

AFTER ASSAD: NAVIGATING SYRIA'S HUMANITARIAN CROSSROADS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | APRIL 2025



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Cover image: Interior view of the abandoned and bullet-scarred hospital in Quneitra, Syria. iStock.com / Joel Carillet

Research process: This research was designed and implemented in partnership between HAG, GLOW, NSDation and KAE Consulting. The research scope and methodology was co-developed between all partners. Data collection with key informants in Syria was led by NSDation and KAE Consulting, and supplemented by desk review and global level data collection led by HAG and GLOW. Data was jointly analysed and validated by the research team. The report was drafted by colleagues at HAG, NSDation, and KAE Consulting. The report was supplemented by additional desk review by Matthew Walker. UKHIH provided oversight and guidance throughout this process.

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About the research team:

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice. An Australian-based ethically driven business, we combine humanitarian passion with entrepreneurial agility to think and do things differently.

NSDation is a women-led consultancy services company that was established in 2018 to advise on projects in the Middle East and Europe. Our expertise spans Third-Party Monitoring, evaluations, assessments, developing and implementing monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) systems, and dynamic capacity-strengthening activities. Dealing with intricate human development needs demands a broad, innovative, and adaptable perspective.

KAE Consulting (KAE) is a Syrian development entity formed from experts with many years' experience delivering high-quality services. We specialise in public sector reform, market development, monitoring, evaluation and civil society strengthening. With focus on the Syrian context, KAE provide innovative and cost-effective solutions to development challenges using wide-ranging expertise, by working closely with clients, partners and development specialists. We work with our clients to build inclusive, participatory and sustainable solutions.

GLOW Consultants is a leading Pakistan based research firm dedicated to advancing the humanitarian and development sectors. GLOW is providing learning services like baselines, endlines, evaluations, reviews and research studies to donors and their implementing partners. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation (M&E) assignments.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Syria experiences major upheaval in the aftermath of Bashar al-Assad's ousting from power in late 2024, the humanitarian response finds itself at a crossroads characterised by both significant challenges and new opportunities. This report, based on interviews with humanitarian actors at all levels of the Syria response, attempts to articulate the key shifts evolving in the first months post Assad, how these are impacting humanitarian operations, and what actions humanitarian actors can undertake to navigate them effectively.

CHANGING ACCESS DYNAMICS AND HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

While in power, the Assad government severely restricted humanitarian access and regularly weaponised aid to further its political objectives. Now, many organisations can reach previously underserved communities as they expand their geographic scope and adjust to new operational realities, as evidenced by the quick expansion of many Northwest Syria-based organisations, particularly local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite the complexity of the situation, dramatic contextual changes wrought by the transition have generated hopes for a more enabling environment for humanitarian actors.

Policies and procedures are still evolving and are affecting local and international organisations differently. Many involved in the response have expressed concerns about the emerging humanitarian governance framework and potential impacts on the independence of humanitarian operations. This has created a bottleneck, as some organisations are delaying officially registering in Damascus until the situation is clarified. If left unaddressed, these concerns may cause some humanitarian actors to reconsider their existing presence (e.g. those in Northwest Syria), potentially leading to major disruptions in essential services for vulnerable Syrians.

RESTRUCTURING THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

The Syria response's humanitarian coordination architecture has historically been fragmented due to territorial division and Assad-era policies. This has presented immense challenges for effective aid delivery throughout the crisis. Current circumstances offer a unique opportunity to restructure coordination at the national level and establish a more unified and coherent approach. The Damascus-based Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) has released transitional plans for a new structure that aims to 'create a streamlined, standardised, and representative coordination architecture', led by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) in Damascus by June 2025.

While the proposed new structure is an ambitious overhaul, there are concerns among humanitarian actors how it will translate into reality, especially as many specific details remain unclear. This includes uncertainties around funding availability for core coordination and information positions across the proposed subnational framework. Compressed transition timelines have raised concerns about rushed handover processes, particularly in northeast Syria. Reconciling the operational cultures of the three hubs (Northeast Syria, Northwest Syria, Government of Syria) within the new structure is also sensitive and necessitates a highly inclusive phased process to avoid tensions. Furthermore, there is an overarching concern that the new structure will be overly centralised, United Nations (UN) dominated, and roll back some of the genuine localisation progress seen in the Northwest Syria response unless Syrian-led actors are prominently included in senior positions.



RECORD HIGH HUMANITARIAN NEEDS, DWINDLING FUNDING

Over recent years, major reductions in donor funding have increasingly widened the gap between response resources and growing humanitarian needs in Syria. Although further decreases in funding were widely expected, in line with global trends, the unprecedented United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding freeze announced on 20 January 2025 has placed extreme pressure on an already strained and overstretched system adjusting to Syria's transition, at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest level since the crisis began in 2011. While the impacts have been felt across all levels of the response, they have affected the protection sector particularly severely. The end of a wide range of gender, protection, and inclusion programs is expected to have perilous consequences for vulnerable groups. Large information gaps also persist across the Syria response, and the rapidly shifting context and increasingly limited resources means that updated data across sectors is urgently required to inform prioritisation and ensure aid is needs based.

Furthermore, while the expansion of many international and Syrian organisations' geographic access is a major opportunity to channel their expertise and resources to previously neglected communities, it is essential careful steps are taken to understand local dynamics and avoid causing harm. This will be critical to avoid marginalising existing community-based actors. A data-driven and needs-based approach to aid distribution, regardless of sect, religion, or political affiliation across regions, is crucial to help address the reputational damage suffered by UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) during the Assad era, when aid delivery was regularly coopted to serve political interests.¹



AN OPENING TO BRIDGE THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT GAP

The transition in Syria has renewed calls for a greater emphasis on balancing life-saving assistance with scaled-up early recovery programming to address key drivers of humanitarian needs. This approach could act as a significant and timely bridge between humanitarian and development action. A recurring sentiment expressed by interview participants was frustration about the negative impacts of short-term funding cycles on their ability to reduce aid dependency, build resilience, and support sustainable recovery in the communities they serve. Due to donor redlines regarding funding reconstruction during the Assad era, the discussions on Syria's early recovery response became highly politicised and undermined efforts due to blurred lines between what constitutes early recovery and development aid.

Following the ousting of Assad, many actors hope the humanitarian situation will change. Longer-term, integrated projects that support sustainable recovery are critical to durable solutions for returnees, both from abroad and inside Syria, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in host communities. In addition, the transition opens the possibility for much greater direct collaboration with local governance actors (e.g. authorities responsible for service provision), previously inhibited by donor restrictions and political considerations. Reflecting this, many representatives of Syrian organisations interviewed emphasised a desire to provide technical support to local government entities, with an eye to identifying entry points for development action.

¹ Human Rights Watch, *Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria*, October 2019



ACTION 1: SUPPORT UNIMPEDED, NEEDS-BASED ACCESS ACROSS SYRIA

UN

- ✓ **Strengthen engagement and relationship-building efforts with relevant government authorities** to ensure emerging regulatory frameworks do not impose unnecessary constraints that impact the independence and access of humanitarian operations.

INGO/LNGOs

- ✓ **Continue sustained consultations via well-established NGO coordination bodies** to formulate clear collective advocacy positions around emerging humanitarian governance and access.
- ✓ **Collaborate through NGO coordination bodies to create a detailed 'living' document with comprehensive practical information** about the shared resource on the new registration and permission processes, including region-specific differences, based on experiences and lessons learned.



ACTION 2: SUPPORT A SYRIAN-LED RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Donors/UN

- ✓ **Scale up pooled funds nationally to develop LNGOs and reduce competition between humanitarian actors**, building on and replicating the success of pooled funds in Northwest Syria that directly fund Syrian NGOs (e.g. Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS)).
- ✓ **Increase representation of Syrian-led actors in strategic and operational decision-making processes and entities** through explicit, measurable commitments (e.g. quotas), including across humanitarian coordination and in key forums, to ensure Syrian voices inform and shape the direction of the response at the highest levels.

INGOs

- ✓ **Reinforce and sustain partnerships with local and national organizations to leverage their operational expertise, while strengthening trust through equitable models**, such as joint decision-making and fair inclusion of indirect costs. Prioritise local leadership to address power imbalances and advance a truly Syrian-led response.

Syrian organisations

- ✓ **Strengthen existing and new strategic coalitions and alliances** to advocate for increased representation in key decision-making bodies, greater access to direct funding, and more equitable partnerships with response actors.
- ✓ **Establish dedicated spaces to foster dialogue between previously divided Syrian organisations**, both to exchange knowledge and information to enhance response capacity, as well as address and mitigate any emerging tensions that act as a barrier to meaningful collaboration and partnership.
- ✓ **Further increase efforts to localise capacity strengthening** by supporting medium and small organisations with organisational and technical development.



ACTION 3: ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE, INCLUSIVE, AND COHERENT COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

UN/HCT

- ✓ **Ensure decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive while transitioning to a country-wide IASC-coordination model**, taking additional care not to marginalise either international or Syrian NGOs, or hub-specific concerns, in order to secure buy-in from the wider response.
- ✓ **Ensure strong representation of NGOs—particularly Syrian-led and community-based organizations** across leadership and coordination structures through formal quotas or mandates (e.g. co-chair roles, strategic advisory groups). Building on existing LNGO leadership in Northwest Syria and establishing inclusive, practical mechanisms to support the meaningful participation of diverse Syrian civil society actors across all areas of operation.
- ✓ **Co-design, share and socialise a detailed roadmap for the transition**, in tandem with, and informed by, inclusive consultation processes and mechanisms.

Humanitarian coordination

- ✓ **Capitalise on increased engagement among coordination bodies, including clusters and working groups** during the transition by creating dedicated space to exchange hub-specific best practices, and lessons learned for coordination mechanisms that have potential to be adopted into country-wide structures.



ACTION 4: ENSURE HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING IS ETHICAL, DATA-DRIVEN, AND REACHES THOSE MOST IN NEED

All humanitarian actors

- ✓ **Collaborate to support country-wide assessments**, in addition to sector-specific and area-based assessments, as needed, to address critical information gaps linked to the changing context. More in-depth research is required to understand the complex needs of especially vulnerable groups, such as former detainees.
- ✓ **Ensure Syrians have a leading voice in defining their needs and priorities** by centering community perspectives in program design and implementation. This must be paired with conflict-sensitive programming grounded in robust analysis of local dynamics to prevent unintended harm, reduce inter-group tensions, and protect humanitarian access.
- ✓ **Openly address historic distrust and grievances against humanitarian actors through organised community dialogues and clear statements**, aiming to increase community acceptance and mitigate tensions. This is particularly relevant to UN agencies and INGOs, specifically those that were based in Damascus during the Assad era.

Humanitarian coordination

- ✓ **Tailor approaches to expanding operations in recognition of different operational contexts across formerly divided areas.** This includes cluster/sector coordination actors reviewing and updating programmatic guidance for partners, exploring opportunities to harmonise across former hubs, where feasible, or making clear area-specific recommendations.



ACTION 5: INVEST IN LONG-TERM STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

Donors

- ✓ **Provide more flexible, multi-year funding for early recovery and nexus-linked activities.** This is essential to reduce aid dependency and act as a bridge to sustainable development opportunities. While emergency aid is still a critical need, long-term investment is required to strengthen the resilience of Syrian communities and support durable, cost-effective solutions for IDPs and returnees.

Humanitarian coordination (HCT, ISCCG)

- ✓ **Adopt and expand contextualised and area-based approaches that bridge the humanitarian-development divide.** This should be led by senior HCT, in coordination with donors, and be operationalised through the Inter-Sector Cluster Coordination Group (ISCCG).

All humanitarian actors

- ✓ **Begin the process of systematising links between humanitarian and development action across the response.** Dedicated platforms (e.g. 'nexus' working groups) should be used to strategise, plan, and coordinate related actions.
- ✓ **Design and implement projects that support sustainable livelihoods and the restoration of basic services**, using area-based approaches and engaging local authorities where possible. Humanitarian actors should enhance efforts to increase complementarity between projects at the area-level.

Syrian organisations

- ✓ **Actively engage the Syrian diaspora and returnees through formalised mechanisms** to identify where technical skillsets and capacities can best support recovery efforts in localised contexts.

This report is the second in a series of reviews conducted by the Humanitarian Advisory Group under the Humanitarian Rapid Research Initiative (HRRI), commissioned and supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) and funded by UK International Development from the UK government.

