Research Paper

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# UN Humanitarian Coordination in Lebanon

## The Consequences of Excluding Syrian Actors

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# Summary


- The politicization of humanitarian funding in response to the Syrian conflict has had a negative impact on coordination between the major international humanitarian actors. For their part, UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations appear more focused on winning big contracts than drawing up and implementing effective strategies to coordinate the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict and its consequences in Lebanon.
- There is a consensus among international humanitarian actors that coordination is necessary among the different organizations providing assistance. However, the understanding of what coordination entails and the extent to which it should be prioritized varies significantly from organization to organization.
- A recent study by the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) Initiative shows that while Syrian humanitarian actors were responsible for delivering 75 per cent of humanitarian assistance in Syria in 2014, they received just 0.3 per cent of direct cash funding and only 9.3 per cent of indirect cash funding available for the overall Syria response.
- The ongoing exclusion of Syrian actors in the humanitarian response and coordination structure in Lebanon contravenes the values of the international humanitarian system. In short, it impedes a more principled humanitarian response. The legal status of Syrian humanitarian actors, organizations and individuals in Lebanon is another factor that affects the inclusion of Syrian actors in the UN coordination process there.
- The legacy of tension and power struggles among UN agencies, on the one hand, and between UN agencies and external international organizations, on the other, hinders coordination. Internal dynamics and the double or even triple hatting of some agencies has further exacerbated that struggle and made coordination more difficult still.
- Ad hoc and short-term funding is yet another factor preventing effective coordination and strategic planning by international actors. Not least, it means there is neither the time nor capacity to avoid the overlapping of responsibilities, the duplication of work and ineffective planning.
- Syria is seen as a vacuum when it comes to credible information. Sensitivity about sharing information – and the security rationale for not doing so – is understandable. However, information has become a commodity and an integral part of the power game between the various international actors.
- Double standards in the international humanitarian community discriminate between international and Syrian organizations – and not just in terms of funding. Syrian organizations face strict examination when funders determine their neutrality or impartiality; but UN agencies and international organizations are not subject to the same levels of due diligence.
- The issue of reforming the UN's coordination structure must be revisited and the renewed debate based on reliable cost-benefit analysis. If the costs of the current coordination structure and mechanisms outweigh the benefits, then admitting those failures could help the UN save face.

# 1. Introduction

In terms of duration, intensity, severity and scale, the ongoing Syrian conflict is unprecedented, both at the local and regional levels. The humanitarian crisis, which, in January 2013, was classified by the UN, under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Transformative Agenda, as requiring a Level 3 emergency response,[1] has been described as a 'stain on the conscience of the international community'.[2] But for all the hard-hitting rhetoric, the response has been poorly executed. It is not only the people of Syria who are experiencing fatigue and frustration; international humanitarian actors have been pushed to breaking point.

Owing to the massive influx of both Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria, Lebanon now has the highest per capita refugee immigration rate of any country in the world. The number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon is 1.03 million,[3] although the real number is thought to be significantly higher as many refugees do not register themselves as such.[4] Some 5.9 million people are estimated to be living in Lebanon, 3.3 million of whom are in need of assistance.[5] As a result, the Lebanese government has come under considerable strain – from socioeconomic, political and security perspectives – to meet the mounting requirements of refugees alongside those of its own people. Lebanon's gross domestic product (GDP) growth decreased from 10 per cent in 2010 to 1 per cent in 2014, despite the fact that every $1 spent on humanitarian assistance in Lebanon in 2014 had a multiplier value of $1.6 in the economy.[6] Moreover, unemployment has doubled over the same period,[7] while tourism decreased 23 per cent, exports fell by 7.5 percent and GDP growth contracted.[8] At the same time, the stability and security of Lebanon itself has deteriorated owing to sporadic car bombs, localized armed conflicts and rocket attacks, highlighting the legacy of the decades-long Syrian occupation of parts of Lebanon and Hezbollah's involvement in the current conflict, which has only intensified the sectarian strife and boosted anti-Syrian sentiment.

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[1] International Council of Voluntary Agencies (2013), *Basis for Declaration of a Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Response "L3" Syria Crisis*, https://icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/doc00005602-1.pdf (accessed 2 Feb. 2016). Level 3 (L3) emergencies were defined by the IASC Principals as major sudden-onset humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters or conflict, which require system-wide mobilization. For more details on Level 3 definition and procedures see: Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2012), *Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures*, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IASC%20System-Wide%20Activation.pdf (accessed 8 Mar. 2017).

[2] Harberg, M., Bowen, D. and Gorevan, D. (2015), *Failing Syria: Assessing the Impact of UN Security Council Resolutions in Protections and Assisting Civilians in Syria,* http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebe-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/FAILINGSYRIA_REPORT_MARCH2015.PDF (accessed 15 Sep. 2015). The report was co-written by authors from 20 leading international aid organizations.

[3] According to the most recent UNHCR data (30 June 2016), UNHCR Lebanon has temporarily suspended the registration of refugees under an order by the Lebanese government dated 6 May 2015. As such, this figure does not include individuals who have waited to be registered since then. Moreover, 72 per cent of Syrian refugee newborns in Lebanon do not have an official birth certificate owing to bureaucratic constraints. Amnesty International (2015), *Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon*, London: Amnesty International Publications, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1785/2015/en/.

[4] Lebanon Support (2016), *Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality: The Impact of the Lebanese State's Policies on Syrian Refugees' Daily Lives*, p. 7, http://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/formal_informality-brokering_mechanisms-illegality-ls2016_0.pdf (accessed 5 Jan. 2017).

[5] The key categories of people in need in Lebanon are displaced Syrians (1.5 million), vulnerable Lebanese (1.5 million) and 320,174 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinian refugees from Syria. See Amnesty International (2015), *Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon.* London: Amnesty International Publications.

[6] UNHCR and UNDP (2014), *3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015–2016: In Response to the Syria Crisis*, http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/3RP-Report-Overview.pdf (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).

[7] Ibid.

[8] UNDP and UNHCR (2015), *Impact of Humanitarian Aid on the Lebanese Economy*, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Impact%20of%20Humanitarian%20Aid-UNDP-UNHCR.PDF (accessed 2 Aug. 2015). The results cover the time span from the fourth quarter 2011 to the second quarter 2014.

Owing to its already fragile economy and inadequate infrastructure, Lebanon has been unable to provide sufficient shelter, water, electricity, healthcare, education, sanitation and other services to many refugees entering the country and to the Lebanese communities. Government expenditure increased by $1.1 billion between 2012 and 2014 alone in response to the enormous pressure on public services.[9] Of the 1,700 localities where refugees are accommodated, 242 are inhabited by 68 per cent of Lebanese living at or below the poverty line, 80 per cent of all UN-registered Syrians and 80 per cent of Palestinian refugees.[10] The humanitarian implementation plan, which serves as a communication tool for the partners of the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (ECHO) and helps draw up their proposals, estimated that the number of Syrian refugees and persons without legal status in Lebanon would reach half a million by the end of 2015.[11] Another study estimated that in 2015, 70 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon did not have valid permits of stay.[12] Meanwhile, the World Bank estimates that 92 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are working without an employment contract and that more than half of them are paid weekly or daily.[13] The onerous conditions in Lebanon have forced refugees to adopt negative coping strategies – including child labour, early marriage, smuggling and so-called survival sex[14] – in order to be able to meet their most basic needs. Their financial resources, like those of many of the Lebanese communities hosting them, have been exhausted after years of conflict; as a result they have become both more dependent and vulnerable.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly described the Syria conflict as the worst humanitarian crisis of our time, the biggest refugee population created by a single conflict in a generation and the most serious threat to global peace and security. To exacerbate the situation, there is evidence that the humanitarian aid system has failed – and continues to fail – Syria.[15] This state of affairs has lasted six years. To remedy the situation, intensive efforts coordinated by the various international humanitarian actors are required to respond in a meaningful way in the short, medium and long terms. This is not simply a professional imperative; it is also a moral duty.

This research paper examines the UN-led system intended to coordinate the humanitarian and development response to the Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon. It examines the inclusion and representation of Syrian individuals and organizations in the UN coordination structure, the challenges to and opportunities for meaningful and well-intended engagement with Syrian actors and the extent to which the UN is able to respond to and influence government policy – in this case, Lebanese government policy. The paper is based on more than 40 interviews conducted between March and June 2015 in Beirut, London and over Skype with members of various UN agencies and international humanitarian and development organizations, academics and Syrian aid workers and representatives of Syrian aid organizations in Lebanon. It is worth noting that at the time the fieldwork was being conducted in Lebanon, in April 2015, UN coordination of the humanitarian response was an extremely sensitive issue, not least among the UN agencies themselves.

[9] World Bank (2013), Lebanon – Economic and social impact assessment of the Syrian conflict, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16790 (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).
[10] UNHCR and UNDP (2014), *3RP Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015–2016: In Response to the Syrian Crisis*. See the report for a more detailed account of the Lebanese, Syrian nationals, and Palestinians in Lebanon that live at or below the poverty line and how the number of poor is calculated.
[11] ECHO (2015), *Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP) Syria Crisis*, http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/funding/decisions/2015/HIPs/syria_en.pdf (accessed 17 Jul. 2015).
[12] Janmyr, M. (2016), *The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut.
[13] World Bank (2016), *By the Numbers: The Cost of War & Peace in the Middle East*, http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/02/03/by-the-numbers-the-cost-of-war-and-peace-in-mena.
[14] Ferris, E., Kirişci, K. and Shaikh, S. (2013), *Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs and a Shortage of Solutions*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
[15] Sida, L., Trombetta, L. and Panero, V. (2016), *Evaluation of OCHA response to the Syria crisis*, a report published by UN OCHA.

# 2. From a 'Policy of No Policy' to one of Total Control

The rift between domestic political parties allied with the Syrian regime and those supporting the Syrian opposition – as well as the two-year political vacuum in Lebanon before Michel Aoun was elected president in October 2016 – prevented the Lebanese government from playing a prominent role in the early response to the Syrian crisis. Despite its initial open-door policy in 2011 (under which there were neither protocols nor official camps), the Lebanese government stressed that Lebanon 'is neither a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement'.[16] Moreover, it distanced itself from the Syria crisis response by pursuing a 'disastrous policy of no policy',[17] which created confusion and led to an uncoordinated approach towards formulating concrete comprehensive measures that would help to regulate the Syrian refugee crisis and mitigate its far-reaching consequences. Owing to this lack of policy, UNHCR led the response to the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon during the first two years of the humanitarian crisis.

Despite its initial open-door policy in 2011 (under which there were neither protocols nor official camps), the Lebanese government stressed that Lebanon 'is neither a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement'.

However, the Lebanese government's position began to change when senior ministers voiced their concern about the influx of Syrian refugees in August 2012, which sparked the government's pursuit of a more active role in coordinating the response. Its first official comprehensive policy position on Syrian displacement was announced in October 2014. The stated goal of which was to reduce the number of Syrian refugees by limiting the number of individuals registered by UNHCR, encouraging Syrians to return to their own country, addressing the growing security concerns and sharing the burden of protecting the Lebanese workforce and developing the Lebanese economy and its various sectors.[18] Between 31 December 2014 and 23 February 2015, the Lebanese government issued new regulations that 'significantly reduced eligibility for admission, residency and regularization'[19] and, in practice, have helped lower the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.[20] Moreover, at least 45 municipalities across Lebanon have introduced curfews since August 2014,[21] while Syrian nationals – including even those registered by UNHCR or enjoying other forms of sponsorship – are required to sign a pledge not to work. This last approach has led to a growing reliance among

[16] Government of Lebanon and UN (2014), *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015–15*.
[17] Mufti, K. E. (2014), *Official response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon: the disastrous policy of no-policy*, http://cskc.daleel-madani.org/paper/official-response-syrian-refugee-crisis-lebanon-disastrous-policy-no-policy (accessed 15 Jun. 2015).
[18] Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Lebanon (2014), *Session October 23, 2014*, http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=6118 (accessed 1 May 2015).
[19] UNHCR (2015), Refugee Response in Lebanon – Briefing Documents.
[20] Saghieh, N. and Frangieh, G. (2014), 'The most important features of Lebanese policy towards the issue of Syrian refugees: From hiding its head in the sand to "soft power"', http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/12/30/most-important-features-lebanese-policy-towards-issue-syrian-refugees-hiding-its-head (accessed 10 Jun. 2015).
[21] Janmyr, M. (2016), *The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut.

refugees on debt and humanitarian aid, when faced with potential criminal sanctions involving detention, fines, deportation, or a permanent ban on re-entry to Lebanon, in cases when they do not have residency visas in Lebanon.[22]

Lebanon's General Security Office (GSO), which has had historically long-standing ties with the Syrian regime,[23] is reported to have been arbitrarily arresting Syrian refugees.[24] Since 2014, new government policies, curfews and stringent restrictions on obtaining legal status – in some cases, the stripping of an individual's legal status – put Syrian refugees in Lebanon at risk of arrest, detention, ill-treatment, and vulnerable to work and sexual exploitation.[25] These developments, combined with the six-year refugee crisis in Lebanon, have pushed both the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees to their limits. Equally important, these events have circumscribed the ability of international actors to respond to the humanitarian crisis in a coordinated manner, enhance the UN coordination structure and allow the Lebanese government to play a leading role in the coordination efforts while continuing to pursue its own policies and safeguard the country's sovereignty.

[22] Norwegian Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee (2015), *Legal Status of Refugees from Syria: Challenges and Consequences of Maintaining Legal Stay in Beirut and Mount Lebanon.*

[23] Ferris, E., Kirişci, K. and Shaikh, S. (2013), *Syrian Crisis: Massive Displacement, Dire Needs and a Shortage of Solutions*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

[24] Discrimination against Syrian refugees has increased, and several Lebanese NGOs and activists have denounced racism and arbitrary measures against refugees. See also Tahhan, Z. (2016), 'Lebanon: Beirut protesters decry racism toward Syrians', http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/lebanon-beirut-protesters-decry-racism-syrians-160719083641250.html; AFP (2016), 'In Lebanon, Syria refugees fear rising discrimination', http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/07/lebanon-syria-conflict-refugee-abuse.html; and *The Arab Weekly* (2016), 'Mounting discrimination against Syrians in Lebanon', http://www.thearabweekly.com/News-&-Analysis/6049/Mounting-discrimination-against-Syrians-in-Lebanon.

[25] Human Rights Watch (2016), '"*I Just Wanted to be Treated like a Person". How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees',* http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/i-just-wanted-be-treated-person-how-lebanon-s-residency-rules-facilitate-abuse-syrian. Recent reports from Lebanon suggest mass arrests have been made, curfews imposed and vigilante-style attacks carried out against Syrian refugees. For more on the curfews in Lebanon, see Reuters (2016), *Syrians in Lebanon hit by arrests, curfews and hostility after bombings*, http://news.trust.org/item/20160725133951-cuvmn/; and Al-Saadi, Y. (2014), *Examining curfews against Syrians in Lebanon*, http://cskc.daleel-madani.org/content/examining-curfews-against-syrians-lebanon-0.

# 3. Humanitarian Aid: Motivations and Politics

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) Financial Tracking System (FTS), Lebanon received $1.3 billion in humanitarian funding in 2015, which constituted almost 55 per cent of the total humanitarian funding received during the period 2012–14. The increase is due to the country-based pooled fund (CBPF) efforts at increasing national NGOs' capacities and access to funding and ensuring coordination with the relevant national and local authorities.[26] The total pooled funds – including the Emergency Response Fund (ERF) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) – amounted to $36.7 million during the period 2012–14 and $23.7 million in 2015 alone. However, the ERF decreased by a full 49 per cent in 2014.[27]

**Table 1: Humanitarian aid to Lebanon, 2012–15 (US$)**

| Year | CERF (US$) | ERF (US$) | Total pooled funds (US$) | Total reported humanitarian aid received (US$) | Pooled funds as share of total funding received |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2012 | 2,978,910 | 1,489,071 | 4,467,981 | 164,000,135 | 2.7% |
| 2013 | 18,531,518 | 8,892,934 | 27,424,452 | 1,040,945,995 | 2.6% |
| 2014 | N/A | 4,811,350 | 4,811,350 | 1,097,058,783 | 0.4% |
| Total in period 2012–14 | 21,510,428 | 15,193,355 | 36,703,783 | 2,302,004,913 | N/A |
| 2015 | 18,004,139 | 5,670,280 | 23,674,419 | 1,285,598,305 | 1.8% |

Source: Financial Tracking Service (FTS) tracking humanitarian aid flows.

Of course, humanitarian funds are unable to solve all the problems faced by the Syrian refugees and their Lebanese host communities. This is not only because of the limited size of the funds; it is also due to how the funds are spent and how that spending is coordinated, if at all. This raises several important questions. Does the international humanitarian architecture enhance or impede coordination efforts? To what extent is such aid guided by humanitarian concerns or political motivations? What share of humanitarian funding fails to reach the Syrian refugees and other end users owing to the layered structure of the humanitarian aid system? How much humanitarian aid is returned to or remains with the donor governments? In Afghanistan, for example, it is estimated that 40 per cent of foreign aid is returned to donor countries via corporate profits and consultant salaries.[28] Other sources suggest that payback spending on donor countries' services and personnel can reach up to 60 per cent or even 90 per cent of foreign aid.[29]

[26] OCHA (2015), *Lebanon Country Based Pooled Fund (CBPF),* https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/CBPF%20OVERVIEW%20150506.pdf (accessed 5 May 2016).
[27] Stoianova, V. (2014), *ICVA's Review of NGOs' Experience with the Syria-Related Pooled Funds*, published by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).
[28] Waldman, M. (2008), *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan,* Kabul: Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/ACBAR_aid_effectiveness_paper_0803.pdf (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).
[29] *The Guardian* (2014), 'How much aid money is spent in donor countries? – get the data', https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/datablog/2014/feb/13/aid-money-spent-donor-countries-get-data (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).

It is undeniable that politics plays a major role in humanitarian aid and how it is spent. Indeed, this has been the case in almost every humanitarian crisis in recent history, as evidenced by the Humanitarian Response Index 2010, which shows that donor governments are failing to keep humanitarian aid apolitical and that, on the contrary, political interests inform humanitarian aid decisions. Such politicization inevitably has an impact on the coordination of aid efforts by the various international actors. As one former high-ranking UN official has written: 'The coordination of global humanitarian relief operations is as much about politics as it is about efficient and effective management.'[30] This has been very conspicuous in the Syria case. According to a senior official working for a donor country to Syria, who was interviewed for this paper, 'the work on Syria is very political. Every donor government has its different agenda, position, views, and priorities.' In addition, another senior official working for an international organization argued that 'most of the donors give the money in line with the elections in their respective countries and they often lack any strategic vision or strategic patience.'

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Several senior officials, working for international and Syrian organizations in Lebanon, interviewed for this paper emphasized that the humanitarian fund for the Syria response was serving as a 'money machine' and that it had become more important to win big contracts than to devise and implement effective coordination strategies to harmonize the response. The humanitarian system itself helps to perpetuate politics of one form or another, fuels power struggles within the system and leads to inefficiencies. While the system is designed for big actors – including international donors, UN agencies and international NGOs (INGO), all of which compete for resources – this environment of competitiveness has helped prolong the conflict. Moreover, the international humanitarian system is not only split by the various mandates and agendas of the actors involved; it is also challenged by their geopolitical interests and intent in the Syria conflict.

The Syria refugee response context is indisputably overwhelming: there are humanitarian (as well as military) interventions at the regional and international levels; access to several parts of the country is difficult; many projects are located in remote areas; the amount of aid available is considerable while project cycles are often short; and decisions on who should receive assistance have to be made in line with the implied neutrality and impartiality of the organizations operating inside Syria and other countries in the region. The situation on the ground is extremely challenging and to a certain extent is exacerbated when efforts are made to bring disparate actors together in order to draw up a long-term strategic plan in Lebanon.

In light of the complexity of the situation, it has been easier for the international community to view the Syria conflict as a humanitarian crisis rather than to seek a de facto political solution that possibly would have ended the conflict at an earlier stage. A recent evaluation of OCHA's response to the conflict in Syria confirmed that humanitarian action has been used as a substitute for political action or political will.[31] It could be argued, however, that finding political solutions does not fall within the remit of aid organizations. One Syrian academic in Lebanon interviewed for this paper commented:

[30] Barber, M. (2015), *Blinded by Humanity,* London: I.B. Tauris, p. 187.
[31] Sida et al. (2016), *Evaluation of OCHA response to the Syria crisis.*

'The humanitarian response is less expensive and more camouflaging than finding political solutions to end the violence in Syria. Foreign aid did not help to adopt a conciliatory approach but did encourage the continued dream of victory or being close to ending the conflict.' Paradoxically, while humanitarian aid is itself politicized, it serves primarily to thwart political discourse on Syria or to undermine any such talks. One senior official from an international organization supported that proposition: 'We [international organizations] somehow prevent a political discussion on Syria. We divert the attention away from the political sphere; there is no discussion of a political solution and no political discourse going on.'

The futility of any political effort aimed at finding a solution to end the Syrian conflict has caused long-term frustration in the international community. Meanwhile, the coordination of humanitarian aid is complicated by competing humanitarian and geopolitical interests. On the one hand, it is imperative to focus on improved coordination between the various humanitarian actors in Lebanon. On the other hand, it is clear that coordination is neither a priority nor an objective of international humanitarian actors. Furthermore, if it is to succeed to some extent, coordination must play a pivotal role in bringing together the UN-led system and the Lebanese government to work for the benefit of Syrian refugees and to work together with Syrian refugees.

# 4. Layers of UN Coordination in Lebanon

One of several catchwords in the humanitarian aid sphere is 'coordination' – an ill-defined and loosely used term that means different things to different actors and in the end means little. The Transformative Agenda of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) notes that the purpose of coordination is to meet the needs of affected people by means that are reliable, effective, inclusive and respect humanitarian principles.[32] According to one definition, humanitarian coordination is the 'systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner'.[33] That is all fine in principle, but the reality is that the humanitarian system is 'large, complex, unstable, and somewhat differentiated, with moderate connectivity and centralization'.[34] Other experts suggest that coordination agencies and structures give authority to one actor and, in the resulting power struggle, strive to implement policies in line with their own programmes. Ultimately, these agencies have proved to be 'rigid, reluctant or simply unable to adapt to the changing needs of dynamic contexts'.[35]

Lebanon's Inter-Ministerial Committee was formed in 2012 to manage the refugee crisis on Lebanese territory. A humanitarian coordinator was appointed in March 2012 and a humanitarian country team (HCT) was established two months later, in May 2012, to step up coordination efforts. However, the HCT has been wary about 'stepping on UNHCR's toes', reflecting interagency tension over which body should take the lead coordination role.[36] Within six months of the formulation of a new government in February 2014, the Lebanese government established a Crisis Cell, a type of task force, to supervise crisis management and deal with the Syrian refugees and the Minister of Social Affairs was given responsibility for the coordination of the humanitarian response.[37]

Meanwhile, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015–16 (LCRP), which was drawn up by Lebanese government ministries, UN agencies and Lebanese and international aid organizations, is being implemented by the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs and the UN resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator (UNRC/HC) in Lebanon in collaboration with UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The funding requirement under the LCRP is $2.14 billion but less than 50 per cent of that amount was provided in 2015.[38] The LCRP reflects the paradigm shift in the response to the Syria crisis in Lebanon towards a more overarching strategy of stabilization and resilience building. However, some donors have criticized the plan as a 'wish list and not a strategy, with too much emphasis on conducting activities favoured by the service providers as opposed to focusing on evidence-based needs'.[39] Needless to say, the transition from a purely humanitarian

[32] IASC Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2015), *Reference Module Cluster Coordination at Country Level,* IASC Inter-Agency Standing Committee, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda/documents-public/reference-module-cluster-coordination-country-level (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).
[33] Advanced Training Programme on Humanitarian Action (2008), *Humanitarian Coordination: An Overview January 2008*. http://www.hpcrresearch.org/sites/default/files/publications/ATHA%20Thematic%20Brief%20Humanitarian%20Coordination.pdf.
[34] Seybolt, T. B. (2009), 'Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network: Adaptive Change in a Complex System', *International Studies Quarterly*, 53, pp. 1027–50.
[35] Kjellman, K. E., Harpviken, K. B., Millard, A. S., and Strand, A. (2003), 'Acting as one? Co-ordinating responses to the landmine problem', *Third World Quarterly,* 24 (5), pp. 855–71.
[36] InterAction and ICVA (2013), *Mission Report: An NGO Perspective on the Response to the Syria Crisis*, p. 4.
[37] UNHCR (2015), *Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Government Policy and Protection Concerns*. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/droi/dv/94_restrictedbriefingnote_/94_restrictedbriefingnote_en.pdf (accessed 25 Aug. 2016).
[38] Government of Lebanon and UN (2015), *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-16 Year Two.*
[39] Darcy, J. (2016), *Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) – Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis*, New York: UN OCHA.

response to an approach more focused on development and resilience is never smooth. Indeed, it has posed many challenges for Lebanon owing to the limited capacity of pertinent government agencies and dwindling funds earmarked to adopt such an approach.

The UNHCR coordination toolkit was issued in April 2014 to support the response to the Syrian refugee crisis.[40] As explained in its introduction, the toolkit is a 'collection of global, inter-disciplinary practices that inform successful leadership and coordination in the inter-agency humanitarian context' (see Figure 1 in appendix). The toolkit does not, however, offer advice on how coordination should work in practice and serves only as a broad-based field and training resource for capacity-building. Therefore, it is difficult to assess how useful the toolkit is and to what extent coordinators and members of coordination groups use it to promote coordination in Lebanon.

> 'Mistakes are identical in humanitarian responses. Everyone wants coordination but no one wants to move towards more commonality, modality or cohesion.'

Interviews with experts and senior officials from international organizations suggest that there is a consensus among international humanitarian actors that coordination is necessary. However, they acknowledged that their understanding of what coordination entails varies considerably and that they are unclear as to how or to what extent it should be prioritized. Moreover, they recognized that a clear definition of the concept of coordination does not exist and that there is a lack of awareness of how coordination can be achieved in practice and why it is necessary. One interviewee, a senior UN official, said: 'Mistakes are identical in humanitarian responses. Everyone wants coordination but no one wants to move towards more commonality, modality or cohesion.'

Not unlike the broader international humanitarian system, the UN-led coordination structure is unwieldy and static. Its very design resists reform based on real experience and mistakes or engagement with local actors.[41] When asked about the UN-led humanitarian system and coordination effort, a former UN senior official said: 'The UN is surreal, tight, self-serving, lacking transparency for end users; it has plastic words and it is not conceptualized properly. On top of that, it often hires weak leaders.' Some argue that the various clusters, sectors, sub-sectors, working groups and task forces that make up the UN-led system allow the humanitarian response to be flexible and responsive. However, this multi-layered structure leads to more ambiguity and makes it more difficult to understand the purpose and motivations of the individual coordination mechanisms.

[40] UNHCR (n.d.), *Coordination Toolkit*, www.coordinationtoolkit.org.
[41] Mansour, K. (2015), 'Syria Showcases the Failure to Engage Locals in Development', Chatham House Expert Comment, 20 August 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/syria-showcases-failure-engage-locals-development.

# 5. The Reality of UN-led Coordination in Lebanon

The multi-layered UN-led coordination structure in Lebanon is steered by the Lebanese government, the UN RC/HC, UNHCR and UNDP in collaboration with the Crisis Cell ministries, UN agencies and pertinent partners (see Figure 2 in appendix). It comprises nine sectors (Basic Assistance, Education, Food Security, Healthcare, Livelihood, Protection, Shelter, Social Stability, Energy & Water) supported by the relevant ministries together with UNHCR and UNDP.[42] It became apparent that there was a problem with coordination of the Syria humanitarian response in Lebanon at an early stage. From January 2013 onwards, various international organizations complained about the weak UN leadership and lack of coordination in the response and called on the UN to provide stronger leadership and improved humanitarian coordination in Lebanon.[43]

A major factor hampering coordination is the legacy of tension and power struggles between UN agencies themselves, and between the same agencies and international organizations. The UN RC/HC was established to reduce tensions between UN agencies, mainly to manage the division of responsibilities and the conflict of interests between UNHCR and OCHA. However, the role of OCHA in Lebanon is the least clear of any UN office that is currently operating in the region.[44] The independent programme evaluation of UNHCR's response to the influx of refugees into Jordan and Lebanon pointed to the 'frustration and exasperation associated with the wrangling for authority and power between UNHCR, OCHA, and, more recently, UNDP'.[45] Furthermore, the tension and disagreements between the UN's various offices in the region, mainly Syria's immediate neighbours, reflect the multifaceted dysfunction of the UN-led system. Meanwhile, UNDP and the World Bank are competing to take the lead in the development response in Lebanon.

A major factor hampering coordination is the legacy of tension and power struggles between UN agencies themselves, and between the same agencies and international organizations.

The internal dynamics and debates affecting the UN and its work are not known to the general public. One expert from an international organization interviewed for this paper said: 'Even within the UN agencies, no one knows what power battle is taking place exactly, developments are upsetting to each organization. Furthermore, the UN often hires international expats and local staff that are not qualified.' Several evaluation reports,[46] have addressed the notoriously weak coordination under the UN-led system, the everlasting 'turf battles' between UN agencies and the double or even triple hatting

[42] Government of Lebanon and UN (2014), *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2014–15*.
[43] Christian Aid et al. (2013), The humanitarian response to the Syrian Conflict (Inside Syria and in neighbouring countries) – Recommendations for action, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Kuwait%20Conference%20INGO%20position%20paper.pdf.
[44] Sida, L., Trombetta, L. and Panero, V. (2016), *Evaluation of OCHA response to the Syria crisis*, a report published by UN OCHA.
[45] Transtec (2015), Beyond Humanitarian Assistance? UNHCR and the Response to Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, January 2013 – April 2014, p. 49.
[46] Sida, L., Trombetta, L. and Panero, V. (2016), *Evaluation of OCHA response to the Syria crisis*, a report published by UN OCHA*; Darcy, J. (2016), Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) – Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis, New York: UN OCHA;* Transtec (2015), Beyond Humanitarian Assistance? UNHCR and the Response to Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, January 2013 – April 2014.

of some agencies, which have served only to intensify the fight for leadership in coordinating the Syria humanitarian response.

While it is easy to criticize the UN-led system for not doing enough or not responding effectively to the Syrian humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, it is difficult to imagine what would happen if there were no UN agencies playing the leading role in humanitarian crises. According to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), donors see the UN as the default coordination structure even if they doubt the ability of its agencies to perform the job sufficiently. Moreover, the UN agencies and its coordination structure are rarely up to the task, making it difficult for donors to hold them to account.[47] Former senior UN officials interviewed for this paper were openly critical about the UN's failure as a humanitarian system and coordination body in the Syrian response and were pessimistic that there will be any changes for the better in the foreseeable future. For their part, current senior UN officials interviewed for this paper tended to be far less critical and careful about what they said, desiring to be diplomatic and speaking in general terms only; however, it was possible to detect dissatisfaction behind all the diplomacy.

## The exclusion of Syrian actors from UN-led coordination in Lebanon

If there is anything that stands out in the context of the dysfunctionality and drawbacks of the UN-led system and coordination in Lebanon, it is the marginalization and exclusion of Syrian actors.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional consultation meeting, held in Amman in March 2015,[48] highlighted how humanitarian response coordination mechanisms are neither inclusive nor representative of national and local humanitarian actors. Moreover, those mechanisms sometimes bypass governments willing to play a role in the humanitarian responses and tend to cater for the needs of international organizations.[49] Repeated calls to engage local actors in humanitarian response efforts have fallen on deaf ears. A recent Local to Global Protection (L2GP) study shows that while Syrian humanitarian actors were responsible for delivering 75 per cent of humanitarian assistance in Syria in 2014, they received just 0.3 per cent of direct cash funding and only 9.3 per cent of indirect cash funding available for the overall Syria response.[50] Clearly, the share of direct and indirect funds granted to Syrian actors does not reflect their contribution to the overall response and makes their involvement unsustainable in the longer term. Of course, the need for Syrian humanitarian actors in Syria is predicated on the security situation inside that country and not necessarily the case that they are required in Lebanon. And while Syria is unsafe for international humanitarian organizations, it can equally be argued that Lebanon is unsafe for Syrian actors owing to the engagement and control of Hezbollah as well as to the deep polarization in Lebanon over the Syrian conflict.

In the MENA regional consultation meetings that took place ahead of the UN's World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, civil society organizations advocated a 'shift in focus from the international humanitarian system's inward-looking coordination to an emphasis on shared ownership of humanitarian response between international, regional and domestic institutions'.[51] Regrettably,

[47] Macrae, J. et al. (2002), *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action*, Humanitarian Policy Group Report, London: ODI.
[48] This was one of several stakeholder consultations held across the Middle East and North Africa in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. The aim of these consultations was to identify the main humanitarian challenges and opportunities for the MENA region.
[49] World Humanitarian Summit (2015), *Regional Consultation Middle East and North Africa*.
[50] Els, C., Mansour, K. and Carstensen, N. (2016), *Funding to national and local humanitarian actors in Syria: Between sub-contracting and partnerships*, a report published by the L2GP initiative.
[51] World Humanitarian Summit (2015), Preparatory Stakeholder Analysis: Regional Consultation for the Middle East and North Africa.

there has been no such shift in the case of the Syria response in Lebanon. Syrian organizations and individuals in Lebanon are not represented at UN coordination meetings, according to all the senior officials from the UN, other international organizations or Syrian organizations who were interviewed for this paper. One expert working for the coordination review team in Lebanon said that no Syrian actors – individuals or organizations – are included in such gatherings. An OCHA official confirmed that view: 'I have not seen any Syrian organization attending any coordination meeting in Beirut.' This is in stark contrast with the situation in Turkey, where Syrian organizations are influential and have a strong presence in the humanitarian coordination meeting (HCM), chaired by OCHA. Moreover, they have leverage over the work and policies of the UN and other international organizations.

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At the same time, the issue of how Syrian individuals and organizations perceive UN coordination in Lebanon is rarely addressed. Unsurprisingly, the coordination of the humanitarian response in Syria is evaluated only from the UN perspective. The coordination review team, for example, conducted more than 150 interviews, between February and April 2015, to assess humanitarian coordination in Lebanon but not a single Syrian organization was included among the interviewees. Syrian aid workers interviewed for this paper said that the UN coordination structure in Lebanon is designed to include only large international and Lebanese organizations and that the UN makes no effort to engage with Syrian organizations for the humanitarian response in Lebanon.

Most international humanitarian actors interviewed for this paper said it is problematic to get acquainted and establish working relations with Syrian actors either in Lebanon or elsewhere and to determine how they operate and whether they are abiding by the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Claims that Syrian actors 'might' be politically affiliated or active reflect the double standards of the international humanitarian system, which, to a large extent, is itself politicized, donor-driven and often biased. In the words of a former UN senior official: 'The UN is not an NGO, it's a political organization. How can the UN maintain its impartiality and neutrality?'

In late August 2016 it was reported that under the Syria aid programme, UN agencies have awarded procurement contracts worth tens of millions of US dollars to regime affiliates in Damascus and that the UN is staffed with former Syrian officials and close relatives of regime incumbents.[52] The same report declares that UN agencies routinely understate the number of besieged areas and people and confirms that the World Health Organization (WHO) 'failed to detect early signs of the threat of polio and other contagious diseases in opposition-controlled areas as it relies on the regime's laboratories'. If such allegations are true, the UN is clearly at risk of violating the fundamental humanitarian principles identified earlier.

Counterterrorism legislation makes donor governments and international humanitarian organizations reluctant to fund Syrian organizations. Time and again this affects the programming and activities of

[52] Leenders, R. (2016), 'UN's $4bn aid effort in Syria is morally bankrupt', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2016/aug/29/uns-4bn-aid-effort-in-syria-is-morally-bankrupt; and Hopkins, N. and Beals, E. (2016), 'UN pays tens of millions to Assad regime under Syria aid programme', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/un-pays-tens-of-millions-to-assad-regime-syria-aid-programme-contracts.

some organizations that are scrutinized under this legislation. A 2015 ODI report on UK humanitarian aid and counterterrorism legislation found – based on interviews with British INGOs – that 'some aspects of UK legislation are too vague and open to wide interpretation'. It also argues that the danger of humanitarian aid ending up in terrorist hands is overstated. The number of alleged cases of this happening is exceedingly small, and allegations are not always substantiated by facts.[53]

The UN-led system and coordination structure fails to include local actors in the planning or design process, which further impairs their effectiveness.[54] The UN-led humanitarian coordination effort is keen to engage with the Lebanese government (especially the relevant ministries) and donor communities, as well as other international actors, in order to be able to implement the LCRP; but it is unfortunate that in order to comply with the host government's policies and the donors' requirements, the UN excludes Syrian actors from the humanitarian response in Lebanon. Several senior experts from international organizations, interviewed for this paper, said that they have a 'large appetite' to work directly, albeit in a discrete manner, with Syrian individuals and organizations, even if this were ultimately to jeopardize the presence of such organizations in Lebanon. One senior expert talked about the compromises being made in humanitarian work: 'The context is very difficult. You have to make compromises if you want to work on [the Syrian refugee response]. In Lebanon, you can work without Syrians, but you make the choice.' A UN senior official said: 'I think, as a self-criticism of the UN, we could do much more to involve Syrian organizations in the humanitarian response and coordination in Lebanon, but we cannot – and we do not want to – get involved in this.'

Syrian actors could have proved indispensable for the humanitarian response in Lebanon, where they are better placed than other actors to assess the situation, understand the context and come up with long-term and sustainable solutions. One Syrian NGO leader working in the area of education for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon addressed the exclusion of Syrian actors from the coordination process. Since the beginning of the refugee influx into Lebanon, she and other Syrian professionals have tried to convince international actors about the need for Syrian refugee children to be enrolled in schools or at least receive some kind of informal education so they do not miss years of schooling:

> 'International actors were providing only various activities to entertain Syrian kids. They thought that it was enough to simply give painting colours to refugee children or have them jump up and down. Those activities are necessary for the kids, but they can never replace education – formal or informal. At the time, international actors were more concerned about providing funds for psychosocial support activities. Now they realize the magnitude of the problem.'

One of the biggest obstacles to the work of Syrian organizations and aid workers in the humanitarian response in Lebanon is the lack of their legal status in the country.[55] Syrian organizations are not allowed to register in Lebanon and Syrians cannot obtain work permits. One Syrian NGO leader described the situation of Syrian NGOs in Lebanon as follows: 'We work in a minefield and we are not welcome; we can be deported at any second and we are often subject to and threatened with the closure of our organizations. This environment has the most negative impact on our work and on us.'

Not least because of the Lebanese government quota for the NGO staff of 90 per cent Lebanese and 10 per cent from overseas, UN agencies and other international organizations avoid engaging with Syrian individuals and organizations. Many senior officials from international and Syrian organizations and academics interviewed for this paper blamed the UN for pushing, albeit indirectly,

[53] Metcalfe-Hough, V., Keatinge, T. and Pantuliano, S. (2015), *UK humanitarian aid in the age of counter-terrorism: perceptions and reality*, Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, London: ODI.
[54] Jorgensen Diener, K. and Proctor, K. (2013), *Charting a New Course: Re-thinking the Syrian refugee response.*, a report published by MercyCorps.
[55] Only a few Syrian organizations could register, by coincidence, in Lebanon after they lost hope to be legally present in the country.

many Syrians and Syrian aid workers out of Lebanon as they are unable to play an active role in the response to their own humanitarian crisis. One senior Syrian aid worker said: 'The UN agencies have a destructive impact on Syrian people and civil society in Lebanon. They pushed many Syrian people to emigrate, especially the educated and middle-class, who could have worked and built and served the country.'

It can, of course, be argued that the Syrian actors are not included in the coordination process not because the UN does not want to include them but because of the Lebanese government and the legal status of Syrian aid organizations on Lebanese territory. But a valid objection to that argument is that the UN could engage in advocacy with the Lebanese government to push for the registration of Syrian humanitarian organizations and for granting work permits to Syrians in Lebanon.

In essence, the exclusion of Syrian aid organizations in the humanitarian response and coordination structure in Lebanon contravenes the values of the UN-led system. It hinders reaching a better understanding of the context in which the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon emerged and makes it more difficult to come up with viable solutions and improved strategies and strategic planning. Not least, it denies the Syrian people any ownership – shared or otherwise – of the humanitarian response and only exacerbates and perpetuates their suffering.

## Competition, overlapping, duplication

As long as 40 years ago, the UN system was already being described as the 'most complicated organization in the world' and was seen to be facing a 'fundamental problem of overlapping responsibilities' and unfocused efforts.[56] Interviews with international humanitarian actors for this paper confirmed that most coordination meetings in Lebanon are spent introducing each organization and individual and providing updates on new members of staff (there is a frequent turnover in the workforce of such organizations). International actors who take part in the coordination meetings in Lebanon said that the gatherings are dry, time-consuming and lacking in content. They also pointed to the large number of such meetings and suggested that it might be an issue of quantity rather than quality.

> Both international and Syrian aid workers emphasized the overlapping of responsibilities and the duplication of work in Lebanon, saying that international actors are implementing the same projects in the same areas and municipalities and at times are even targeting the same beneficiaries.

Both international and Syrian aid workers emphasized the overlapping of responsibilities and the duplication of work in Lebanon, saying that international actors are implementing the same projects in the same areas and municipalities and at times are even targeting the same beneficiaries. One senior expert from an international organization said that the fundamental problem is that international actors do not know what to do when they discover duplication, and they refrain from reporting it. Each international organization has its own funding scheme; and, as many interviewees pointed out, the timetable for implementing that scheme does not allow for coordinating effectively with other organizations. It is questionable, however, whether the lack of effective coordination

[56] Ronald, C. (2011), *Costs and Benefits of Coordination of United Nations Operational Activities for Development: A background paper prepared for DESA*, http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/pdf/final_report_2011.pdf.

between international humanitarian actors can be attributed merely to a lack of time or whether the lack of organizational will to coordinate with other players is the main factor.

It is indeed unrealistic to believe that the same momentum can be maintained in the response to a crisis over the medium or long term. Moreover, the ability to respond to a humanitarian crisis is impaired by the competition between humanitarian organizations for visibility. The head of one Syrian organization described humanitarian coordination in Lebanon as a 'platform for the UN agencies and big international organizations to monopolize and flex their muscles to compete for how many informal tenant settlements (ITS) each one of them already covers and is able to cover in order to get more funds'. This rivalry over funds and resources is much more important than creating synergies between the various humanitarian actors and leads to both corruption and blaming one another for the inevitable failures. The UN cannot, of course, be held solely responsible for the damaging competitive environment – the main culprits are the donor member states. But the organization does nothing to discourage such competition either in general or within its own system.

According to many interviews with senior officials from international and Syrian organizations, ad hoc and short-term funding and programmes are additional sources of inefficiency, work fragmentation and weak coordination, which prevent joint project assessment, planning, and implementation in a coordinated manner. It denies international actors the time and capacity to avoid the overlapping of responsibilities, the duplication of work and random planning. International humanitarian actors have been quoted as emphasizing that short-term 'staccato' programming is counterproductive and poses challenges that lead to unhealthy dependencies, wasted efforts and a disproportionate amount of energy spent on contracting.[57] The evaluation synthesis and gap analysis states that little attention is given to the programme cycle in evaluation reports and that there is a 'time lag between programme planning, resourcing and implementation'.[58] The short-term programming additionally reflects the lack of contingency planning. The evaluation gives examples from the UNHCR regional evaluation reports on how in Lebanon the concept of longer-term national programmes was 'virtually non-existent' and from the World Food Programme (WFP) that focuses on short-term contingency plans such as cutting rations. Additionally, the short-term approach is also opportunity-based and reactive, which makes it difficult to identify priorities and ensure a demand-driven orientation. One senior official from an international organization made the following comment: 'I am sceptical about to what extent coordination works. All our work is driven by our funds and these funds are allocated on an ad hoc basis. Decisions are made by ministries in Europe; one year they think it is better to spend the money on Syrian civil society and another year on Syrian refugees, for example.'

The short funding cycle and unplanned transition towards stabilization and resilience building can do more harm than good. One international organization abruptly halted in 2015 the implementation of a six-month project for Syrian refugee children to attend school in Lebanon in the middle of the academic term because funds were needed to support affected Lebanese communities instead. While such support is unquestionably necessary, the sudden disruption to the enrolment of refugee children in schools left those young people with no option other than to return to playing on the streets. It could be argued that in the dynamic and rapidly developing context of a humanitarian crisis, needs are frequently changing and funding must adapt accordingly. This is certainly true in

[57] Diener and Proctor (2013), *Charting a New Course*.
[58] Darcy (2016), *Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning*.

the case of the humanitarian response in Syria itself.[59] But the fact remains that long-term projects and other activities, together with a well-planned transition process, are essential in Lebanon, as was emphasized by all Syrian and international humanitarian actors interviewed for this paper.

## Knowledge is power

The dearth of credible information in Syria is obstructing the humanitarian response both inside the country and in neighbouring states. Under the circumstances, sensitivity about sharing information – and the security rationale for not doing so – is to be expected. However, the acceptance that there will be some sensitivity in the sharing of information often appears to justify the lack of coordination and effectiveness of the response. It is true that there is an abundance of publicly available information about the humanitarian response, but what is lacking is a reliable, precise set of data – for example, the accurate mapping of actors on the ground and the regions in which they are active – that could facilitate better coordination. According to UNHCR, an 'awkward and frustrating "understanding" particularly in the area of data sharing' seems to persist.[60]

However, it would be indefensible to cite the reluctance to share information as a reason for international actors to not take effective action in Syria. It is generally assumed that the unwillingness to share information is exclusive to information related to events inside Syria. However, expert interviewees highlighted that the lack of sharing information and its consequences also persist in Lebanon. As a 2013 study argued, the sensitivity about sharing information has led to divergent and uncoordinated needs analysis and assessment in neighbouring countries.[61] It is clear that the complexity and sensitivity of the situation inside Syria, the lack of security in that country and the difficulties that international humanitarian actors experience in providing assistance to Syrians in the neighbouring countries would make full-fledged information-sharing – not to mention, full transparency of information – very difficult indeed.

This raises several important questions. In a more open environment, who decides which information can be shared? What level of security permits information-sharing in such complex and polarized situations? What is meant by credible information in such a context and what qualifies as a credible source? At what stage can information be made available to the public? One senior official from an international organization confirmed that donors and international actors want to obtain information for their own purposes and do not want to share it, not least because, 'Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power'. Moreover, the lack of clarity on counterterrorism measures and their repercussions resulted in less transparency and hampered sharing of relevant information for fear of possible sanctions.[62]

The dilemma that has long troubled humanitarian organizations is that 'extensive exchange of information reduces an organization's proprietary control over a valuable resource, and therefore weakens its power position in relation to other organizations'.[63] Through needs assessment and questionnaires carried out ahead of various projects, data are collected on the locations of the households of members of armed groups, for example, and other demographic changes. In the

[59] For more about the need for flexibility of funding to adjust to project activities and budgets inside Syria, see Els et al. (2016), *Funding to national and local humanitarian actors in Syria.*
[60] Transtec (2015), *Beyond Humanitarian Assistance?,* p. 119.
[61] Parham, N., Tax, L., Yoshikawa, L. and Lim, K. (2013), 'Lessons from assessing the humanitarian situation in Syria and countries hosting refugees', *Humanitarian Exchange* (59).
[62] Metcalfe-Hough et al. (2015), *UK humanitarian aid in the age of counter-terrorism.*
[63] Seybolt (2009), 'Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network'.

interests of safety it is clear that such sensitive data should not be shared. However, the question remains whether such data are relevant in the context of humanitarian aid and whether they are, in fact, used to serve political or even military purposes of various international actors in the name of humanitarian assistance.

# 6. Potential for Reforming UN Aid Coordination

In October 1947, just two years after the founding of the UN, the senate expenditure committee revealed that the new organization was riddled with problems such as the overlapping of responsibilities, the duplication of work, poor coordination among UN agencies, multiple mandates and programmes and overly generous compensation for staff, all of which prompted repeated calls for sweeping structural reforms of the UN system. Any debate about reforming the UN has been tainted by the overtly political nature of the organization and inevitably ends up being a struggle over political turf and power. As one study put it bluntly, much of the reform debate has been about three things: who makes decisions, who implements them and who pays for them.[64] But for all the calls to reform the UN system, the reality is that such institutional and structural reform is impossible owing to the combination of political, legal, and governance considerations as well as its funding systems. Indeed, it has been argued that 'the UN system is not structured, nor is it intended to be structured, to achieve internal UN-system coherence'.[65]

But for all the calls to reform the UN system, the reality is that such institutional and structural reform is impossible owing to the combination of political, legal, and governance considerations as well as its funding systems.

The cost of coordinating UN country-level activities is estimated at some 3 per cent of total country programmable resources. It is very difficult to quantify the benefits of coordination based on available data.[66] The report of the high-level panel on United Nations system-wide coherence suggested to the secretary general that the potential annual saving from merging or consolidating duplicate functions and activities is around 20 per cent.[67] According to another estimate, the annual cost saving from interoperability in both programming and operations between the organization's various entities could be between $2.4 billion and $4.8 billion.[68] Such savings notwithstanding, the UN-led system has continued to expand rather than restructure and the number of its entities has increased rather than decreased.

The literature on the UN is rich in proposals and recommendations on reforming the UN system and its coordination structure.[69] For example, cost-benefit scenario analysis has been used to recommend harmonizing business practices and operations as part of the UN reform process.[70]

[64] Krasno, J. (2003), *Reforming the United Nations: Lessons from a History in Progress*, International Relations Studies and the United Nations Occasional Papers 2003, No. 1.
[65] Lindores, D. (2012), *Enhancing the functioning of the UN Resident Coordinator system*, a report prepared for the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).
[66] Ibid.
[67] UN General Assembly (2006), *Sixty-first session Agenda: Item 113.* A/61/583.
[68] Hybsier, C. (2015), *Fit For Purpose? UN Development Reform in the Post-2015 Context: A summary of selected reform options, GIZ,* https://www.bmz.de/de/zentrales_downloadarchiv/wege_und_akteure/Fit_for_purpose_UN_reform_options.pdf.
[69] Lindores (2012), *Enhancing the functioning of the UN Resident Coordinator system.*
[70] Schörnich, C. (2012), Assessing the Cost and Benefits of Simplifying and Harmonizing Business Practices of UN Entities at the Country Level, New York: UN DESA, http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/pdf/qcpr_2012_business_operations_report-unedited_draft-13.06.2012.pdf (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).

Donor countries tend to distribute most humanitarian funds through UN channels under the assumption that those channels are better able to coordinate a response. At the same time, 'studies and evaluations show that governments and other partners can face high "transaction costs" in dealing with the UN system, due to the large number of independent entities and the variety of implementing modalities and programming and reporting procedures that still prevail', according to a 2011 report prepared for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.[71]

There is a growing momentum to reform the UN-led system and its coordination structure. Some proposals focus on operational and financial reform while others target governance structures, programme harmonization or in-country presence.[72] It is difficult to predict which proposals – if any – will be adopted. The language being used indicates that international actors are still engaged in a power struggle. Moreover, according to a recent study, 'the sectoral imbalances in humanitarian assistance reflect the political actions of powerful private interests in donor countries'.[73] Competition between the different agencies will obstruct coordination as long as the latter is voluntary owing to the independence and authority of the relevant agencies. It is unlikely that any reform of the UN-led system will be so sweeping as to lead to full-fledged coordination between the agencies, international organizations and local actors.

[71] Ronald (2011), Costs and Benefits of Coordination of United Nations Operational Activities for Development.
[72] Hybsier (2015), *Fit For Purpose?*.
[73] Gingerich, T. R. and Cohen, M. J. (2015), *Turning the Humanitarian System on Its Head*, Oxfam Research Report, https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/turning-humanitarian-system-its-head (accessed 15 Mar. 2017).

# 7. Conclusion

The international humanitarian system led by the UN has failed in its response to the Syria crisis and its coordination structure has proved dysfunctional. This paper does not advocate disbanding the UN-led humanitarian system; rather, it calls for addressing in an open and constructive manner the problems it faces. There is a growing consensus in favour of reforming the international humanitarian architecture to ensure the inclusion of local actors. Such a development would require a dramatic change in UN leadership and leadership style as well as more specific changes to the system's autonomy, authority and culture. One former UN senior diplomat interviewed for this paper doubted that any genuine change would ever take place within the organization since, according to him, that would entail the loss of tens of thousands of jobs worldwide and no UN agency or donor government would be prepared to support any measures necessitating cuts of that magnitude.

Even if genuine reform is not on the cards, the UN coordination structure and mechanism should become less geared towards large international organizations, and become more transparent, more accountable and, most important, more inclusive. In the context of the Syrian crisis, this means involving local Syrian actors in the humanitarian response in Lebanon. It may be effective to establish an initiative to conduct cooperative analysis in order to promote more strategic planning and a more sustainable humanitarian response. The 2016 UN OCHA report, *Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) – Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis,* provides a good basis for such an initiative and for a long-term approach.

Having relevant and reliable data that could be easily accessed would assist in identifying and filling the gaps in the humanitarian response and avoiding duplication of work between the various agencies. A unified system through which funds can be tracked – organization by organization, project by project, and activity by activity – from the donors to the end beneficiaries and which is obligatory for all players should be established.

The UN must reassess its relationship with host governments and carefully consider whether it is the people in need or host governments that benefit from a UN in-country presence. The organization's closeness to the Syrian regime, as mentioned earlier for example, has raised the question of whether the UN is suffering from a form of 'Stockholm syndrome'.[74] The UN appears mostly unable to acknowledge the many challenges that have arisen in its humanitarian responses; and in those instances where it does acknowledge them, it is unwilling to change its approach. International and Syrian actors – including those who have written or contributed to UN evaluation reports – have criticized and continue to criticize the performance of the UN humanitarian system in Syria and cast doubt on its adherence to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.[75] Any change in this state of affairs might require radical evaluations in the UN response to the Syria crisis, including how resources have been spent, procurement and logistics contracts awarded, staff compensations granted, and coordination efforts made. As an article

[74] Parker, B. (2016), 'Aleppo is screwed. Thanks everyone,' IRIN, https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2016/07/29/aleppo-screwed-thanks-everyone.
[75] For more on this subject, see The Syria Campaign (2016), *Taking Sides: The United Nations' Loss Of Impartiality, Independence And Neutrality In Syria*; and Martínez, J. C. and Eng, B. (2016), 'The unintended consequences of emergency food aid: neutrality, sovereignty and politics in the Syrian civil war, 2012–15', *International Affairs,* 92 (1), pp. 153–73.

noted when addressing the moral bankruptcy of UN aid: 'As long as donor governments wish to hide the UN aid fiasco from their taxpaying citizens the problem will refuse to go away.'[76]

In its response to the Syria refugee crisis in Lebanon, the UN-led humanitarian system must exercise its influence over government policy in regards to the legal status of Syrian organizations and individuals to facilitate the registration of Syrian NGOs and grant residency and work permits to Syrians in Lebanon. The least the UN can do to play the lead role in the Syria response is to recognize the essential role of Syrian humanitarian actors in Lebanon and exhaust every effort to ensure their inclusion and representation in the coordination structure. Moreover, the UN-led system must ensure that Syrians are employed at the policy- and decision-making levels within the UN agencies and international organizations.

Despite the differences in the political environment and social conditions between Lebanon and Turkey, the UN-led humanitarian system could nonetheless benefit from its experience in Turkey in order to increase the inclusion of Syrian actors in Lebanon. For example, a pooled fund similar to that of the OCHA humanitarian pooled fund (HPF) in Turkey could be replicated and established in Lebanon to fund Syrian organizations. Syrian NGOs received, either directly or indirectly, about 80 per cent of the entire HPF in Turkey;[77] such an approach in Lebanon could be adopted. Moreover, Syrian organizations have a strong presence and powerful leverage in the HCMs in Turkey. Their access to besieged and difficult to reach areas inside Syria makes working with Syrian actors indispensable in Turkey's response to the Syria humanitarian crisis. If it were prepared to show both the courage and willingness, the UN could work towards allowing Syrian organizations to play a major role in its humanitarian response and coordination meetings in Lebanon.

The issue of reforming the UN system – especially its coordination architecture – must be revisited and the renewed debate based on reliable cost-benefit analysis. While it will doubtless be expensive to overhaul the coordination structure and mechanisms, it could ultimately cost less than maintaining the current dysfunctional system. If the costs of coordination structure and mechanisms outweigh the benefits, then admitting the failures of the UN-led coordination could save the UN face.

> Now is not the time to pay lip service and be lenient towards the UN. The organization has been up and running in the business for seven decades and has yet to learn key lessons.

Now is not the time to pay lip service and be lenient towards the UN. The organization has been up and running in the business for seven decades and has yet to learn key lessons. The question remains: just how many more humanitarian crises need to occur in the most troubled and unfortunate parts of the world for the UN to start to change its ways?

[76] Leenders, R. (2016), 'UN's $4bn aid effort in Syria is morally bankrupt', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2016/aug/29/uns-4bn-aid-effort-in-syria-is-morally-bankrupt.
[77] Els et al. (2016), Funding to national and local humanitarian actors in Syria.

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| CBPF | country-based pooled fund |
| CERF | Central Emergency Response Fund |
| ECHO | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| ERF | Emergency Response Fund |
| FTS | Financial Tracking System |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| GSO | General Security Office |
| HCM | humanitarian coordination meeting |
| HCT | humanitarian country team |
| HPF | humanitarian pooled fund |
| IASC | Inter-Agency Standing Committee |
| ITS | informal tenant settlement |
| L2GP | Local to Global Protection Initiative |
| LCRP | Lebanon Crisis Response Plan |
| ODI | Overseas Development Institute |
| UN OCHA | UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| UN RC/HC | UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNHCR | UN High Commissioner for Refugees |
| WFP | World Food Programme |

# About the Author

**Kholoud Mansour** is a Syrian consultant and researcher. She was formerly a senior academy fellow at the International Security Department at Chatham House and worked as a senior consultant for the Local to Global Protection Initiative (L2GP). She is affiliated with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) in Lund University. Her current work focuses on humanitarian and development response, the UN system and humanitarian coordination, refugees and migration, civil society and conflict mitigation.

Kholoud has a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies from Lund University. She has a bachelor's degree in economics and a postgraduate diploma in international economic relations from Damascus University. She has a diploma in conflict prevention, resolution and reconciliation from the International Peace and Security Institute and Johns Hopkins University. In Syria, she had worked extensively with refugees, resettlement programs, human trafficking and humanitarian assistance.

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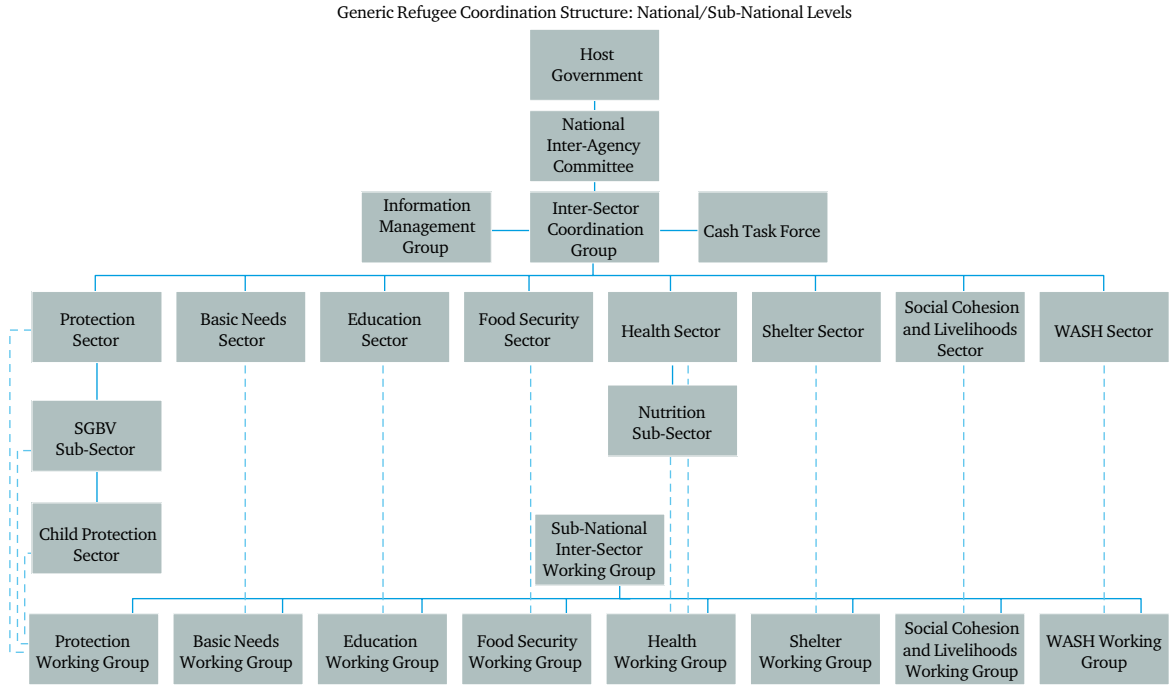
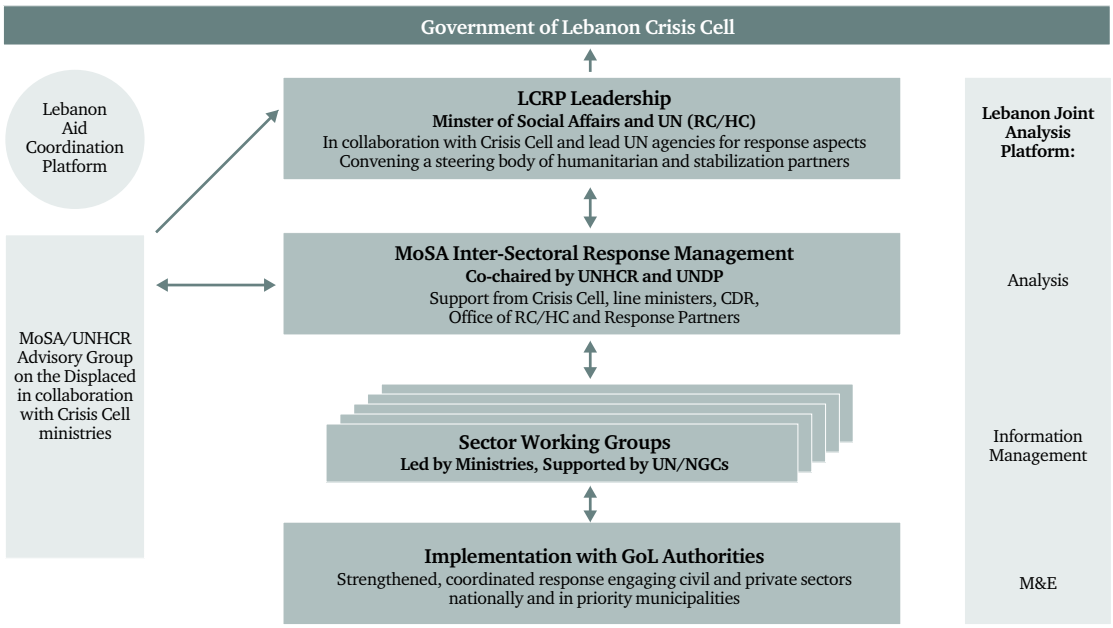
# Appendix

## Figure 1: Coordination Organizational Chart for Toolkit



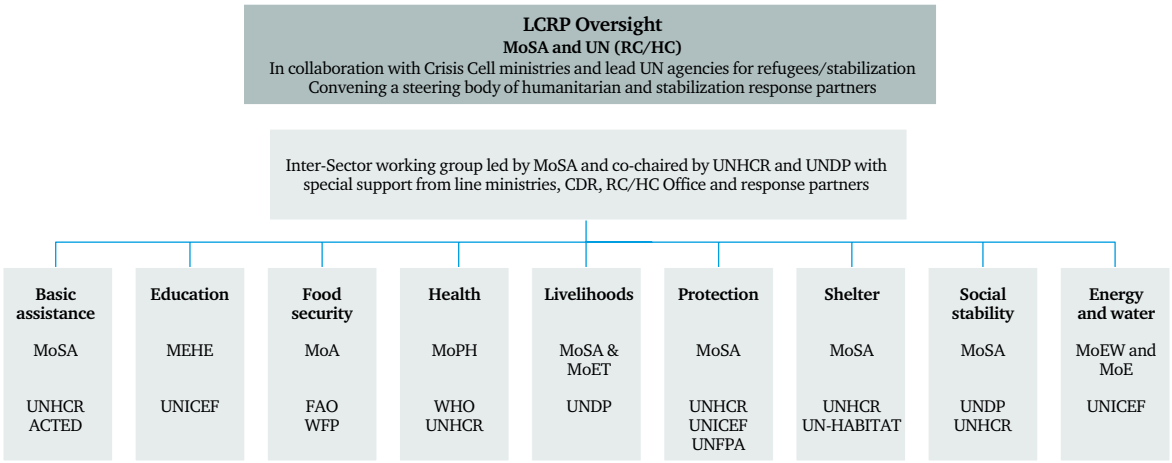

Source: UNHCR http://www.coordinationtoolkit.org/?p=444.

## Figure 2: Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015–16




Source: Lebanese government and UN.

## Figure 3: Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015–16




Source: Lebanese government and UN.

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Cover image: A Syrian refugee youth walks in an alley at an unofficial refugee camp in the village of Deir Zannoun in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, 31 January 2017.

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