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HUMANITARIAN AID IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS:
A CASE STUDY OF CROSS-BORDER AID TO SYRIA

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1. Introduction

The Syrian conflict is one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of the 21st century. Since 2011, more than 220,000 people have been killed, 8 million have been internally displaced, and 4 million have fled Syria as refugees.¹ Despite a large number of people in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance, the Syrian government has chosen to ignore its responsibility to its civilians. The al-Assad regime has denied the UN and humanitarian relief organizations widespread access to the country, however this has not kept some organizations from responding to the crisis via remotely managed cross-border aid programs.

With heavy restrictions on access and high risks to aid workers, humanitarian organizations have turned to cross-border aid programs as a solution. A cross-border aid program is a type of emergency humanitarian program in which remote management techniques are used to send aid (food, non food items, medical supplies, shelter, etc) into a country experiencing a war or crisis from a neighboring country where the program and its staff are based. The use of cross-border programs versus traditional humanitarian aid programs are a result of limited access due to overwhelming government restrictions and/or extreme levels of violence that prevent staff from establishing normal operations inside a country. While cross-border aid programs have been a feature at some point during past conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Syria is different due to the fact that cross-border programs were needed from the very beginning of the war as a result of the Syrian government's strict control of access to the country and its historic policy of repressing civil society.²

The positive results of cross-border programs are undeniable. Mercy Corps, a US-based humanitarian organization, reports that its cross-border programs provided aid to 1.3 million

¹ Mercy Corps, *Cracking the Code: Enhancing Emergency Response & Resilience in Complex Crises*: 9.

² Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites, and Danya Chudacoff, "Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings— The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan," *Feinstein International Center* (2015): 14.

people in 147 locations inside Syria each month throughout 2014.³ Further, as of March 2015, the UN and its implementing partners have provided 925,300 people in two governorates in southern Syria with food commodities, health assistance, and emergency relief supplies via cross-border programs from Jordan.⁴ Cross-border aid programs have the potential to make a difference in the lives of millions of Syrians and it is important to better understand how these programs function.

We began our research with this in mind and set out to answer the following question: How are international aid and development organizations overcoming the challenges and issues of implementing remotely-managed cross-border humanitarian aid programs in Syria? It is our hope that the following paper will help humanitarian relief practitioners and policy makers to better understand the nature of cross-border programs in Syria, as well as to analyze best practice for these types of aid programs. To this end, we will begin with an overview of the literature and process of cross-border humanitarian aid before examining key issues and challenges that aid workers face based on eight first-hand interviews. Finally we will make several recommendations in an effort to disseminate best practice and lessons learned in the implementation of cross-border programs.

2. Background

The humanitarian needs situation in Syria is extremely complex and continues to worsen, with a total of 13.5 million Syrians, including 6 million children, in need of life saving assistance.⁵ Challenges to access pose a particularly difficult problem for humanitarian organizations in responding to the crisis, as demonstrated by the fact that 4.5 million of those in

³ Mercy Corps, *Cracking the Code*, 11.

⁴ USAID, *Syria Complex Emergency – Fact Sheet #5*, USAID, March 2015.

⁵ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2016, Syrian Arab Republic*, UNOCHA, October 2015: 3.

need are in hard-to-reach areas, including 390,000 people in besieged areas.⁶ The UN defines a hard-to-reach area as “an area that is not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors for the purpose of sustained humanitarian programming as a result of denial of access.”⁷ Complex patterns of internal displacement along conflict lines also contribute to access and programmatic challenges for aid organizations, with a total of 6.5 million Syrians internally displaced at the end of 2015.⁸

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that 8.7 million Syrians are in acute need of multi-sectoral assistance such as food, non food items, and healthcare.⁹ The fact that humanitarian needs in Syria span across all humanitarian sectors necessitates the involvement of a large cross-section of aid organizations, and also poses the challenge of needs prioritization in a situation where a limited amount of aid can enter the country due to border challenges. The needs situation is increasingly dire, as life expectancy among Syrians has been reduced by 20 years since the onset of the crisis in 2011, and close to 9 million Syrians are unable to meet their basic food needs, with 70% of the population lacking access to safe drinking water.¹⁰ Three in four Syrians currently live in poverty,¹¹ and needs are greatest in protection, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, livelihoods and access to markets, food security, and shelter.¹²

Safety and security challenges are one of the main barriers to the humanitarian response in Syria. The high level of security risk to humanitarian personnel, coupled with the Syrian

⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁷ Cara Anna, “UN: 4.5 million people in Syria are not ‘besieged’ — they are ‘hard to reach,’” Business Insider, February 9, 2016.

⁸ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2016, Syrian Arab Republic*, 3.

⁹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan 2016, Syrian Arab Republic*, UNOCHA, December 2015: 4.

¹⁰ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 6.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan*, 6.

government's refusal to grant access to the country, is a key reason that necessitates cross-border and remotely managed programs in an effort to protect staff. The extreme risk to personnel is demonstrated by the fact that, as of the end of 2015, at least 654 health workers and 81 aid workers had been killed since the beginning of the conflict.¹³ The fact that actors on all sides of the conflict have been willing to target, and in some cases have even deliberately targeted, civilian and humanitarian facilities has exacerbated these risks and made the situation more dangerous for organizations operating on the ground in Syria. Between June and August 2015 alone, there were at least 70 recorded aerial attacks on health facilities,¹⁴ while attacks peaked again in February 2016, with 30 attacks on health facilities throughout the month, in which 7 personnel were killed.¹⁵

3. Literature Review

Before understanding the challenges of implementing cross-border aid programs in Syria, it is important to place the subject in a larger theoretical and conceptual framework in order to produce better analysis. Attempting to place and analyze our research topic within an established, formal academic framework was a challenge since remotely-managed cross-border humanitarian aid is a unique topic that does not fit within a traditional academic body of literature. While much has been written about humanitarian aid, development, and civil war by both academics and aid professionals, we could not find a single peer-reviewed journal article or academic source specifically on cross-border aid programs. Therefore, the ability to ground our research question in academic theory is limited. With this in mind, we approached our research from two

¹³ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵ WHO/Syria Response Turkey-Cross Border Health Cluster, *Attacks on Healthcare in Syria, February 2016*, WHO, March 11, 2016: 5.

perspectives: theory of state capacity during civil war and issues facing the delivery of humanitarian aid in conflict environments.

3.1 State Capacity in Civil War

State capacity is a multifaceted concept that affects civil wars in a variety of ways¹⁶ and is essentially defined as the ability of a state to exercise control over its people, borders, activities, and resources.¹⁷ Hendrix (2010) further classifies state capacity into three categories: military capacity, bureaucratic and administrative capacity, and the coherence of state political institutions.¹⁸ State capacity affects the ability of armed groups to engage in fighting against the state, as well as the state's ability to defend against such groups, and it is often used to explain the onset and duration of a civil war.¹⁹ A state with a strong military will logically have the ability to control its borders and the ability to regulate population movements, while a weaker state may not. Access to vulnerable populations and the ability to move aid across borders is imperative to humanitarian actors in conflict zones, thus making state capacity a major factor in the success of such programs due to its ability to regulate aid flows.

Since humanitarian aid is a valuable economic resource, both the state and other armed groups in a civil war will seek to control or regulate it in an effort to influence and control the civilian population. Some of the ways in which a state can influence, or impede, the delivery of humanitarian aid includes restricting the activities of aid workers, restricting access to rebel or

¹⁶ David Sobek, "Masters of Their Domains: The Role of State Capacity in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, 3 (2010): 270.

¹⁷ Mattias Ottervik, "Conceptualizing and Measuring State Capacity: Testing the Validity of Tax Compliance as a Measure of State Capacity," *The Quality of Government Institute* 2013:20 (2013): 3.

¹⁸ Cullen S. Hendrix, "Measuring State Capacity: Theoretical and Empirical Implications for the Study of Civil Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, 3 (2010): 274.

¹⁹ David Sobek, "Masters of Their Domains," 269.

enemy territory where aid is badly needed, and requiring aid groups to operate under the protection of a state-sanctioned armed force, which many humanitarians view as unethical.²⁰

In regards to Syria, state capacity theory could, at one time, be used to help identify and understand the issues and challenges facing humanitarian actors implementing cross-border aid programs. Based on our research we have determined that the Syrian government has moderate state capacity because it can control access to populations in some areas and it can control official border crossings (but not the full extent of its borders). This is relevant to humanitarian aid because while some aid can be, and is, crossed through unofficial crossing points, any UN-funded aid must pass through official, state-regulated border checkpoints. This is due to the UN's commitment to state sovereignty. However, we find that state capacity is not a sufficient enough framework in which to analyze cross-border aid. This is due to a major artificial condition outside of the realm of normal state capacity theory.

In July 2014 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2165, which gave UN agencies and their implementing partners the legal authority to conduct cross-border humanitarian aid operations.²¹ In December 2015 the Security Council extended this vital authority until January 2017 under UN Resolution 2258.²² Prior to these resolutions, the Syrian government's moderate state capacity was affecting aid flows into Syria, however with the implementation of Resolution 2165 in July 2014, state capacity theory has lost its ability to explain cross-border aid flows. Therefore, we cannot use state capacity theory as a solid framework in which to guide our research. The Syrian government's willingness to comply with, rather than to block or fight, the

²⁰ Glyn Taylor, Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, Katherine Haver, Paul Harvey, Kathryn Barber, Lisa Schreter and Constance Wilhelm, "The State of the Humanitarian System," *ALNAP* (2012): 24.

²¹ Syrian American Medical Society, "White Paper: Implementing UN Cross-Border Aid to Syria under Resolution 2165," SAMS, December 2014: 4.

²² United Nations, "Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2258 (2015), Security Council Renews Authorization for Passage of Humanitarian Aid into Syria," United Nations Meetings Coverage, December 22, 2015.

resolution despite its moderate capacity to control its official borders falls outside of the framework of the theory. Further, prior to July 2014, some aid organizations used (and still use) unofficial border crossings to send aid into Syria. While this is risky, it is possible, which shows that the al-Assad regime, despite its relative capacity to control state territory, does not have true control of its borders.

Even though the conflict in Syria is a civil war, the internationalization of the conflict means that state capacity theory is not sufficient to fully explain its dynamics, especially in regards to cross-border humanitarian aid. Elements such as the UN resolution, military intervention in the form of proxy forces backed by states like the US and Iran, and threats from foreign armed groups such as ISIS, all have an effect on the conflict and the Syrian government's ability to control the state. Subsequently, this also influences the state of humanitarian assistance inside the country, as well as the challenges that humanitarian actors face when implementing aid programs.

3.2 Issues of Humanitarian Aid in Conflicts

One of the most basic factors that has a large influence on humanitarian aid in conflicts is funding. Major Western donor countries, like the US, and the UN are the primary financial sources for aid organizations. While the allocation of funding for humanitarian aid should be based on need, the reality is that aid is often politicized and used as a tool to further foreign policy and national security objectives. In Syria, the US has decided that the country is of significant national interest and as of February 2016, has given more than \$5.1 billion in humanitarian assistance over the course of the conflict.²³ Should the funding priorities or

²³ *New US Assistance to Respond to Syria Crisis – Fact Sheet*, US Department of State, February 4, 2016.

perceptions of national interest of the US or other major donor countries change, this could have a negative effect on the amount of funding for aid organizations, thus effecting cross-border aid programs.

Many of the major challenges and issues surrounding humanitarian aid delivery in conflict environments, including Syria, can fall under the umbrella of shrinking humanitarian space, which is a concept based on the view that UN agencies and NGOs are facing increasingly greater dangers, threats, and constraints when attempting to respond to humanitarian needs, thus limiting how they can operate (if at all). Humanitarian space, though a disputed concept, can best be defined as the context in which humanitarian action occurs and is a product of the complex interplay of military, political and legal actors, institutions, processes and interests.²⁴ The idea that humanitarian space is shrinking, which is both shared and disputed by many in the humanitarian field, is partially a product of the post-9/11 era, which saw the use of humanitarian assistance as a tool for Western governments to achieve security and political goals abroad.²⁵ In examples from the past 10 years such as Iraq and Afghanistan, this took the form of one of the main international donors for humanitarian funds, the US, simultaneously engaging as an active party in the conflict and thus creating a conflict of interest that raised the suspicion that aid was tied to a Western agenda.²⁶ Other elements that contribute to the perception that humanitarian space is shrinking, thus putting aid workers and beneficiaries at risk, are an increase in the complexity of conflicts, increased attacks and deaths of aid workers, and NGOs choosing to

²⁴ Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, "Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues," *Humanitarian Policy Group* 32 (2012): 1.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁶ Glyn Taylor, et al, "The State of the Humanitarian System," 23.

“stay and deliver” rather than flee an insecure operating environment as often occurred in the past.²⁷

Humanitarian aid in conflict environments is not a new phenomenon and there was substantial cross-border aid work in Afghanistan and Eritrea throughout the 1980s. It can be argued that cross-border programs are a result of the insecurity produced by post-Cold War conflicts. Howe, Stites, and Chudacoff (2015) identify two trends that have contributed to a shift in how humanitarian actors respond to emergency and conflict situations. First is remote programming, which is a product of rising levels of insecurity in which organizations withdraw their international staff and transfer management and responsibility of programs to local staff.²⁸ Second is the aid industry’s emphasis towards “localization or local ownership,” which attempts to put a local face on development and aid programs by seeking more direct involvement from local governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, and the beneficiaries themselves in aid programs.²⁹

Remote management and cross-border programs have become more prevalent in the world due to insecure environments and threats facing humanitarian workers. Kidnapping is the fastest growing type of attack against humanitarian aid workers, which creates major obstacles to program implementation in areas where aid is often needed the most.³⁰ The UN defines remote management as “an adaptation to insecurity, the practice of withdrawing international (or other at-risk staff) while transferring increased programming responsibilities to local staff or local

²⁷ Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, "Humanitarian Space: A Review," 10.

²⁸ Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites, and Danya Chudacoff, "Breaking the Hourglass," 14.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Jean S. Renouf, "Once Removed: Lessons and challenges in remote management of humanitarian operations for insecure areas," *Humanitarian Outcomes* (February 2010): 11.

partner organizations.”³¹ Various development and humanitarian organizations have adapted their own definition of remote management, but the UN’s definition broadly encompasses a solid working idea of the concept.

Remote management of humanitarian aid has become significant in the last 20 years due to prolonged and violent conflicts in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan among others.³² Some of the major issues surrounding remote implementation of aid include quality assurance and monitoring, the ethical issue of transferring security risks to local communities, and oversight challenges of local implementing partners.³³ Major issues surrounding cross-border programs include legal constraints on NGOs from both the base and target countries’ governments,³⁴ logistical challenges, security, and the ethical dilemma of negotiating with armed groups in order to ship aid across geographic space and to safely distribute it.

While the specific strategies and methods used to address the challenges of remotely implemented cross-border aid operations vary across organizations, there are some principles that can be considered best practice. These include using a variety of technological platforms to monitor and manage aid delivery and removing local staff from the target country for face-to-face training and capacity building.³⁵

In addition to deciding how best to use remote management as an operational mode to conduct humanitarian intervention in a conflict, there are a number of other major challenges to humanitarian actors. One of the biggest, and most concerning, issues is the potential for aid to

³¹ Antonio Donini and Daniel Maxwell, "From Face-to-face to Face-to-screen: Remote Management, Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments," *International Review of the Red Cross* 95 (2013): 386.

³² Ibid, 387.

³³ Ibid, 402-403.

³⁴ Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, "The Law Regulating Cross-border Relief Operations," *International Review of the Red Cross* 95 (2013): 351-382.

³⁵ Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Jean S. Renouf, "Once Removed: Lessons and challenges," 1-44.

prolong a conflict. This happens when, for example, armed groups seize aid convoys intended for civilian populations, and divert the aid to their forces or sell it for financial gain.³⁶ Further, the literature on this subject often identifies four main ways that this occurs. First, aid can inadvertently provide direct or indirect material support to armed groups in a conflict.³⁷ Though combatants are required under international law to distinguish themselves from noncombatants, armed groups often live among and blend in to the civilian population in a given area.³⁸ This makes it incredibly difficult for aid organizations to know with certainty who is a civilian and who is a combatant. In Syria, humanitarian organizations primarily distribute aid in opposition-held areas. This creates the potential for aid items to inadvertently fall into the hands of civilians loosely or even closely affiliated with local militias or armed groups.

Second, the literature identifies the potential for humanitarian aid to result in the creation of protected areas or safe zones in a conflict, which armed groups can then use as staging grounds to launch attacks.³⁹ While uncommon, there have been instances in previous civil wars and conflicts of armed groups using refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps as mechanisms to recruit new fighters, resupply forces, and/or plan attacks.⁴⁰ While IDP camps exist inside of Syria, international humanitarian organizations often refuse to distribute aid in these enclaves due to a number of ethical considerations such as the corruption of local camp managers/land owners and the inability to independently distribute aid to all people in the camp based on need and humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.⁴¹ The establishment of

³⁶ Reed M. Wood and Christopher Sullivan, "Doing Harm by Doing Good? The Negative Externalities of Humanitarian Aid Provision during Civil Conflict," *AidData* 11 (July 2015): 8.

³⁷ Neil Narang, "Assisting Uncertainty: How Humanitarian Aid Can Inadvertently Prolong Civil War," *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (2015): 185.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Aid Worker #1. Interview by authors, March 16, 2016.

future safe zones or humanitarian corridors as some international actors have called for could, however, make the issue of armed groups using protected humanitarian areas to launch attacks a tangible concern.

Third, humanitarian aid has the potential to insulate armed parties from the political burden and responsibility of sustaining a war.⁴² Large amounts of international assistance can meet the needs of local civilian populations, thus allowing armed parties to focus limited resources on war efforts.⁴³ This could theoretically be a factor in Syria, however given the large number of diverse opposition groups, as well as the Syrian government's blatant disregard of its responsibility to protect its citizens, humanitarian aid likely does not have an influence on the prioritization of limited resources.

A fourth way that humanitarian aid can fuel a conflict is when aid organizations' efforts create or contribute to the local war economy.⁴⁴ Some examples include international aid being taxed upon entering the country and governments or armed groups profiting from the issuance of visas, import taxes, and administrative fees.⁴⁵ Additionally, humanitarian organizations often employ local staff from the affected communities they deliver aid in, thus creating a source of employment and financial assistance to local populations. However, this argument is weak in regards to the Syrian conflict. The use of a cross-border model for delivering aid, rather than shipping it through official air or seaports controlled by the Syrian government, prevents official taxes or duties from being collected. Similarly, most aid organizations refuse to pay bribes or protection fees to armed groups in exchange for safe passage through Syria. All of the organizations we interviewed said that they hire locally inside Syria, however to assert that local

⁴² Neil Narang, "Assisting Uncertainty," 186.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

employment would result in the prolonging of a conflict as complex as the Syrian crisis is unsubstantiated.

Narang (2014) finds that, while it is far from a concrete empirical law, humanitarian aid can prolong some conflicts, especially wars in which the final destination of aid items is unknown.⁴⁶ Tracking aid and ensuring that it reaches the intended beneficiaries is a key challenge in Syria, however it has also been an element that humanitarian organizations have focused on the most. As we will discuss in the findings section of this paper, strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) procedures are a key part of each cross-border aid organization that we interviewed, and while very difficult, organizations are fairly confident that they know where and to whom their aid reaches.

Another issue that aid organizations working in a conflict environment face, particularly organizations engaged in remotely-managed programs, is shifting danger and risk to the local population. Some mistakenly assume that local staff face less danger than international staff in a conflict environment, therefore shifting responsibilities and management to local staff is seen as an effective way to mitigate risks.⁴⁷ However, studies show that local staff experience extreme risks but do not have the resources and support that their international colleagues would have in the same situation.⁴⁸ In Syria, the organizations interviewed described safety procedures they implement such as staff tracking and continuous monitoring of conflict dynamics and local conditions, however given the myriad uncertainties, it is virtually impossible to ensure the safety of staff working in an active conflict environment.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 185 and 194.

⁴⁷ Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites, and Danya Chudacoff, "Breaking the Hourglass," 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

4. The Cross-Border Model: How Aid Reaches Syria

Cross-border aid operations are an alternative to state-imposed denial of relief and humanitarian services,⁴⁹ making it an effective mechanism for a conflict like Syria. Cross-border aid shipments started “under the radar” in 2011,⁵⁰ and only in 2014 did such operations become official. This is because the UN’s own mandate prevented it from entering Syria, a sovereign country in the international system, without the explicit permission of the al-Assad government.⁵¹ The Syrian government allowed the UN to set up operations in Damascus, however the vast majority of its relief and aid items were directed toward pro-regime and regime-approved areas.⁵² This unethical and biased form of distribution that was forced on the UN by the Syrian government led to millions of Syrians remaining in an acute state of need.

Citing that “previous demands for aid access had not been heeded,” the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2165 in July 2014, making it possible for UN agencies to begin legal cross-border aid deliveries from neighboring Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.⁵³ The Security Council extended this provision until January 2017 under UN Resolution 2258, which it passed in December 2015.⁵⁴ These UN resolutions were a turning point in the international community’s response to the humanitarian situation in Syria and they will continue to be essential for the delivery of cross-border aid.

The process of conducting cross-border aid to Syria requires sound logistics, patience, and calculated risk. Additionally, the process is different for UN-funded aid and non-UN-funded

⁴⁹ Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, “Consent to humanitarian access: An obligation triggered by territorial control, not States’ rights,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 96 (2014): 215.

⁵⁰ Mercy Corps, *Cracking the Code*, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Jose Ciro Martinez and Brent Eng, “The Unintended Consequences of Emergency Food Aid: Neutrality, Sovereignty and Politics in the Syrian Civil War, 2012–15,” *International Affairs* 92: 1 (2016): 159.

⁵⁴ United Nations, “Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2258 (2015), Security Council Renews Authorization for Passage of Humanitarian Aid into Syria.”

aid. The Syrian-American Medical Society details the UN's cross-border procedures from Turkey in a white paper published in December 2014. First, the UN agency that is the donor of the aid must inform UNOCHA that it plans to cross an aid convoy into Syria 72 hours in advance, and UNOCHA in turn notifies the Syrian government 48 hours in advance.⁵⁵ The UN agency then ships its aid items to a staging area near the border where a partner organization loads the aid onto their own trucks.⁵⁶ The convoy is then inspected by Turkish customs and is sealed by the UN Monitoring Mission (UNMM).⁵⁷ The aid then passes through one of two official border crossings, Bab al-Salameh or Bab al-Hawa.⁵⁸ Long delays and spontaneous closures are a regular occurrence at the border crossings. Once the convoy clears the border it enters Syria and delivers the aid to a warehouse or distribution point where the aid is then offloaded and distributed to beneficiaries.⁵⁹

The process is different for non-UN aid. One aid worker, whose organization receives funding from the US government for cross-border programming from Jordan to southern Syria, reports that organizations receiving non-UN aid are not required to ship aid in large formal convoys.⁶⁰ This allows organizations to send as few as one truck at a time, which can sometimes be an advantage since it results in a lower profile. Additionally, the UN often sends a convoy into Syria only once a month, which makes it unable to respond to changing needs on the ground in real-time, such as a sudden influx of IDPs to a specific village due to new fighting.⁶¹ Another clear distinction between UN and non-UN aid is the type of border crossing they are permitted to

⁵⁵ Syrian American Medical Society, "White Paper: Implementing UN Cross-Border Aid," 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Aid Worker #6. Interview by authors, April 14, 2016.

⁵⁹ Syrian American Medical Society, "White Paper: Implementing UN Cross-Border Aid," 6.

⁶⁰ Aid Worker #7. Interview by authors, April 20, 2016.

⁶¹ Ibid.

use. UN convoys are only allowed to use official border crossings, while non-UN-funded organizations are not required to and sometimes use unofficial crossings.⁶² However, it also poses greater risk since foreign fighters and arms smugglers also use unofficial crossings and often mix arms with humanitarian aid items, which creates the potential for aid organizations to come under unwanted attention from local authorities. This risk is further increased due to the fact that non-UN funded aid organizations do not coordinate or communicate with the Syrian government, which views their acts as illegal.

5. Methodology

The first step of our research was to review the available academic articles and professional reports on humanitarian aid in conflict environments and cross-border programming. While academic literature on humanitarian aid and civil war is plentiful, we could not find a single academic or peer-reviewed journal article specifically on cross-border aid. In order to fill this knowledge gap, we turned to reports and articles published by humanitarian and development organizations, which offered a current and practical overview of the topic.

Next, we compiled an Excel spreadsheet of humanitarian and development organizations, both non-profit and for-profit, engaged in cross-border relief activities in Syria. The spreadsheet included as much detail as we could find for over 20 organizations, including the type of aid the organization provides, which neighboring country it conducts cross-border operations from, which parts of Syria the organization covers, and contact information. We then began targeting organizations from this list for interviews by searching the Internet and LinkedIn for contact

⁶² Ibid.

information for specific individuals, as well as utilizing our own personal contacts in the aid industry.

We conducted seven interviews over Skype and one interview over email with current and former aid professionals from seven non-profit organizations and/or private companies engaged in humanitarian work inside of Syria. Most of the interviewees have many years of experience working in conflict environments such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, and Bosnia. The interviewees spoke on strict conditions of anonymity and all citations refer to them as “Aid Worker.” Their names and the names of their organizations will not appear in this paper in an effort to protect them from professional repercussions of talking about highly sensitive cross-border aid programs. This anonymity policy also allowed the interviewees to speak comfortably on controversial subjects and we are confident that we would not have received the same level of candor without offering them the chance to speak anonymously.

Our study is not without limitations. First, while we had originally planned to speak to smaller Turkish and Arab NGOs and aid workers from the region, we were unable to identify and make contact with the appropriate local organizations. All of the aid workers we interviewed work for western NGOs and development companies, thus a more local perspective on cross-border aid is missing from this paper. Second, we had hoped to conduct at least 15 interviews total, however we struggled to acquire enough contact information and fell short of this target. We were also unable to interview personnel from some of the key organizations in the field, which would have given us additional insight. Some of the personnel were too busy to schedule an interview, while others did not respond to our requests. However, limitations aside, we believe that our research succeeded in helping to better understand the challenges of cross-border programming in Syria.

6. Findings

The following are some of the key findings from our eight interviews on the challenges and issues that organizations face when implementing cross-border programs. The findings are by no means exhaustive or encompassing of the entire questionnaire and the subjects we discussed in our interviews, but instead they provide an overview of the most relevant and insightful topics discussed with the interviewees.

6.1 State Capacity and Border Access

Our interviews confirmed our earlier statement that UN Resolution 2165 has increased the ability of aid organizations to consistently send aid through official border crossings. While the resolution has stopped the Syrian government from completely restricting aid flows, the ability to send aid through official checkpoints is still subject to unpredictable border closures on both ends due to constantly changing security and political conditions.

None of the aid workers interviewed said that their organizations coordinate aid efforts with the Syrian government. Six out of eight said that they only use official crossings and one said that their organization uses both official and unofficial crossings. Another said they were not sure. Of the six that use only official crossings, one aid worker did not directly say that his/her organization did or did not use unofficial crossings, leading us to believe that it might. In terms of location, seven of the aid workers said that their organizations deliver aid from Turkey into northern Syria. Of those seven, three said that their organization also delivers cross-border from Jordan and Iraq in addition to Turkey. One aid worker said that his/her organization delivers cross-border aid from only Jordan and Iraq.

6.2 Dealing with Armed Groups

The subject of encountering armed groups was one of the more interesting and controversial topics that arose in our interviews. Only one of the aid workers we interviewed reported some form of contact between his/her organization and armed groups in Syria.⁶³ These groups included Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, and various factions and militias. The aid worker said that in some cases it was necessary to be in contact with such groups in order to secure safe passage through territory held by the group and/or to access villages where aid was badly needed.

Employees of the organization do not coordinate, partner, or hold official meetings with armed groups, but instead use an indirect form of communication via local envoys. The process begins by the organization's local Syrian staff identifying a community leader, often the imam or Shura council of a local mosque, and asking them to request access on behalf of the organization. The envoy then meets with representatives of the armed group and explains who the organization is and how they will help the civilian population, as well as its reputation for being an impartial, neutral humanitarian organization. In the case of Islamic extremist groups, the organization has found success in leveraging Islamic principles of charity and passages from the Quran in order to find common ground and establish trust with them. It is important to note that the organization does not allow armed groups to be present during the distribution of aid and it refuses to pay any form of compensation or protection fees.

The aid worker said that his/her organization has experienced very few security incidents in the past 3-4 years while using this model of indirect communication with armed groups. However, it is important to note that the aid worker said that this model does not work with all armed groups. His/her organization found that it had success with groups whose members were

⁶³ Aid Worker #6, Interview by authors, April 14, 2016.

mostly Syrian and who had localized goals and ideologies, such as Jabhat al-Nusra. The organization found it impossible to deal with groups like ISIS due to its large number of non-Syrian, foreign fighters whose goals are very different from local armed groups. The fact that ISIS operates more as a criminal organization also led to fears that it would attempt to co-opt humanitarian aid, thus making them a risky entity to deal with.

The interviews were not conclusive enough, however this organization's model of limited, indirect communication with armed groups in order to gain safe passage to deliver aid could possibly be replicated in similar contexts. However this is obviously a high risk and controversial issue since some aid organizations would consider any form of direct or indirect communication with extremist groups unethical.

6.3 Coordination Issues

All of the interviewees reported taking part in some form of communication with the UN, host country governments, and other aid organizations. None of the organizations said that they coordinate their relief efforts directly with the Syrian government. Coordination is a central element of any humanitarian response, however we received mixed replies as to the effectiveness of coordination efforts, particularly in Turkey.

One former aid worker reported a huge lack of effective coordination and leadership from the UN,⁶⁴ while others replied that the UN's coordination efforts were fair. Some of the interviewees said that their organizations were very proactive and took part in a variety of UN-run working groups and coordination meetings, in addition to coordinating both formally and

⁶⁴ Aid Worker #1, Interview by authors, March 16, 2016.

informally with colleagues from other organizations. Others said that their management neither encouraged nor discouraged coordination.

We found in one case that the type of organization has an effect on coordination. One interviewee who works for a private, for-profit company engaged in development and relief work in Syria via Turkey said that the UN excluded his/her company from its coordination meetings and working groups.⁶⁵ The aid worker said that his/her company sometimes coordinated privately and directly with UNOCHA, however in general the company was not contacted to participate in formal coordination mechanisms with the UN and its implementing partner organizations.

6.4 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

All of the interviewees described M&E as one of the biggest challenges to implementing cross-border aid programs. However, it is also the strongest way to ensure that aid does not fuel the conflict. All of the interviewees described using similar remote management and monitoring methods to track where their aid goes. Some of these methods include taking GPS-tagged photos of distributions, shooting cell phone videos of distributions, conducting post-distribution phone and in-person surveys with beneficiaries, monitoring social media sites like Facebook and Twitter for updates on aid distributions, and training local staff in remote M&E techniques and data collection.

One organization we interviewed has established a particularly strong M&E system that features multiple independent, compartmentalized layers of monitoring and verification as well as third party monitoring. The aid worker described how his/her organization uses three separate

⁶⁵ Aid Worker #5, Interview by authors, April 11, 2016.

teams of staff both inside Syria and in Turkey at the headquarters office to perform M&E.⁶⁶ The organization's field team distributes the aid and then uses some of the techniques described above to document the distribution. A separate field-based M&E team follows up with beneficiaries and collects similar forms of documentation of the distribution as well. Next, a team at the organization's head office in Turkey analyzes all of the documentation from both field-based teams and looks for any potential fraud. The headquarters team also conducts phone surveys with beneficiaries. Additionally, the organization periodically subcontracts a third party monitoring and research company to conduct independent evaluations and verifications of the organization's operations and distributions inside Syria.

The use of a multi-layer M&E system is particularly effective in conflict environments, however the use of a third party monitoring company can be very expensive. Unfortunately, this key financial consideration prevents many organizations from using this type of model for M&E despite the overwhelming positives.

6.5 Use of the Hawala System

Moving funds around an active conflict environment is very dangerous and can put local staff at risk. One way that aid organizations can transfer money to Syria is through the hawala system. The hawala system is an informal value transfer system (IVTS) common in the Middle East that operates outside of, or parallel to, formal financial mechanisms and banks.⁶⁷ The entire system is built on trust and does not involve the physical movement of cash.⁶⁸ The system works similar to a Western Union wire transfer: a person wishing to send money to someone in Syria

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Roger Dean, *Remittances to Syria: What Works, Where, and How*, Norwegian Refugee Council, July 2015: 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

goes to a local hawala agent, known as a *hawaladar*, and gives them the sum of money to transfer. The *hawaladar* takes a small commission and gives the person a security code to pass on to the recipient inside Syria. Next, the *hawaladar* contacts a trusted *hawaladar* in Syria, gives him the security code and the information of the recipient. The recipient then goes to the *hawaladar* in Syria to collect the money.

The hawala system is especially useful for humanitarian organizations since the banking system has collapsed in opposition-held areas in Syria.⁶⁹ Two out of eight aid workers said that their organization uses the hawala system to transfer money into Syria. The money they transfer is used to pay Syrian staff salaries, procure local materials, and distribute cash to beneficiaries as part of voucher programs.⁷⁰ The two aid workers described it as being very reliable, despite being a decentralized system. However, because it is decentralized and there is typically little paper records involved, western donors such as the US generally do not approve of organizations utilizing this system.⁷¹

7. Recommendations

Based on our interviews and findings, we have developed the following recommendations for aid organizations that are currently implementing cross-border programs in Syria and also for organizations that are developing their own cross-border programs for the first time.

⁶⁹ Beechwood International, *Technical Assessment: Humanitarian Use of Hawala in Syria*, July 2015: iii.

⁷⁰ Aid Worker #6. Interview by authors, April 14, 2016.

⁷¹ Ibid.

- 1. The UN should revise Resolution 2258 to include all humanitarian aid entering Syria.** As it currently stands, Resolution 2258 only applies to UN-funded aid shipped on official UN convoys. Expanding the resolution to encompass aid from all other donors, such as USAID, could result in greater access for aid organizations and an increase in the amount of aid entering Syria.
- 2. Organizations should prioritize building relationships with local communities, community leaders, and Syrian NGOs.** Working side-by-side with local communities is one of the most important elements of a successful cross-border program. Further, partnering with local Syrian NGOs is often the only way to distribute aid inside Syria, thus making it imperative to develop close working relations and trust. Organizations should also seek to build the capacity of Syrian NGOs, since these local organizations will play a key role in rebuilding the country after the war and in helping to create a new Syrian civil society.
- 3. Each organization engaged in cross-border aid should develop its own in-house research and analysis unit in order to inform its programming.** These units provide essential information to the organization by monitoring security conditions, population movements, and access points inside Syria, in addition to acting as an extra layer of M&E and verification of aid deliveries. The organizations we interviewed that use such units described them as being an important and highly useful element of their program.

- 4. A robust M&E system featuring compartmentalized layers of monitoring and verification, combined with third party independent monitoring, should be accepted as best practice for cross-border M&E.** The model used by the organization described in section 6.4 should be the standard that all organizations strive for and that donors encourage. However, as noted, this model is expensive and prevents many organizations from using third party monitoring companies. Donors should increase funding for their implementing partners and contracting organizations to be used specifically for third party monitoring in an effort to encourage this practice.

Additionally, organizations should increase the focus of their M&E efforts towards impact evaluations. In conflict environments and emergency assistance programs, it is very easy for M&E to focus more heavily on monitoring than on evaluation. Quantitative indicators (for example the number of food parcels distributed or the number of beneficiaries served) are more easily determined than overall impact, and they are essential for donor reports. Though difficult due to security concerns and the inability of expat M&E experts to work in Syria, efforts to conduct long-term impact evaluations should be increased in order to measure the qualitative effects that emergency cross-border programs are having on civilian populations and overall conflict dynamics.

- 5. Organizations should take every measure possible to minimize the chances of their aid falling under the control of armed groups, thus perpetuating the conflict.** One way this can be achieved is by obtaining accurate information on local populations and beneficiaries to ensure that only non-combatants receive aid and assistance. This further

justifies the need for organizations to each establish a humanitarian research and analysis unit, as suggested above.

- 6. All organizations should participate in coordination efforts.** Sharing information about what type of aid an organization is sending and to where inside Syria is essential to avoid overlap, inefficiency, and to reach the most beneficiaries as possible. Organizations should make every effort to coordinate, both formally and informally, with other organizations and the UN. Additionally, the UN should change its practice of excluding private companies from official working groups and coordination meetings.

This short paper has attempted to bring to light the challenges and issues that humanitarian organizations face when implementing remotely-managed cross-border aid programs in Syria. As the conflict continues with no end in sight, it is important to better understand how to continue assisting Syria's civilian population. With few academic sources available on the topic, we hope that this paper has contributed to a better understanding of cross-border aid and we hope that more research, both academic and professional, will be produced in the coming years.

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