To support the aid response in Syria, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in the country, with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies’ communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

**Summary**

This social media monitoring brief analyses sentiments regarding:

- a humanitarian emergency flood response by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) carried out in Tartous governorate in western Syria, and
- the management and distribution of foreign aid through the SARC elsewhere in Syria. The analysis is based on the collection and analysis of nearly 500 publicly available Facebook comments.

Social media users who posted comments on Facebook referring to the SARC response to the floods in Tartous governorate in February 2024 shared mainly positive feedback.

In contrast, opinions related to the management and distribution of external aid in government-controlled areas indicated that a significant percentage of social media users do not trust the SARC to reliably distribute the aid to the beneficiaries who need it.

Social media comments expressed strong and deeply held perceptions that corruption related to aid delivery is widespread and that this explains why those most in need do not receive aid.

**Context**

Since the earthquake in February 2023, an already difficult humanitarian situation in Syria after years of civil war has deteriorated further. The earthquake added to the already dire circumstances that many people found themselves in, causing widespread destruction and exacerbating the challenges faced by millions of Syrians. Infrastructure damage compounded the difficulties of delivering aid and accessing basic services, increasing the suffering of an already vulnerable population.

The earthquake's impact worsened the country's displacement crisis, with thousands made homeless and forced to seek shelter in overcrowded camps or makeshift settlements. Limited resources strained relief efforts, with humanitarian organisations struggling to provide adequate assistance to those affected. The disaster deepened existing vulnerabilities.

To assess sentiment on social media towards the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), online reactions and discussions were collected in relation to two different activities carried out by the aid organisation.
Firstly, online reactions were analysed in relation to the intervention in January 2024 in the aftermath of floods in the Akkar plain in Tartous governorate, where many residential areas, villages and agricultural areas were devastated. After the flooding, the SARC intervened to provide aid for the victims, including food baskets and clothes. Tartous governorate tends to be considered an Assad stronghold and was relatively untouched by the tumultuous civil war due to its population’s overall support for the regime. In the light of this, sentiment towards the SARC may be more positive than in other areas due to the overall closeness of Tartous residents to the Syrian regime. At the same time, however, in recent years the governorate has seen a number of strikes and protests due to inflation and cost of living concerns, indicating that frustration with the regime might be growing in this area.

Secondly, social media reactions in relation to the arrival of foreign aid at the port of Latakia intended for distribution via the SARC were analysed. Like neighbouring Tartous governorate, Latakia is also historically seen as a pro-regime stronghold.

Online sentiment towards the SARC in government-controlled areas in Syria

In the case of emergency humanitarian responses by the SARC to flooding in Akkar, Tartous governorate, which is controlled by the Syrian government, public sentiment on social media tended to be overwhelmingly positive, with reacting users welcoming and praising the organisation’s initiative and work. As Figure 1 indicates, only around 5.1% of comments were negative, with the remaining 94.9% being either positive or neutral. A factor that may underpin this significant show of support is that most commentators appear to hail from Tartous governorate, one of the Syrian regime’s heartlands.

“All appreciation and respect for your humanitarian efforts that contribute to alleviating the painful injured that suffered our people in the plain of Akkar, Tartous province”

The comments expressing negative sentiment tended to consist of criticism that the aid provided to the flooding victims was insufficient. Other comments alleged that aid is diverted away from people who need it. For example, one user from Safita town in Tartous governorate alleged that “[aid] exists only for people who know people”, and stated that “[the aid response in Akkar] means that people must die and become homeless before they receive aid”. Similarly, another social media user from Tartous governorate alleged that “the [Red] Crescent is for the rich, you’re disgraceful”. However, these comments appear to be isolated when compared to the positive sentiments expressed by most reacting users.

Sentiments are remarkably different in comments on the SARC’s management and distribution of aid received from external donors. As Figure 2 indicates, in this case around 48.4% of
comments included expressions of concern around the distribution of aid. Users expressing negative sentiments appear to hail mostly from Aleppo, a key opposition stronghold during the civil war, as well as Latakia governorate. This suggests that negative sentiment towards the SARC is also present in traditionally pro-government areas and may be linked to the increasing frustration towards the regime that is being driven by unprecedented inflation and increasing poverty.

Some social media users expressed their concern that the aid would not reach those who need it, in some instances including themselves, suggesting that they do not believe that the aid will be distributed to needy beneficiaries. For example, one female commentator said, “If all this [aid] got to the right place, we would be fine, but unfortunately everything evaporates”.

In most cases, however, users explicitly argued that the aid would be stolen and diverted, either to be given to “people who know people”, either for “the children of the officials and their relatives” or to be sold in the “black market” or in shops such as pharmacies. Comments such as “now they are selling [the aid] to the citizens at the highest prices” or “tomorrow they will steal it like they stole [in previous cases]” are common. Referring to the arrival of foreign aid in the form of medicine, one user added, “We fear that it will be sold to patients in hospitals and [in shops such as] pharmacies”.

Some drew parallels with the fate of the “earthquake aid” which arrived following the earthquake that devastated some parts of Syria in February 2023. For example, one male user commented, “we won't see any of this aid, like [in the case of] the earthquake aid”. Another said, “the citizens will not see any [of the aid] … until now, nothing has reached the victims of the earthquake”.

Combined, these findings suggest that when it is responsible for organising urgent humanitarian responses such as in the case of the Akkar flooding in January 2024, the SARC generally enjoys positive feedback among social media users. It is possible that seeing concrete and documented action, especially in the form of pictures showing volunteers helping and victims and supplying them with food and other assistance, elicits a positive response from social media users.

Moreover, as suggested above, it is possible that sentiment towards the SARC was influenced by sentiment towards the government in Damascus, and therefore civilians hailing from Tartous may be more inclined to express positive sentiments. However, at the same time, as seen in the case of the receipt of foreign aid for the SARC to distribute, users identifying themselves as being from Latakia governorate were represented among those expressing concerns about aid being diverted.

Figure 2: Sentiment expressed towards the SARC on social media in the context of foreign aid being received by the organisation to be distributed to beneficiaries

52%

Source: Insecurity Insight
Recommendations for aid agencies

Understand perceptions:

- Be aware that, at least among some social media users in Syria, the SARC is not trusted to uphold the humanitarian principle of neutrality due to its perceived proximity to the Syrian regime in Damascus.

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.
- Consider strengthening the principle-based approach by ensuring that principles such as humanitarian neutrality remain at the forefront of community engagement, in view of the serious reputational risks that proximity to a particular conflict party could engender.
Work with trusted partners:

- Identify positively perceived partners and work with them.
- Be aware that in some contexts social media users will be careful not to post opinions that may be perceived to challenge the power of the regime.

Methodology

Publicly available Facebook data was first collected in Syria for the period 1 January-29 February 2024 using keywords associated with the SARC. A total of 465 comments were collected and analysed. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on Facebook.

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