

# The Future of Humanitarian Operations: Aid and Politics in Syria

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## Event Transcript:

**Featuring:**

**Charles Petrie**

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PROGRAM

**Jon Alterman:**

Good morning and welcome to CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program. I'm delighted to welcome you to this program on the humanitarian crisis in Syria. As we get started, I'd like to introduce you to my friend and colleague, Jake Kurtzer, the director of CSIS's humanitarian agenda program. Jake is a veteran of The Red Cross and Refugees International, and he's been a terrific partner as the Middle East program has explored a range of humanitarian challenges in the region. Jake?

**Jake Kurtzer:**

Thank you, Dr. Alterman, for inviting me to participate in this morning's discussion—and for our guests and all the participants for joining us today. As we all know, for ten years, armed violence in Syria has upended the lives of Syrian civilians—causing billions in damages, hundreds of thousands of deaths, and leaving millions of people in urgent need of support from external parties. The Syrian Civil War has been categorized by severe contempt for norms of basic decency and humanity, as well as a wanton disregard for the core tenants of international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.

The Assad regime, with the support of its international allies, has deliberately targeted medical facilities, killed thousands of aid workers, destroyed urgently needed equipment and medicines, and cynically exploited assistance for the civilian victims of the violence. The regime and other non-state armed groups have diverted and denied the movement of humanitarian assistance and essential materials, weaponizing this desperately needed aid in feeble attempts to make battlefield gains.

The operational reality makes Syria extremely challenging for humanitarian organizations and humanitarian workers who strive to operate through principles of neutrality and impartiality, and who seek to deliver aid to people based on needs alone. Aid organizations find themselves caught in a conundrum. The needs are massive and urgent, and these organizations have the capacity to respond. However, the operational environment is so politicized and so challenged that it brings reputational and security risks and raises important questions about the overall impact of the international aid structure.

Syria's dynamics are not unique, but they are extreme. Right now, we're anxiously awaiting the result of the outcome of the latest round of UN Security Council deliberations on the cross-border mechanism to deliver aid to the

northwest—the most vivid example of the politicization of aid in this context. We should be clear. The failures in Syria are political, and they fall entirely on the parties to the conflict who deliberately exploit international assistance for nefarious purposes.

This environment also requires us to reflect on how international assistance—in Syria and elsewhere—can be calibrated, and should be navigated, in politicized contexts like this, to

ensure it brings about the most benefits with the fewest harms. I'm very grateful to you—and to our panelists today—for convening this conversation so that we can think through these important questions and try to ensure a humanitarian system that makes the most

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good. So, thank you very much again, and I'll turn it back to you, Dr. Alterman.

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you very much, Jake. As Jake suggested, we do have this near-term UN Security Council vote because the authorization for cross-border aid ends on Saturday, but there's a larger set of questions about whether we are going about aid in the right way. We have this short-term authorization, which requires constant renegotiation. It makes it hard to plan. It gives countries veto power over the assistance. It gives them leverage every time there's negotiations about it.

The government of Syria has learned to game the system. Local NGOs have their own stakes and patterns are unchanging. What should we really be thinking about aid in Syria as we think about the near-term needs? 10 years into this conflict, what lessons do we need to draw from what we've seen, not only about the Syria conflict, but other humanitarian conflicts going forward. To guide us through these very, very complex issues, I couldn't be happier with the three experts we've assembled for you today.

Dr. Zaher Sahloul is the president and co-founder of MedGlobal, a humanitarian NGO providing healthcare in disaster areas. He's also a critical care specialist and associate professor in clinical medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He was in Idlib earlier this year, and he has a deep, on-the-ground perspective that many people in government and outside of government have benefited from for many years.

My colleague, Natasha Hall, joined the CSIS Middle East program a little more than a year ago after more than 15 years as a researcher, analyst, and practitioner in the Middle East and beyond. She spent years working on a variety of aspects of the Syria conflict. In the last year, she

interviewed more than 100 UN officials, NGOs, diplomats, analysts, and government aid agencies on Syrian aid issues. She wrote an excellent brief last month on aid to Syria that I recommend to you, and she regularly speaks with Syrians on the ground.

Charles Petrie is legendary in UN circles for addressing hard tasks with a critical eye. A former assistant secretary-general and deputy humanitarian coordinator, he served in Rwanda, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, and Burundi. Although he left the UN a decade ago, he led the secretary-general's internal review of the UN's actions in Sri Lanka, and he was a member of a panel reviewing the UN's peacekeeping efforts. He was also an advisor to the Syrian negotiations committee.

After introductory remarks from the panelists, I'll moderate a discussion between them, and then we will take questions from the audience. If you're watching this on the CSIS events page, on that page, there's an "ask questions" button. Please press the button, type in your question, and we'll incorporate it into the discussion at the end of the panel. So, Dr. Zaher Sahloul, we'll start with you. Please go ahead.

**Dr. Zaher Sahloul:**

Good morning. Thank you, Jon, for the nice introduction. I'm really humbled to be among you all and to listen to the people who are experts on these issues and who will be doing the heavy lifting. I'm going to just provide some reflections on the situation based on my understanding and recent visits on the ground in Idlib.

***There are 4.2 million people in Idlib, in northwestern Syria. 80 percent of them are dependent on humanitarian assistance that is coming across the border from Turkey.***

Every year—or six months it looks like—we have this ritual where we discuss the Russian threat to veto the renewal of cross-border relief to Syria. There are 4.2 million people in Idlib, in northwestern Syria. 80 percent of them are dependent on humanitarian assistance that is coming across the border from Turkey.

This region in Syria is landlocked. There is not

a sea there, and the Syrian government prevents anyone from moving from that area to regime-controlled areas. If this cross-border relief is not renewed, about one million people will go hungry. It will affect education for children—who make up 50 percent of the population there. There will be no clean water. Hospitals will be suffering, especially in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis.

The problem that we have faced in Syria throughout the last 10 years is the issue of sieges. The Syrian crisis started with a siege of the city of Daraa in April of 2011. The regime at that time cut water, food, humanitarian assistance, electricity, and phone lines to the city of Daraa because of the early peaceful demonstrations that started there. Throughout the crisis, the regime employed siege—which is basically cutting aid to communities that it considered hostile, whether it's in Eastern Ghouta, Zabadani, Madaya, north of Homs, or other regions—in order to make the population surrender to the regime.

Many of them have done that throughout the last 10 years. The last large-scale siege that

ended with the displacement of the population happened in the city of Aleppo. We know that about 250,000 people were displaced because of the siege and the events afterward. Cross-border humanitarian assistance is an alternative to crossline humanitarian assistance, which is something that we tested in Syria. We tried crossline assistance for the last 10 years, and it showed that it is failure.

Multiple United Nations reports show that most of the crossline aid—when it was deployed by the regime—was manipulated. Many of the medical supplies and humanitarian supplies—medical equipment, suture kits, and even baby formula—were taken by the regime, which has led to a severe malnutrition crisis in areas that were under siege, especially Eastern Ghouta, Madaya, and Zabadani.

A few years ago—with the help of our advocacy director Kathleen Fallon—I wrote a report called *Slow Death: Life and Death in Communities in Syria Under Siege*, which talks about the plight of about 650,000 people in Syria that were living under siege by their government and were dependent on crossline relief. Many of them had suffered because of the manipulation of crossline aid by the Syrian regime. Many of the UN convoys that were approved by the Syrian regime were blocked eventually, and much of the life-sustaining humanitarian aid was caught up because of manipulation by the regime.

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***We have nightmares when we talk about crossline humanitarian assistance in Syria, because we know what happened to the populations that were the target of the regime's wrath.***

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populations that were the target of the regime wrath. About 50 percent of the people in Idlib are displaced from other regions in Syria because of the manipulation of humanitarian aid from cities like Homs, Aleppo, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta.

In my last visit to Idlib three months ago, I went to one of the displacement camps. There are about 1,250 camps in Idlib, hosting about 1.2 million people. I met with a group of children in that camp. I asked them about their living and what they are doing. Some of them go to school every morning. Some of them stopped going to school. At the end of that meeting, I asked them, "How many of you would like to be a physician or doctor?" And two-thirds of the children raised their hand, including Asma, who was 11 years old. She was going to school every day, walking in the mud.

It takes her about two hours to reach the school in the next village. And she wanted to be a doctor in the future. She was displaced with her family from north of Hama seven times before she arrived in that camp in Idlib. Many people that I've met in Idlib also have the same stories. They were displaced multiple times because of the bombing and because of the manipulation of humanitarian aid. Idlib is the last place that many Syrians—hundreds of thousands of Syrians—are living.

At the same time, I've seen stories of resilience. I visited hospitals that we supported at MedGlobal with personal protective equipment (PPE), oxygen, and oxygen generators to fight Covid-19. These hospitals did very well because

of cross-border operations that assured the flow of humanitarian aid, medicine, oxygen, and medical supplies from Turkey to Syria. I met with Dr. Nosaima, a pulmonologist in the city of Darkush, who told me stories about the use of an oxygen generator that we provided to provide oxygen to patients in Syria and how it saved lives.

***Because of this cross-border relief, life is as normal as it could be in a situation of war.***

Because of this cross-border relief, life is as normal as it could be in a situation of war. There's still bombing of hospitals by the regime. As we know, the regime has bombed more than 580 hospitals in Syria, including more than 80

hospitals in the province of Idlib. The last hospital that was bombed was only a week ago, al-Shifa hospital in Afrin. Several medical workers were killed in that bombing.

In spite of the bombing, in spite of the suffering, and in spite of the fact that there is no light at the end of the tunnel, people are still living. They go to school. They go to universities. They go to hospitals, and doctors and nurses are working because of this cross-border humanitarian aid that has been continued over the past few years. To me—and to many Syrian humanitarians and humanitarian organizations—there is no alternative for the cross-border relief in the scale and the scope that we see right now. Crossline aid will bring a lot of nightmares to the people of Idlib, and that

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may lead to another wave of displacement.

Syria already is the largest crisis that led to a displacement of population since the Second World War. More than half of the population has been displaced. It affected not only the region, but also the European Union. It created anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, and the rise of populism. It affected a lot of politics in the United States. I think our policymakers—especially President Biden—have to not only pay attention not to the humanitarian situation in Syria every time we have the renewal of the Security Council resolution, but also to the political side of the crisis—because it will continue to flare up and cause problems unless we take care of it. It should be a priority in our foreign policy.

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you very much. Thank you, Dr. Zaher. Natasha, let's pull back a little bit and think about this issue. We've been doing humanitarian assistance in Syria for ten years. What does that mean?

**Natasha Hall:**

First of all, it's such an honor to speak alongside two people who have been really courageous in their fields, but I wanted to start today by talking about a place I actually spent a lot of time in prior to 2011, prior to the protests starting in Syria. Yarmouk Camp is a neighborhood in Damascus that unfortunately became the center of fighting between the Assad regime and opposition forces. Some of my friends escaped before this happened, some were actually captured, and several were killed by security forces.

The regime besieged the area. As they did, I had one friend that actually slipped back into the neighborhood. My friend, Niraz, was this skinny, Syrian-Palestinian kid—an amateur

photographer. He wanted to document to the world what was happening in Yarmouk. He wanted people to know that people didn't have fresh food, that they didn't have fuel, that they burned everything they could to cook or to boil contaminated water, or to keep themselves warm in the winter.

For years, the United Nations negotiated with the Syrian government about providing humanitarian assistance to these besieged populations, but over two years, aid never really came up in my conversations with Niraz. That's probably because aid was completely irrelevant to his survival. In 2015, less than one percent of people in besieged areas in Syria received monthly food assistance from the United Nations.

Then—even as Niraz and others risked their lives to report on the conditions of millions of people that were in these besieged or hard-to-reach areas—I was really surprised by how little changed, and by how humanitarian access was being negotiated. Western governments complained that some UN agencies were seemingly over-complying with regime demands, but they didn't do much to change it.

So, humanitarian aid continued to be used as a substitute for inaction on shocking war crimes. At the same time, the Syrian regime grew more adept at manipulating aid and aid agencies.

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Right at the outset, the Syrian government told UN agencies to use certain companies and aid organizations affiliated with the regime for procurement—like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Syria Trust—for most of the deliveries and programming because they wanted the UN to stay for legitimacy and resources.

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asked for, we could have gotten access here.”  
“If only we hadn't reported that this area was besieged, they might have granted access.”

I understand how humanitarians can get stuck in this kind of trap. Niraz eventually fled Yarmouk in hopes of fleeing the country altogether, but government forces arrested him before he could get out. At first, his family was able to get news about him and his conditions. Those connected to the regime warned the family not to publicize the case because that could ruin his chances for survival. This subsequently elicited debates amongst those of us close to Niraz about whether that was really

***an effective strategy.***  
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an effective strategy.  
Every lead became a dead end and three years later, we found out that he died in prison. I spent years trying to understand how humanitarians could allow themselves to be as manipulated as they have in Syria—until it came down to one person. But the humanitarian community and donor governments are not individual families. 10 years in, we have extensive reporting on

Frankly, the regime knew how to keep humanitarians on the edge of their seats while still depriving millions of people in need. I've spoken to some people—UN officials based in Damascus—for many years during this time. As they told me: “If only we did this thing that the government

an effective strategy.

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how the regime has—and continues to—instrumentalize aid.

Some UN officials have told me over the past few months that the besieged era is a relic of the past, but I think that what we've seen should be cause for concern. Crossline aid to the northeast continues to be uncoordinated, delayed, and inadequate. The Russians and the regime are currently besieging Daraa and bombarding civilians, hospitals, and water pumping stations in the northwest.

At the same time, the Russians are arguing that cross-border assistance to this very area is unnecessary. In the meantime, people continue to be arbitrarily arrested in government-held areas, making real monitoring and evaluation and needs assessments really difficult. I think that donor governments and the humanitarian community need to start confronting these broader challenges now—beyond the cross-border mandate—because it will affect security and stability well beyond Syria.

There are a few reasons I think that this is particularly time sensitive. The first is that the Russians and some aid agencies are pushing to start reconstruction and shift more aid to Damascus. The Russians are leveraging their UN cross-border veto for this purpose right now, but on the ground today, there need to be more confidence-building measures to ensure that that assistance is not diverted and manipulated.

The other issue—as Dr. Altman alluded to—is the sheer length of this emergency response. In this environment, aid with no parameters for

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another decade is not just going to not meet the need, it's going to entrench economic disparities and fuel the warring parties—as we

saw during this besieged era.

***If the Biden administration intends to lead primarily through aid diplomacy and human rights in the region, they need to look hard at making aid work.***

The third concern I have is specifically for the U.S. government. It has this self-proclaimed pivot away from the Middle East. Thankfully, now the Biden administration has been heavily involved in this publicized showdown over UN cross-border aid. If the Biden

administration intends to lead primarily through aid diplomacy and human rights in the region, they need to look hard at making aid work. If it's going to be the main course, it should be treated as such, with consistent high-level diplomacy and analytical rigor to meet the challenge.

I personally think that there are so many lessons that can and absolutely need to be learned from Syria—for both donor governments and for aid agencies. The UN cross-border mechanism is one of those lessons. I found that—although data from current crises worldwide showed that aid is increasingly provided based on limited access rather than need—there's been one exception to that trend. And that was in areas reached by cross-border aid in Syria.

It allowed aid to reach those in need despite insecurity and access constraints in other parts of the country. Although it's on the chopping block at the security council this week, many legal scholars have argued that a UN Security

Council resolution should not be necessary to deliver life-saving aid to 4 million people in such acute need, especially in the face of prolonged and egregious war crimes.

I think if Syria has taught us anything, it's that international humanitarian law is clearly not enough. Donor governments will need to be more forward-leaning than they have been to assess the holistic impact of aid in Syria because these problems are only going to grow. I think we only need to look east and west of Syria—to Lebanon and Iraq—to see the consequences of failing to reach those in need for a prolonged period of time and leaving a vacuum to be capitalized upon by nefarious actors.

Returning back to Yarmouk, the neighborhood remains mostly empty and completely in ruins, but those close to the regime are buying up property for cheap. The vast majority of the population remains displaced with no prospects

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for return. So, I hope that we can talk in the discussion about some other recommendations and some of the ramifications of the status quo, but thank you again to my fellow panelists.

**A UN Security Council resolution should not be necessary to deliver life-saving aid to 4 million people in such acute need.**

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you very much, Natasha. Charles?

**It's essential to see situations as they are, and not as one would want them to be.**

**Charles Petrie:**

Thank you. The thoughts I want to share with you come from my continued involvement in Myanmar, especially since the first of

February. If I were to summarize the points that I would want to make, the key one is that it's essential to see situations as they are, and not as one would want them to be. I think that's the problem with the West.

I think one of the most tragic sights—of the many tragic sights—that I have of Myanmar are these young, peaceful protestors on the barricades with “R2P” stickers, believing that Responsibility to Protect (R2P) will be deployed to save them. And what I find even more reprehensible are former politicians—or even government officials—who say the same thing when it's very clear that it's not going to happen. You're not going to have R2P. Look at 10 years of Syria—look at the paralysis in Syria. Look at the situation in Myanmar today. It's clear that there's not going to be the type of intervention that the people really hope for.

The reason I say that is not because I think we should all get depressed and say that nothing could be done. It's quite to the contrary. It's only by having a lucid, clear understanding of what the situation is—what the realities are—that we can hope to find a workable solution. It can't be easy because these conflicts are profoundly painful, violent, and difficult, but there are solutions.

I think talking about Syria today—the overall landscape, the international landscape—has changed over the past 10 years. And

unfortunately, it's not for the better. If anything, there's been an aggravation of tendencies that we saw 10 years ago. For example, we are looking at a much more polarized UN Security Council. I would argue that Libya is the trigger that led to the lack of ability to find a consensus in Syria in the beginning, but now, it's much more complicated. We've entered a world that is far more Darwinian in its approach—where you have the strong who tend to assert their authority. You have decreasing support for multilateralism.

What's interesting to note is that there hasn't been a new UN peacekeeping operation almost since 2015. In terms of the United Nations, you have a United Nations that has not been able to fully implement the secretary-general's reforms—specifically, the reform of the resident coordinator and the reform of the UN structure in country.

In Syria, I think there has been greater investment; there have been UN structures on both sides. Meanwhile, in Myanmar and other areas, you basically see a United Nations that hasn't been able to operate in a coherent manner—in part because of this unfinished reform of the UN structure on the ground.

**A UN Security Council resolution for cross-border access is a fairly recent phenomenon.**

I think what is interesting about this cross-border and the Security Council resolution for cross-border, is that a UN Security Council resolution for cross-border access is a fairly recent

phenomenon. For the Operation Lifeline (OLS) in South Sudan—the cross-border operation from Kenya into South Sudan in the 1980s and 1990s—and operations in Ethiopia, there was never any question about needing a UN Security

Council resolution and mandate to undertake it. It's only basically since the War on Terror and the need to look at how funds were going to be used.

There have been innovative ways of doing cross-border operations in the past. Since it is a UN Security Council mandate, it's probably far more restrictive for the United Nations than other international entities. In terms of the way forward, I think Natasha's and Will Todman's "[Lessons Learned from a Decade of Humanitarian Operations in Syria](#)" brings out many of the lessons that we need to be looking at in terms of operating in Syria—and in Myanmar.

**We need a much greater focus on local capacities—local NGOs and local communities—both as conduits and as the deliverers of assistance.**

Basically, they could be encapsulated—though your paper is much more thorough—into three areas. The first is that we need a much greater focus on local capacities—local NGOs and local communities—both as conduits and as the deliverers of assistance. Second, we need not only provision and assistance in a way

that doesn't jeopardize the security of the actors involved, but also assistance that helps develop their capacity to provide assistance and support to the people.

I think one should realize—and this is definitely a concern that I have for Myanmar—that one should not look at humanitarian assistance in its purest form. It is life-saving, but it has to also support local communities' capacity to deal with what they're confronting. Resilience has become such a buzzword, but it is very much a

partnership with local structures—a partnership with local communities.

Above all, I think it's necessary for the donor community to change its approach to intervention in those areas and to be willing to take greater risk—to not impose these sort of new accountability mechanisms on the delivery of aid. In summary, what I would say is that we are in an environment defined by a number of new realities.

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As some of you know, I was in Rwanda during the genocide. The instruments that were created after the genocide—"Responsibility to Protect" and all that—haven't been able to deliver. I think the international community needs to question the needs and the approaches that can work, and that does entail taking greater risk, being willing to assume greater responsibility. It means working with local structures and reinforcing local structures—and no longer using instruments of the UN to create the conditions and be the main deliverers of assistance.

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you very much. I want to thank all three speakers for giving us an awful lot to think about. One question I have listening to these three presentations is: what lessons has the Syrian government learned from other conflicts? What lessons have other governments learned from the Syrian government's conduct? What lessons has the international community learned from the sustained difficulty of delivering humanitarian

aid based on need rather than access in Syria? What has that learning process been like?

Charles talked about how the world has changed. I think the humanitarian situation has changed because everybody has been through this period of learning lessons from each other. What kinds of conclusions are there, and where does that leave us?

**Charles Petrie:**

I think the intervention that started to get the ball rolling in terms of lessons to learn was Sri Lanka. It was the ability of the government to attack the Vanni Pocket and do it with a very strong human cost with the international community doing absolutely nothing. I think what the Sri Lankans were able to do very ably is use the terrorist narrative to justify a lot of their actions.

I suspect very strongly that the Myanmar regime has drawn some conclusions from Sri Lanka. I would imagine that the Syrian government has also drawn some conclusions, in terms of the whole terrorist narrative. I think the lessons—or the realities that are being used—is the paralysis of the Security Council and the divisions within the Security Council in using allies to ensure that.

**I don't think the humanitarians have learned lessons. I think humanitarians are still very stuck in a very classic view.**

The only thing I would somewhat disagree with you on is that I don't think the humanitarians have learned lessons. I think the humanitarians are still very stuck in a very classic view. In

a way, that was the missed opportunity of the humanitarian summit in Istanbul. That it was just a reaffirmation of the principles, the

approach. And I think most of the institutional or formal humanitarian actors have yet to learn the lessons of this new world.

**Jon Alterman:**

Zaher, you've been on the ground in Syria for years. You've operated. You've responded to the needs. You've responded to the pressures. Is that fair that the humanitarian community really hasn't learned—that they're the ones who haven't learned?

**Dr. Zaher Sahloul:**

I have tears in my eyes when I remember what happened to my colleagues in Syria and our failure in protecting hospitals and doctors and nurses. I wrote an article in *Foreign Policy* just yesterday about the election of Syria to the governing council of the World Health Organization (WHO) that sets the standards for healthcare at the global level. This is the

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same government or regime that bombed hospitals in Syria more than 580 times, and killed 930 doctors and nurses, including Dr. Hassan al-Araj, who I met in a hospital that was built inside a cave and north of Hama. It's called the Central Cave Hospital in Syria. He was a cardiologist who wanted to help his community. He did not flee like 50 percent of the Syrian doctors fled—according to the WHO. He insisted on serving his community. His hospital was bombed, and he was killed by an alleged Russian missile when he was leaving the hospital. He's one of those doctors and nurses who are the heroes—who expected the international community and the UN system to protect them because we are told that medical neutrality is essential in the humanitarian

system. We're told that you are protected as a doctor, a nurse—you are providing healthcare to your community. I'm not talking here about healthcare to people who are fighting and

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injured. I'm talking about healthcare to children and women who are going through birth, and patients with chronic diseases, patients who have Covid-19.

In spite of that, our hospitals have been bombed more than 580 times by the same regime, and there's no accountability. That's the first lesson I think everyone has now learned from the Syrian crisis. And authoritarian regimes in the future—including Myanmar's—will be using the same lessons: that you can do whatever you want with your population, and there's no accountability, but you will be elected to the WHO governing council, as we have seen in Syria, instead of being referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

I think the Syrian regime has learned from other crises, but it also created something that is unique: the weaponization of humanitarian aid at the large scale. This is something invented

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by the Syrian regime. Weaponization of healthcare by bombing hospitals and undermining doctors and nurses, this is something that is unique to the Syrian crisis. I'm not aware—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—of any other crisis in the world where doctors and nurses are targeted and hospitals are bombed. And it has also used siege as a tactic that will lead to displacement—large-scale displacement—of the population. Half of the population in Syria have been displaced, and there is no accountability.

I think these are the lessons, and I agree with Charles about the terrorism issue. This is something that we—our government—are actually responsible for because our emphasis on the War on Terrorism has been incorporated in every other country when they deal with the rest of population—or the population that want to have democratic reform. They label them as terrorists because we have done similar things. And they employ the same laws that we have employed. So, it's our responsibility now to change the narrative of terrorism and to try to pressure the government not to use the same laws that we have used at one point to target its own population. And this is a tragedy of the Syrian crisis.

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you. Natasha, let me ask you a different question, which picks up on Charles's discussion of the need to build resilience and local capacity. One of the consequences of—we've now had seven years of cross-border assistance—is that you build a dependence on the cross-border assistance mechanism, and you divorce countries from areas that are outside of government control, and you create a set of interests where, rather than leading to political healing, the aid environment deepens the rift.

Zaher talked about the inability of cross-line assistance to be effective in the way that the government captures it, but I've also heard from UN people who've talked about the fact that local NGOs don't want cross-line assistance because their business model depends on cross-border assistance. So, how do we think about the problem of resilience and moving toward post-conflict reconstruction and getting out of conflict, when, in some ways, a cross-border mechanism embeds a split between areas inside and outside of government control?

**You have UN agencies operating in a silo. You have NGOs working in a silo, negotiating one-on-one with the regime or with non-state armed groups, and that is not a position that you want to be in.**

working in a silo, negotiating one-on-one with the regime or with non-state armed groups. And that is not a position that you want to be in, frankly, because it reduces your leverage.

In the words of one local NGO that I spoke to in the northwest, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the designated terrorist group that operates in the northwest would love it if NGOs had to deal with them one-on-one and negotiate with them one-on-one. And likewise, the regime, or any other group, frankly, in the world, is learning a

**Natasha Hall:**

Yeah. I just want to turn that last bit on its head a little bit. Competition for funding between different aid organizations—including between different UN agencies—is quite common throughout all of these contexts. And that's part of the problem. You have UN agencies operating in a silo. You have NGOs

lot from how the regime is doing that. HTS is taking some pages out of the book of the regime in that regard, too.

I think that to say that local NGOs don't want cross-line because it's a competition is a false narrative given everything that we just spoke about for the past 10 years. For these populations, especially in the northwest, two-thirds of this population was forcibly displaced from other parts of the country because cross-line didn't work. As Dr. Sahloul mentioned, this population is heavily traumatized by the myth of cross-line aid.

I've heard from others that it's HTS that doesn't want cross-line aid to happen—but the rest of the population is also quite fearful of it because it's not safe, it's not cost efficient, and it's not reliable. And speaking from the position of the Russians, I think that this might be a controversial point of view, but I don't work for a humanitarian organization, so I can say it.

The Russians have said that they are going to cut off cross-border aid if a cross-line convoy does not go through to the northwest. This has been their talking point in the past few months. But you could see that this is kind of a checkmate. If one cross-line convoy goes across— maybe two, maybe three—then they can say that cross-border aid is not needed anymore, which is simply not accurate.

We saw over 12,000 trucks cross through Bab al-Hawa last year. A few unreliable convoys that

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are stripped of supplies is not going to make up for that. So, I think that we need to get cross-line right in other parts of the country before we talk about this population in particular, a large percentage of which has been displaced between six to 25 times. What we see in the northeast, for example, is that, again, cross-line deliveries are stripped of certain medical supplies.

So, we're not really seeing the confidence-building measures that we need, which is an understatement, in order to really consider cross-line aid as an alternative to the northwest. That's the position I've seen from dozens of interviews with UN officials, with

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people on the ground, and with local NGOs as well. So, I think that this narrative is a bit dangerous within the context that we're currently operating in.

In terms of your point about dividing up the country: I don't think that Syrians want to divide up the country, but this has been the position that they've been put in because they don't want to die. So, I think that we need to talk about these issues of

cross-line access as kind of a starting point for the people in the northwest to not be fearful of joining up with other geographic areas because they've stayed in their areas for many, many years, under aerial bombardment, under sieges. They wanted to stay, but they simply couldn't.

**Jon Alterman:**

Charles, you mentioned Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and other places. Natasha's point is that we

should start making cross-line work before we rely on it. Is that right? Is there an element that we should also be considering based on the range of situations you've looked at?

**Charles Petrie:**

Well, I would look at the whole discussion differently. For me, whether it's cross-line or cross-border is sort of secondary to the ability to actually support local communities. And I think there needs to be a complete rethinking of the approach and a move away from seeing the support to local structures as an extension of the provision of assistance, and rather see it as the essence of the intervention. That what you're trying to do is you're trying to support local actors, local communities, to deal with their challenges, and there are horrific challenges.

I think the whole argument—and there's a similar argument being made in Myanmar—is that if you provide humanitarian aid, especially if you provide humanitarian aid in government-held areas, you're basically facilitating the acceptance of the military over the people. It's a completely false argument.

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I think the problem is that outside actors have such a low threshold—or high threshold—in terms of accepting security risk that they're not able to really engage with actors. So, in a way, what you see is they start developing partnerships with a class of people—what they call sort of the local communities. Many times, local communities for Western organizations are basically made up of people who speak

English. They're not necessarily representatives of the local communities.

So, again, I think the challenge, or—there needs to be a paradigm shift. And the paradigm shift is to move from seeing local communities, local NGOs, as being the endpoint of distribution of aid, and seeing them much more as being the essence—building their capacity being the essence—of the intervention. And what the paradigm shift entails, one, is having a clearer sense through better analysis of who the different actors are. But most importantly, donors willing to take risk—financial and political risk—in providing assistance.

**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you. That's very helpful. I want to turn to some audience questions. Steve Heydemann from Smith College and Brookings asked about if cross-border assistance were to end or be heavily constrained, how would humanitarian organizations and the main humanitarian donors respond? Will there be alternative streams of aid? Will the Security Council

become less relevant to the question of assistance to Syria? And, Zaher, perhaps this is up your alley as the person most directly involved in delivering assistance in Syria.

**Dr. Zaher Sahloul:**

Thank you very much. Thank you, Steve, for the question. I also want to support what Charles had mentioned about partnering with local communities because this is something that we hear a lot about in the humanitarian sphere. But it's not translated the way it should be. The grand bargain that everyone is aware of was supposed be that 25 percent of the funding, of humanitarian funding, should go to local communities by 2020. And we have not reached that. Most of the Syrian humanitarian organization that have been providing life-sustaining humanitarian assistance—education, food, shelter, and healthcare—to the 4.2 million Syrians in Idlib are not receiving enough funding, in spite of the miracles that they are creating on the ground every day. Also, these organizations—and we had a meeting last week of 22 humanitarian organization that are working in Idlib—were not in existence 10 years ago. They were created because of the need of the local communities. And they're doing really amazing work. I was in Idlib and many other cities three months ago. The livelihood, the work that they are creating to local communities, the hope that they are giving to local communities. And this is something that we're not thinking of: the hope. People are dependent on these organizations to live and to aspire for a better future for their children.

And if this assistance is cut, that means 4.2 million people will not have hope, and many of them will be thinking about leaving. The fact that you have 4.2 million people in Idlib right now is a miracle, in spite of the bombing. They tolerate the bombing and the chemical weapons that were used more than 300 times in Syria. But they cannot tolerate that there is no assistance, and that they will be dependent

**There should be a plan B so we will not be blackmailed by Russia and other countries every time we have a renewal of this**

on the regime that created all of this mess. And to answer Steve Heydemann's question, yes, there are alternatives. It should be a way from the UN Security Council—maybe through the UN General Assembly. There are some laws that stipulate that, but there should be a plan B so we will not be blackmailed by Russia and other countries every time we have a renewal of this situation. And this should be the real discussion of these platforms. Even if the veto did not happen, what is the plan B? How can we partner with local communities and lift their capacity so they can absorb the funding to help their population? And how can we provide real reform in the United Nations so that it is not manipulated by only one country that provides less than 1 percent of the aid to Syrians?

**Jon Alterman:**

From where I sit, I saw lots of nodding from Charles and Natasha. Is there anything you want to add, or should we move on to the next question?

**Natasha Hall:**

We can move on, but I just want to build off a point that both Charles and Zaher made about building the resilience of local communities and then also building the capacity of these local NGOs, which I think is absolutely vital. The problem is that we have a designated terrorist organization in the northwest, and the UN has been able to fund these local NGOs in spite of donor governments' risk aversion to the situation on the ground.

What I fear—and what I really don't want to happen—is the risk, once again, being offloaded to Syrians, which has been the case for both physical risk and financial risk as well. So, I do think that there need to be some safeguards for those local NGOs, but absolutely, they need to be supported more directly in the northwest. That could also reduce dependence on the UN and simply keep the aid flowing—and not just trucks of aid, but also salaries for medical workers, for teachers, all of these other operational things that keep life livable in these areas. So certainly, donor governments need to rethink how they look at delivering aid in Syria and in other contexts as well.

**If this assistance is cut, that means 4.2 million people will not have hope, and many of them will be thinking about leaving.**

**There need to be some safeguards for those local NGOs, but they need to be supported more directly in the northwest.**

**The fact that the UN Security Council would not have oversight of humanitarian aid would free a number of the more innovative donors to intervene.**

**Charles Petrie:**

I think the idea that the Security Council would no longer have the humanitarian issue on its agenda is actually good. That's what you want because it would then free a number of donors who have demonstrated their ability to operate in very complex environments. I think the other

misconception is the idea that you need billions of dollars. I mean, most of these communities just need a little bit of money. They just need a little bit of support to be able to survive and resist and build. I think the fact that the Security Council would not have oversight of humanitarian aid would probably free a number of the more innovative donors to intervene.

**Jon Alterman:**

We have a question from James, who says that he's a private citizen working for an NGO in Syria. He asks about this problem of sovereignty. All the UN Security Council resolutions talk about being committed to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Syria, and yet you have this issue of providing assistance irrespective of the desires and direction of the host government. Is that an unusually difficult problem? Is it a problem where we should be willing to tolerate the tension and just move on and save lives? How do we think about that?

**Charles Petrie:**

We think of it as constructive ambiguity.

**Jon Alterman:**

So, you're just for let's keep both ideas ahead moving forward?

**Charles Petrie:**

Basically since the end of the Cold War, there have been a number of General Assembly resolutions that have brought out the primacy of providing support. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was a very strong legal constraint. I think now, since the end of the Cold War, it's a reality, but it isn't the straight jacket that it was before.

**Jon Alterman:**

What has the effect of attacks on the U.S. military in northeast Syria and in the Kurdish region of Iraq had on the Syria crisis? What would happen if the United States were to completely leave Syria—or more generally, lighten its footprint in the Middle East. How would that affect the humanitarian issues we're talking about today?

**Natasha Hall:**

I think that the Biden administration has tried to insert a little bit of predictability into the presence in the northeast, which is a good thing. And the reason for that is not because it's a military intervention. This is a very small footprint, but just by virtue of being there, it provides a little bit of leverage in an environment where otherwise you wouldn't really have very much.

Having spoken to a lot of people in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqqa and these areas, a lot of them simply can't live under government control, so, I think if you had a U.S. withdrawal, there is a much higher potential for the Syrian Democratic

**If you had a U.S. withdrawal, there is a much higher potential for the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)—the de facto authority in the northeast—making deals with the regime**

Council (SDC)—the de facto authority in the northeast—making deals with the regime, not just them, but I think individual tribal leaders as well might cut deals with the government and cede territory.

I think that that would be a mistake for all of those people making those deals, but they would feel, perhaps, under existential threat, especially for the Kurdish-dominated government there, if they didn't. And that

would definitely start a mass displacement crisis once again. So, I think that that's something that we need to consider as we're talking about these issues today.

The other thing is that it provides a little bit of stability for developing this resilience that we're talking about in these areas. If you develop an element of predictability and stability, then you can move to programming that isn't just water trucking, or food trucking, or all of these other issues. You can actually look a little bit more long term, especially in the northeast.

**Jon Alterman:**

We have reached the end of our time, but we haven't yet solved all the problems. I think we'll have to gather this remarkable panel once again. I'd like to thank Charles Petrie, Natasha Hall, and Dr. Zaher Sahloul for their wisdom, insights, and participation today. We thank you for joining us, and we look forward to seeing you all again very soon.

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