

Syria in 2022

New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis

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Executive Summary

Although the conflict in Syria has slowed considerably since 2020, the country remains locked in a grinding protracted crisis, and a political settlement remains far out of reach. Relief actors must therefore adapt to meet evolving humanitarian needs. To do so, they must recognise that the crisis in Syria is arguably undergoing a paradigm shift. Although conflict-related violence remains an important aspect of the aid environment, other issues of a deeper, systemic nature are growing in importance. Among them are threats to the cross-border system, potential adoption of early recovery programming, emerging realities surrounding refugee return, and worsening economic volatility and food insecurity. Donors can and should use the new year to consider how to move beyond outmoded emergency response approaches to achieve more substantive, lasting change.

Introduction

The crisis in Syria continues to change, but the donor-funded aid response has failed to adapt. Syria has seen no major military offensives since March 2020, and although skirmishes, shelling, and airstrikes continue and large-scale conflict activity remain a possibility, frontlines are — for now — essentially frozen. Localised violence persists, and no part of the country is safe for return. However, the scope and intensity of armed conflict in the country pale in comparison to conditions witnessed between 2012 and 2019. Paradoxically, however, the UN characterises Syria as being locked “in a downward spiral,” and top officials warn that humanitarian needs are now greater than at any point in the crisis.¹ These realities should prompt reflection over donor fatigue and funding shortfalls, as well as the evolving nature of the crisis in Syria and the approaches, objectives, and operating modalities of donor governments.

As 2022 begins, the Syria crisis response stands at a crossroads. Donor governments and aid actors have been at pains to develop strategies to match new paradigms in Syria. One reason for this is the changing nature of the crisis, as the dynamics that are now most pertinent to needs in the country bear little resemblance to the main donor concerns of previous eras, such as the delicate aid politics of sieges, access restrictions, and interference by proscribed groups. While the capacity for emergency response must be retained, particularly in chronic conflict hotspots, the most pressing challenges that now confront crisis response actors on a daily basis are no longer directly related to violent conflict. Arguably, the most urgent needs in Syria are fueled by the secondary and tertiary effects of the protracted

crisis, such as economic volatility, state collapse, and the impacts of COVID-19 on already distressed sectors. In an effort to promote needed discussion of the overall direction of the Syria crisis response, this report identifies six broad issues that will shape the space for implementation in Syria, each of which should draw greater attention to the need for forward-looking implementation strategies. Each trend is, directly or indirectly, a consequence of the fragility and instability that have plagued Syria for a decade. In many ways, the future of the donor-funded aid response — and the lives and livelihoods of millions of Syrians — depend on the adoption of approaches that acknowledge how the crisis in Syria has evolved and manage to do more with less.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- Negotiations to renew the UN cross-border mandate will almost certainly prompt debate over concessions demanded by Russia, which is expected to threaten an all-out veto.
 - Despite widespread frustration with the way Moscow has whittled away the cross-border system, aid actors should understand the actual risks. The negotiations may bring about an early recovery phase, which — if done right — offers stronger donor safeguards, greater programmatic impact, and reduced implementation risk than a protracted humanitarian response. There are risks, however, and aid actors must continue to explore alternatives to the current UN-led cross-border system.
- Syria’s status as a narco-state remains notable, and although it has been widely discussed it is almost universally misunderstood.
 - Donor governments can enact commonsense mitigations against narco-trafficking, but aid actors have failed to operationalise the attention generated by the issue, while mental health and drug treatment services are still neglected across Syria.
- Arab rapprochement with Damascus is likely to continue, yet there are hard limits on how far regional states are willing to go.
 - Donor governments must recognise that regional states cannot afford the costs of indefinitely isolating Syria. Nonetheless, their return will be limited in scope, as sanctions will deter meaningful engagement, including financial support and foreign direct investment. Donor governments must be prepared to ride out the consequences of Syria’s isolation for the long term.

¹ “Humanitarian Needs in Syria Greater Than Ever, Relief Chief Warns Security Council, as Speakers Welcome Breakthrough Cross-Line Delivery of Food Rations to North-West,” UN Security Council (15 September 2021): <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14638.doc.htm>.

- Refugee return issues are approaching an inflection point as a growing number of Syrian refugees become eligible for naturalisation.
 - It is time for the aid response to holistically reconsider refugee return to Syria. While many projects are designed to assume eventual return, hard data, monitoring frameworks, and analysis concerning returns have failed to account for long-term intentions and needs as conditions in Syria, and the lives of Syrians abroad, evolve.
- The Syrian state apparatus will continue its conflict-induced adaptation as it expands revenue collection, even if service access lags.
 - Stretching thin resources further yet, Damascus is expected to continue to plug its budgetary gaps by co-opting aid mechanisms and civil society entities, and extorting Syrians abroad. Aid actors should expect further evolution and must recognise that aid is a vital pillar of Syrians' lives.
- A partial Government of Syria return to the northeast remains possible in 2022, which would present implementers with a stark choice as Damascus registration would be needed to retain access.
 - While such a scenario is by no means guaranteed, it would dramatically alter the cost-benefit analysis of registration in Damascus. Aid actors have been slow to consider the costs and options available if further territorial shifts occur.
- Surging inflation, foundering agricultural production, and the systemic collapse of the nation's economic sector will exacerbate poverty and drive up food insecurity.
 - The cumulative effects of the protracted crisis in Syria mean that Syrians now face greater hardship and more extreme needs than at any time in the past decade — a perverse reality considering that major conflict has largely paused. As state subsidies continue to shrink, Syrians will rely more heavily on aid. Donors can and should do more in Syria, but must recognise the increasingly complex and systemic drivers of needs.

Protesters in Idleb demand the extension of the UN convoy system, which has been the backbone of the UN-led response to opposition areas of Syria. Donor states and implementers have failed to devise alternatives. Image courtesy of Daily Sabah.



Cross-Border Access: Concessions Are Likely, But Opportunities Exist

Politicking over renewal of the UN mandate for cross-border aid access via Bab al-Hawa is among the few guarantees for the year ahead. Although the Security Council salvaged the cross-border mechanism with a zero-hour vote on 9 July 2021, all bets are off when renewal comes up once again in July 2022 (see: [Syria Update 12 July 2021](#)). The last renewal measure, Resolution 2585, was the result of a largely bilateral deal between Washington and Moscow, and its last-minute nature prompted response-wide concern over Russia's apparent willingness to veto the mechanism altogether, come what may. In return for extension, the US and like-minded Western states agreed to new information-sharing protocols for the cross-border aid response, an increase in cross-line deliveries, and a commitment to early recovery programming.

End of An Era, Regardless of Outcomes

Looking ahead, Moscow is unlikely to countenance re-authorisation without demonstrable progress on some, or all, of the facets of the July 2021 deal, particularly cross-line delivery and early recovery commitments. Aid actors should approach renewal discussions in 2022 with a clear-minded understanding of how they can shape such adaptations, which appear all but unavoidable. This will be practically and politically challenging. Russia's hard-ball approach to negotiations over the cross-border mechanism has intensified the sense among donor governments that they have been forced to accept a zero-sum proposition. Yet this impression does not alter the reality that donor agencies can benefit from a cautiously adopted early recovery phase, which key donor governments have already endorsed in concept through the adoption of Resolution 2585. Aid actors should recognise that an early recovery approach — offering stronger safeguards, conditional implementation, and more impactful relief works — is a partial solution to their concerns over aid diversion, instrumentalisation, and the

Narco-state financing in Syria has become a main focus of the international community, but aid responders have been slow to develop aid-related strategies to deal with addiction and usage. Image courtesy SANA.



limitations of a response that is locked in a protracted humanitarian phase (see: [Syria Update 20 December 2021](#)). If international donors approach early recovery wisely, it is possible to make it serve their interests, not the Kremlin's.

There will be no guarantees, however. Some analysts worry that the new requirements are unattainable and are therefore a poison pill provision that will make future authorisations harder still. Whether or not the cross-border mechanism is renewed, aid actors must face the reality of doing more with less in 2022, and they must prepare for the very real possibility that access via the Bab al-Hawa crossing will be cut off. They should accelerate efforts to ensure a turnkey alternative is in place, in case of non-renewal. The timing could not be worse. Across Syria, humanitarian needs grew in 2021, while donor fatigue has set in. As such, even in the case of a renewal in July, implementers across Syria would be well served to diversify funding mechanisms, cut overhead and operational costs, and prepare for possible changes to the architecture of the aid response.

Narco-State Politics: Moving Beyond a War on Drugs Mentality

Perhaps more than any other subject related to Syria, the narcotics trade captured international attention throughout 2021. Although the amphetamine-type stimulant captagon has been associated with Syria since the early days of the conflict, prior to 2021, few actors within the crisis response had more than a passing familiarity with it. That has changed as the industrial-scale production of the drug and its role as a financial lifeline to the embattled Assad regime have become more apparent. Regional states captured Syrian captagon worth \$3.5 billion in 2020 alone; the quantity of drugs that reached consumers in the Arab Gulf is unknown (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)). The scale of the drug issue attracted attention in Western capitals at the highest levels. As 2022 begins, international actors will continue casting about for practical steps to deal with the narcotics trade in Syria. Although wider awareness of the issue has improved radically, interdiction efforts have been slower to evolve.

In Search of A Strategy

Although analysts, think tankers, and political officers have fixated on Syrian captagon, they have produced few workable strategies to counter the drug trade and mitigate its impacts. Several factors explain the failure to operationalise concerns over narco-trafficking. Data concerning use patterns in key consumer markets remains poor. Despite advances in data-sharing on the government level, multilateral coordination is patchy. False assumptions abound, and observers routinely overlook the nebulous structure of the Syrian regime. Efforts to interrupt the narcotics trade in Syria are hampered by a failure to understand — or even acknowledge the existence of — internal regime politics, economic competition, and the need to balance among key constituencies.

A more nuanced, grounded approach is needed. International actors must recognise that the Syrian captagon trade is in large part a response to monetary needs. In that respect, the crisis is a consequence of cumulative impacts of the civil war in Syria, including destruction of the country's economic base, the empowerment of conflict entrepreneurs, the growth of illicit economies, the lack of progress toward a durable political solution, and the punitive impact of sanctions. Incentive to participate in the drug economy exists among local traders and smugglers, upstart narcotics producers, and military and security actors who profit from protection rackets and crossing fees. In some cases, regime-linked actors lend political, economic, or familial support to ensure drugs move smoothly. Although these realities are daunting, common-sense approaches to halt drug production are available. More work should be done to interrupt the supply of chemical precursors and pre-precursors. Both global chemical producers and regional importers and traders should adhere to stricter know-your-customer practices. However, no comprehensive solution is available so long as narco-profiteering is among the few financial lifelines in the country. Thus, for the near term, it will be crucial to take actions that will benefit the Syrians who have been habituated to such drugs, both through combat use and heightened exposure due to proliferation in the country. Aid actors must continue exploring programmatic entry points in mental health treatment, an underfunded aspect of an underfunded health response.² Some donors have weighed the possibility of funding drug treatment centres which, if pursued, may contribute positively to outcomes for Syrians.

² Pledged funding for health care covers a mere 17 percent of needs according to the Humanitarian Response Plan, as of October 2021.

Regional Rapprochement with the Government of Syria

The past year has witnessed an unmistakable, if overstated, shift in regional attitudes³ toward the Syrian Government, as many Arab states inch closer to Damascus (see: [Syria Update 30 August 2021](#) and [20 September 2021](#)). Jordan has arguably led the pack, bolstering cross-border trade volume and heightening government-to-government coordination. The most significant outreach was at the palace level: a phone call between Jordanian King Abdullah and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that was the first communication of its kind in a decade. In November, the UAE followed suit and dispatched a ministry-level envoy to Syria to discuss economic cooperation, implicitly testing the waters and waiting for signs of political blowback (see: [Syria Update 15 November 2021](#)).

Though more cautious, Egypt and Algeria also declared their interest in seeing Syria welcomed back into the regional community. Some states, including Qatar and Kuwait, have sworn off normalisation, but they seem to be outliers. Efforts to resuscitate Syria's once toxic brand in the region are gaining steam, and a growing number of states are publicly coming to terms with the reality that although al-Assad will not step down willingly, they can ill-afford to isolate Syria forever. The new year therefore begins with growing speculation over the next steps in regional normalisation.

As Normalised as Possible

Such developments are important milestones for the international trajectory of the crisis in Syria, but normalisation has been widely misunderstood. Critics, proponents, and analysts alike have seldom accounted for the limited extent of what Arab states can plausibly hope to achieve by re-engaging with Damascus. For instance, Jordan's desire for increased cross-border trade with Syria, a linchpin of its economy, is a major factor in its thawing relations. This need has been partially satisfied, but intermittent border closures threaten the limited commerce that has resumed. Also important to Amman is the spillover of the Syrian drug trade. On this issue, too, its hopes have been frustrated, as the Government of Syria has limited capacity to interdict smuggling, despite Jordan's vocal dissatisfaction. In addition, political upset in Washington following Abdullah's phone conversation with al-Assad offers a warning to other states with the notional appetite to reach out to Damascus. Meanwhile, the UAE's headline-grabbing delegation and its

pledges of economic cooperation with Syria are, so far, little more than set pieces. No new deals have materialised since the meetings.

Arab states have executed a remarkable about-face on Syria. After cutting ties, condemning rights violations, and openly supporting armed opposition factions, many of Syria's neighbours have decided that if they cannot change the government in Damascus, they will have to find a way to accommodate it. For now, international pressure is the key obstacle limiting the extent of normalisation, and it prevents the degree of support Damascus seeks. The most prominent barrier is the US Caesar Act, which deters engagement with the Syrian Government through its sweeping secondary sanctions. This remains the case despite a series of tweaks to US Treasury general licenses that tone down the impact of sanctions on Syria to better facilitate aid activity.

For the time being, the Government of Syria needs PR victories; developments in regional rapprochement provide that. In the long term, however, it will need cash in hand, at-scale foreign investment, deeper international cooperation, and political support from parties that — unlike its backers in Moscow and Tehran — are not on the margins of the international community themselves. None of the Arab states that have recently made overtures toward the Syrian Government has been willing to provide such support — yet. Aid actors in Syria may look to the wealthy Gulf states as sources of future rehabilitation funding and foreign direct investment of the type needed to generate sustainable, locally driven recovery in Syria. Regional states are likely to continue making more substantial overtures, but the road to Damascus is neither straight nor smooth, and there is a hard limit on how far most states will be willing to go.

Refugee Return: New Realities as More Syrians Naturalise Abroad

Refugee and displacement issues in Syria are on the cusp of change, even as donor governments and aid agencies adhere to a business-as-usual approach. The pressure to naturalise and integrate Syrians who have sought asylum or migrated abroad — particularly in Europe — is growing.⁴ In many countries of asylum, Syrians who arrived during

3 Sima Aldardari, "Strategic Interests Drive Gulf Policy Toward Syria", Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (29 December 2020): <https://agsi.w.org/strategic-interests-drive-gulf-policy-toward-syria/>.

4 Anchal Vohra, "Are Europe's Syrians Still Refugees?" Foreign Policy (25 March 2021): <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/25/are-europes-syrians-still-refugees/>.

the major wave of displacement that crested in 2015 are approaching or have already exceeded periods of residency that entitle them to naturalisation, often after five years.⁵ That is not yet true for many Syrians in Germany, the nation that has received the largest number of Syrians fleeing the conflict, but many have crossed the threshold, especially in Sweden, which hosts the second highest number of Syrians of any European state.⁶ The view from regional host states is different, and only in Turkey is large-scale naturalisation administratively possible, even if it is increasingly difficult politically.

Who Will Return?

As more Syrians integrate abroad, donors and aid implementers may find they must adapt to new realities in the politics and programmatic needs surrounding return. Return is an understood component in the design of many non-humanitarian aid projects in Syria. For instance, sensitivity to the housing, land, and property rights of Syrians who have fled conflict-affected communities is an important aspect of projects that entail work in hard infrastructure, support for household rehabilitation, or targeted support to key livelihoods sectors. Donors and implementers often design their programmes so as to improve conditions for Syrians in the country and hold open the door for others who will — it is implicitly assumed — some day return. Increasing rates of naturalisation abroad may challenge this assumption, at least for some Syrians.

As more Syrians naturalise abroad and gain travel authorisation, it is widely assumed that many will return to Syria — not to rebuild the lives they left when fleeing the country — but on a temporary basis to sell assets, manage the affairs of deceased or displaced relatives, and facilitate transactions for others who cannot return. Return decisions are highly personal and vary considerably according to personal circumstances and assessed risks. Such factors are often arbitrary and therefore defy one-size-fits-all planning for aid implementation.

For this reason, donors and aid implementers should prioritise the creation of a more nuanced strategy to deal with the evolving conditions surrounding refugee return to Syria. This will require monitoring and analysis systems that go beyond simplistic numbers-based frameworks that count returnees. Likewise, a focus on security risks to returnees is also ill-suited to planning needs. Such a focus is also redundant, as safe return cannot yet be guaranteed anywhere in

Syria (see: [Point of No Return? Recommendations for Asylum and Refugee Issues Between Denmark and Damascus](#)). Instead, it will be important to understand who returns, where, and why. Equally important for the international community is a better understanding of the current status of Syria's 6.7 million refugees. A more detailed accounting of Syrians' future options and prospects for naturalisation — or lack of any pathway forward, as in host states like Jordan and Lebanon — will clarify and complement the findings of regional intentions surveys that continue to show a majority of Syrians wish to return some day, despite the apparent reality that vanishingly few are actually willing or able to do so.⁷

Government of Syria Adaptation: Public Policy as a Means of Survival

A decade of conflict has left the Syrian state with significantly reduced capacity, and a population with needs greater than ever before. In a context of economic freefall, state collapse, and protracted humanitarian crisis, the Government of Syria is increasingly pursuing public policy reform not to improve service delivery, but rather as a means of survival and adaptation to this new reality.

Seeming reforms that have taken place in recent years strengthen the state, and shield the regime that sits atop it. Examples of such reforms were seen earlier this year with the abolition of the post of Grand Mufti, an effort to ratchet-up and formalise state influence over religious institutions (see: [Syria Update 22 November 2021](#)). Likewise, changes to public school curricula impose the Government's perspective on the conflict, strengthening the state's "official narrative" of the past ten years (see: [Syria Update 15 November 2021](#)).

Key among these adaptations are those that increase revenues to the cash-strapped state. The obliteration of the tax base means that fee-based governance, long a de facto reality given endemic corruption, has become increasingly codified as the Government of Syria seeks to extract resources from the Syrian population through, for example, added costs for expedited services, such as passport issuance.

⁵ Kai Dambach, "Explainer: How Long Until You Can Apply for Citizenship?" Info Migrants (19 April 2021): <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16009/explainer-how-long-until-you-can-apply-for-citizenship>

⁶ "Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus," UNHCR Cyprus (18 March 2021): <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/03/18/syria-refugee-crisis-globally-in-europe-and-in-cyprus-meet-some-syrian-refugees-in-cyprus/>.

⁷ "Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria," UNHCR (March 2021): <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/MENA%20regional%20survey.pdf>.

Syrians outside the country are a particular target for such measures, a reality highlighted by the introduction of an online portal for acquiring civil registry extracts and renewing passports from abroad (see: [Syria Update 13 December 2021](#)).

Limited Change to Serve the State

Broader reforms are unlikely in Syria for the foreseeable future, given the architecture of the crisis. Western states have effectively embraced a policy of “strategic patience” toward Syria, hoping that the political isolation of Damascus and a slowdown of conflict in the country will, respectively, generate pressure and space for reform, concessions, and ultimately a durable settlement. However, the Government of Syria has so far refused to budge. Leveraging its dominance over territorial Syria, international apathy, and the state basis of the international system itself, Damascus has shown that it, too, can be patient.

Hence, although headline reforms are unlikely, the Syrian state is likely to continue undergoing piecemeal, targeted

adaptations. Reforms of particular interest for the aid community, such as administrative decentralisation and amendments to the laws concerning civil society organisations, have so far changed little on the ground. In large part, these appear to have stalled amidst Damascus’ push for further reconciliation deals in the south and the east, and continued suspicion of NGOs not explicitly aligned with, or controlled by, the Government. Opportunities for change may result from the shifting regional picture as normalisation with Arab governments proceeds, though these are more likely to serve political and business needs than those of the people themselves. As it seeks stability, hard currency, and legitimacy, it will continue to attempt to co-opt the efforts of aid responders to suit its interests. Donors supporting projects in Government of Syria areas should be aware of these reputational risks, and should consider how to ensure transparency, openness, and accountability, as well as adherence to red lines. Amid changes to how the Syrian state operates, donor governments must bear in mind that although the people of Syria are renowned for their generosity, the Syrian Government is unlikely to give anything away for free.

A Russian military patrol in northeast Syria. Possible changes in military influence in the northeast would force implementers and donors alike to reconsider NGO registration. If Kurdish forces amalgamate with the Syrian Government, NGOs’ return to Damascus would be all but inevitable to retain access. Image courtesy of Daily Sabah.



Northeast Syria Access Limitations May Prompt Damascus Registration Debate

Renewed threats of a Turkish military operation in northeast Syria in late 2021 prompted aid implementers to revisit fundamental questions about access and registration that are familiar to veterans of the Syria crisis response (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Although Ankara has — for now — backed down from its threats, the basic roadmap for implementers remains perilous. Major military operations along the Turkish-Syrian border could prompt dramatic change to the region's generally relaxed access environment. If threatened militarily, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would likely seek protection through Russia, as they did during Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. In turn, Moscow is likely to capitalise on such unrest to force the SDF and the existing political apparatus in northeast Syria to amalgamate with the Government of Syria, thus changing registration and access conditions for aid action.

Back to Basics: Access Above All Else?

Should the SDF allow Damascus to take back control, aid actors will face a series of difficult choices. In the first instance, they will need to weigh the risks of rapid closeout or the adoption of a remote model. Complicating matters, transferring activities to experienced local staff may prove difficult, as local stakeholders will face security risks if they are seen by Damascus as being subversive due to their closeness to Western donors or the Autonomous Administration. Should Damascus raise its flag over areas now administered by Kurdish forces, it will likely replicate takeover models seen in previous reconciliation areas such as eastern Ghouta and northern rural Homs, where opposition-aligned local governance bodies were dismantled, aid operations were quashed, and loyalists were promoted to prominent posts (see: [Potential Models of Governance in Northeast Syria](#)). By and large, only dual-registered entities such as SARC and UN agencies were able to weather such changes in controlling actors. If northeast Syria changes hands similarly, donors will find themselves bereft of partnership options, and they will be forced to tap the few NGOs that are already registered with the Government of Syria. Such a shift would likely precipitate a debate of more a fundamental nature as NGOs consider agains how and when they can return to Damascus — and at what cost.

Economic Crisis and Food Insecurity Are Worsening

Perhaps the most sweeping challenges facing Syria in 2022 result from the systemic collapse of the nation's service, agricultural, and economic sectors. Hard infrastructure awaits reparation, both locally and on the system-wide level. Regional energy-sharing agreements predicated on gas transfer through Syria have stalled due to network outages and insurgent attack (see: [Syria Update 20 September 2021](#)). Syria's hydrological networks continue to haemorrhage water, exacerbating the impact of yearly rainfall shortages and upstream damming (see: [Syria Update 10 May 2021](#)).

Meanwhile, surging inflation, a global problem, is worryingly pronounced in Syria. By some estimates, Syria's annual inflation rate is just shy of 40 percent.⁸ Only a handful of states fare worse. Inflation is seemingly endemic to the eastern Mediterranean: the troubled economies of Lebanon and Turkey are among the five states with worse inflation than Syria. It is expensive to have neighbors like these. Regional inflation drives up import costs and reduces the capacity of the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon and Turkey to remit earnings to families back home.

Foundering agricultural production is a particularly troubling area. Syria faces acute food shortage and possible famine in 2022. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates Syria's 2021 wheat production reached 1.05 million tonnes, a substantial reduction from the 2.8 million tonnes harvested in 2020, a reduction that was itself a factor in subsequent food insecurity.⁹ Poor water access and substandard resource management, inapt or unaffordable inputs, and fuel shortages impacting transportation and water pumping all diminish cropping and blunt output. More than 60 percent of Syrians — 12.4 million people — are food insecure. That number doubled from 2019, and more are likely to begin facing food shortages. To date, few if any plans have been set in place to ensure Syria will be on surer footing to sustain growing nationwide food needs in 2022.

What Comes after the Option of Last Resort?

It is a perverse reality that many Syrians now face greater hardship and more extreme needs than at any time in the crisis. The cumulative effects of the protracted crisis are growing more apparent. Conflict damage, deferred maintenance, the compounding effects of negative coping

⁸ Steve Hanke, "Hanke's Inflation Satellite," updated 9 December 2021: <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/prof.steve.h.hanke/viz/HankesInflationSatellite/HankesInflationSatellite>.

⁹ FAO, "Special Report: 2021 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic (December 2021)," 17 December 2021: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/special-report-2021-fao-crop-and-food-supply-assessment-mission-syrian>.

strategies, depleted household savings, a heavily sanctioned economy, and economic crises in neighbouring states have all factored in Syria's continuing decline.

Donors will find that addressing issues such as these will require multi-year strategies, greater multilateral coordination, and a willingness to devise more ambitious activities. They will be aided by the fact that many, but not all, programming areas face a limited risk of large-scale military violence, governance transition, or fundamental disruptions that will force early project close-out. Nonetheless, donor governments will understandably hesitate to engage in ways they fear risk violating red lines or compromising on political and human rights principles. Such principles need not be abandoned in order to do more good, better, in Syria. Understanding environmental and social risks, proactively creating robust safeguards, and embracing advances in context-sensitivity procedures can mitigate these dangers. As always in Syria, coordination will be a challenge. Donors draw their own red lines in very different ways. Programming objectives differ. And coordination becomes more necessary – and more difficult – as aid budgets shrink.

Donors must understand that such issues will worsen over time, and needs will rise accordingly. The Government of Syria has reduced its budgeted “investment” file, used for hard infrastructure, to a mere 15 percent of the state budget, down from more than 40 percent pre-crisis.¹⁰ State subsidies also continue to shrink, leaving more vulnerable people to fend for themselves (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Syrians will rely more heavily on aid as state support withers, yet aid projects will also become more difficult as ancillary systems collapse. For instance, agricultural livelihoods and food support are stunted by water usage issues, import challenges, mobility and transport issues, and fuel shortages. Addressing basic food needs may require understanding and tackling these root causes. Donors can and should do more in Syria, but they must also recognise that the aid environment is beset by increasingly complex challenges that demand multi-pronged approaches (for more on such approaches, see: COAR [Nexus Programming Profiles](#) and [Needs-Oriented Strategic Area Profiles](#)).

¹⁰ Syria Report, “Government Delegation Tours Former Opposition Areas in Rare Visit,” 12 December 2021: <https://syria-report.com/news/government-delegation-tours-former-opposition-areas-in-rare-visit/>.

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