

A Decade of War in Syria: What Have Humanitarian Agencies Learned?

A virtual lecture by Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, at the Geneva Graduate Institute

16 March 2021

As delivered

Well, Mahmoud, thank you very much indeed. Hello, everybody. Thank you for joining us. And I'm looking forward to the discussion.

No crisis has absorbed more money and effort from humanitarian agencies than the tragedy of Syria. So, the question I am addressing today is what has the humanitarian system learned from the experience, and how is it reshaping the work of humanitarian agencies?

I'm going to spend a few minutes just reminding everybody of what's happened over the last 10 years, because there has been a series of phases, and I think it is helpful to remind ourselves exactly how things have played out. But I'm going to spend most of the time trying to distill some implications, lessons, takeaways, if you like.

Now as you'll recall, everything started with protests as part of the wider Arab Spring in Deraa. What happened in Syria was that the protests were greeted by the Government with beating and bullets, and that in turn led the opposition to take up arms. And that's how unrest turned into civil war.

And it's important to note that the international community's stake in Syria from the outset stacked up differently than in other countries affected by the Arab Spring. In particular, the Russian Federation had long held a naval facility in Tartus. The Assad family had sustained an intimate long-term alliance with Iran. So, both Russia and Iran had important stakes in the survival of the Syrian Government. And meanwhile, other key powers including the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and other Gulf States clearly hoped that the Arab Spring might topple Assad and open the space for a

Government more aligned with their interests. So, from the very outset the conflict was internationalized.

The UN appointed a diplomatic envoy in February 2012. That was Kofi Annan, who you all remember. But his efforts were undermined really from the outset by the growing acrimony among the five permanent members of the Security Council arising from the NATO intervention in Libya.

The intervention in Libya fuelled fears, I think, in Moscow and Beijing that any invocation by the Security Council of Chapter VII measures — which is the part of the UN Charter which allows for enforcement action — in Syria, even in the form of non-military measures like sanctions, would be the start of a slippery slope towards regime change. And so, the Security Council was not able to agree on any of those measures. In fact, there were multiple vetoes, 15 or 16 vetoes by Russia in the Security Council. In many cases they were joined by China. Three quarters of the vetoes exercised in the Council over the past 10 years have been on Syria, in fact.

So, Kofi wasn't able to get any real buy-in beyond rhetorical support for his diplomatic initiative, and he ended up stepping down in July 2012 out of frustration.

One thing that meant was an increasing onus on humanitarian organizations to deal with the consequences.

And that failure of politics also set the scene for a dramatic increase in the scale, intensity and brutality of the fighting between mid-2012 and September 2015. And that escalation was basically driven by three factors, I think.

Firstly, Assad's realization, in light of recurrent Russian vetoes in the Security Council, that the risk of finding himself held accountable for his actions was limited. And that essentially opened up the way for the decision he took to use chemical weapons against the opposition. Initially, the US administration, the Obama administration, said that was a red line for them. But that red line wasn't enforced. And Assad accordingly knew he had been let off the hook, essentially.

The second factor, I think, fuelling escalation was the increase in military and financial support from fighting parties from those outside, including Iran and Hezbollah who had boots on the ground, but also a wide variety of other actors. And those other actors were reflected in the emergence of really a huge number of opposition groups. At one point the UN counted more than 1,500

separate groups, all with constantly shifting agendas and alliances and backers.

The more moderate groups failed to unify, but others like the Islamic State were able to establish a strong foothold. And before long, Syria became the global centre for jihadi militancy.

I am going to come back to ISIS, who have committed some of the most heinous crimes of the conflict.

But the effect of this fragmentation and multiplicity of groups at this time was that the situation on the ground was extremely chaotic.

By September 2013, Government forces controlled only 30 per cent of Syrian territory. Much of the rest was under the sway of this plethora of other armed groups. And one of the consequences of all that was a mushrooming humanitarian tragedy. The number of refugees during this period grew fiftyfold to more than 3 million, and at the same time there was a twenty-fivefold increase in internally displaced people. And by 2015, more than half of the Syrian population were no longer living in their pre-war homes.

The fact that the Syrian Government no longer controlled most of the country's territory, and combined with its refusal to allow the UN's Damascus-based aid operation to deliver aid across front lines to opposition areas, led to the Security Council in 2014 passing a resolution permitting the UN to carry out cross-border aid operations. And I'll come back to that as well. Over the summer of 2015, the refugee issue assumed much greater prominence, especially in Europe.

In the face of all these developments, the international response to the crisis by late 2015 basically shifted from resolution of the conflict to mitigating its fallout. The policy focus was basically around three things, on which there was a degree of unity among the permanent five members of the Security Council. And those three things were chemical weapons, terrorism and humanitarian assistance.

Then there was a phase from late 2015 to mid-2018, when the Government, with the assistance of Russian military forces who formally intervened on the ground, established control over much of central and southern Syria, and a coalition led by the US waged its struggle to deal with ISIS.

And I'm going to say a bit more about both those two things.

The tactic of choice adopted by the Government of Syria and its allies to regain ground was the siege warfare that was so characteristic during the medieval period.

By the end of 2016, there was something like a million Syrians living in areas besieged by their own Government. What happened was the Government would use sieges in combination with indiscriminate aerial bombardments to coerce dozens of communities into surrender agreements characterized as “starve or surrender” tactics.

And through those processes, the Government was able to establish control of much of the country, often by sending the final remnants of opposition in those sieged areas to the north-west of Syria, to Idlib, and sometimes to the north-east, and that had later consequences, as we’ll see.

Meanwhile, as I said, the US-led coalition, with ground troops from Kurdish militias, were increasingly successful in displacing ISIS from northern Syria. And that culminated, in late 2017, in the liberation of Raqqa. The by-product of that, though, was the complete destruction of Raqqa and the displacement of tens of thousands of more people.

We move on now essentially to the second half of 2018 and the period after that. That was a period which was more peaceful across most of the country. But there was still an ongoing struggle mostly between Syria and Russia on the one hand and Turkey on the other over the control of the two main areas that remained outside Government control at that point, namely Idlib and the surrounding areas in the north-west, and the Kurdish-dominated areas in the north-east.

In the case of Idlib, Turkey and Russia had agreed essentially a buffer zone would be established, when they met in Sochi in September 2018. But despite that agreement, Syrian and Russian forces renewed their offensive in 2019, and that led to a military escalation in 2019 up to March 2020 that saw, in fact, some of the most intense fighting in the whole of the decade of conflict. That also, by the way, directly pitted the forces of a NATO member – Turkey – against Russia.

Finally, in March 2020 there was another ceasefire agreement affecting the north-west. And that continues to hold. Opposition forces continue with Turkish backing to control territory populated by over 4 million people in the north-west, although that situation is still quite fragile.

Through these five years or so, from 2015 onwards, collaboration among key powers on humanitarian issues was increasingly eroded. And that was reflected in December 2019 and July 2020, when the Security Council, faced with Russian and Chinese vetoes, consecutively reduced the scale of the UN's cross-border operation.

So that brings us to the situation we now see.

Syria is currently a picture of economic despair. Heightened humanitarian needs. The economy is less than a third of its pre-war size, maybe much smaller than that. The Lebanese financial crisis has pulled Syria down too, with the collapse of the value of the Syrian pound. Food prices have gone through the roof. On top of all that we have, of course, COVID-19. And some like the US have continued to tighten their sanctions.

I am going to move on to the lessons of all this for humanitarian agencies now. But I want to just pause for a moment and recall, as Mahmoud did at the beginning, what the human cost of all this was.

More than half a million Syrians probably have died in the war. The UN actually stopped counting. We found it impossible to keep track some years ago. But those are the estimates.

More than one-and-a-half to two million living with permanent disabilities. The world's largest displacement crisis – all those refugees and displaced people – since the Second World War.

It's easy to be trapped by the numbers, but the numbers all represent individual people. And on my visits to Syria and surrounding countries, I met many Syrians who told me what happened to them. And the level of trauma and the scale of suffering is really mind-boggling. People frequently weep and shake as they tell their stories; they are unable to recover from their trauma and they are still terrified for what lies ahead. We can talk more in the discussion about some of the people I have met and what they want and what they have said. I think their voices are not heard enough.

Here are seven conclusions I draw from all this for humanitarian agencies. I offer these points in a spirit of humility. They arise amidst terrible tragedy. The lesson learning is not complete; there needs to be more evaluation. We don't know what the future holds. But I do think it's important to try to take stock.

The first thing on the list is that despite all the challenges, humanitarian agencies have been able to save hundreds of thousands of lives by bringing aid to people in severe need.

The UN, in retrospect, we were a bit slow in 2011 and 2012 to get going with the humanitarian operation. But we did quickly build up what's become a major operation, both by supporting refugees in neighbouring countries and supporting Syrians in Government-controlled areas and in opposition-controlled areas. And things would certainly have been a lot worse but for that huge effort.

It is important to say also that most of the people who worked on humanitarian operations inside Syria are Syrians themselves. Syrian aid workers have paid an outsized price in terms of blood and lives. More than 250 of them have been killed doing their jobs over the last few years.

Many of their heroic endeavours have been captured, including in documentary movies like the Oscar-nominated *The Cave*. I know at the Graduate Institute there was a screening of *The Cave* about a year ago. Probably some of you, like me, had a chance to meet the heroine of that story, Dr. Amani Ballour. She is a very gentle, softly spoken paediatrician. And she is characteristic really of the huge courage and determination to relieve suffering many humanitarian workers display.

Notwithstanding all the savagery, there have also been acts of humanity on a vast scale. And much of it has been done by Syrians, often through newly created organizations.

The second lesson I draw is that the Syria crisis exemplifies the challenges humanitarian organizations face in today's geopolitical realities.

We have got more explicit rivalry among the leading powers and greater willingness of others to intervene militarily (often through proxies) in regional issues. That's created greater politicization of the humanitarian realm, and that forces humanitarian organizations to engage much more actively in the political arena. We can decry this all we want. We can invoke the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality all day long, but we still have to deal with the reality of what I've just said.

It's a highly politicized environment. A number of key powers try to instrumentalize humanitarian action for their political and other goals.

Syria's allies wanted to ensure humanitarian support reinforced the Government's sovereignty and State control. Conversely, the people paying for the humanitarian relief operation, in other words paying for most of what humanitarian agencies have done — and they have been largely Western countries — have often harboured a sympathy for the protesters and the moderate opposition.

What this means is humanitarian organizations and leaders, for all the frustrations it involves, inevitably we get drawn into the political sphere. And I know something about that myself, because I spent more than 30 mornings or afternoons during my tenure in this job in often unproductive meetings on Syria in the Security Council. Recognizing this is politicized and there's no choice but to engage with that is something that humanitarian agencies need to reflect on.

The third takeaway is that we need a more honest and nuanced debate about the difficult trade-offs humanitarian agencies face when trying to save lives in a context like Syria.

And those trade-offs result from a basic dilemma. On the one hand, humanitarian action anywhere requires the consent of whoever in practice is in control of the relevant territory. Humanitarian agencies can never force their way in. For the UN, the provision of humanitarian assistance also requires the consent of the affected country, or if that country's Government is not in control of all its territory, permission from a Security Council resolution where that is available. On the other hand, in the case of Syria, the Government has tried to not only manipulate humanitarian aid at every turn, it has also been responsible for a lion's share of the atrocities committed during the war. And that dilemma has made engagement with humanitarian agencies in Syria a perennial walk on an ethical tightrope.

Agencies, including my own office, have taken quite a bit of flak from some human rights NGOs and others for the compromises that they say that's forced us into for — as these organizations see it — having been too accommodating to Damascus. For allowing the Government, as they say, to rig humanitarian assistance in return for access. And as some of them say, for sacrificing humanitarian principles on the altar of consent.

Now, I think elements of this criticism disregards some basic realities. But I want to engage with it because it is important to have an honest debate about it.

Yes, it's true that humanitarian agencies accepted a greater degree of intrusion by the Syrian Government than in other conflict zones. Yes, it was agreed that a national organization — the Syrian Arab Red Crescent — would oversee much of the distribution of aid. And yes, aid agencies never threatened to pull out over the countless restrictions and hurdles that were put in their way.

But the tendency of humanitarian agencies to err on the side of providing assistance was based on a few basic truths. Saving hundreds of thousands of lives through the provision of assistance outweighed the damage done by accommodating Government restrictions.

And there is zero indication that humanitarian agencies would have gained any leverage on the Syrian Government by withholding assistance or suspending operations.

Moreover, those financing the operation, primarily Western donors, wanted it to be sustained despite the difficulties and the dilemmas.

What this boils down to is the hard truth that humanitarian agencies can only do what decision makers in control of those places where civilians in need of assistance live will let them do, and what other people are willing to pay for.

The fourth point, in a way, comes from the opposite end of the spectrum. The emergence of extremist groups who don't even pretend to subscribe to the basic norms of humanitarian action, and who regard aid workers as legitimate targets of attack, has major implications for established humanitarian agencies, which we have yet to find a way of handling adequately.

Areas controlled by ISIS, for example, often became no-go areas for humanitarian agencies. There have been few exceptions where humanitarian agencies were able to deliver help in places controlled by ISIS. One of them that was possible was a large-scale polio vaccination campaign in eastern Syria in 2016 to 2018. And there was some engagement from third parties, which helped with that.

But one thing that we need to do in the future is find better solutions to this challenge of accessing populations in places controlled by extremist groups, because there are now about 60 million people – nearly 1 per cent of the global population – who live in places under the control of non-State armed groups, and many of them are extremists. So, we need to find ways to engage better with them.

My fifth conclusion, then, relates to the UN's particularly important responsibility to try to protect the innocent against atrocities and other abuses. There's been no other crisis over the past 30 years that has been as challenging and disheartening as in Syria on that score. The level of brutality and taboo-breaking over the course of the past decade has no recent parallel. And that tells us something about a wider erosion of respect for humanitarian norms.

On a personal level, I have to say what I found particularly hard to stomach were the systematic attacks on medical facilities. The World Health Organization counted 250 of those attacks just between 2018 and 2020 alone. Around 1,000 health-care workers were killed over the past decade. As well as being acts of pure cruelty, these attacks also lastingly devastated the Syrian health system.

I and my predecessors in this job regularly appeared before the Security Council to call out these violations and plead on behalf of people trapped in the fighting.

It was curious sometimes to see that speakers in the Security Council sought to deny the facts of what was happening. The huge amount of real-time footage of indiscriminate attacks that Syrian activists and citizens, and international groups that supported them, posted on YouTube, Twitter and elsewhere made those denials the subject of considerable ridicule.

As the war escalated from 2013 onwards, we also got increasingly worried about threats not just to civilians but to aid workers on the ground.

In 2014, we'd established a humanitarian deconfliction mechanism, under which the UN gave the US, Russia and Turkey details of all planned convoys and the coordinates of humanitarian sites, with the idea that they would then be protected. For a while, that system actually worked quite well.

But unfortunately, it became increasingly obvious from 2018 onwards that the Government of Syria and some of its allies no longer bought into the deconfliction arrangements. In 2018, more aid workers were killed in a single year in Syria than in any other conflict over the previous 20 years.

And the Government of Syria openly and transparently took the view that there was nothing in the areas that they didn't control which was not a legitimate target. Their view, and they wrote to the Security Council to say this in plain terms, was that it was acceptable to hit every single target in

parts of Syria they didn't control because they asserted those targets were used by terrorists. In our estimation, there were 100 civilians for every terrorist in Idlib. Essentially, what the Syrian authorities were doing was stripping the core international humanitarian law principle of proportionality of any meaning at all.

I came to the conclusion that deconfliction wasn't working.

We began to advise humanitarian organizations on the ground about the risks of continuing to provide information on where they were operating.

I'm afraid the subsequent evidence suggests those concerns were right. The *New York Times* in October 2019 published a list of 182 deconfliction sites, of which 27 had been damaged by Russian or Syrian attacks over the previous six months. All of those sites were hospitals or clinics.

Ten members of the Security Council asked us to set up a Board of Inquiry to investigate some of those cases. The Board of Inquiry, which is an independent group of people, concluded it was "highly probable" that most of the attacks were "attributable to the Government of Syria or its allies".

Now the issue is, how do you pursue advocacy in those circumstances? We didn't have a deconfliction system that was working anymore. We faced deepening battles over truth, with the thickening fog of information warfare, and the facts we provided were sometimes falsely dismissed as fake news.

But we took the view that it was important to sustain the advocacy. Ultimately, facts tend to prevail. There is an ever-greater premium on our ability to gather, assess and present truthful information. And that's important really for the simple reason that it reinforces the validity of the basic norms of how people are supposed to behave in conflict.

However much they dodge and weave, no one, in fact, likes to be shamed on the world stage for grave violations. One good thing is that there's huge amounts of evidence. And one question is how the evidence is going to be used. There is no agreement in the UN about having international processes. But there are, interestingly, some national processes that are already under way.

Many of those cases are in Germany, including a trial which started in April last year against Anwar Raslan, the head of the investigations unit at a notorious torture prison in Damascus, and one of his aides, Eyad al-Gharib.

The German Ambassador to the Security Council relayed a lot of the evidence that was presented in that case to members of the Security Council. And one of the defendants was convicted in February. And the verdict for the other main defendant is expected to be issued later this year.

This issue of accountability is super important because unless there is accountability, miscreants will draw the lesson that serious crime pays and what's not punished is incentivized.

I've got two more quick points, Mahmoud, and then I'll wrap up.

The sixth point is about what we've learned from the experience of raising huge amounts of money for the relief operation. We've raised, between 2013 and 2019, something like US\$30 billion. That amounts, in fact, to a third of the global humanitarian funding the UN has managed over that period.

Two thirds of all that money comes from the US, Germany, the UK and the European Commission, and a group of other Western countries account for another 21 per cent.

Some other countries that might be expected to share some of the financial burden, in light of both their means and their political responsibilities for Syria – including, I have to say, three of the permanent members of the Security Council, as well as Saudi Arabia – are conspicuously absent from the list of significant donors.

So why have we been able to raise money on that scale? I think it's three factors.

The first is – and this is thanks to the courage, determination and grit of Syrian and Western journalists – Syria consistently featured prominently in the news headlines in donor countries reminding everyone of the scale and extreme nature of the suffering. And that meant that taxpayers wanted their governments to provide some relief to the suffering.

The second factor is that donors, I think, were afraid of contagion – that problems would spread if they are not contained where they started.

The third factor which was important is that the aid agencies were largely able to convince the donors that most of their money was reaching people in need. And there was a lot of innovation, in fact, particularly in the cross-border operation, which proved to people, and continues to prove to people, that money does get to people who need it.

Some of the things we've done on the cross-border operation, which go way beyond what we've been able to do in terms of monitoring in parts of Syria under government control, we should replicate in other places around the world.

The last thing I want to touch on briefly is the question of sanctions. The Government and its allies claim that sanctions are the main culprit of the humanitarian suffering and the sorry state of Syria's economy. And they accuse others of collective punishment. This has been one of the most contentious issues in the UN in New York in the last couple of years or so. And the debate enjoys a great deal more heat than light.

But there are some things that are clear enough.

First, the tendency of the Syrian authorities to ascribe to sanctions all the problems they face and to claim that the underlying intent is to maximize the suffering endured by their people is not to be taken seriously. For one thing, it rather glosses over the impact of a decade of war. It glosses over the Government's own corruption and mismanagement, the economic and health impact of COVID, the effect on Syria of the Lebanese banking crisis. And for another thing, why would the West be providing billions of dollars a year in life-saving aid if their goal was to maximize the suffering of the ordinary people?

Equally though, the point of the sanctions is to harm someone. And the issue is whether those imposing sanctions are penalizing the people they want to penalize.

The truth is that it is difficult to disentangle the socioeconomic and humanitarian impact of sanctions from other war-related and economic factors.

One thing we know from elsewhere, notably Somalia, is that sanctions can complicate the delivery of humanitarian assistance in ways those imposing them say they don't want. That is particularly true for NGOs who do not benefit from the same immunities and exemptions as the UN. There are real issues to be addressed about whether the sanctions, in fact, constrain the humanitarian operation which those who have imposed them are duty bound to take seriously and mitigate and deal with, in my opinion.

I'm afraid looking at the situation today in Syria, it's difficult to be optimistic. There is a lull in the fighting, but the suffering of the population probably is greater than ever because of the poverty and the hunger. And the political

process is not going well, as my colleague Geir Pedersen said yesterday. Ultimately, the only way out of this tragedy is through politics and some kind of agreement. The leading powers have a responsibility to play a stronger role in that, but it's not happening yet.

Mahmoud thank you.

ENDS