



## AID INSIDE SYRIA:

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Authors: Daryl Grisgraber and Sarnata Reynolds



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## INTRODUCTION

Providing humanitarian aid in a conflict zone is a challenge all over the world. But perhaps no situation has proved more complex than that of Syria. A particularly stubborn and brutal regime, a fragmented opposition movement, and ever-changing alliances among fighting groups have resulted in an operational context defined by irregular access and major security risks for humanitarian workers. Every day, millions of vulnerable people across the country live with food and fuel shortages, homelessness, and an absence of vital medical care. Almost 5 million of those people are in places that are difficult for humanitarians to access. Syrian groups working inside the country have been able to offer some support in hard-to-reach areas and to a lesser degree in besieged areas where the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations do not send their staff. But there needs to be far more focus on getting more and better humanitarian assistance inside Syria. This can be done by ensuring that the Syrian aid organizations that international actors rely on to deliver the vast majority of assistance are supported and included in all aspects of the design and implementation of humanitarian action.

Front cover: Volunteers with a Syrian NGO help carry supplies brought in from Turkey.

This page: Staff with a Syrian NGO unload a medical shipment. Photo courtesy of Syria Relief and Development.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The U.S. government [specifically, the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)] should operate its \$10 million capacity-building fund for local Syrian humanitarian organizations as a high-priority project, with robust financial and technical support and timely monitoring and evaluation.
- ❑ In administering the fund indicated above, the U.S. government (USAID/OFDA) should assign officers to mentor and work directly with those already-approved Syrian humanitarian organizations that are the recipients of grants in a way that is in keeping with best humanitarian practice.
- ❑ Donor governments, UN agencies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) should make greater efforts to build relationships with Syrian humanitarian organizations based on successful models, to provide more substantial resources for building their capacity, and to support projects addressing needs the groups have identified.
- ❑ Donor governments, UN agencies, and INGOs should require that partners and sub-grantees relying on local Syrian organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance inside Syria include those organizations in the established planning process for the location, time, and types of assistance being provided.
- ❑ Donor governments and UN agencies should each establish a standardized form for reporting on the use and delivery of materials inside Syria so that organizations are not required to complete different forms for multiple agencies whose funds all originate from the same donor or UN source.

## BACKGROUND

The conflict in Syria is well in to its fifth year, and the human toll continues to increase. More than 220,000 people have been killed and over one million have been injured. There are nearly four million registered refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and hundreds of thousands more Syrians live in but are unregistered in those countries. Inside Syria, 12.2 million people need humanitarian assistance to survive. But the inability of humanitarian actors to safely move aid around the country coupled with perpetual funding shortfalls have left Syrians without access to sufficient lifesaving assistance.

Even in early 2011, at the beginning of the crisis in Syria, it was a challenge for humanitarians to provide aid and services inside the country. The government in the capital Damascus was, and continues to be, extremely restrictive about which international organizations it will permit to operate inside its borders. It also approves very few local Syrian partners for the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), with the notable exception of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).<sup>1</sup>

United Nations agencies and their partners have succeeded in providing humanitarian assistance inside Syria through national staff and in cooperation with Syrian groups, but the

majority of that assistance has been limited to government-controlled areas and the areas of the country directly across the border from the refugee-hosting countries. Currently, the bulk of this cross-border aid – 40 of 54 shipments in 2014 – originates in Turkey and only reaches the neighboring northern region of Syria. Likewise, aid moving into Syria from Jordan tends to cover the area near the shared border in Syria's south.

**“Most aid near the fighting lines is provided by locals.”**

-Employee of Syrian aid group

For each of the past four years, donors, United Nations agencies, and international and local humanitarian groups have struggled to get adequate humanitarian aid to those unable to flee Syria. Three UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to cross-border aid provision have helped an estimated 700,000 people who might otherwise have had little support. But the same series of resolutions has also been described as having “no impact,”<sup>2</sup> a sentiment that was echoed by multiple Syrian refugees and aid workers operating inside Syria whom RI met with during a field mission to Turkey in March. Clearly, any progress that has been made has been minimal.



Now in year five, there is wide recognition among humanitarians that local Syrian groups operating inside the country deliver much of the assistance. But these Syrian organizations are reliant on the United Nations agencies and INGOs for funding that is then distributed to them in amounts that may not be adequate and with requirements that may not be reasonable given the circumstances. These relationships between large INGOs and smaller Syrian groups create human, financial, and technical resources on the ground that are an essential part of the international humanitarian aid system. But the way they are currently structured does not always take into account the amount of assistance that could not happen without the Syrian groups, the danger in which they operate, and the difficulty they face in attempting to document the delivery of assistance through methods designed for easier, non-conflict settings.

Donor governments, UN agencies, and INGOs have attempted to make steps toward incorporating more local and diaspora Syrian aid organizations into their operations with the intent of increasing their capacity and thereby increasing the number of people and locales inside Syria reached with humanitarian assistance. However, in the case of Syria, it is not clear that this capacity-building process is taking account of and responding to the actual needs and concerns of the Syrian organizations on the ground. While these major donors and operational entities know that local partnerships are best practice in humanitarian work, with regard to the response in Syria, they rarely seem to achieve them.

## OVERVIEW OF EMERGENCY HUMANITARIAN AID

Providing lifesaving assistance in a crisis involves a huge and complex system of beneficiaries, implementers, coordinators, and donors. While each situation is different, there are some general processes that usually hold true. A very simplified description of the most common method of providing aid is as follows: donor governments and private donors contribute money to United Nations agencies, which then make grants to partner organizations that may implement programs, or sub-grant to local organizations to implement the work, or both. In a similar vein, donor governments may also fund their own partners directly, who then may implement or make sub-grants as well.

In both of these scenarios, the organizations at the “bottom” of the funding flow tend to be the local groups – both formalized and not – that are based inside the country and have national staff that know the language, the culture, and the dynamics of the region they serve. Many are community-based organizations (CBOs) or small non-governmental

**“The hard-to-reach areas are a challenge because of the conflict, but aid is happening. We need government and INGOs to support that work.”**

-Employee of Syrian aid group

organizations (NGOs) with localized areas of service. Others may be larger NGOs that are active nationally. Inside Syria in particular, these groups are almost always the ones best-equipped to know what is happening from day-to-day on the ground, who are involved in both a crisis and its response, and who know how and where to find people most in need of assistance – indeed, they are often members of these communities.

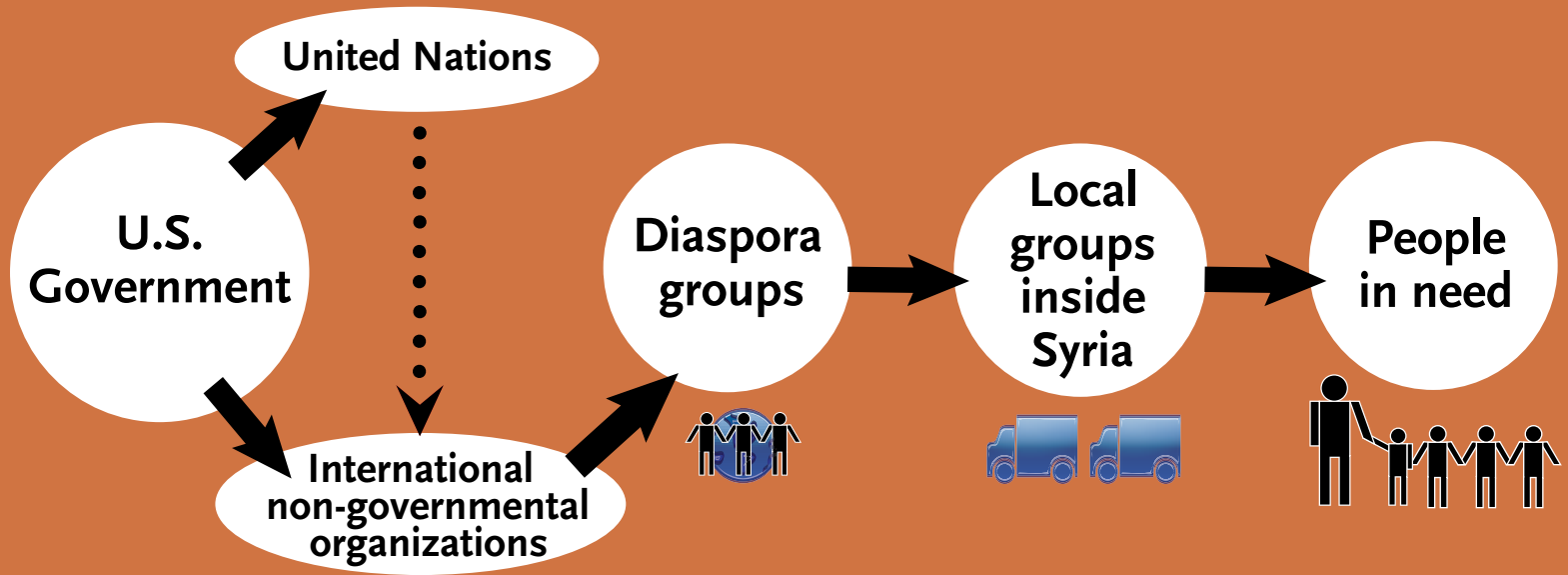
Using local, in-country partners for humanitarian work is considered good practice worldwide. It gives agency to people in the midst of a crisis, it recognizes and uses the skills – linguistic, cultural, professional, and otherwise – of the community, and it allows for communication and exchange of information that are based on the facts of daily life. Perhaps most importantly, it empowers people in a crisis to help themselves, and to build their capacity to continue providing for their communities even after the UN or the INGOs have moved on to other crises.

**“INGOs give materials, but there is no support for things like transportation and rent.”**

-Head of Syrian NGO that works cross-border from Turkey

Syria is no exception to these general models. Though civil society groups were limited in Syria prior to the conflict, some did exist. Others arose in response to the needs of those trapped inside Syria, particularly in the communities where the most vulnerable reside, and still others formed in diaspora populations that retained contacts and networks inside the country and wanted desperately to help. In Syria, the local groups that are now doing so much of the lifesaving aid are in many places the only ones with real access to desperate Syrians who cannot survive without help.

# AID TO LOCAL GROUPS IN SYRIA



## LOCAL AND DIASPORA SYRIAN GROUPS IN THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

In any crisis situation involving conflict and the displacement of people, it is invariably local actors on the ground who provide the immediate response. These first responders are very often not organized groups with a name, a business registration, and a mission statement. Rather, they are the individuals who open their homes and provide food and shelter to relatives and friends fleeing violence. They are the doctors down the street from a destroyed home, and they come to patch up the wounded and try to get them to the hospital safely. They are the local officials who unlock the school buildings so that families displaced from the next town over have a place to sleep indoors. And they are the neighborhood residents who put their own lives at risk to rescue survivors of bombings and attacks. After these initial small-scale and often individualized responses, formalized humanitarian aid groups are usually the next to approach a crisis. In Syria, the SARC has been providing assistance since the beginning of the conflict, and UN agencies and INGOs progressively came on the scene as well.



The principal of a school in northern Syria that serves the children of the village where it's located, as well as IDP children who now reside in the village after fleeing their homes.



Left: A truckload of winter care items. Photo courtesy of Syria Relief and Development.  
Right: Medical supplies to be moved across the border into Syria.

Larger diaspora aid groups also formed over the past four years (or already existed). These are generally registered in a western country, are often funded by committed individuals in the diaspora, and tend to have good relations and communications with various communities inside Syria. As a result, they may be able to provide funding, training, and technical assistance to their networks inside Syria, and by doing so can offer support ranging from food parcels to rehabilitation of a school for an internally displaced person (IDP) settlement. A handful of these diaspora humanitarian groups were able to meet the U.S. government eligibility standards for humanitarian response funding, and can now apply for grants from the U.S. government directly. This allows them access to a much larger amount of funding that can be further disbursed to those local groups implementing programs.

These diaspora groups are making an essential difference in getting humanitarian aid inside Syria. In addition to providing their own services through national staff, they often act as intermediaries between the donors and local groups on the ground because they speak the various languages and understand the cultures of Syria, and they have also learned how the international aid system works. Their local connections allow them access and information that may not be open to INGOs foreign to Syria, and they employ people inside the country who desperately need the means to support themselves.

The government in Damascus has been reluctant to give permission for too many international groups to set up

operations inside Syria, and so few were given the green light to go to work. Many other INGOs turned their attention to the refugees who were fleeing Syria into Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Supporting Syrians in those hosting countries has also had its complications, but more groups were able to secure that permission and while they served refugees, they could also pursue the consent to work inside Syria at the same time. Nonetheless, the network of INGOs operating within Syria remains relatively small in comparison to the humanitarian needs.

Local humanitarian groups inside Syria struggle in numerous ways. They work in extremely dangerous and unpredictable conditions amid a variety of armed groups that view their work as a threat. Their funding often depends upon sub-grants, meaning that donor governments or UN agencies, for example, disburse grant money to INGOs or contractors, and the INGOs further distribute small grants to local groups. Practically every Syrian humanitarian group that RI spoke with during its March field mission mentioned one particular detail of sub-grants that took up a tremendous amount of precious staff time: extensive reporting requirements that involve different forms for each granting and sub-granting organization from the top downward. Governments and other “top end” donors have become more flexible about their reporting processes for work inside Syria, in acknowledgement of the very difficult circumstances inside the country. For example, aid delivery can sometimes be documented with a photo rather than with large amounts of burdensome paperwork and signatures from people who are afraid to reveal their names. However, the



obligation to document the same activities in detail several times over in different formats can be needlessly onerous and not always reasonable given what is occurring on the ground. Many Syrian aid groups are made up of no more than a handful of willing people, and so the same people providing humanitarian assistance are also tasked with documenting what they have done on tight deadlines – sometimes requiring that they choose between the delivery of food, for example, and the completion of a report.

**“The local groups are focused on doing the work, rather than how to do it.”**

-Employee of Syrian aid group

Reporting is made even more difficult by the fact that INGOs and UN agencies require that the same information be submitted differently, depending on contextual preferences and regardless of whether that preference actually achieves a more complete report. Requiring that one form be used to document and report on funds that originate from the same source would make a substantial difference in the ability of Syrian organizations to both comply with their humanitarian and fiduciary obligations. Donor governments and UN agencies should each establish a standardized form for reporting on the use and delivery of materials inside Syria so that organizations are not required to complete different

forms for multiple agencies whose funds all originate from the same donor or UN source.

**“At some point, NGOs began to compete because projects are donor-driven. So some direct funding could allow Syrian groups to assess needs and do the right work.”**

-Employee of Syrian aid group

Additionally, local humanitarian groups told RI that the work they do is often dictated by what funders would like to sponsor, rather than by the actual humanitarian needs. For example, RI was told of a situation in which a donor wanted to fund medical services for children in a particular city of interest. The INGO that received the grant money duly searched for a Syrian group that could carry out the proposed project. However, the proposed project was challenged by the fact that there was only one licensed pediatrician in the city who could run the project, but that doctor did not have the capacity to perform the types of medical services required by the grant. At the same time, in that particular city, the greatest need was for medical trauma kits, which include supplies to provide emergency aid for broken bones and life-threatening injuries occurring in armed conflict. But the Syrian NGOs could not find an INGO that was willing to put its money

A school in Syria that gets support from a Syrian humanitarian group based in Turkey, but working across the border.



toward trauma kits. Nonetheless, the local groups scrambled to see if they could meet the terms of the proposed program largely because it would provide some type of assistance in a place where the needs were so tremendous.

Local groups on the ground can usually be relied upon to know what people need and can relay that information back to grant-makers and donors. But if their assessments are not taken seriously, the aid can miss the mark. RI was told by Syrian organizations that INGOs regularly applied for funds to take up specific projects without first consulting with them about the type and location of assistance needed, and as a result, missed the opportunity to address the most urgent needs. Donor governments, UN agencies, and INGOs should require that partners and sub-grantees relying on local Syrian organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance inside Syria include those organizations in the established planning process for the location, time, and types of assistance being provided.

## BUILDING CAPACITY?

“*Building the capacity of local organizations is part of encouraging hope.*”

-Aid worker in Turkey

Simply put, building capacity is the work of helping organizations develop the ability to perform better. For Syrian groups, capacity-building is especially relevant in the context of the international humanitarian aid system, to which many of them have had little exposure. Capacity-building can apply to operations, for example, ensuring groups in the field are aware of the international standards that must be met when distributing food parcels. It can also apply to administration, such as helping staff members learn to write more effective funding proposals.

While donors, UN agencies, and INGOs are aware of the need to build the capacity of local organizations, and sometimes include such activities in their grants and programs, the reality is that true capacity-building for local groups must be a separate commitment rather than an add-on to existing projects. The practice of building capacity needs the same careful attention that the practice of providing psychosocial services, for example, requires. Many local Syrian NGOs told RI that activities meant to build their capacity had potential, but rarely lived up to it.

The groups RI spoke to in March had a standard repertoire of capacity-building that had been offered to them: there had been trainings in proposal-writing and reporting/documentation, trainings in how to track and record financial transactions including grant money, trainings on international humanitarian law (IHL) and principles, and trainings on how to adequately address the special needs of women and children in programming. While the groups generally agreed

A learning center for Syrian children near the Turkish border, run by a Syrian humanitarian group





that these topics were valuable and useful, there was uniform dismay about how little follow-up occurred once the training session was over. Staff members of local groups had expected mentoring, ongoing discussions with point people, even small grants that allowed them to practice what they had learned. But in most cases, none of these next steps took place.

**“The training happens in Turkey, then the trainee is sent back to Syria with four new hats and can’t possibly implement. Nothing works as it was taught.”**

-Employee of Syrian aid group

Some local Syrian groups described positive experiences with INGOs that treated them as partners, rather than just the deliverers of aid, because it translated into real organizational and operational improvements. However, the majority of local aid workers with whom RI spoke in March felt that the UN’s and INGOs’ purported commitment to the development of local groups was not backed up by action. Instead, they were only brought in at the back end of a humanitarian response, and then expected to do what they were told regardless of the danger involved or whether the response was appropriate to the situation on the ground.

RI did speak with a few INGOs and UN agencies that appear to have well-functioning and productive relationships with local Syrian groups, as acknowledged by those groups. There are also successful examples of partnership from other crises the U.S. government has helped address, such as the Sub-Grants for Humanitarian Assistance and Relief in Emergencies (SHARE) program in Sri Lanka (see below). The question now is how to facilitate and support effective models, and how to improve those that are not working.

**“People in Syria don’t want to live on aid. They can’t keep living on relief. Someone must help organizations be sustainable.”**

-Head of Syrian NGO that works cross-border from Turkey

## IMPROVING THE MODEL

**“The concern [of Syrian groups] being left behind in the whole-of-Syria process is valid.”**

-Aid worker in Turkey

One program that has been a cause for hope among the Syrian organizations operating out of Turkey is the U.S. government’s \$10 million fund for support to local Syrian groups.<sup>3</sup> In a nutshell, the fund, which is operated by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), is meant to go to an INGO that will then use the money to focus specifically on working with Syrian organizations to improve their capacity in humanitarian response. This fund is a welcome step in the right direction, and at the time of RI’s visit to Turkey, concept papers had been submitted to the U.S. government by aid organizations and full applications had been invited from selected submissions. Seventy percent of the money is intended to be used for small grants to the Syrian organizations so that they can put their learning into practice.

However, the learning offered must be tailored to the stated needs of the Syrian groups, and not be topics that are simply the standard ideas of what donor governments and INGOs think local humanitarian groups should have. A certain amount of training and capacity-building has happened for Syrian groups over the past four years, but it has not been systematic or based on needs. So while it’s important for local groups to know how to write a solid proposal, groups that already have had training in this area should be supported with other learning opportunities that continue to increase their knowledge base.

As mentioned above, OFDA has been indirectly providing support to groups inside Syria in various ways since the beginning of the conflict, through the funding of UN agencies and INGOs that sub-grant the actual delivery to Syrian organizations. However, specifically designating U.S. government funds for Syrian groups through a targeted program will allow the work of capacity-building to be a primary project rather than an afterthought. OFDA and USAID must operate the \$10 million capacity-building fund for local Syrian humanitarian organizations as a high-priority project, with robust financial and technical support and timely monitoring and evaluation.

At the same time, OFDA should explore some of the successful local partnership models of the UN and INGOs worldwide with the intent of encouraging their use and replication. For example, the OFDA SHARE program in Sri Lanka offers a working premise for how the Syria project could function. In that context, the U.S. government awarded funding to an INGO specifically for the purpose of managing small grants to local aid organizations in order to increase the amount of aid available in response to the humanitarian needs. This administrative structure could also work for Syria, where an INGO could help local groups manage small amounts of funding, thereby removing the need for the U.S. government to individually administer these multiple grants. Understanding that the administration of these partnerships and consequent small grants will require additional staff members with particular qualifications, a central office or program should be tasked specifically with making sure local groups are brought into the U.S. government's humanitarian response activities in all situations where it provides aid. In administering the fund, the U.S. government (USAID/OFDA) should assign officers to mentor and work directly with those already-approved Syrian humanitarian organizations that are the recipients of grants in a way that is in keeping with best humanitarian practice.

***“The U.S. government provides funds in so many ways, it’s confusing. There are no systematic announcements when funding is available, and the proposal processes are massive and complex.”***

-Head of Syrian NGO that works cross-border from Turkey

The INGOs that are the ongoing partners of the U.S. government and other donor governments have shown the ability to identify credible local aid groups working inside Syria. The contacts and relationships they have made could help to determine which local NGOs are doing effective humanitarian work inside the country. Referring these more effective NGOs to capacity-building programs and smaller-scale funding mechanisms like those being offered by OFDA would be a meaningful way to increase the amount of humanitarian aid reaching people inside Syria, and a useful contribution to local groups' sustainability and future success.

***“There are certain things everyone is keen on funding, like direct services. But now in a protracted crisis we need other things covered – like salaries and hydroengineers. We need to fix the water system, rather than bring in a water tank.”***

-UN agency employee

A welcome development in the situation for the local aid groups based in Turkey and working inside Syria has been a genuine improvement in the humanitarian response coordination through an NGO Forum and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Ideally, donor governments, UN agencies, and implementing organizations communicate and collaborate on their work in order to reach the largest possible number of people in need and to avoid redundancy in their activities. For several years, Syrian NGOs have repeatedly told RI how difficult it was to enter this coordination process because of language barriers, unfamiliarity with the system of coordination in the first place, and lack of real interest on the part of the larger, more established groups to include them. However, on RI's recent trip to Turkey, there was wide acknowledgement by Syrian groups and by INGOs that the United Nations and the coordinating bodies at the national level have made concerted outreach to the Syrian groups. Interpretation is more often provided at meetings, information the local groups bring about humanitarian conditions and security inside Syria is considered, and more effort is being made to include the work of the local groups in mapping and information exchange exercises. As these local groups made efforts to organize themselves in order to have a more united voice, the international community responded.

The outlook for Syria in the near future is grim. The conflict is likely to continue for some time, and more people will continue to flee. And as more and more of the country's resources are destroyed, ever growing numbers of people inside will need aid to survive. For the past four years, funding for humanitarian assistance – both inside Syria and



Winter care distribution. Photos courtesy of Syria Relief and Development.

to refugees in the surrounding region – has not kept pace with needs.

The world’s attention is divided among a number of serious humanitarian crises, and the lack of political and humanitarian progress in Syria can make it a challenge to motivate donors. But that same lack of progress is an indication of how much worse the needs are and why more attention is essential four years later. Better support for the proven Syrian groups that have access to and knowledge of the real needs on the ground is a way to meaningfully increase the number of people being helped.

*Daryl Grisgraber and Sarnata Reynolds traveled to Turkey in March 2015 to assess the humanitarian aid situation for Syria’s internally displaced.*

## ENDNOTES

1. There is an ongoing debate as to whether the SARC is too closely connected to the current Syrian regime to be considered an independent, neutral, and impartial provider of humanitarian assistance.
2. Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, as quoted in the New York Times. [www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/02/25/world/middleeast/ap-ml-syria-humanitarian-aid.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/02/25/world/middleeast/ap-ml-syria-humanitarian-aid.html?_r=0)
3. USAID/DCHA/OFDA Annual Program Statement (APS) No. APS-OFDA-15-000001, Support to Local Capacity-Building and Emergency Response Efforts in Syria. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/neo-assets/procurement/grant\\_attachments/0000/4614/APS-OFDA-15-000001.pdfpdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3D\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3Dpdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3D](https://s3.amazonaws.com/neo-assets/procurement/grant_attachments/0000/4614/APS-OFDA-15-000001.pdfpdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3D_____pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3Dpdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJX2T6U65OHXVWSMQ&Expires=1431024329&Signature=fVLA dghC2I%2FO9d1YpzhZ3b%2Fyv14%3D)





## REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

2001 S Street, NW · Suite 700 · Washington, DC 20009

PHONE: [202] 828-0110 · FACSIMILE: [202] 828-0819 · E-MAIL: [ri@refintl.org](mailto:ri@refintl.org)

[www.refugeesinternational.org](http://www.refugeesinternational.org)

 Refugees International  @RefugeesIntl