



Earthquake-affected Populations in Syria Weary of Corruption and Favouritism in Aid Distribution

Social Media Monitoring

June 2023

To support the earthquake response in Türkiye and Syria, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in these countries and contribute to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community feedback.

Summary

This social media monitoring brief presents the findings of a review of the main social media trends related to aid distribution in Syria from 1 April to 30 May 2023. Its aims are twofold: (i) to gather beneficiary feedback on humanitarian aid distribution at a time when aid organisations are managing the humanitarian fallout following the February earthquake; and (ii) to identify possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation targeting the humanitarian sector.

Focussing mainly on social media users from Latakia governorate, the review yielded two principal findings:

- Earthquake-affected populations in Latakia governorate generally suspect that the local distribution of international aid is marred by rampant corruption, fraud, and favouritism towards well-connected and well-off people.
- Humanitarian organisations such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, often entrusted with the distribution of aid, have been identified by some social media users as being part of the issue of aid diversion.

Context

For over a decade, the civil war in Syria has plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis, made worse by the severe earthquake in the north-west of the country in February 2023. As of June 2023, more than [15 million people](#) – or seven out of ten civilians – are in need of aid. Moreover, 12 million civilians are food insecure, with 2.8 million others at risk of food insecurity.

Following the February 2023 earthquake, Syria experienced an increase in international humanitarian aid after two new border crossings were [opened](#) in the country's north-west in order to ease humanitarian access to zones hit by the earthquake. However, according to an [iMMAP report](#), the politicised humanitarian landscape in Syria “has been plagued by significant structural problems that became more apparent in the wake of the recent earthquakes”. Remote humanitarian access in areas outside government control and weaknesses in the cross-border system have complicated the response. At the same time, Syrian non-governmental organisations and local actors were under [considerable pressure](#) when attempting to deliver aid in the context of “an obstructed cash transfer system, lack of pre-positioned supplies, the monopolization of key goods, and price surges”. According to a human rights organisation, the effectiveness of humanitarian programming was [undermined](#) by “systematic aid diversion and obstruction by the Assad regime” in line with its strategy of besieging areas supporting the opposition during the conflict.

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International and local humanitarian access to aid beneficiaries in Syria has most often been accompanied by compromises with the regime in Damascus due to its hold on the humanitarian sector and aid supplies. Although much attention has often been focussed on the UN's "[tangled](#)" relationship with Damascus, which has included the employment of relatives of regime loyalists and the procurement of supplies or staff accommodation from businesses linked to the Assad regime, the regime's control over the sector has also impacted local aid organisations, in particular the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), over which the government has [extended its control](#) since the beginning of the civil war. A [Human Rights Watch](#) report entitled *Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-opt Aid and Reconstruction in Syria* describes the SARC as: "one of the largest operating humanitarian organizations in the country, with an office in each of Syria's 14 governorates, and 75 sub-offices according to its website. It also boasts a large number of volunteers. SARC is closely affiliated with the government, and has strong relations with the Syrian security services" .

In the same report, Human Rights Watch identifies [numerous forms of collusion](#) between Syrian government institutions and the SARC – yet international organisations working in Syria must partner with the SARC in order to obtain access to aid beneficiaries. According to the report, the government's control over the SARC appears to have severely affected the organisation's humanitarian operations, and has reportedly also led to recurrent collaboration between intelligence officers and SARC employees to steal and resell aid supplies.

Methodology

Social media data was first collected from Facebook during the period of 1 April-31 May 2023 from Latakia governorate in Syria using Boolean search queries focussing on major international aid organisations - including the Red Crescent, the World Food Programme, Doctors without Borders, the International Rescue Committee, and Caritas in the Arabic language. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data.

The collected data was filtered by human analysis to comb for possible mis-information, dis-information, or mal-information and to identify sentiment. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e., the number of social interactions by other social media users with the original post). Relevant comments, usually accompanied by reactions (i.e., comments or replies), were manually analysed using an online participant observation approach to research sentiments. An estimated 980 relevant Facebook comments were reviewed in preparation for this brief. An examination of profiles of social media users who expressed opinions that featured in this research suggests that most of these users hail from Latakia governorate, which is controlled by the Syrian government, and do not appear to be aligned with opposition groups.

Findings

Earthquake-affected populations in Latakia governorate generally suspect that the local distribution of international aid is marred by rampant corruption, fraud, and favouritism towards well-connected and well-off people..

On social media, reports of the arrival of international aid convoys and supplies following the earthquake disaster in February attracted broad attention, often provoking thousands of engagement actions (e.g., comments and shares) by social media users. Stated opinions in the form of comments in reaction to reports of international aid supplies tend to be overwhelmingly sceptical that the supplies will reach beneficiaries. Echoing a sentiment

repeated by many of his peers, a Syrian social media user from Latakia stated: *“I swear that if a thousand ships of aid were to arrive, we [still] wouldn’t see any [aid]”*. Employing humour, another said: *“and us, as [ordinary] Syrian citizens, what do we have to do with this [news]??!!!”*, implying that the reports are not relevant to ordinary people since the aid will not reach them.

In fact, social media users appear to widely suspect that humanitarian aid tends to be subject to rampant fraud and corruption that line the pockets of well-connected and well-off people. Many reacted to the reports by asking about the “price” of the supplies, implying that the aid is being sold. This was confirmed by numerous, more explicit reactions such as that of a female social media user who, like many others, said that the aid supplies will be “sold as usual”. Such reactions, which seem to capture the general sentiment, accuse well-connected and well-off people of diverting the supplies for their own benefit. When someone (also from Latakia governorate) complained by saying *“where [is] the aid [going? W]e hear about it and we don’t see anything”*, another replied simply: *“in the pockets of the rich”*.

Many social media users lamented the situation, believing that the diversion of aid from its intended destination – i.e., the earthquake-affected population – is unjust in view of the plight of many sections of the country’s population. Many of the users participating in these discussions appear to view themselves as either in need of this aid or knowledgeable of the situation of those who need help. This resulted in a mix of collective anger and sympathy on the part of users. One social media user stated: *“I swear to God the needy will take nothing except for words, may God help them”*, implying that reports of aid will not materialise into concrete help for people in distress.

Humanitarian organisations participating in the distribution of aid are seen as complicit in the misuse and diversion of aid supplies.

In recent years, most of the international aid arriving in Syria has been channelled through the SARC (see Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2019). This key role in the management and distribution of humanitarian aid means that reacting social media users in Latakia associated the SARC – which has close ties with the Syrian government and its security services – with the alleged practice of diverting international aid from beneficiaries who need assistance in Syria to well-off and well-connected people who exploit it for their own benefit (Human Rights Watch, 2019). One male social media user from Latakia governorate said: *“After the Syrian Red Crescent received it, I wonder if the poor Syrian citizen would get something from [the aid]. Of course, certainly not. God takes revenge on every person who steals the poor citizen’s morsel”*. Other social media users were more explicit, with some arguing that the SARC distributes aid to its own people.

أي وبعد ما استلمها الهلال الأحمر السوري ياترى رح ينالو منها شي المواطن السوري الفقير طبعاً وأكد
لاء
بس بحب قول الله ينتقم من كل انسان عميسرق لقمة المواطن الفقير

Although most of such reactions focussed on the SARC, because it is often specifically named as the organisation responsible for the distribution of the newly-arrived aid convoys, some social media users implicated the aid sector in general in accusations of aid misuse. For example, a female social media user argued that *“aid goes to Damascus and is taken by charity organisations who [then] sell it”*. Nevertheless, in the data used for this study, neither the UN nor other significant humanitarian organisations were specifically mentioned.

المعونات تصل لدمشق وتاخذها الجمعيات اللاخيرية وتبيعها عبر وسطائها في البسطات

Conclusions

The opinions expressed on social media underline the sense of abandonment among affected populations, which was created by the significant structural problems that have plagued the humanitarian aid landscape in Syria. The discussions on social media also highlight the differences in perception between affected populations active on social media and internal discussions within the aid sector: while the aid sector discussed the shortcomings of the UN Cross-Border Mechanism (iMMAP, 2023, p. 7), social media users in government-controlled areas such as Latakia governorate appeared to perceive corruption and nepotism as the reasons that no aid reached them. Combined with allegations of [UN complicity with the Assad regime](#), these views expressed on social media highlight the threats to aid agencies' reputation among Syria's earthquake-affected populations in a complex politicised context and underline the need to reprioritise the effective communication of the humanitarian principles guiding the work of international actors, including the "do no harm" principle.

Recommendations to the aid sector

- Understand the power of widely shared critical opinions on social media and their detrimental impact on the reputation and credibility of aid efforts among Syria's earthquake-affected populations.
- Recognise that a focus on sovereignty in the humanitarian response in north-west Syria is inherently in conflict with the principles underpinning international humanitarian law in a context where a population has been systematically targeted by its own government.
- Recognise the importance of widely communicating and reinforcing the human rights principles underlying aid efforts to strengthen the credibility of the international aid system.
- Develop a longer-term, integrated humanitarian strategy for Syria that strengthens depoliticised modalities.

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