Attitudes Towards Border Crossings Openings in Syria for Aid Convoys

Social Media Monitoring

September 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 from a review of sentiments expressed in 204 Facebook comments on the subject of border crossings and humanitarian aid in Syria during July 2023. The aim was to identify possible misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation targeting the aid sector and to understand online sentiments that help aid agencies in their programming and security risk management.

Findings:

- Some social media users – identified through key searches that included the name of the three border crossings Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salama and Al-Ra'ee combined with terms related to aid operations – expressed negative sentiments about the humanitarian aid passing through the Syrian border crossings.

- The main reasons behind these negative sentiments include suspected corruption; the belief or fear that international humanitarian organisations are smuggling weapons and supplies to armed groups in opposition-controlled areas; and the belief that beneficiaries and needy civilians would still not receive sufficient aid even if the border crossings were open for humanitarian aid to pass through.

- Social media users often mentioned corruption alongside inadequate humanitarian aid distribution, suggesting that they believe that the two are linked.

- Social media users mentioned local government, opposition authorities, and unspecified so-called "international humanitarian organisations" as being negatively linked to aid passing through the border crossings.

Context

The importance of border crossings for humanitarian access to beneficiaries in Syria increased in the aftermath of the February earthquake. Following the disaster, two additional border crossings, Bab al-Salama and Al-Ra'ee, were opened to ease pressure on the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which before the earthquake was being used to supply aid destined for **more than 4 million beneficiaries**. However, since then, international negotiations seeking to extend the opening of the border crossings have encountered difficulties.

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In July 2023 the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution to reauthorise the delivery of cross-border aid to north-west Syria after Russia vetoed the proposed nine-month extension of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. This resolution would have allowed the delivery of humanitarian assistance to non-government-controlled parts of Syria without requiring the consent of the Syrian government.

Although the UN reached an understanding with Syrian officials on 9 August 2023 to reopen the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for six months, as of 29 August the UN stated that aid deliveries were yet to restart via this crossing. Two other crossings, Bab al-Salama and Al-Ra'ee, will also remain open for three more months, which the UN is using at the moment to bring in aid supplies. To complicate matters further, the UN **announced** in late July that it was forced to cut aid deliveries globally by 50% or more due to a "crippling funding crisis". A top UN official said that 5.5 million Syrians who relied on the UN's World Food Programme for food were already on 50% rations. In July the agency cut all rations to 2.5 million Syrians.

Findings from social media sentiment analysis

Most social media users (around 76%) identified through key searches that included the names of the three border crossings of Bab al-Hawa (باب الهوى), Bab al-Salama (باب السلامة) and Al-Ra'ee (باب الراعي) in combination with words related to aid expressed negative sentiments about the humanitarian aid passing through these Syrian border crossings. Around a quarter expressed opinions in favour of the border crossings remaining open for humanitarian aid to pass through.

- **Corruption and ineffective aid**

More than half of those expressing negative sentiments towards aid passing through the border crossings (51.1%) cited corruption as the concern that explained their negative sentiments (see Figure I). A social media user, for example, commented: *"Do not send aid, nothing reaches us, they are stealing it"*. Another, a male from Idlib governorate, commented: *"Better without [the delivery of humanitarian aid], [since] all the aid is being stolen. Praise be to God, the thief's livelihood has been cut off. The poor don't see any [aid]"*.

Another 19.5% of those expressing negative sentiments appeared to be significantly frustrated at what they seem to view as the negligible or non-existent impact of humanitarian aid in their communities and their negative sentiment was driven by this frustration. For example, a male from Idlib said, *"In any case, more than 90% of the poor do not receive any aid, so clos[ing the border crossings] is better"*. Another male user employed humour to refer to the Bab al-Hawa crossing ("hawa" in Arabic means "air"), saying: *"I swear I didn't benefit anything from this crossing, except that it passes some air"*. Another male user residing in Al Bab city in Aleppo governorate said of the border crossings, *"What difference will it make [keeping the crossings open] for the people in free Syria? Nothing reaches the poor"*. Although users in this category did not explicitly cite corruption as the reason for aid not reaching them or their communities, they may view corruption as one of the reasons behind this.

A high number of social media users appeared to link corruption to inadequate humanitarian aid distribution. Indeed, most social media users who complained about corruption tended at the same time to mention that humanitarian aid was not reaching beneficiaries or those who

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needed it. For example, a male user said, *"except for those with connections, there are many poor and needy people who do not receive aid"*. Another male user, from Idlib, commented, *"I swear we do not see anything, everything is stolen"*.

Overall, around 70% of all negative comments about aid passing through the border crossings were linked to perceptions of corruption and inadequate aid distribution. In total in July 2023 around 94 individual negative comments were posted by people who believed that aid passing through the border crossings would be syphoned off and would never reach those in need.

- **Fears and beliefs that aid is misused to smuggle weapons to opposition groups**

Another group of social media users who expressed negative sentiments towards the border crossings (28 individuals, or 21% of social media users whose posts were analysed) believed or feared that international humanitarian actors were smuggling weapons or other forms of supplies for "terrorist" groups in opposition-controlled areas. A female user residing in Damascus said, *"How would we know that they will pass aid and nothing else?"* Most were more categorical in their comments. A male user in Homs said *"aid [consists] of weapons and ammunition"*, while another user whose location was not identified said, *"The aid contains weapons for terrorists"*.
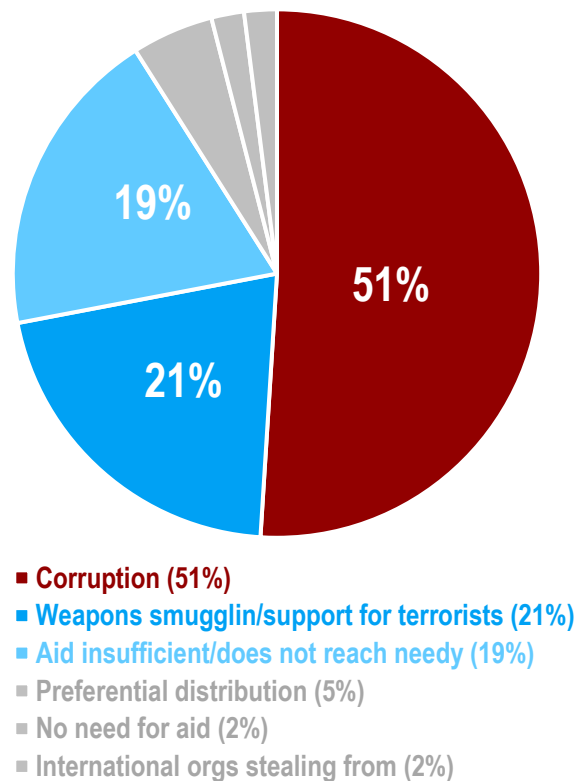
- **Additional views**

Some six additional social media users (5%) expressed negative views that included criticism of the humanitarian focus on opposition areas in north-western Syria at the expense of other parts of the country. Others (2%) believed that Syria does not need any aid from humanitarian actors, while some (2%) argued that humanitarian organisations were stealing from Syria.

Figure 1: Reasons given by social media users when expressing negative sentiments (%)

- Corruption (51%)
- Weapons smugglin/support for terrorists (21%)
- Aid insufficient/does not reach needy (19%)
- Preferential distribution (5%)
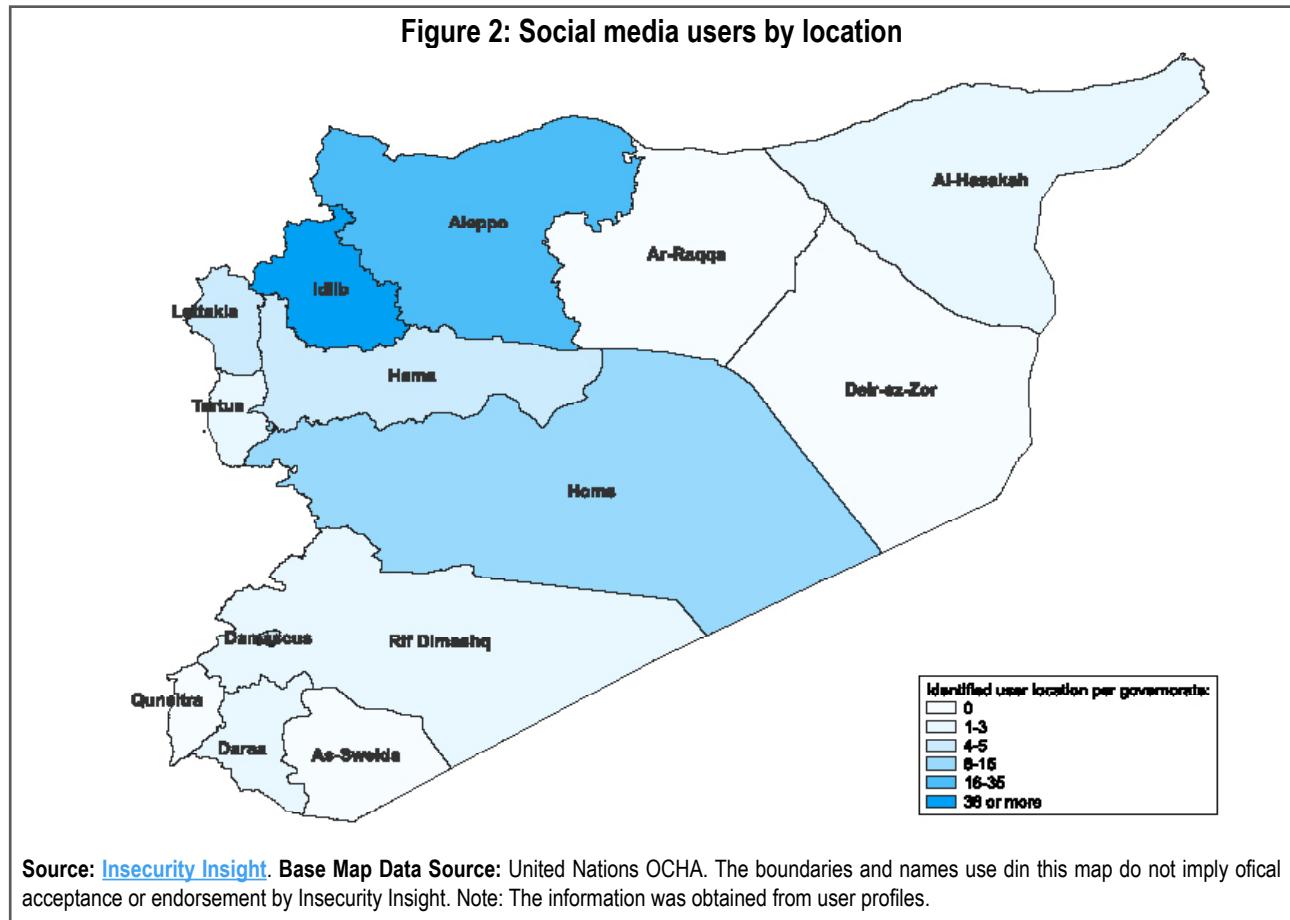- No need for aid (2%)
- International orgs stealing from (2%)

Source: Insecurity Insight

Note: The calculations are based on the frequency of the specific reasons given when expressing negative views. Cases where negative sentiments are unaccompanied by a specific reason (e.g. "I do not agree") are not included.

- **Who do social media users blame for ineffective aid?**

Social media users identified a number of actors whom they believed to be responsible for corruption and ineffective aid. Local authorities associated with the government in Damascus were most commonly referred to as being responsible for corruption, while government officials and associated commercial actors were also included in this grouping. International humanitarian organisations were also referred to, mostly in relation to accusations of smuggling weapons and aid to opposition groups, and also in relation to accusations of corruption. To a lesser extent, opposition groups in north-west Syria were also identified as being responsible for corruption, often by pro-government supporters.

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- **Who are the social media users expressing negative sentiments towards aid passing through border crossings?**

The overwhelming majority of social media users who shared negative views and who shared their location settings publicly lived in northern Syria. Nearly half came from Idlib governorate and more than a quarter from Aleppo. Other provided locations were in Homs (7.8%), Damascus (4.3%), Hama (3.5%), Lattakia (3.5%), Al Hasakah (0.9%) and Daraa (0.9%) governorates (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Social media users by location

Identified user location per governorate:
0
1-3
4-5
6-15
16-35
36 or more

Source: Insecurity Insight. **Base Map Data Source:** United Nations OCHA. The boundaries and names use din this map do not imply ofical acceptance or endorsement by Insecurity Insight. Note: The information was obtained from user profiles.
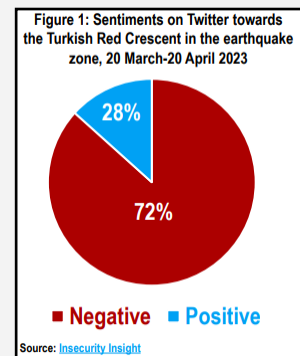
A significant number of profiles identified in the database do not employ their real names, possibly to protect themselves from the risk of politically motivated repercussions for expressing their views online. The use of protected profiles makes it difficult to determine who these social media users are. The majority of posts dealing with the topics under discussion were comments, and most appear to have been written spontaneously, suggesting that they are personally held views that are shared among a like-minded community of users to vent individuals' frustrations. There was little indication that those sharing negative sentiments did so as part of an organised campaign, because posts forming part of such a campaign are usually well written and carefully crafted rather than comments shared in response to someone else's statements. Comments, which are sometimes published alongside hundreds of other comments, tend to be read by fewer people, so the comments discussed in this brief would have had a limited impact on the wider community. They have to be understood as an indication of strongly held feelings among those who share these views among members of like-minded groups. Such groups often reinforce views among those participating in these discussions.

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The creation of negative sentiment towards the aid response in the aftermath of the earthquake in Türkiye

In Syria, the monitoring of social media sentiment in the aftermath of the earthquake identified repeated claims by social media users that widespread corruption made the aid response ineffective. However, such perceptions tended to be expressed in the form of general statements, and no specific case that justified such opinions could be identified.

In Türkiye, by contrast, the story of the sale of tents by one aid agency to another went viral and significantly contributed to the development of negative sentiment about the aid response that is likely to stay with many of the 20 million people exposed to the story. It is also likely that those exposed to the story will never remember the details of what contributed to their negative perceptions. The example from Türkiye illustrates how negative sentiments can spread without aid agencies leading the communication and how repeated discussions of an issue can contribute to the deepening of negative sentiments over time. It is very possible that specific stories of corruption circulated at some point on social media in Syria and that the perceptions that surfaced during the earthquake response were influenced by such stories that had contributed to the development of views in light of which any aid-related news continues to be interpreted.

Figure 1: Sentiments on Twitter towards the Turkish Red Crescent in the earthquake zone, 20 March-20 April 2023

28%
72%

■ Negative ■ Positive

Source: Insecurity Insight

The example of a viral social media story from Türkiye

Four days after the earthquake struck in February 2023, the Turkish Red Crescent sold 2,050 tents to the AHBAP charity organisation. Two weeks later the newspaper Cumhuriyet published an article detailing an investigation into this transaction. The journalist behind the story was a political activist who had been detained during the 2008 Ergenekon trials and who had contested the 2018 parliamentary elections for the right-wing İYİ political party.

The story of the tent sale in the aftermath of the earthquake spread via social media, in particular X (previously called Twitter) and Facebook. An estimated 20 million Turkish social media users were exposed to mainly negative comments about the tent sale story. In May – more than two months after the story had first been made public and three days before the heatedly contested 2023 election – President Erdogan criticised the tent sale. This led to the resignation of the head of the aid agency.

The politicisation of this tent sale story profoundly influenced the overall sentiment among social media users regarding the aid response. By the end of April 2023, three-quarters of social media users expressed negative sentiments towards the Turkish Red Crescent, and these feelings were predominantly driven by their perception of the tent sale issue. Over time, negative sentiment increased even further and reached the lowest point once President Erdogan seemed to agree with criticism about the tent sale first voiced by his political opponents.

The growing negative perception in Türkiye was the result of a specific technical aspect of a much larger aid response. The sale of the tents may not have impacted affected populations immediately. The significance of the decision to sell tents to another aid agency rather than to deliver them directly to affected populations is probably negligible in relation to questions of the overall effectiveness of the aid response to the earthquake. Yet this story was a significant factor in the development of sentiments and attitudes that go much deeper and wider than the story that

- **Is there widespread corruption at the border crossings and in the aid distribution process in Syria?**

Conversations alleging that corruption was widespread in the aid sector frequently surfaced in social media communities among Syrians discussing the earthquake response. However, during the monitoring period, no social media user alleging corruption mentioned specific incidents. Instead, they commented in response to claims that aid would not reach the needy because it would be syphoned off by those who controlled the system.

Because social media monitoring was limited to the period in the aftermath of the earthquake, it is impossible to know what these assumptions about large-scale corruption are based on. Discussions on social media take place within trusted communities of established like-minded groups that are formed around shared sentiments. Within such groups the reasons for any particular conviction no longer need explaining because they are an established and agreed sentiment among group members.

The concerns about corruption may be the result of personal experiences of either current or past corruption. They could also be the result of specific stories about aid-related corruption that may have circulated on social media at some stage. If stories of corruption were shared at a specific time, it is also no longer possible to ascertain whether they were based on fact or were misinformation or disinformation. To understand developing and evolving sentiment, social media monitoring has to take place on a long-term basis. The example of the tent sale story in Türkiye in the aftermath of the earthquake is a pertinent illustration of how social media engagements can create negative sentiment.

- **Humanitarian principles and allegations of weapons being smuggled by aid agencies**

Social media platforms are frequently used to accuse aid agencies of *"aiding the enemy"*, and such allegations undermine the reputation of the aid sector and its claim to be implementing humanitarian principles. Aid agencies may be accused of aiding "terrorists" when they provide health care to all sides in a conflict, seek dialogue with all **armed actors**, or do not explicitly mention perpetrators of violations, but refer to them as "**conflict parties**" or "armed men". Accusations of aiding the arming of opposition groups can also be fuelled by real case scenarios in which security forces have misused aid programmes for security strategies (see, for example, how **Osama Bin Laden was identified in Pakistan**).

The 28 social media users in Syria who alleged that aid delivery through border crossings would be used to deliver weapons include users who provided their location of residence in Homs, Aleppo, Damascus, Lattakia and Tartus governorates. It is probable that the authors of such comments are pro-government partisans. It is unclear whether they believe these allegations or use such claims to sow distrust of the aid system. While not large in numbers, such opinions are potentially very dangerous by undermining the understanding of the true intentions of the aid response.

- **Trust and distrust in aid agencies**

Discussions on social media about aid-related topics tend to express discontent rather than appreciation. Social media platforms are frequently used to share frustrations and fears with like-minded groups. Views expressed on social media are often more extreme and less balanced than **offline shared opinions**. In the context of north-west Syria, negative sentiments

Turkish Red Crescent Tent Sale Story

Social Media Monitoring

around corruption were predominantly associated with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent when reference was made to actual aid distribution. In discussions of issues around border crossings, negative sentiment seemed to extend to "aid agencies" in general, without any specific agency being mentioned by social media users. Assessments of trust in aid agencies among affected communities using other means than social media monitoring have found that respondents trusted the Syria Civil Defence (White Helmets), the AFAD, and unspecified non-governmental organisations with positive track records. Yet it is striking that neither the White Helmets nor the AFAD was the subject of social media conversations discussing the Syrian earthquake **response**. This highlights the importance of using social media posts to understand negative perceptions that can reduce the humanitarian space. It also indicates that social media sentiment analysis is not the appropriate tool to identify constructive entry points for effective local partnerships that reach people in need.

Recommendations for aid agencies

Understand perceptions:

- Be aware that, at least among social media users in northern Syria, there is a strong and deeply held perception that there is widespread corruption related to aid delivery and that this explains why those most in need do not receive aid.

- Be aware that any reduction in aid allocations for any reason may be interpreted as evidence that corruption and the syphoning off of aid is increasing.

Improve anti-corruption controls:

- Consider reviewing and strengthening internal anti-corruption mechanisms to ensure that questionable arrangements and practices do not take away aid from those for whom it is intended.

- Consider communicating your anti-corruption control processes to build trust in your own processes.

- Understand the importance of your local staff in building trust in your ethical working practices.

Work with trusted partners:

- Identify positively perceived partners and work with them.

- Be aware that social media monitoring is better at identifying negative than positive perceptions.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was collected from Facebook from users with IP addresses in Syria during the period 1-30 July 2023 using Boolean search queries focussing on border crossings used for aid, namely Bab al-Hawa (باب الهوى), Bab al-Salama (باب السلامة) and Al-Ra'ee (باب الراعي). Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data.

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The collected data was filtered to comb for possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation and to identify prevailing sentiment. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e. the number of other social media users interactions with the original post). Relevant comments, usually accompanied by reactions (i.e. comments or replies), were entered into a database and analysed. The final database consisted of 204 comments.

The research has a number of limitations. Firstly, it relies on a small sample size, and in view of the unavailability of large-scale data, the available data could not be controlled for sex, location, and other categories such as social class or political affiliation. Secondly, only public social data features for which users had given their consent for public viewing were included. Therefore, this analysis excludes possibly pertinent data from encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.

Internet penetration in Syria in 2023 is estimated to include **35.8%** of the population. However, accurate data on social media usage is currently not available.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org