592effaf5113a03f6bfc76a49> (accessed 20 April 2024).

17 See: <https://npasyria.com/en/111145/> (accessed 21 April 2024).

18 Interview with Syrian NGO staff, 28 March 2024 by phone; Interview with humanitarian coordinator, 2 April 2024 by phone.

---

19 It is likely, for example, that the UN initiated its Early Recovery Trust Fund as quid pro quo for the Assad regime agreeing to the consent agreement.

20 Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *Early Recovery Assistance in Syria: Balancing Political and Humanitarian Goals*, 2023, [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2024).

21 See: <https://www.syriaintransition.com/flatonarrival> (accessed 21 April 2024).

Early Recovery end and reconstruction begin? Donors want a gradual exit from the endless need to provide lifesaving aid, but they do not want to contribute to the reconstruction of the Assad regime. Hence, what checks and balances can be introduced to map and hold this line? An important check in the equation could be the 'localisation' of humanitarian aid, i.e. entrusting its design, provision and monitoring to vetted local humanitarian organisations that know what interventions can make aid more sustainable, how community resilience can best be improved and who ultimately benefits from interventions. Nevertheless, such local NGOs will still need the backing of – and some control by – international actors in order to operate and operate responsibly in a politically charged environment like Syria.

As the next sections will demonstrate, the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) can partially resolve the problem of regime appropriation of aid by providing a governance template for existing and future funds that can be replicated, but also by severing the UN's dependence on regime consent to cross-border aid delivery. This will strengthen the UN's negotiating position for the provision of aid in Assad-held Syria – and, crucially, that of donors. Severing this link will also resolve the second problem that has plagued humanitarian aid delivery in Syria, i.e. the need to negotiate cross-border aid flows with Damascus on a permanent basis. Finally, as the AFNS has a stronger focus on Early Recovery than existing funds and a more responsible setup than the Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF) (see Table 1 below), it can help address existing hesitation towards increasing budgets for Early Recovery by developing a learning practice.

### 3. Enter the Aid Fund for Northern Syria in December 2022

The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) established the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS), a multi-donor pooled fund licensed in Turkey, in December 2022. It joins the ranks of several existing trust funds, namely the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF, UN-run), the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian

Fund (SCHF, UN-run), the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF, established by Germany/UAE/US/Syrian Opposition Coalition) and the emergent Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF, UN-run). Table 1 below provides a comparative overview of their focus, governance, geographical areas of activity and donor contributions.

The AFNS' main governance body is a Steering Board that comprises three donors (FCDO, USAID, Germany/France),<sup>22</sup> three INGOs (IRC, CARE, Human Appeal), and three Syrian NGOs (Mercy Without Limits, White Helmets, Women Now). It is subject to annual rotation, five out of nine members are women, and it is chaired by an independent person who does not have voting rights and serves as the public representative of the AFNS. Decisions on fund policies and strategic direction are based on consensus, unlike the UN SHF and SCHF (see Table 1) where decision-making authority rests entirely with the Damascus-based Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (SHF) and the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (SCHF). In brief, the AFNS gives donors and Syrian partners a greater role. In cases where the Steering Board cannot reach consensus, the AFNS convenes an ad hoc partnership board that brings all contributing donors around the table to assist in finding consensus.<sup>23</sup>

The AFNS provides both lifesaving aid and Early Recovery assistance through a localised approach. To this end, it handles two types of funding allocations. Regular allocations are made periodically in line with the UN Humanitarian Planning Cycle (HPC) and priorities identified in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). Special allocations are conducted on an ad hoc basis to enable rapid funding (less than two months until disbursement) in case of unforeseen events. The size of and priorities for budget allocations are identified through a combination of the UN's HRP and Humanitarian

<sup>22</sup> Germany and France share a seat.

<sup>23</sup> For detailed information about AFNS governance structure see: <https://afns.org/volumes/doc/Handbook-v3-clean-franklin.pdf?v=1677758831> (accessed 21 April 2024).

Table 1. Pooled humanitarian funds active in Syria

	Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS)	Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF)	Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF)	Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF)	Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF)
Established	2022	2014	2014	2013	Announced for 2024
Type	Pooled fund	Pooled fund	Pooled fund for cross-border assistance	Pooled fund for opposition-held areas	Pooled fund
Focus	Early recovery assistance, short-term gaps and life-saving assistance	Life-saving and Early Recovery assistance	Life-saving assistance	Recovery and stabilisation assistance	Early Recovery assistance
Area of activity	Idlib/Aleppo governorates, RATA corridor	Areas under control of the regime, including AANES	Idlib/Aleppo governorates	Aleppo governorate, AANES areas	Areas under control of the regime, including AANES
Management	Consortium led by Adam Smith International	UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator	UN OCHA	Management Unit headed by the Director General	UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator
Governance (decision-making)	Steering Board with 9 voting members (3 donors, 3 Syrian NGOs, 3 INGOs); consensus based	UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator; not consensus-based	UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator; not consensus-based	Steering Board and Management Committee; decision-making processes unknown	UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator; not consensus-based
Partners	INGOs, RC movement, local NGOs, small CBOs	UN agencies, INGOs, Syrian NGOs, RC movement	UN agencies, INGOs, Syrian NGOs, RC movement	Local Councils, Public Service councils, public service providers, NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies,	UN agencies, INGOs
Planning and needs assessments	Consideration of UN HRP; independent assessments	UN HRP; UN Country Team identifies needs priorities	UN HRP; UN Country Team identifies needs priorities	Independent assessments	UN Country Team identifies needs priorities
Grant duration (max)	18 months	12 months	12 months	Average 18 months	5 years
Donor contributions (2023-24, preliminary)	US\$90.75 million	US\$67 million	US\$150 million	US\$22 million	No information available

Legend: AANES = Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; RC movement = Red Cross Red Crescent Movement; CBOs = Community-based organisations; RATA corridor = Turkey-controlled corridor between Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad, also known as ‘Peace Spring area’.

Needs Overview (HNO), cluster inputs<sup>24</sup> and independent assessments conducted by the AFNS. After the allocation strategy is approved by the Steering Board, selected project and partner proposals that respond to tender calls by the fund are handed to Technical Review Committees, which are put together on an ad hoc basis for each allocation and include experts from UN agencies, INGOs, Syrian partners, and an equal number of AFNS technical experts. Committee recommendations are subsequently shared with the Steering Board in a dynamic process of exchange of views and feedback until there is approval. Funds are managed and operational support is provided by a Fund Management Agent contracted by the FCDO and led by Adam Smith International based in Gaziantep, Turkey. This setup means that the AFNS can operate independently from the UN with regards to data and planning and deliver aid to northern Syria without the Assad regime's consent. Nevertheless, the AFNS currently works through the UN with regards to local access negotiations and coordination.

Until March 2024, the AFNS had delivered three allocations worth US\$83 million, with funding timelines of up to 18 months. Donations have so far been made by seven countries, namely the UK, US, France, Germany, Netherlands, Qatar and the Channel Island of Jersey. The AFNS aims to attract more donors, seeking to match the scale of the UN Syrian Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), which runs to about US\$150 million annually.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the fund has gone well beyond the proof-of-concept stage and demonstrated that it can work and scale up.

---

24 Clusters are UN-led technical working groups of humanitarian organisations and government bodies focused on specific sectors, e.g. health and protection.

25 See: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cross-border-humanitarian-fund-2023-cumulative-dashboard-end-year-20-december-2023> (accessed 21 April 2024).

## 4. Addressing aid capture and cross-border dependencies

Originally, the AFNS was designed as a contingency mechanism in case the UN is no longer able to operate across the border. Since this has not yet happened, the AFNS has so far complemented the existing SCHF (see Table 1 above). The tortuous nature of past negotiations about cross-border aid and gradual closure of border crossings to the UN makes it likely that at some point the Assad regime will impose new, possibly unacceptable, conditions on UN aid, or even withdraw from parts of the consent agreement altogether. Early warning signs for such a scenario already exist. For example, Russia accused the UN of bypassing the Assad regime in its humanitarian response in northwest Syria during an intervention at the Security Council on 27 February 2024.<sup>26</sup> Also, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Adam Abdelmoula remarked to donors at a meeting in April that launching and funding the ERTF would have a positive impact on the Assad regime's continued consent to cross-border assistance.<sup>27</sup> A final factor that makes further demands by Assad more likely is that donors have so far not indicated that they will stop all humanitarian aid to Syria in case the regime cuts humanitarian access to the northern opposition-held areas.

Should the consent agreement between OCHA and the Assad regime eventually fail, the AFNS is likely to shift to an NGO-led approach to delivering humanitarian aid with a significant

---

26 See: <https://undocs.org/S/PV.9559> (accessed 20 April 2024).

27 The ERTF is a new initiative of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator scheduled to launch in the first half of 2024. At the time of writing, the UN has shared concept notes with donors but has not publicised conclusive information about the ERTF. The information in this brief draws on a draft Terms of Reference obtained by the authors. Western diplomatic sources interviewed for this brief have unanimously indicated that they view the ERTF negatively due to a lack of critical (governance) safeguards. For more information: <https://www.syriaintransition.com/reconstruction-lite> (accessed 21 April 2024).



role for the Northwest Syria NGO Forum,<sup>28</sup> given that over 70 per cent of cross-border assistance is already conducted by these NGOs.<sup>29</sup> Such a shift would, however, require significant capacity investment in the Forum, which lacks efficient leadership and coordination. Its fragmentation stems from the absence of a cohesive donor strategy to support the leadership role of the local NGO community, instead favouring a UN-led system that is dominated by a few large Syrian-led NGOs based in Turkey that act as intermediaries and gatekeepers.<sup>30</sup>

In brief, the AFNS offers a viable opportunity to put the provision of humanitarian aid to opposition-held areas in northern Syria on a sustainable footing in the short term, reduce Assad's leverage over aid provision in regime-held Syria, increase that of donors in the medium term, and, consequentially, reduce regime capture of aid in the long term. This should free up humanitarian resources and make sure existing resources can be used more efficiently.

## 5. Increasing aid localisation and Early Recovery efforts

The humanitarian community has long emphasised the importance of local ownership and participation as a longstanding goal.<sup>31</sup> Local actors are typically seen as key to mobilising effective and sustainable humanitarian responses due to their greater skills and deeper knowledge in assessing needs and identifying challenges. Moreover, their connections often allow them to secure access. In the context of Syria, local actors took the lead in delivering humanitarian aid early on. This was not, however, the result of an enlightened international plan to live up to commitments made in the past. It was rather the consequence of expats being

withdrawn out of security concerns and visa hurdles imposed by the Assad regime to ensure that humanitarian assistance was implemented by national staff it was more able to control.

Despite recognition of the importance of local actors, they have hardly been empowered. In 2016, major donors and humanitarian organisations signed The Grand Bargain, pledging to transfer greater decision-making power to local and national actors. The aim was to channel 25 per cent of all humanitarian funding directly to such actors by 2020.<sup>32</sup> Until now, however, there has been no common definition of localisation or a strategic approach to achieving it. As a result, on the whole local Syrian partners continue to be subcontracted by INGOs and their intermediaries rather than funded directly.<sup>33</sup> Although an estimated 75 per cent of humanitarian assistance within Syria was implemented by Syrian NGOs in 2019, they received less than 1 per cent of the direct funding available.<sup>34</sup>

The AFNS has developed a more strategic approach to localisation that seeks to streamline funding and reorganise the downstream model that is predominant in the Syria response.<sup>35</sup> Typically, INGOs and big Syrian NGOs headquartered in Turkey win UN contracts or receive bilateral donor support and sub-contract implementation to smaller organisations inside

28 See: <https://reliefweb.int/organization/nws-ngo-forum> (accessed 21 April 2024).

29 See: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria> (accessed 21 April 2024).

30 Interview with humanitarian coordinator, 20 April 2024 by phone.

31 See: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/45827300.pdf> (accessed 21 April 2024).

32 Dixon, S., Moreno, E., et al. *Localisation of Humanitarian Response in the Syrian Crisis*, Confluences Méditerranée, Vol. 99, Issue 4, 2016, [online](#) (accessed 21 April 2024).

33 Duclos, D., Ekzayez, A., et al. *Localisation and cross-border assistance to deliver humanitarian health services in North-West Syria: a qualitative inquiry for The Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria*, Conflict and Health 13, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2024).

34 See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/enabling-localized-aid-response-syria-assessment-syrian-led> (accessed 21 April 2024).

35 Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS), *Localisation Strategy*, 2023, online (accessed 21 April 2024). For further information on AFNS' accessibility for NGOs compared to other funds such as the UN's RhPF (piloted in West and Central Africa) and the Global Start Fund, see: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/pooled-funding-models-governance-systems-a-comparative-study/> (accessed 21 April 2024).



Syria. These smaller organisations are what keeps the humanitarian engine running but, in most cases, do not meet the technical eligibility criteria to receive direct funding or do not have the capabilities to handle complex application processes in the first place. Treating them as (replaceable) service providers makes it difficult for them to build the capacity that is necessary to qualify for direct funding that could, in turn, cover their overheads and enable further professionalisation and growth. Under the present UN-led system, there are no incentives for INGOs or big Syrian NGOs headquartered in Turkey to empower small organisations because their role as gatekeepers helps them to maintain relevance and secure future contracts.

In contrast, the AFNS approach to localisation aims to reduce the number of intermediary actors by expecting local and international NGOs to fund small organisations directly whenever possible (rather than subcontracting big Syrian NGOs headquartered in Turkey), and by conditioning funding for partners on their readiness to involve local actors more extensively in decision-making and to share with them the overheads they receive from donors. Under this approach, 72 per cent of funding in 2023 went to Syrian NGOs (in comparison, the SCHF achieved 55 per cent). AFNS strategy papers suggest that this is a transitional approach meant to serve as a proof of concept for donors to ultimately allow more funding to go directly to smaller grassroots organisations while limiting the role of big NGOs to the provision of specialised services (such as blood banks or more comprehensive early recovery activities).

Research suggests that such a switch to local intermediaries would be highly cost-effective. A 2022 study by the Share Trust and Warande Advisory Centre estimates that by stripping out inflated international overhead and salary costs while providing local actors with salaries and overheads equitable to their international counterparts, local intermediaries could deliver programming 32 per cent more efficiently than international intermediaries. If 25 per cent of the US\$54 billion of donations that the UN and INGOs receive annually would be shifted to

local intermediaries, this would equate to cost savings of US\$4.3 billion per year.<sup>36</sup> This sum could have covered a large part of the entire UN humanitarian response plan for Syria of 2023.<sup>37</sup> Among other things, it could finance the investment the Northwest Syria NGO Forum needs to improve its leadership and coordination capabilities, which will be necessary for it to take over from the UN-system when the consent agreement comes to an end, or if donors simply decide to shift away from the current dependency on Damascus for cross-border aid delivery. Investment in this Forum is anyway a smart move to accelerate localisation of the humanitarian response in Syria.

The AFNS' approach to localisation is likely to encounter resistance from those who benefit from current arrangements. There is also a risk resulting from the fact that giving local actors decision-making power over humanitarian aid amounts to providing them with economic power in a resource-scarce environment and a source of political legitimacy. In the first years of the Syrian civil war, internationally funded local civil society actors were able to claim political leadership roles based on their ability to provide limited services. This undermined the small amount of legitimacy that locally elected revolutionary councils enjoyed. A repeat of such a situation would need to be avoided through a judicious mix of localisation and international supervision-of-last-resort based on sound political economy analysis.

In civil wars, going local is no panacea. Local actors have intimate knowledge but, being embedded in their communities, have biases and face social pressure.<sup>38</sup> In conflict contexts, they are also part of the conflict tapestry, whether or not they want to be. Hence, to a large extent,

---

36 Venton, C., Warria, C., et al. *Passing the Buck: The Economics of Localizing International Assistance*, 2022, [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2024).

37 Budgeted at US\$5.41 billion. See: <https://humanitarianaction.info/overview/2023> (accessed 26 April 2024).

38 Elgibali, K., Elkahlout, G., *From Theory to Practice: A Study of Remotely Managed Localised Humanitarian Action in Syria*, 2020, [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2024).

the AFNS approach of operationalising and implementing localisation explores new terrain. While there is plenty of conceptual research and anecdotal evidence coming from practitioners, little systematic evidence has been gathered that demonstrates the estimated operational benefits of localisation can be realized in practice (access, speed and sustainability). On the other hand, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that it is riskier than the predominant intermediary model either.<sup>39</sup> In other words, there seems to be little risk and potentially many advantages in increasing the level of localisation. A representative of an NGO that has implemented multiple AFNS-funded projects on the ground noted that the fund's localisation approach has already increased capacities across various sectors because application announcements and technical implementation procedures have been both professional and context-sensitive.<sup>40</sup> Given that the current aid delivery model is not sustainable, exploring new terrain seems worthwhile. Navigating its manifold challenges requires careful planning and finesse in establishing networks on the ground.

## 6. Bonus: Bringing closer a 'safe, calm and neutral environment'

Conflict resolution efforts based on UNSCR 2254 are often considered deadlocked due to the Assad regime's intransigence and international stakeholders' incompatible interests. Such conventional wisdom overlooks the need for effective conflict management as a precursor to conflict resolution. While big-ticket items like identity, national legitimacy, borders and power sharing cannot be resolved at present, a more practical and local conflict management strategy could alleviate the humanitarian situation in Syria, enhance livelihood prospects and perhaps prevent permanent partition. This is what the concept of creating a 'safe, calm and neutral environment (SCNE) is all about. Rooted in the 2012 Geneva

Communiqué and the 2015 UNSCR 2254, the call for an SCNE has gained momentum as a potentially unifying framework for Syrian civil society organisations, even in regime-controlled areas. Western political and humanitarian actors have also recognised its potential, aligning the notion with its 'triple nexus' approach that integrates life-saving aid, development assistance (including Early Recovery) and peacebuilding efforts.

The unconventional structure of the AFNS makes it a multilateral agency and partner rather than a traditional donor. Its resulting greater neutrality means it is well equipped to play a prominent role in piloting SCNE-informed projects in northern Syria using its Early Recovery budgets, with implementation organised via its localisation strategy. The AFNS' localisation agenda, especially, makes it well-suited to support community networks as part of a broader conflict management strategy that can be developed collaboratively by Syrian civil society, the private sector, de facto authorities and international state actors. Notably, the AFNS' mandate extends beyond northwest Syria to include the Turkish-controlled corridor between Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abad (the 'Peace Spring area'), with potential expansion to northeast Syria.<sup>41</sup> The combination of its independence from the UN, localisation approach, greater attention to Early Recovery and territorial mandate present an opportunity to use the fund to encourage greater connectivity between the northern regions of Syria and facilitate cross-area stabilisation projects that foster mutual dependencies between hostile parties. For instance, cross-area projects on water and energy infrastructure could be leveraged to make 'pragmatic peacebuilding' an ancillary goal of early recovery assistance

39 Venton and Warria, *Ibid.*

40 Interview with NGO staff, 19 April 2023, WhatsApp.

41 Expansion to northeast Syria depends on the governance, financial and administrative bandwidth of the AFNS that in turn depend on the funding and political support it receives from the FCDO and other donors. Political sensitivities are considerable because the Assad regime's presence in northeast Syria would need to be taken into account and mutually agreeable terms with Turkey negotiated.

on a larger scale.<sup>42</sup> By investing in communities while promoting convergence between different areas of control, the AFNS can advance the SCNE agenda that contributes to better conflict management in Syria, as well as making the humanitarian response more sustainable.

## Conclusions

Born out of necessity, the AFNS offers an opportunity to tackle some of the problems that have long diminished the effectiveness of the international community's humanitarian response in Syria. Addressing these issues can reduce the humanitarian funding gap by making existing aid flows count for more. This will help maintain humanitarian aid levels in view of an approaching funding crunch. It will also mitigate geopolitical consequences that will inevitably arise from a deteriorating humanitarian situation, such as more local predation and migration towards Turkey and Europe. As a bonus, the AFNS' greater focus on Early Recovery, its more balanced governance structure and its innovative, if emergent, localisation strategy can help bring about a 'safe, calm and neutral environment'. This can be achieved by strengthening connectivity between different parts of northern Syria through Early Recovery work. It offers a pragmatic and low-key conflict management strategy as the international community waits for new windows of opportunity to open that can help resolve the conflict. To seize this potential, three recommendations are worthy of consideration:

*First, unequivocally support the AFNS to gradually take over the cross-border provision of humanitarian aid.* Due to AFNS independence of both the UN and Damascus, which have become problematically intertwined in the provision of humanitarian aid, putting the fund in pole position regarding cross-border aid provision eliminates the regime's leverage over the entire humanitarian response and will allow

the UN to drive a harder bargain with Damascus regarding humanitarian aid to regime-held Syria. Donors have the opportunity to increase the value for money of their aid, reduce the slice of their resources that benefits Damascus and force the UN into a stricter humanitarian posture. Acting on this recommendation requires donors to concentrate their cross-border aid funds in the AFNS and to mobilise political capital to ensure that AFNS coordination with the UN runs smoothly.

*Second, use the AFNS governance model to reform the aid architecture in all of Syria.* The AFNS model, which involves equal decision-making rights for donors, INGOs and Syrian partners, along with a focus on localisation tailored to the Syrian context, can help break the bureaucratic and exclusive decision-making practices regarding humanitarian aid provision that have become entrenched over time. Empirical evidence suggests that the current UN-led aid architecture centred on the Country Team does not adequately prevent the systematic diversion and misuse of aid. By shifting decision-making authority away from the UN on its own, better use can be made of existing resources and capabilities.

*Third, advance the creation of a 'safe, calm and neutral environment' via the AFNS.* The more inclusive structures of the AFNS (leadership, decision-making and implementation), its greater focus on Early Recovery and its innovative, if emergent, localisation strategy position it well to support programming aligned with the triple nexus, i.e. efforts to integrate humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities to greater synergetic effect. Early Recovery initiatives can build on the manifold relationship webs that exist between communities in and across Syria's divided territories to improve inter-area civilian travel, education, trade, aid and investment. Greater connectivity will amplify these relationships and create mutual dependencies that can gradually lead to greater trust and confidence. This will enable more effective conflict management in the medium term and might even create conditions for conflict resolution in line with UNSCR 2254 in the long term.







---

42 Examples for such projects include water infrastructure and distribution agreements in the Idlib-Hama-Latakia triangle, and energy initiatives in northern Aleppo. For more see: <https://www.syriaintransition.com/triplenexusyriaversion> (accessed 23 April 2024).

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)  
[info@clingendael.org](mailto:info@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 clingendael\_institute  
 Clingendael Institute  
 Newsletter

### About the author

**Lars Hauch** is research director at Conflict Mediation Solutions. Before, he worked as independent researcher and consultant for various humanitarian organizations, security companies and political consultancy outfits. His analyses of non-state armed groups, humanitarian responses and political dynamics in Syria and the region have appeared in numerous publications.

**Erwin van Veen** is a senior research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit where he leads a team that analyses the political economy of conflicts and crises in the Middle East. His own work examines the political use of armed groups in processes of state development and geopolitical conflict.