

Forgetting Food in Syria

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The focus on cash and military equipment flows into Syria has neglected the role of food aid in sustaining the regime and the civil war

While Russia's military escalation in Syria has been the subject of much recent debate, little attention has been given to new evidence of Moscow's involvement in humanitarian contributions to the country, or to the political strategies that undergird this assistance. The arrival of Russian aid to the city of Latakia earlier this month – as shown in photographs circulated by state media – reminds us of the complex political role that food and humanitarian assistance play in Syria's ongoing civil conflict.

There is considerable evidence that emergency food aid has served unintended purposes in Syria. In Latakia, for example, opposition activists claim that aid offices such as the local Red Crescent storehouse have become illicit trade hubs where volunteers and pro-regime militias sell donated goods for profit. Supplies are also predominantly distributed in areas under the Assad regime's control, while internally displaced Syrians fleeing from violence in Aleppo, Homs and Idlib claim that they have received little of the humanitarian aid meant for them.

The problem lies in how the vast majority of humanitarian organisations working in Syria have been manipulated by the Assad regime. For example, a recent evaluation determined that the World Food Programme (WFP) has acquiesced to the Assad regime's demands in order to 'maximize access' to those in need. The disconcerting outcome, as the UN affiliate admits, is that the 'Syrian government has retained a capacity to license and control aid agencies in the areas of the country under its control, and to restrict access to those that are not.'

The WFP's woes in Syria are a decisive illustration of how ostensibly neutral humanitarian aid meant to address the critical needs of Syrians has bolstered the Assad regime. Despite the WFP's intentions, the Syrian government co-opts external resources and uses them as a political weapon: food has proven an advantageous means of buttressing support, fostering compliance and punishing enemies. And thanks to foreign aid, the regime can do so without diverting resources from its military efforts.

The regime is not the only fighting force that benefits from emergency food aid. Earlier this year, the Islamic State confiscated WFP aid intended for civilians. It then distributed the goods under its own name, replacing the UN logo. Such actions make explicit the process through which neutral international aid becomes politicised local welfare.

The fate of humanitarian aid is no idle concern in a war marked by frightening levels of scarcity. Severe shortages of fuel, flour and farm labour, combined with unremitting violence and infrastructural damage, have collapsed Syrian food production to 40 percent below pre-war levels. With the decline in local production and Syria's broader economic collapse, food costs have risen significantly. A recent UN report found that families in Syria are spending more than half of their incomes on food. Alarmingly, these figures rise to as much as 80 percent in the most conflict-ridden parts of the country. And as poverty levels and food insecurity continue to surge, civilians will increasingly shift their allegiances to the actors most capable of ensuring their basic needs.

Moving forward, the Assad regime will continue to benefit from access to external assistance. In addition to its monopoly over the vast majority of humanitarian aid, the Syrian government has repeatedly used a \$3.6 billion Iranian credit line to issue commercial tenders, not for arms or mercenaries, but for wheat. More recently, the regime promised to use a second \$1 billion Iranian credit line issued in 2015 to secure the flow of essential goods and materials. This will only provide the government with greater leverage over a suffering populous.

On occasion, rebel supporters have tried to fill the sustenance void in opposition-held areas. Qatar has either directly or indirectly supplied flour for bread production to rebel-controlled territories in the past month, Turkey recently delivered 1,200 tons of flour to a local opposition governance council in Idlib as part of a larger plan to donate 10,000 tons, and the Saudi government is involved in similar projects. While these contributions may strengthen public support for opposition groups and address critical humanitarian needs in regime-neglected areas, they remain sporadic. They lack organisation and consistency.

Considering the realities on the ground, the UK's humanitarian donations to Syria, directed through relief organisations such as the WFP, have most likely been misused as a means of advancing the interests of Assad's regime. The vast majority of these resources have been funnelled through local implementing partners, many of which are closely regulated, if not entirely controlled, by the Syrian government.

This is not to say that all emergency food aid should be unilaterally withdrawn. Humanitarian organizations do offer important services and have undoubtedly ameliorated suffering. The current fixation on military assistance, however, has obscured international food aid's political-military impact and prevented discussion of its merits and consequences.

Undoubtedly, the moderate opposition's ability to combat the Assad regime's Iranian and Russian-backed military has been hampered by a lack of weaponry. Yet crucially, they have also lacked food. Foreign powers who oppose the Assad regime have been so worried about arming the right rebel groups that they have forgotten to feed those under rebel control. If overthrowing Assad while curtailing the Islamic State's expansion in Syria is the goal, providing basic necessities and fostering inclusive public services in opposition-held areas would be a good place to start.

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**Header image courtesy of WFP/Abeer Etefa*