Weaponization of Aid
Interference and Corruption

Syrian Regime’s Methods of Control of Humanitarian Sector
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Executive Summary

The Syrian regime’s weaponisation of the humanitarian aid that the overwhelming majority of Syrians depend on has been thoroughly documented in the last 10 years. International forums have presented ample evidence that the Assad regime has deliberately starved opposition-held areas,blackmailed United Nations (UN) agencies, appropriated aid for the military and militias, used aid to advance its military strategy, propped up its war economy with aid funds, and employed various other tactics that involve using humanitarian aid agencies to further its goals.

Most notably, the regime manipulated the delivery of humanitarian aid to force opposition-held areas into submission through the notorious “reconciliation agreements” with the help of its Russian and Iranian allies. Russian carpet bombing of civilian areas intensified and besieged areas were starved; desperate civilians were offered humanitarian aid if they submitted to the regime and accepted “reconciliation”. According to Mouayad Albouni and Maxwell Gardiner of the Centre for Operational Analysis and Research, and the former US Special Envoy for Syria, James Jeffrey:

Examples of aid manipulation as a fundamental element of reconciliation proceedings are numerous. The promise of humanitarian relief was an implicit — and often explicit — dimension of local reconciliation agreements throughout central and southern Syria. Indeed, the arrival of UN convoys frequently followed in the weeks, or days, immediately after the signing of reconciliation terms. Prominent examples include Darayya, At-Tall, Eastern Ghouta, and communities in northern Rural Homs. For instance, in interviews during the intense final days of siege, members of the Darayya local council stated that UN staff had explained to them that UN aid convoys would be conditioned upon a reconciliation agreement that entailed the surrender of local armed opposition groups. Decision makers in New York, Geneva, Washington, Berlin and other capitals are well aware of this reality.

The stark nature of the Syrian regime’s chokehold on humanitarian aid delivery is a central focus of discussions on delivering cross-border aid to millions of displaced Syrians in the North at the UN Security Council (UNSC), most recently in July 2021. Russia has used its veto power to hold the UNSC to ransom and force them into systematically reducing the number of crossings through which aid is delivered to some 4 million Syrians crammed into Idlib. It insists that the aid is delivered through Damascus to give the regime complete control over the flow of humanitarian aid, with the aim of forcing the last opposition-held enclave in the northwest of the country into submission, while increasing its profits from the associated corruption and appropriation of aid distribution.

1 https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/damascus-weaponization-humanitarian-aid-should-be-focus-upcoming-un-cross-border-resolution

“Damascus Weaponization of Humanitarian Aid Should be the Focus UN Cross-Border Resolution Debate”, Wilson Center, 8 July 2021
This report examines the mechanics of the methods the Syrian regime uses to control and direct the work of humanitarian aid agencies, including the UN and other international aid organisations, as well as myriad Syrian organisations that are often directly established by the regime’s institutions or proxies. It is based on interviews with 45 employees of 29 organisations operating in Assad-held Syria. Mostly Syrians and several internationals, these individuals work in international aid organisations, UN agencies, and Syrian humanitarian and civil society organisations (CSOs). In most cases, their motive for participating in the study was to change the status quo in which the Syrian regime either directly or indirectly, but always decisively, interferes in the work of these organisations, making them yet another weapon in its arsenal directed against the Syrian people.

Regime interference ranges from directly influencing the aid distribution, deciding who will (and who will not) be the beneficiaries of various projects; to appointing people close to the regime to crucial positions of influence in these organisations to control and monitor their work; to directly appropriating aid to the regime’s military and militias, sometimes in larger percentages than what reaches the intended beneficiaries. The acceptance of such interference permeates all aid organisations, international and Syrian; there is now a dangerous symbiosis between these organisations and the regime’s institutions. Finally, most of the participants firmly believe that the Syrian regime is itself involved in creating many CSOs that later appear in political negotiations as representatives of “independent” civil society.

These findings must inform the policies of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to Syria, primarily the US and the European Union. There must be an independent, objective audit of how their funds are being used by the UN agencies and international and Syrian organisations working on the ground to prevent aid manipulation and interference by the Syrian regime in furtherance of its repressive, criminal agenda. These findings must inform discussions on how to end Russia’s blackmail in the UNSC regarding cross-border aid and adopt alternative approaches to ensure that aid is deliver legally to the people without UNSC approval or regime interference. A comprehensive review of the policies and practices of UN agencies involved in humanitarian aid distribution in Syria is needed before any plans are developed for the organised, safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians following a comprehensive political solution with robust international guarantees. It is necessary to ensure humanitarian operations are conducted in line with the humanitarian principles and work that goes beyond life-saving aid is in line with the 2018 UN Principles and Parameters for UN assistance across Syria. Increased monitoring of implementation is needed and cannot come too soon. This would urgently require an increased focus on the ongoing regional dialogue to ensure donor red-lines and basic operational standards are respected by UN agencies operating inside Syria, especially in regime-controlled areas. Furthermore, in their discussions, the UN Country Team and donors should take seriously evidence and recommendations from external stakeholders, such as the information contained in this report.

The policies and practices described in this report, and the Syrian regime’s weaponisation of aid and capture of civil society, must not be normalised if there is to be hope of any long-term solution and stability. Ultimately, there must be accountability for corruption and using aid funds to finance the Syrian regime’s war economy. This report is designed to contribute to such policy changes.
Four-fifths (81 per cent) of interviewees confirmed that, based on their observations and direct involvement, the Syrian regime directly interferes in their organisation’s work, mainly in the following ways:
- Determining who benefits from these organisations (and who does not)
- Appointing directors and managers, and hiring employees
- Directing help and benefits to military and security agencies and personnel

Over three-quarters (77 per cent) of study participants identified “governmental agencies overseeing the organisation’s work” as the main source of interference. More than a quarter (27 per cent) of participants indicated that unofficial military parties (militias) have directly interfered in their work, while 23 per cent cited direct interference from official military structures.

The vast majority of participants indicated that they always accept any regime interference; only 19 per cent said they used to refuse it. Refusing direct or indirect instructions from the regime can result in harsh consequences ranging from revoking an organisation’s permits to cancelling projects or losing jobs. Nearly all participants (95 per cent) accept regime interference due to fears of losing their jobs; 38 per cent are afraid of detentions or harassment, while 19 per cent fear direct threats against them.

Approximately 58 per cent of survey participants describe corruption levels within humanitarian and aid organisations (international and local) operating in regime-controlled areas as ranging from medium to very high; the remaining 42 per cent report low or very low levels.

International aid organisations and UN agencies are mostly forced to accept certain levels of corruption in order to continue operating and avoid persecution by the regime. Most local organisations are founded by individuals close to the regime as a means of obtaining funds, mainly through partnering with international organisations, with such partnerships closely supervised by the regime.

Approximately 44 per cent of participants believe that more than 25 per cent of the humanitarian aid targeted to regime-controlled areas is diverted to the military and militias; 16 per cent of participants reported it was even higher—75–50 per cent of the aid.

Relatives of regime-linked figures and those associated with the regime are appointed to most aid organisations to monitor and report to the regime and the parties that secured their employment about the activities of the organisations and their workers.

Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of those interviewed believe the Syrian regime has had a hand in establishing numerous CSOs in order to use them as an “independent” front to represent the civil society in the political track.
Research Relevance

Based on direct and privileged access and inside information, this report closely examines the policies and behaviour of humanitarian and aid organisations in Syria, and the true impact of their work. The research entailed conducting interviews with employees of the main UN and international organisations operating in Syria. Employees of local organisations were also interviewed, but due to security concerns the report refers to these organisations in general terms.

The subject of how CSOs, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), and even UN organisations and agencies operate in Syria—and the regime’s level of influence over them (and the true motivation of its involvement) is extremely important but very rarely addressed or researched.

This research was undertaken by the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity (SACD), a grassroots civil rights movement. The SACD is a fervent supporter of social movements and civil society initiatives to empower and serve civilians and protect their rights and livelihood. It considers this type of activism, bolstered by the support of local and international donors, to be a crucial aspect of shaping a new social and political culture in Syria as well as a more promising future for the country.

The SACD seeks to prevent regime-affiliated actors from manipulating this support for political purposes or to inflict more damage upon the Syrian people. It is paramount that humanitarian resources are not diverted to benefit the oppressors or those committing systematic human rights violations in Syria.

This issue is crucially relevant and timely for the following reasons:

- The welfare and dignity of a large segment of the Syrian population in regime-controlled areas (displaced, returnees and residents) are hugely affected by the work of the organisations addressed in this report, especially during the country’s economic and financial meltdown.

- Exposing the issue of corruption in international and UN organisations in Syria is very important in and of itself, but it also helps donors and supporting states devise more effective policies and practices to ensure that aid reaches the beneficiaries who most need it.

- Exploring the relationship between these organisations and the Syrian regime, and fully understanding the levels of interference, as well as the role these organisations play in advancing the regime’s agenda and narrative, is crucially important for helping policy-makers discern the real demands of Syrian society unrelated to any politicisation.
**Methodology**

This report analyses the results of a survey of 45 employees of 29 different aid organisations in regime-controlled areas, including both Syrian and non-Syrian nationals. The survey was administered in direct interviews either in person or virtually due to Covid-19 conditions.

Organisations were selected to participate in the survey based on the following criteria:

- Relevance and influence: the survey targeted organisations with the greatest impact and relevance within their field.

- Number of years in operation: preference was given to organisations that had operated since the beginning of the conflict, but a minimum of 5 years was required.

- The organisation’s known affiliation with the Syrian regime

To build a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian regime’s role in the operations and policies of aid and humanitarian organisations operating in the country, the study targeted a variety of types of organisations (see Figure 1). The local organisations surveyed receive funds from the UN and international donors to execute projects and deliver services in Syria.

- UN organisations: 11 per cent (5)
- International organisations: 33 per cent (15)
- Local organisations: 56 per cent (25)

**Figure - 01 Types of Organisations Surveyed**

- Local
- International
- UN
These organisations operate in different sectors within the humanitarian and aid field, covering the following areas:

- Food security
- Health
- Services infrastructure
- Early recovery
- Education
- Phycological and mental health support
- Capacity building

Survey participants worked during different periods of time between 2011 and mid-2021, when the information and data for this report were collected. Some of the participants were forced to leave their jobs; others decided to quit their jobs but to work in the humanitarian field in a different capacity, while others still work in the same organisations.

Due to security threats, special measures were taken at each phase of the survey, including the sample design phase, the candidate and organisation selection process, and the communications with participants. All the names of the participants and organisations were kept anonymous, especially local ones since they are more vulnerable to being targeted by the regime. All participants gave their signed consent after the risks and implications of participating in the survey, as well as the measures taken by the SACD, were fully explained.

The study sought to create a gender-balanced sample; 40 per cent of participants were female.

*Figure - 02 Participants’ Gender*
The analysis splits the participants into two groups based on their age (Figure 3).
71 per cent: 26–42 years
29 per cent: 43–60 years

![Participants’ Age Groups](image)

The study questions were tailored to participants’ managerial levels within their organisation’s hierarchy, since these imply different levels of:
- Information access
- Awareness of relationships and engagement with the Syrian regime
- Technical knowledge of the modus operandi and project delivery

Nearly three-quarters of the participants (71 per cent) were managers and directors; the rest were employees (non-managerial positions) (see Figure 4).

![Participants’ Managerial Rank](image)

It was difficult to categorise participants’ positions regarding the Syrian regime and the events of the last 10 years. However, their testimonies and answers reflect a variety of political affinities.
Prevalence of Syrian regime’s interference

The questions in the following sections were asked of directors and managers within the sample of participants; 81 per cent confirmed that the regime directly interferes in their organisation’s work based on their observations and direct involvement.

The responses to this question are in line with the general yet characteristic interventionist nature of the regime with respect to any activity or organisation operating in Syria, though the percentage is higher than expected given that the vast majority of organisations included in the survey are not operating in security-sensitive sectors.

Note: Figure denotes responses to the question “Is there interference from the regime?”

“Government interference is a type of partnership and not an interference per se. The organisation is considered to be a governmental agency that belongs to the first lady, not an independent one. In practice, this organisation is “stronger” than the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and controls a large number of organisations working in this sector.”

Samer Syrian NGO – Manager

“In my organisation, I cannot say that the government interferes directly in appointing managers and employees, but it is fair to say that managers and directors have very particular hiring policies that are in line with their interests and partnership with government parties.”

Ali Syrian NGO – Manager
The overwhelming impression obtained from the survey and the conversations with participants is that the relationship between the Syrian regime and humanitarian organisations and agencies goes beyond regime interference. There instead appears to be a somewhat symbiotic relationship in which the regime, through different bodies and figures, controls the decision-making process and defines the “red lines” for these organisations, and has considerable influence over determining the beneficiaries.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which is supposed to be an independent organisation, is controlled by the Syrian government. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent takes orders from the government and makes decisions in consultation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Ministry of Interior, even sometimes the Ministry of Defence depending on the type of activity and the areas where it will be carried out. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent is the ‘humanitarian’ arm of the Syrian government.

Sande Syrian NGO – Manager

We work on educational and cultural projects and peace building, but very few service projects or those where aid is distributed. The reason we chose this field is to avoid extortion by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which gave us a permit to work after a long arduous process of almost a year and a half, and paying a lot of bribes and giving gifts in order to finally obtain my right to work in this organisation.

Daren Syrian NGO – Manager

The Board of Directors of the organisation has strong ties to political and security figures, in addition to other civilian figures who have huge influence. The policies followed by the board are designed in a way that avoids any intervention from these people.

Ahmad Syrian NGO – Manager

There has not been interference in the work of the organisation because the relationship was originally built on common interest and coordination with government agencies and security branches, and these organisations support the regime politically and offer assistance and aid to militias and their families.

Majed Syrian NGO – Manager

It is an overlapping rather than interference. There is a security office in the organisation that is linked to security branches and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. This security office is responsible for monitoring work and employees and all other details.

Lojien Syrian NGO – Manager

There is unity with the government rather than interference.

Maher Syrian NGO – Manager
The survey shows that the regime is interested in controlling almost entirely how these organisations operate in terms of decision-making and service/aid delivery (Figure 6). It regularly interferes with the following:

- Determining who benefits from these organisations (and who does not)
- Appointing directors and managers, and hiring employees
- Directing help and benefits to military and security agencies and personnel

### Types of Interference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Interference</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevent certain society segments from benefitting</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine beneficiaries</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appoint employees</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divert aid to military groups</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appoint managers/directors</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Weaponization of Aid**

**Interference and Corruption**

Sometimes during the aid distribution in some areas that were recently captured by the Syrian government like Barzi and Jobar and others where militias are operating, they interfered directly in the aid distribution process, and took a share of the aid for themselves in return for allowing the distribution of aid to civilians.

**Ali** Syrian NGO – Manager

“The mere fact that the presence of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent is required (by the regime) in all aid distributions and reconstruction projects is in itself a flagrant and unacceptable interference by the regime.”

**Saeb** Syrian NGO – Manager

“Influential figures in the state, as well as decision makers and security branches, interfere in the operation of organisations in order to direct aid towards specific beneficiaries or to give employment to certain people”

**Naden** Syrian NGO – Manager
Another aspect of interference is related to imposing partnerships with other organisations that are supposedly independent and operate as CSOs, but in reality they are linked to the regime. This type of interference seeks to build and fully control the country’s entire civil society ecosystem, to ensure it is in line with (and serves) the regime’s policies and objectives.

The participants’ testimonies convey an overwhelmingly negative perception of the role of the SARC; its presence is mostly imposed, and is always associated with the regime.

“Some projects were cancelled because it targeted hot areas (areas that were under the opposition control and were retaken by the regime)”  
Lames Syrian NGO – Manager

“A lot of influential figures impose the names of certain people who were wounded during military confrontations with the opposition as mandatory beneficiaries of material and psychological help.”  
Same International humanitarian organisation – Manager

“The interference has to do with the hiring of employees, and the type of projects undertaken, as well as the names and political affinities of families that will benefit from the support.”  
Hala Syrian NGO – Manager

“The type of interference is often related to hiring and imposing certain people by the ministry despite the fact that often these people lack experience and skills. But it is also known that their presence is for monitoring and sending reports regarding all operational aspects, but mainly the grans and funding.”  
Meera UN Agency – Manager
Within our work, security agencies select certain people to become part of the working team, and they select the names of people to benefit from our aid.

Tawfik
International humanitarian organisation - Manager
Main Sources of Interference

The questions in this section were asked of all participants, regardless of their managerial level. More than three-quarters cited the main source of interference as “regime agencies overseeing the organisation’s activities” (Figure 7). In addition, 27 per cent of participants indicated that militias directly intervene, while 23 per cent reported direct official military interference.

Figure - 07 Source of Interference

“...I work in procurement and logistics, and I get pressured on a regular basis through those who got me the job in first place since I was employed through connections but I didn’t imagine that there would be interference in all financial details, employees’ salaries, names of beneficiaries and even the organisation’s funding. I voluntarily quit my job 6 months ago after 8 years of working with them because of the interference issue.”

Mousa – UN Agency - Manager
The participant testimonies assert again that the interference in the work of both managers and employees is done through internal and external “agents”, implanted in the organisations themselves or monitoring their work from outside. These agents are mainly influential figures with connections inside the regime, or regime agencies directly. Further testimonies reinforce the perception regarding the SARC’s role in interfering in the work of organisations and being directly managed by the regime.

“"I worked for 4 consecutive years focusing on studying the necessities (of beneficiaries) and the level of intervention required by the organisation. Our work was mainly within Damascus and Damascus Reef (rural area), specifically with displaced people coming from areas where the conflict has intensified and caused big waves of displacement such as eastern and western Ghouta and some neighbourhoods of Damascus City. Interference in my work was done by employees assigned by security agencies with the task of reporting on the organisation’s plans, beneficiaries and project budgets, as well as reporting to specific bodies within the regime. We were all working under pressure for fear of being called for interrogation if we showed any objection to the interference or condemned the management or the way grants are assigned. This issue happens in all of the organisation’s branches in regime-controlled areas.”

Meera UN Agency – Manager

“My job is constrained by a lot of conditions regarding how to build partnerships and reach out to other organisations, and by my relationship with the security branches and Ba’ath Party officials in the different governorates, in addition to the donors.”

Haidar – Syrian NGO – Manager
Interference Acceptance

The survey results demonstrate that it is difficult to refuse or challenge direct regime interference, whether through official or unofficial channels. Approximately 81 per cent of participants indicated that they always accept any regime interference, while only 19 per cent said they used to refuse it (Figure 8). The questions in this section were asked of all participants, managers and workers.

Nevertheless, refusing direct or indirect instructions from the regime has consequences, ranging from revoking organisations’ permits to cancelling projects or losing jobs.

“The license for ‘Mercy Corps’ has been frozen since 2013.”

Ghanem International humanitarian organisation - Manager

“Projects were simply cancelled.”

Naser International humanitarian organisation - Manager

“I oversee many teams working on the ground. During planning phase we were monitoring and reporting mechanisms are agreed there would be a group of colleagues that are not part of the team that would interfere in the planning phase and ask for the names of beneficiaries and the list of partners. We all know that these lists will go to security branches, but I cannot object to that, not even the Director”

Fatema UN Agency - Manager
A staggering 95 per cent of participants accept regime interference due to fears of losing their jobs, which further confirms the regime’s tight control of (and influence over) these organisations (Figure 9). Around 38 per cent are afraid of detentions or harassment, while 19 per cent fear direct threats against them—a further reminder of the security policies in regime-controlled areas, and the absence of a safe environment. These results are in line with the with the results and findings of the SACD’s August 2021 “Normalisation of Horror” report. The topic in this section was discussed with all participants.

“\textit{I was fired from my job despite the fact that I got it through a very influential businessman from Damascus who used to donate generously to the organisation on a regular basis. I was fired after I complained many times about the types of beneficiaries constantly targeted by the organisation, mainly wounded and families of killed soldiers from the regime’s army and supporting militias, as well as families of current members of these militias and security branches where the project is being carried out. I also complained about the lavish expenses of the board.}”
\textbf{Samer} Syrian NGO - Manager

“\textit{Interference in my work was done through determining the targeted beneficiaries, in addition to the direct interference of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, forcing us to participate in activities and events that are not part of our core work.}”
\textbf{Seema} Syrian NGO - Manager
Diversion of Humanitarian Aid to Military Forces

The issues in this section were discussed only with directors and managers due to the need for privileged access to information. Throughout the 10 years of conflict in Syria, there has been constant discussion and doubts regarding whether the international aid sent to regime areas was being delivered to the right beneficiaries. Some testimonies and evidence have suggested that some UN aid to Syrians in regime-controlled areas ended up with the regime’s military forces or allied militias.2

Approximately 47 per cent of respondents confirmed that they knew of cases where humanitarian aid was diverted to military forces (Figure 10). This is quite a high percentage since few individuals are privy to such information; the true percentage of humanitarian aid being diverted to the military and militias is therefore likely to be much higher.

Figure - 10 Diversion of Aid to Military Forces

Note: The figure displays the breakdown in answers to the question “Do you have information that confirms the diversion of aid from our organisation or another one to the military?”

“The support for the military and security forces is done through imposing the names of wounded soldiers amongst the beneficiaries.”

Naden Syrian NGO - Manager

It is clear from the survey results and testimonies that diverting aid to the military in regime-controlled areas has become a systematic practice due to the regime’s security policies and its high level of interference with and penetration of humanitarian and aid organisations.

“Many wounded military personnel have been registered as poor families so they could benefit from the aid.”
Nadeem
International humanitarian organisation - Manager

“We are forced to give aid to military checkpoints in the form of food and medical aid so they will let us go through without delays or checking the list of beneficiaries.”
Sande
Syrian NGO - Manager

“Lists with the names and numbers of beneficiary families are prepared; they are normally from destroyed areas in Damascus Reef (rural area). When the funds to the organisation are secured, the vast majority of the aid was given to families of members of the military forces and allied militias. Other organisations do the same just to guarantee their security and continuity.”
Samer
Syrian NGO - Manager

“This doesn’t happen in my organisation.”
Nor
International humanitarian organisation - Manager

“Part of the aid is diverted to ‘unspecified’ parties, and I’m not allowed to know any details.”
Seema
Syrian NGO - Manager

“Organisations operating in Syria dedicate a fixed monthly amount of aid and cash from the funds received for aid purposes to pay to the military authorities and checkpoints in the areas where these organisations operate.”
Kasseem
International humanitarian organisation - Manager

“Under the pretext of showing and giving support to the Syrian government, a considerable chunk of the aid was assigned to families of members of the armed forces and militias, especially cash.”
Meera
UN Agency – Manager

“Under the pretext of showing and giving support to the Syrian government, a considerable chunk of the aid was assigned to families of members of the armed forces and militias, especially cash.”
Meera
UN Agency – Manager
More than half (56 per cent) of respondents indicated that up to 25 per cent of the total aid offered by their organisation is diverted to the military forces and their families, as well allied militias; 28 per cent confirmed that 26–50 per cent of their organisation’s aid ends up with the military (Figure 11).

Figure - 11 Percentage of Aid Diverted to Non-humanitarian Beneficiaries

Percentage of Aid Diverted to Non-humanitarian Beneficiaries

- 16%
- 28%
- 56%

Note: The figure displays the responses to the question “What is the percentage of aid diverted from your organisation to non-humanitarian beneficiaries (military, militias, security, officials, etc.)?”

“A part of every project is assigned to support the army and finance the militias such as the National Defence and others. This is a known practice for everyone.”

Lojien – Syrian NGO – Manager
“Any funding acquired by an organisation the belongs to the ministry goes to the ministry itself. The ministry forwards these funds to certain parties that we all know.”

Waseem Syrian NGO - Manager

“There is a full program to support the wounded soldiers in the regime’s army and to provide food baskets to the families of killed soldiers as well as psychological support for those who lost limbs or have permanent disabilities because of the war. Therefore ‘Al-Amanah’ (the main organisation run by Asmaa Assad) is considered to be an organisation that formally supports the armed forces and even the militias.”

Ali Syrian NGO - Manager

“The Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the ‘Al-Bustan’ organisation are the two parties that provide the most support to the military forces. Most of the aid goes to the families of the military personnel and National Defence in an open manner.”

Layla Syrian NGO - Manager

“There is a large number of organisations that provide part of the funding for their projects to military forces and militias with the objective of protecting their operations and continuity in the areas where they carry out projects. There are organisations that exist mainly to provide aid to the military, such as ‘Al-Bustan’, ‘Al-Areen’, and ‘Al-Amanah’.”

Tarek Syrian NGO - Manager
Approximately 62 per cent of respondents believe the military and security authorities have a high or very high level of interference in the work of humanitarian and aid organisations in Syria, while only 3 per cent believe there is no military interference (Figure 12).

**Figure - 12  Military and Security Branches’ Interference in Humanitarian Work**

Note: The figure displays the responses to the question “How do you evaluate the interference of military and security branches in the work of humanitarian organizations?”
Corruption

The following sections examine corruption within the different types of organisations operating in regime-controlled areas using answers to questions asked of participants from all managerial levels.

Corruption Levels in UN Organisations

Approximately 58 per cent of survey participants believe corruption levels within UN humanitarian and aid organisations in regime-controlled areas are medium to very high, compared to 42 per cent that report they are low or very low (Figure 13). The participant testimonies categorise this corruption as follows:

- Acceptance of conditions imposed by the Syrian regime and security branches regarding the designation of beneficiaries in a politicised way regardless of the humanitarian conditions
- Appointing directors, managers and employees based on their affiliation with the regime rather than their competency and qualifications
- Accepting bribes and diverting a certain percentage of received aid to regime-linked parties
- Selecting certain local organisations without clear criteria to benefit from international aid and grants

"UN agencies have become organisations run by officials’ relatives and the privileged in Damascus. Their real role is just to show off and keep up appearances. The UN is not doing its real mandate."

Daren Syrian NGO - Manager
“Most of the corruption in UN organisations is imposed upon them since they will not be able to operate in regime-controlled areas without giving concessions under pressure from government agencies and security branches.”

Samer Syrian NGO - Manager

“The level of corruption is high due to the fact that the party (Ba’ath) and security-linked people interfere in directing the aid to specific parties, and we are forced to pay bribes in order to get the work moving.”

Naden Syrian NGO - Manager

“We cannot say that UN organisations are completely corrupt because there are a good percentage of employees that has good credibility and transparency, but UN organisations operating in regime-controlled areas are forced to give concessions to secure the continuity of such operations, and this is done by giving away aid.”

Fatema UN Agency - Manager

“In the areas where we operate which are under the control of the Syrian regime, I can say that corruption pervades throughout the organisations because of favouritism, bribes and the direct interference of officials. Everyone is keen on benefiting from the funds and decides the beneficiaries according to their political and religious background.”

Meera UN Agency - Manager

“I speak as the head of the liaison office with a UN organisation: we as a civil society [organisation] had to pay [bribes] on many occasions to UN organisation employees in order to get funding for certain projects.”

Lama Syrian NGO - Manager

“UN organisations suffer a certain degree of corruption from my point of view, but their work is real and effective in general in Syria.”

Motaz International humanitarian organisation - Manager
“From personal experience, I dealt with the [World Health Organization], and I agreed a contract with them for a certain amount of funds. I received half of the funds and they kept the other half. Other organisations also always keep a percentage of the funds.”

Kawther Syrian NGO - Manager

“Favouritism in choosing beneficiaries, partners and employees; covering non-humanitarian activities under the usual pretext; and buying expired medicine and repackaging and sell it are usual practices.”

Basel Syrian NGO - Manager

“UN organisations in Syria suffer from a high level of corruption due to the lack of accountability and the partnerships with local organisations that are corrupt, in addition to the issue of bids and outsourcing that involves high commissions being paid in order to secure a deal.”

Sande Syrian NGO - Manager

“Favouritism and connections play a major role in the work. The heads of departments and offices get paid very high salaries and bribes for getting things moving. The parties that these organisations want to help get quick contracts, while those they don’t intend to help have to wait for a year and then don’t get it.”

Anas UN Agency - Manager

“There isn’t corruption per se, but rather certain UN organisation workers are pressured by influential figures with personal requests.”

Jamal Syrian NGO - Manager

“Currently, corruption is less due to the lack of resources and the reduction in the size of grants (from donors).”

Ayham UN Agency - Manager

“A big part of the aid meant for the people is squandered on exaggerated logistic and technical expenses.”

Rana UN Agency - Manager
The data confirm the testimonies and statements collected from participants indicating that international organisations are less corrupt than others. Only 7 per cent of participants believe they exhibit a high level of corruption, and just over half (51 per cent) report a medium level of corruption (Figure 14).

“Based on my familiarity with a good part of the international organisations operating in Damascus, I can say that there is a dark side to these organisations whose work has been largely determined in the last few years by the government. A large number of relatives of officials and people in charge have been given employment with high salaries, as working for these organisations has become a sign of privilege amongst Syrians.”

Fatema
UN Agency - Manager

“International organisations have become – in one way or another – more transparent than the UN agencies, but still, you need personal connections in order to have access and get things done in these organisations.”

Lama
Syrian NGO - Manager

“Generally speaking, international organisations operate in Syria by accepting the government’s conditions in order to secure their presence in Syria. Corruption found its way into these organisations through the appointment of people linked to the ministry who are interfering in everything, especially financial issues.”

Daren – Syrian NGO – Manager
“International organisations are generally transparent but they submit to the corruption in local partners due to their inability to monitor and track corruption cases in those partners since they are protected by government parties.”

Kasseem – UN Agency – Manager

“International organisations are considered to be more independent than the UN and local ones, but they are forced to let things go in order to guarantee their survival.”

Sawsan
International humanitarian organization – Employee

“Their work is politicised, corruption is clear, and discrimination in granting projects is obvious, and they are in bed with the government.”

Tony
International humanitarian organization – Employee

“International organisations are generally transparent but they submit to the corruption in local partners due to their inability to monitor and track corruption cases in those partners since they are protected by government parties.”

Kasseem – UN Agency – Manager
According to the testimonies and direct conversations with participants, local humanitarian and aid organisations have much higher levels of corruption. Some 52 per cent of respondents believe the levels of corruption in local organisations is either high or very high.

To a large extent this variation of percentage reflects a quintessential difference between international and local humanitarian and aid organisations in regime-controlled areas: international ones are mostly forced to accept certain levels of corruption in order to survive and avoid persecution by the regime, while most of the local organisations are founded by individuals close to the regime as a tool to obtain funds; their partnership with the international organisations is imposed by regime-linked parties.

“Some local organisations are basically corrupt and follow, in their work policies and corruption, methods of the government corruption in Syria.”
Samer – Syrian NGO – Manager

“Local organisations are governed by donor organisations and follow their approach and make concessions to achieve sustainability and continuity, but on the other hand, many corrupt people understand how to engage in the work of organisations. They start working like an activist in civil work and begin to use this work to obtain profits; the organisation becomes a source of livelihood for him and his kind.”
Fatema – UN Agency – Manager

“Organisations currently operating in regime areas, especially in Damascus, are licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and are considered part of campaigns to whiten the image of the regime and are governed by nepotism, bribery and suspicious relations. Their goal is to get the largest amount of funding, regardless of whether it is spent in the right place or not. It is considered one of the most corrupt agencies in the field of humanitarian work.”
Meera – UN Agency – Manager
“Due to the nature of the region and the personalities who have undertaken humanitarian work in the region, we find very large numbers of cases of theft and corruption, as 90 per cent of local organisations are corrupt and do not enjoy transparency and integrity.”
Motaz - International humanitarian organization - Manager

“Appointments in most local organisations depend on mediation, bribery, kinship and other [corrupt practices]. This means that we see family associations rather than human associations. There are no clear structures in these organisations, no budget, no monitoring and evaluation mechanism, no oversight and transparency.”
Kawther – Syrian NGO - Manager

“Local organisations are administratively weak institutions that do not have sufficient experience to be able to control the grant and project management process. Therefore, we see many of the heads and owners of these organisations come from the wealthy class in Damascus within a period not exceeding 2 years due to the theft of projects for which they obtained funding.”
Lojien – Syrian NGO - Manager

“Despite the attempts of many local organisations to follow high standards and procedures in transparency and integrity, the reality of the situation in regime-controlled areas is the control of the security services and the various local militias and their interference in the work of these organisations. The rate of (forced) corruption in these organisations has increased, and I cannot condone it; there are many corrupt people in leadership and sensitive positions, in a good number of organisations in the regime’s areas.”
Wael – International humanitarian organization - Employee

“Corruption appears in local organisations to a large extent in two basic areas, the first is the selection of beneficiaries, and the second is the selection of employees. If the organisation does not support the regime (in direct way), it may be forced to accept the employees and beneficiaries chosen by the security agencies or government, and it cannot refuse in order to preserve its existence.”
Sawsan – International humanitarian organization - Employee

“There are several employees who are known to be corrupt and use the organisation’s name for inhumane purposes, such as making promises to people (other than the target beneficiaries) to help them and obtaining money, gifts or services (sexual) in some cases. There is a lot of news about this, but unfortunately it is kept under wraps because the workers of this type have immunity and influence as well as a place on the Board of Directors.”
Fatema – UN Agency - Manager

“Sometimes we must accept the employment of people affiliated with the ministry or one of the security branches despite their lack of experience or knowledge to ensure the continuity of our work. In addition, we give a certain percentage of all of our funding to the Ministry of Affairs to be approved for work and continuity.”
Mansour – Syrian NGO - Manager

“The biggest problem the organisations suffer from is the interference of the Red Crescent in their work. The administration is often forced to hire one or more people who lack the appropriate experience, and they ask for medium to high salaries, not less than 800,000 Syrian pounds. The administration is forced to agree to obtain security approval, which can only be obtained from the director of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and his assistant.”
Akraam - International humanitarian organization - Employee
“I was a volunteer who participated in one of the projects 2 years ago and was given a certain amount of money for my fees in the project. After a while I found out that they in the organisation had sent invoices and receipts for an amount of five times the amount I received, and they signed on my behalf and the donors communicated with me directly and asked me about a lot of the financial matters that later turned out to be manipulated. Of course, the funding and support process has been stopped and the project has been suspended, but the organisation is still fully engaged in its work and has found other supportive bodies; the corruption continues based on information obtained from the employees there. In addition, most of the employees in administrative jobs are the children of officers and officials, and the director of the organisation is unable to take any decision independently of his lower-ranking employees; this is one of the obvious aspects of corruption in the organisation.”

Razaan - Syrian NGO - Employee
The study participants highlighted the following as the main types of corrupt practices undertaken by all types of humanitarian and aid organisations (Figure 16):

- Employment policies (69 per cent)
- Discriminatory selection of beneficiaries (49 per cent)
- Project selection to benefit figures in charge (42 per cent)
- Fake projects to cover embezzlement (22 per cent)

These figures again confirm a very systematic approach by the regime to exercise full control over these organisations. It plays a decisive role in appointing managers and workers, determines who benefits from the projects and even which projects are implemented, and engages in a wide range of illegal activities in the process. It is a closed cycle with a very sinister outcome.
According to participants, the most common practice to ensure that regime-linked figures are in charge of humanitarian and aid organisations is to employ relatives of officials or people close to the regime.

Almost 47 per cent of respondents confirmed that there are officials’ relatives or people linked to the regime working in their organisations (Figure 17), and that 33 per cent of them are in upper-level management (Figure 18).

Favouritism in hiring policies became even clearer when participants were asked whether the employment of officials’ relatives in these organisations took into account the job candidates’ merits and competence. A staggering 93 per cent think that the employment of officials’ relatives and connected people is not done based on competence (Figure 19), and an identical percentage reported that contracted employees are not suitable for their positions (Figure 20).

Note: The figure displays responses to the question “Are relatives appointed based on merit and competence?”
Approximately 87 per cent of respondents said that regime-linked workers and managers monitor and report to the regime and the parties that arranged their employment about the activities of the organisations and their workers (Figure 21). This employment policy has enabled the regime to control different types of CSOs, and even the SARC. Over two-thirds (69 per cent) of managers interviewed for this study asserted that the SARC is fully controlled by the regime, and that it suffers from high levels of corruption and politicisation of its services in a way that supports the regime and its militias; 13 per cent declined to comment on the issue, and the remaining 18 per cent expressed their satisfaction with the role the SARC has played since 2011.
The Role of the SARC

The SARC plays a pivotal role as an extension of the regime apparatus, and exercises a great deal of influence over other local, international and UN organisations. UN and international organisations cannot operate in Syria unless they partner with a local organisation, such as an NGO that has been approved and accredited by the regime, the SARC, or a specific ministry depending on the type of programs it intends to deliver in Syria. Thus the SARC is considered to be at the same level and positioning as a ministry or a regime-approved local organisation.

Regime memos published in August 2019 by the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre demonstrate how “intelligence agencies were giving explicit orders for their branches to work in close coordination with SARC to regulate the distribution of medical aid to these areas [under opposition control] and select the types of aid that will be allowed”. Other documents reference UN complaints, alluding to instances in which security agents interrogated and detained aid recipients directly from aid distribution centres.

Documents and receipts of aid and medical materials distributed presented by an ex-employee of the SARC to Human Rights Watch (HRW) show that the security branches must approve all deliveries of aid materials. Employees of local humanitarian organisations confirmed that the security forces check all materials delivered and escort the aid convoys. The security forces exploit this leverage to confiscate a portion of the aid for personal profit, or block the delivery of essential medical aid for political reasons. A HRW report details these trends:

A former SARC employee told Human Rights Watch that over the course of the four years he spent with the organisation, he witnessed several incidents where high-level intelligence officers collaborated with SARC employees to steal and resell humanitarian supplies. He shared pictures of the supplies he said were stolen, and broken seals on shipments which he said had been breached by the intelligence branches. Another human rights activist shared images of aid supplies stored in what he claimed to be an Air Force Intelligence branch.

The SARC and some local organisations serve as a bridge between the security branches and foreign entities (i.e. UN or international parties) so the security personnel do not have to deal with them directly.

The HRW report states that all the international organisations it contacted expressed their concerns regarding the restrictions imposed on them by local partners, in addition to the constant interference of the security forces in deciding the lists of distribution and beneficiaries, which hinders their capacity to execute their programs. The fact that the SARC is being imposed as a main local partner makes it even harder to validate the actual distribution of aid, and curtails their operations more severely.

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“The Red Crescent is good for the medical department. It devoted itself to work and reached areas that are very difficult to reach, even for the military authorities. At many stages, it was the only authority trusted by the people. But about the relief department, it cannot be denied that there have been historical thefts, embezzlement and exploitation of the beneficiaries, which reached the point of sexual exploitation, and unfortunately there is no accountability.”
Sande - Syrian NGO - Manager

“In the Crescent, theft occurs openly and without fear of accountability because of the relationships with the security branches in the country. For the medical sector, corruption is low because the Crescent does not receive much medical equipment or medicine, but with regard to relief, the theft is clear in addition to the scandals of exploitation and extortion that occur in the Crescent’s branches; the Damascus countryside is especially afflicted.”
Basma – Syrian NGO- Employee

“The Syrian Arab Red Crescent is in name an independent organisation, but it is actually a quasi-governmental, if not governmental, organisation. It reflects in all its details the corruption that exists in the Syrian government, including the methods of appointment and employment, and administrative and financial corruption.”
Samer – Syrian NGO - Employee

“I think that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, since Khaled Haboubati took it over, has become an organisation affiliated with the children of officials and the influential and the rich in society. It provides aid to certain groups, most of which are from military agencies and militias affiliated with the regime.”
Kawther – Syrian NGO - Manager

“The Red Crescent is an arm of the Syrian government and plays the role of watchdog and government representative to interfere in all the work and projects of the organisations. Everyone knows it is very corrupt financially, socially and morally.”
Tarek – Syrian NGO - Manager

“I do not consider it a humanitarian organisation, as it is a tool in the hands of the Syrian regime. It cannot be considered to merit the name of the Red Crescent or humanitarian organisation.”
Motaz – International humanitarian organization - Manager
Establishing NGOs in Regime-controlled Areas

A huge amount of restrictions and control ultimately determine which organisations are licensed; 82 per cent of participants asserted that the freedom to establish humanitarian and aid organisations and their operations is not guaranteed (Figure 22).

“`The freedom to establish and operate organisations is not guaranteed because the body responsible for licensing civil work associations and organisations in Syria is the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The Syrian security branches draw up their policies and work mechanisms, monitor the work of organisations and their projects, and only allow projects that serve the interests of the government and within a very narrow scope and within visions and goals that fit with the state’s policy and appearance.”`

Samer - Syrian NGO - Manager

“When establishing an organisation, very harsh and difficult conditions are set by the licensing body, which is often the Ministry of Affairs. They interfere in the smallest details and impose the employment of people they appoint to monitor all the activities the organisation carries out.”

Meera - UN Agency - Manager

“There is no law that protects organisations, their work, or even the freedom to establish them.”

Fatema - UN Agency - Manager

“There is no freedom. Security oversight over associations is widespread, and each security branch has its own representative for the organisation, to whom all the association’s work, including the minutes of the Board of Directors’ meetings, is submitted. No work can be done without security approval.”

Lama – Syrian NGO - Manager

“We have licensed with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and we cannot currently take on any project without obtaining the ministry’s approval and security approval, providing a percentage of the project’s funding, and providing the names of the targets to be studied by the security branches before starting any project.”

Mansour - Syrian NGO - Manager

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**Figure - 22** Ability to Establish and Operate Humanitarian Organisations

*Note: The figure displays respondents’ answers to the question “Is the freedom to establish and operate humanitarian organisations guaranteed?”*
Weaponization of Aid

Interference and Corruption
More than three-quarters of participants (82 per cent) maintained that the regime allows the foundation and operation of humanitarian and aid organisations in territories under its control in order to control international aid in the country (Figure 23). By controlling this direly needed aid through overseeing the organisations that receive and distribute it, and by employing discriminatory policies and criteria in defining the beneficiaries, the regime is forcing people to leave the areas under its control since their livelihoods will be under constant threat.

The HRW report\(^5\) further exposes the damaging partnerships between UN and international organisations on the one hand and local NGOs on the other hand, and how the regime officials benefit from it:

A UN agency made the decision to partner with a local actor, founded by a member of the abusive National Defence Forces, to implement a protection project. Despite warnings by the technical officer in charge of the risks posed by partnering with an organisation that belonged to a known human rights abuser, the UN agency moved forward with the project. Six months later, in a rare monitoring and evaluation trip, the UN agency discovered that the local partner had not implemented the project. The organisation had been receiving the money from the UN agency for 6 months, and instead of carrying out activities had been forging the signatures of purported beneficiaries.

“Certainly, the Syrian Trust for Development (Al-Amanah) is the largest example. Since approximately 2019, the Syrian Trust has controlled most of the projects related to the legal status of women in Syria.”
Samer – Syrian NGO - Manager

“There are many organisations currently affiliated with the regime and presenting themselves in the community as humanitarian organisations whose goal is to distribute aid and provide awareness and support programs. But in fact they are working to collect data and present it to the security authorities, in addition to collecting funding and building personal glories”
Meera - UN Agency - Manager

“Through our work with many local organisations, it became clear to us that they are government-affiliated organisations and that the aid is used to support militia families and the incubator group that supports the regime instead of being delivered to those in need.”
Motaz - International humanitarian organization - Manager
“Many of the well-known organisations in Damascus are arms of the regime and the influential in Syria; they are only a cover for obtaining funding from external parties.”
Layla - Syrian NGO - Manager

“The Syrian Trust for Development controlled and monopolised all the projects working on women’s legal issues for nearly 2 years. A ministerial decision was issued to prevent, prosecute and hold accountable any organisation that receives support in the form of financing legal projects.”
Tarek – Syrian NGO - Manager

“There are organisations that follow the regime’s security services and work under a humanitarian organisation’s name in order to obtain financial and relief support for military authorities.”
Jawad – Syrian NGO - Manager

“Church-affiliated organisations have been established to collect funding for the government in return for supporting Christians in the area.”
Lojien – Syrian NGO - Manager

“We noticed this when the security situation began to stabilise somewhat, and a large number of organisations became affiliated with the regime.”
Amer – UN Agency - Manager

“Several associations recently formed for this purpose. Some of them are supported by the Iranian embassy in Damascus and receive funding from organisations after the embassy supports them.”
Zain – Syrian NGO - Employee
When participants were asked if the regime purposely infiltrates agents within international organisations or tries to buy the loyalty of certain international workers through bribery and extortion, 76 per cent of respondents stated that it does (Figure 24). This is yet another clear indication of how the regime treats international and local humanitarian and aid organisations as yet another device to exercise more control over the Syrian people and manipulate their welfare through multiple layers of corruption and extortion.

Note: The figure displays the answers to the question “Do you think the regime implants agents and tries to bribe international workers through bribes and extortion?”
“I think that the regime provides bribes and facilities for international employees, but with time the relationship turns into some sort of blackmail and threat (international organisations are not angels; they also have a dark side, and one of their most important goals is to continue their work – this can only be achieved by continuing the conflict and war in Syria).”
Fatema - UN Agency - Manager

“The Syrian regime has infiltrated most of the international organisations operating in Syria by hiring employees within these organisations to monitor and follow up on all their activities.”
Kawther - Syrian NGO - Manager

“One of the conditions for allowing organisations to work in Syria is that the regime imposes the presence of employees that it chooses and within important administrative positions.”
Tarek - Syrian NGO - Manager

“International, local and even international organisations have been forced to abolish the security and guard departments and to employ security companies known for their affiliation with the Syrian intelligence services (Al-Shorouk - Al-Qalaa).”
Waseem - Syrian NGO - Manager

The Red Cross is the biggest example, as there was building relationships with senior officials in the Red Cross, including foreigners, and the regime marketing itself to them as a democratic and humane body. The Red Cross was allowed to enter prisons and detention centers after international pressure, of course, and the prisons were excellent and clean (equipped to give the required image) and this agreed with this type of staff
Kasseem - International humanitarian organization - Manager

“The situation of workers in international organisations has changed significantly since the early in conflict. Most of the employees now follow the system in one way or another. Bribery is widespread, especially among senior management, and honourable employees are “expelled.” This happened with a colleague of mine and he was eventually forced to quit his job.”
Ameer - UN Agency - Manager

“We can see this through the names of the senior employees of these organisations in Syria and their security or political backgrounds.”
Hade - International humanitarian organization - Employee
One of the most relevant issues discussed with participants that has a significant impact on Western policies and perceptions regarding organisations based in regime-controlled areas was whether participants believed the regime purposely founds or facilitates the establishment of CSOs to use them as an “independent” front to represent civil society on the political track. Around 62 per cent believed that this is the case (Figure 25).

“Currently, there are many organisations whose name shines in international and political forums, such as the State Building Movement and the Peace Building Forum (a feminist organisation). Others are known to be directly affiliated with the regime in Syria but present themselves as civil and humanitarian organisations.”

Fatema – UN Agency - Manager

“Yes, I think so. Many organisations mentioned their names at the Sochi conference, and we had not heard of them before. It was clear that they were born from the moment to be a representative of Syrian society and to represent the regime, as happened at the conference.”

Lor - Syrian NGO - Manager

“There are many organisations like the Syrian Forum for Democracy, which promotes itself as an independent opposition party, but in fact it has participated in many conferences in which it supported the government’s existence, continuity, and policies. There are many examples, but I mentioned this party because of my personal knowledge of some of its members.”

Darien - Syrian NGO - Manager
“The Syrian regime formally establishes affiliated organisations to represent civil society. In front of your eyes.”
Basel – Syrian NGO – Manager

“Many of the personalities and organisations that work under the name of civil society are affiliated with the Syrian government and promote the survival of its authority in international forums; they try to present the regime as a democratic government that allows civil and political work in Syria.”
Baseema – Syrian NGO – Manager

“The State Building Movement is one of the parties that markets itself politically as opposing the policies of the Syrian government and presents itself as representing civil society in Syria. In fact it is an arm of the regime and supports its existence and survival. Of course, the most important reason for the State Building Movement acting is the regime’s promises that it will be a party in the future, and for other political ambitions, such as access to membership in the People’s Assembly and other ambitions that have become clear to most people.”
Razaan – Syrian NGO – Manager
Conclusions

International and UN agencies have a crucial role to play in Syria in association with local humanitarian and aid organisations, but the regime has a tight grip on their access and operations.

The vast majority of international organisations strive to play a positive role in regime-controlled areas, but are subject to extortion and are forced to accept certain levels of corruption and favouritism in order to continue operating.

Local organisations exhibit a much higher level of corruption than international and UN organisations; the government uses them as intermediaries to access funds and control project delivery and beneficiaries.

Employment is the key practice through which control is exercised: by appointing managers and workers, the regime can monitor and control the organisations’ operations and spy on their employees.

Humanitarian and aid organisations are under regime control from their inception: the entire cycle is fully controlled and monitored.

Beneficiaries of the aid and projects delivered by these organisations are determined in a discriminatory way based on political affiliation and sectarian considerations.

Some of the aid and services delivered by international and UN organisations directly or through their local partners is diverted to the regime’s military branch and sectarian militias.

The regime views aid organisations operating in regime-controlled areas as instruments with which to advance its policies and practices.

The SARC should be considered a local organisation that is heavily controlled by the Syrian regime and executes orders from security branches.

A high percentage of CSOs in regime-held areas are used as fronts: theoretically they represent civil society in the political track but in practice they are conveying the regime’s agenda.
**Recommendations**

- **International donors, especially the European Union and the United States, must:**
  - Heavily scrutinise the vetting process for any humanitarian or CSO operating in Syria, including UN and international organisations, but especially local ones.
  - Carry out a transparent and professional audit of the aid organisations they fund to work in areas controlled by the regime, including their hiring practices, as well as policies and practices that may have led to discrimination of beneficiaries and appropriation of aid by the regime.
  - Conduct transparent reviews of links between CSOs they fund and the institutions under regime control, including through individual appointments, use of funds and other relevant practices. Such organisations cannot be regarded as independent in the context of representation in the political process.

- **Cross-border aid and all delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria must be depoliticised and deweaponised.** The regime must not be permitted to distribute aid to Idlib given the practices described in this report. There is a legal basis to legally deliver aid across borders without UNSC approval, which relevant states and humanitarian actors can utilize to prevent weaponization of aid by the Syrian regime and Russia.

- **Institute an effective oversight mechanism to conduct a UN-wide review of practices and policies related to humanitarian aid delivery in Syria with a view to develop corruption-free, legitimate mechanisms for aid distribution before any plans for an organised, safe, voluntary and dignified return are carried out as part of a comprehensive political solution with minimum conditions guaranteed by the international community.**

- **International donors should pressure the Syrian regime to allow:**
  - UN and international organisations to operate directly using their own personnel without having to go through a local partner.
  - Their own monitoring and verification teams and processes to be implemented on the ground.
Weaponization of Aid

Interference and Corruption
Weaponization of Aid

Interference and Corruption

Syrian Regime’s Methods of Control of Humanitarian Sector
Weaponization of Aid
Interference and Corruption

Syrian Regime’s Methods of Control of Humanitarian Sector