

Meeting the Real Needs of Syrian Civilians: A Message to the Humanitarian Task Force

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It has been 60 days since the U.S. and Russia signed the Munich agreement, calling for increased attention to address the dire humanitarian conditions inside Syria. In this time the Humanitarian Task Force (HTF)—established by the 23-member International Syria Support Group (ISSG)—has helped push for UN convoys to enter 31 communities designated by the UN as besieged and hard-to-reach areas delivering short-term supplies for 400,000 people since the beginning of the year, less than 10 percent of people in need in those areas.

This is positive, but it is nowhere near enough. Parties to the conflict continue to prevent access to many areas and even when convoys are approved, vital items such as medical supplies continue to be removed. The Syrian conflict is among the worst catastrophe in modern times and reflects the absolute failure of the international community to halt the brutal and unnecessary cycle of violence. At this critical time, we must not let Syria also be a humanitarian failure. The international community must redouble efforts to hold parties to the conflict accountable and press for humanitarian breakthroughs that can have a real impact for Syria's civilians struggling to meet their basic needs. The ISSG and HTF are central to achieving this aim.

NGOs working in Syria have four key messages for the ISSG and the HTF:

- 1. Focus beyond delivery of commodities to enable humanitarian activities that support the resilience of Syrians in the longer term.** The recent convoys are welcomed, but they do not represent sustained, humanitarian access. Humanitarian access is not a one-off or periodic delivery of commodities. And we are concerned that an over-emphasis on the convoys has detracted from other types of assistance that are needed just as urgently, including medical, health, water, sanitation, education, psychosocial support, and child protection services. Humanitarian access should mean that doctors and health care workers have regular access and supplies to tend to the sick and evacuate those in urgent need of care, that farmers have access to seeds and fertilizer, that clean water is available and sanitation services provided, and that children no longer have to resort to eating grass out of hunger.

Syrian organizations on the front lines consistently say communities require these ongoing services and the ability to produce and grow their own food. The delivery of food parcels, shelter and household items, while important, is the most basic option. While necessary in some places, humanitarians, if allowed, can also engage in more sustainable and efficient approaches. In addition to emergency assistance, the focus should also be on the planting season, the provision of livestock, the winter harvest and the development of supply chains for services. Humanitarian organizations have the capacity to develop seed banks and markets during war, even in besieged or conflict-affected communities. In Aleppo governorate, for example, NGOs have supported farmers in planting 3,900 hectares of wheat in the past several months and have provided seeds and fertilizer purchased from the local markets. These efforts can help assist with emergency needs and help Syrians to be active participants in providing for their families and communities.

- 2. Ensure future convoys are more effective in meeting the priority needs of Syrians and place increased emphasis on full humanitarian access.** Any success in bringing life-saving assistance to those in besieged and hard-to-reach areas should be welcomed, but their

effectiveness could be significantly improved. Most importantly, future convoys must be informed and driven by impartial needs assessment, which will only be possible if local Syrian organizations and local stakeholders are permitted access. They should include personnel to deliver services and repair infrastructure, such as water and health infrastructure. They should insist on the ability to evacuate those needing urgent medical attention, as well as delivering medicine, surgical equipment and other medical supplies. They should deliver inputs for food production and other items contributing to greater resilience. They should include the ability to independently assess and monitor aid delivery to ensure it responds to what is most needed. Finally, the convoys should carry with them dedicated protection monitors who can report back with much-needed information about vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, to enable better protection services.

- 3. Push for access negotiations that extend to all humanitarian actors, not just UN agencies.** The ISSG should focus on freedom of movement for aid to reach communities by those best placed to reach them. This should extend in particular to Syrian humanitarian actors that are serving their communities with emergency and longer-term support—both those that are registered with Damascus and those that are not able to obtain registration. Many Syrian humanitarian workers are placing themselves at great risk to serve their communities. Unregistered humanitarians are currently cast as criminals. Humanitarian staff and partners should not have to work under the threat of prosecution, aerial bombardments, arrests, abduction, or detention simply for serving civilians. The ISSG should prioritize the protection of aid workers and recognition by all parties of the impartiality of aid agencies, in line with customary international law.
- 4. Reject the use of humanitarian aid as a political bargaining chip or a weapon of war.** To date, it is clear that the approval for UN cross line convoys is thoroughly linked to political negotiations. We are concerned that convoy permission is being used as a means of enticing populations into entering or maintaining localized truce agreements, while simultaneously penalizing those that will not. The continued exclusion of places like Darayya, Duma, and Moadamiya from the approved list of convoys suggests that approvals are tied to the political process and control of these high priority areas – not based on humanitarian need. Besiegement cannot continue to be used as a weapon against civilians and humanitarian aid cannot be a tool for political wrangling by a state. Fundamental humanitarian values are being challenged and this is a test of the international community’s commitment to humanitarian principles. The ISSG should resist and prevent any future attempts to link humanitarian access to other political negotiations. Humanitarian values should not be compromised by political agendas.

This framework is achievable if parties to the conflict are finally held accountable for their obligations—we owe it to the Syrian women, men and children suffering from this seemingly intractable conflict to uphold these standards. When humanitarian standards are not met and when humanitarian assistance is not responsive to the real needs on the ground, not sufficiently coordinated, and not effectively monitored it brings a terrible human cost. Failing to live up to these standards means well-intentioned aid is less effective, or at worst, even harmful. There must be a stronger focus on scaling up assistance that is based on locally-driven assessments, rooted in local partnerships, and strengthening local markets where they are functioning. Parties to the conflict must be pressed to allow these interventions to take place.

Syrians have endured five years of brutal conflict, but they have not lost their resilience or their hope. We have seen Syrians adapt and cope with the most intolerable conditions—and we will do our best to support them in every way possible. As humanitarians, it is not within our power to end the war—but we

can speak loudly about our commitment to serve those in need and not give up on the values we hold closely. We call on parties to the conflict to urgently come to the negotiating table and commit to end the violence once and for all, as the only way to finally end the massive human suffering. In the meantime, there must be a firm commitment to regaining the momentum on humanitarian access that was seen in the days after the Munich Agreement. The ISSG and HTF must make this a top priority, and do much better to meet the needs of Syrian civilians.

The following organizations, many of whom are operational in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, support this statement:

Bihar Relief
Bonyan Organization
CARE International
Caritas Switzerland
Choubbak Amal
Cham for Development
Elaff Union for Relief and Development
Emissa
International Humanitarian Relief
Live 4 Syria (L4S)
Maram Foundation
Maddad
Mercy Corps
Nabea Al Hayat
Olive Branch
Space of Hope
Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)
Syrian NGO Alliance
Syria Relief and Development
Syria Relief Network
Qatar Red Crescent
World Vision International
ZOA