



REPORT

CROSS-BORDER: ACCESS COORDINATION IN NORTH-WEST SYRIA

The role of access working groups in supporting engagement
with non-state armed groups and de-facto authorities

October 2023



**Funded by
European Union
Humanitarian Aid**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was produced with funding from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO) as part of the ‘Presence, Proximity, Protection: Building capacity to safeguard humanitarian space’ consortium. A research team composed of consortium members produced the report. A special thanks to everyone who contributed their time and effort to the development of the methodology, key informant interviews, and the revision of draft report.

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Editor: Jeremy Lennard

Cover photo: Man in Idlib Governorate returning to his shelter with humanitarian assistance

Layout & Design : Bakos DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and de-facto authorities (DFAs) hold considerable sway over humanitarian access in many crises around the world. They often have the power to inflict violence and impose restrictions that prevent humanitarians from reaching people in need and impede people's access to assistance and protection. Engaging with them is a humanitarian necessity.

Humanitarians, however, often struggle to negotiate effectively with them to establish an environment in which assistance can be provided in a neutral, impartial and independent way and to resolve issues that compromise principled ways of working.

An increasing number of resources and training opportunities on how to engage with NSAGs and DFAs have become available over the past decade, and these have gone some way to addressing practitioners' needs. Research has complemented this by exploring the challenges the humanitarian community faces in maintaining proximity to those most in need, and how aid organisations incorporate the humanitarian principles into their work.

In tandem, humanitarian access working groups (HAWGs) have come to complement traditional coordination mechanisms such as clusters and humanitarian country teams (HCTs). They are now a common feature of many humanitarian responses, playing a key role in forming common positions, shaping access strategies and joint operating principles, and providing the humanitarian community with an overview of the access landscape.

HAWGs tend to be chaired by the UN, sometimes with an NGO co-chair, and are usually made up of UN agencies and international and national NGOs. At a global level they are supported by the UN's access staff and the access focal points of their NGO co-chairs.

Despite becoming a regular feature of the coordination architecture, relatively little research on principled humanitarian action, negotiations and access has focussed on the role HAWGs play. To address this gap this series of case studies examines their role in four major crises, particularly in supporting the

humanitarian community's engagement with NSAGs and DFAs.

The series focuses on Afghanistan, Mali, Nigeria, and north-west Syria. It is hoped that by covering different situations in different parts of the world it will offer a range of experiences and recommendations to support HAWGs' future work.

RESEARCH GOALS

The remit of each case study is two-fold: to look at HAWGs' experiences in supporting the humanitarian community's engagement with NSAGs and DFAs; and to examine what lessons can be drawn from those experiences to inform future ways of working, not only for HAWGs but also the other coordination forums they engage with and receive support from.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The body of each report consists of five sections. Part one provides background information on the situation in question and a summary of the paper's methodology. Part two provides an overview of the access landscape, and part three explores how the HAWG supports engagement with NSAGs and/or DFAs. Part four examines the external and internal barriers that constrain more effective access coordination, and the final section provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

1

THE NORTH-WEST SYRIA CASE STUDY



📷 A boy standing on the rubble of a collapsed building in Northwest Syria

1.1 BACKGROUND

Two powerful earthquakes struck southern Türkiye on 6 February 2023, devastating large parts of the region and swathes of Aleppo and Idlib governorates across the border in Syria. Conservative estimates suggest that more than 50,000 people lost their lives in Türkiye and more than 8,000 in Syria.¹

Large amounts of aid flowed into Türkiye as part of the global response to the earthquakes, but only a fraction crossed the nearby border into north-west Syria, despite the region already being in the throes of a decade-long humanitarian crisis.

The disparity served as a brief reminder of Syria's crisis, now in its 11th year, and particularly the challenges that civilians in the north-west face in accessing assistance and protection. The humanitarian situation receives less attention with each year that passes, but millions of people remain in need. The country still has the largest number of internally displaced people in the world at 6.8 million, of whom 2.9 million are in the north-west.²

The humanitarian response is largely fractured into three distinct areas of the country, roughly in line with the territorial control exerted by the

¹ <https://bit.ly/3MrxdTc>

² <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria/>

main parties to the conflict. The main areas with humanitarian needs are:

- 1 Territory controlled by Government of Syria (GoS), stretching from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean coast and north towards Idlib and northern Aleppo
- 2 Territory controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria (AANES) between the Iraqi border and the eastern banks of the Euphrates and north towards Türkiye
- 3 The north-west, where the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) control Idlib governorate and northern Aleppo

The response in GoS-controlled territory is directed from Damascus, while those in the north-west and north-east rely on cross-border operations from Türkiye and Iraq. Aid from GoS areas represents a fraction of that which is delivered cross-border.

The futures of the respective “regions” are partly intertwined, but the humanitarian access landscape in each one is distinct, which is why this paper focuses on only one area. The north-west is one of the hardest hit areas, and humanitarians have faced a significant task in managing the response, largely from Gaziantep, involving various DFAs and hundreds of NSAGs, some of whom are designated as terrorist organisations. Possibly most significantly, it is also an environment at the mercy of the politics that have engulfed aid delivery in Syria.

The situation was further complicated in July 2023, when the UN Security Council (UNSC) failed to adopt a resolution re-authorising the cross-border aid mechanism. Resolution 2165, which was adopted in 2014, provided the initial framework for cross-border operations, but subsequent resolutions became progressively weaker. The number of authorised crossing points decreased, as well as the duration of each resolution.

In the period since the earthquakes the GoS authorised the temporary use of two crossings from Türkiye into the north-west at Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra’ee, and after the UNSC’s failure to adopt a new resolution the UN struck a deal with the GoS to keep Bab Al-Hawa open until early January 2024.

The UN’s negotiations with the GoS met with the SSG’s disapproval, which led to a temporary breakdown in relations between it and the UN. This was resolved weeks later, and for now the UN-GoS agreement is the principal framework for aid delivery into the north-west, allowing humanitarian organisations to operate under the same conditions as before resolution 2165 expired.

The GoS originally insisted that the UN cease communications with “terrorist” entities and that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross supervise and facilitate aid delivery, but these demands were later dropped.

North-west Syria has long been a region where effective access coordination is needed, and the events of 2023 have only served to cement that requirement.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

Given that the research for this case study was intended to establish a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the situation and processes in north-west Syria, a qualitative approach was adopted with participants’ experiences and perspectives taking centre stage. This was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research.

Data collection

Twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted over a two-week period in late 2022. Most took place in Gaziantep and several in Amman. A small number of additional interviews were conducted online because the participants were not present in either of the study locations. After the developments in mid-2023 discussed above, further discussions were held with several participants to ensure the research was as up to date as possible.

The research participants were from UN agencies, national and international NGOs, coordination bodies and donors. They included both Syrian and international staff. Many were active HAWG members. Others with more senior roles were not involved day-to-day in the HAWG’s work, but had valuable insights into the humanitarian community’s broader efforts to engage with the DFAs and NSAGs present in the north-west.

Participants' roles varied from technical access specialists to programme directors and heads of organisation.

Participants' recall period largely fell between 2020 and late 2022, with most discussions focussing on events in 2022. Many participants had been working on the north-west response for the whole of that period, some with more than one organisation.

The participants were identified through the research team's country representatives and recommendations from those taking part in the research themselves.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with several set questions that all participants were asked, and follow-up questions that varied depending on the participant's role and topics raised during the interviews. Verbal consent was secured from all interviewees.

The interview questions were drafted in consultation with consortium members and with feedback from access practitioners working at peer organisations in headquarter roles. Three pilot interviews were conducted with the NGO co-chairs of HAWGs in countries that were not part of the consortium's work. The interview questions were subsequently refined based on those pilots.

Analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The data analysis software NVivo 12 was used to analyse the transcripts, which were coded according to recurring topics. These topics were then grouped together in different categories and key themes were drawn from the categorised data.

Presentation of findings

Given the sensitive nature of the situation in north-west Syria, particular attention has been given to confidentiality and anonymity. Any participants quoted are referred to solely by the type of organisation they worked for at the time of their interview. Nor is any organisation mentioned by name. Quotes are presented verbatim, except for extraneous words or where there was identifying information.

Review

The emerging findings were presented to consortium members and two drafts of the paper were presented to research participants and their organisations for feedback.

Limitations

The interviews focused largely on the HAWG's engagement with DFAs and NSAGs, but they also touched on a wide range of complex issues spanning the whole humanitarian community. Given the time limitations it was not possible to fully explore all of the issues raised. As just one example, the research is weighted significantly more towards how the HAWG supports organisations' access than it is towards people's access.

Participants also sometimes had differing views and interpretations of the same events and issues, which meant it was not always easy to draw lessons learned or provide an objectively accurate picture of the events and issues being described.

Beyond these considerations, three more specific limitations arise. Firstly, representatives from DFAs and NSAGs were not interviewed. Their inclusion would have added further depth to the research, particularly in ascertaining their perceptions of the humanitarian community's efforts to engage with them and putting the claims of interference and obstruction that some participants raised to them.

Secondly, the response in the north-west has a strong remote management component. For numerous reasons, some of those directing it and humanitarian access engagements have never set foot in the region. Some humanitarians conduct field visits into Syria, but many are based entirely in Türkiye and Jordan. As a result, it is possible that some people's understanding of the situation in Syria is not as deep as it might be in other countries where access to project locations is less constrained. There is a risk this is reflected in the findings.

Thirdly, for the same reasons that restrict many humanitarians' travel into Syria, it was not possible to conduct in-country interviews with the staff at the heart of day-to-day engagements with DFAs and NSAGs. Their experiences would have added further depth to the discussions about how organisations engage with key stakeholders.

2

ACCESS STAKEHOLDERS

PURPOSE: To provide an overview of the what engagement with NSAGs and DFAs looks like in north-west Syria

This section explores two main questions:

- 1 Which are the main DFAs and NSAGs that hold sway over humanitarian access?
- 2 What does engagement with them look like in practice?

2.1 NSAGS AND DFAS

Engagement with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the SSG

Among the large number of NSAGs operating across Idlib and northern Aleppo, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) emerged as the key stakeholder in discussions with participants. This is because a) it controls a large swathe of territory, mainly in Idlib; and b) because the UN and a number of countries designate it as a terrorist organisation. This has significantly affected how humanitarians engage with HTS and other institutions affiliated to them.

By extension, the SSG, the DFA over the territory HTS controls, also emerged as one of the most influential stakeholders. Participants saw it as the quasi civilian-administrative arm of HTS. Many stated that since its formation in 2017, and as HTS had consolidated its military control of Idlib, the SSG had become an increasingly important interlocutor for humanitarians wanting to run activities in the governorate.

Before HTS and the SSG had consolidated their power, participants spoke of trying to negotiate access with various local councils, which over time had become more closely affiliated to or influenced by the SSG.

“ So there is [a list of dos and don'ts] and this is part of the don'ts. You cannot go and speak with armed groups, [SSG] whatever. It is also within the humanitarian principles. We deal with it on a case-by-case basis. If it's requiring more involvement from our side, we seek also the access working group's support. We find ways to communicate the message without actually having the bilateral [ourselves].”

UN official

“ I think that you need to have dialogue. I mean, they are the de-facto authorities. Whether we like it or not, it doesn't matter. They are the de facto authorities. So, at some point you need to have dialogue with them as long as this is for humanitarian operations.”

Donor official

What does engagement look like?

How humanitarians engage with HTS and the SSG is heavily influenced by the international sanctions against the former. Nearly all participants described their organisations' efforts to avoid any engagement with the group because of the perceived impact it would have on funding from their donors.

Some spoke of very local engagements with the group either related to passing its checkpoints or dealing with local security issues. One participant, for example, described receiving threats from an HTS fighter and addressing the issue with a local commander. Other engagements included that the UN was likely to have been obliged to engage with the group over aid deliveries from GoS-controlled territory. Participants also described different approaches to informing their peers and donors about such

engagements. Some were more open about them, some less so.

Despite the HTS's military dominance, some participants deemed this low level of engagement to be adequate because the SSG had assumed the position of key interlocutor on most humanitarian issues. As such they said they engaged more with the SSG, including its Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs. Others, however, said their organisations tried to keep their engagement with the SSG to a minimum, again because of concerns about violating sanctions or donor regulations that focus on HTS.

Participants spoke of having to obtain “no objection letters” from the SSG in order to start their activities in Idlib. This could be seen as seeking a form of approval, but the same participants rejected such a notion. Organisations working in the health sector seemed to find it easier to secure the documents they needed to initiate their activities because their main interlocutors were the Idlib and Aleppo health directorates, which in theory are not under SSG control.

When it came to dealing with access challenges in Idlib, some participants said their organisations addressed the issues directly, some that they asked for UN support and others a combination of the two. One participant said it was sometimes useful for the SSG to be aware that the UN had been informed about the access constraint in question because it might push the authorities towards an agreement. Another said their organisation would prefer to have the UN present in any engagement with the SSG for fear their donors or peers might think some unprincipled agreement had been reached.

Several participants said they preferred the UN to address access issues directly with the SSG, either because of their organisations' lack of contacts or again as a means of shielding themselves against perceptions of violating sanctions or donor regulations. Donors also said they would prefer their partners to seek UN support rather than pursuing engagement with the SSG alone.

Other participants, whose organisations had larger programmes or a stronger access focal point in north-west Syria preferred to engage with the SSG themselves. Some felt they had a better capacity to address issues directly rather than calling on the UN for support.

A number of participants said the SSG viewed certain types of intervention, such as protection work, including on gender-based violence (GBV), less favourably than others. Some organisations were apparently trying to avoid such activities in anticipation of them causing problems. One participant described a “fundamental ideological divergence” between humanitarians and the SSG. They said differences came to the fore in discussions about protection, and that for some organisations it was easier to focus on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) or income-generating activities.

In terms of how engagement with the SSG or HTS might evolve in the future, a number of participants said the former was seeking to extend its control over local councils and the health and education directorates in Idlib. One said that such efforts had the potential to increase the SSG's power over humanitarians, possibly with negative consequences. Some participants also noted that the SSG had been steadily “professionalising” its governance by recruiting staff with experience in the civil service or the humanitarian sector.

Community acceptance

“As my NGO, I would definitely engage with SSG but never with HTS. So after that on their side they [the SSG] can speak to whomever they want.”

NGO staff member

The importance of community acceptance for humanitarian interventions emerged in a small number of interviews. Participants said they wanted to highlight the issue because community backing for their activities, coupled with the fact that the SSG was reliant on humanitarians to address many gaps in services, meant they were able to take stronger positions with the authorities than some might think, including suspending operations.

“It's a very long time since we [had] to talk to someone who ... actually has a gun. All these guys are now wearing suits.”

NGO staff member

2.2 OTHER ARMED GROUPS IN IDLIB

Participants mentioned several other NSAGs present in Idlib, mostly in more remote areas near the frontlines with GoS-held areas where relatively few people live, but none mentioned any engagement with them.

2.3 ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTHERN ALEPPO AUTHORITIES AND NSAGS

In speaking about NSAGs and DFAs across the north-west, participants also mentioned those present in the areas of northern Aleppo outside the control of HTS and the SSG. They said there were far more NSAGs in these areas, where local councils and the SIG also held sway. Participants noted that efforts had been to coalesce various armed groups into more cohesive structures, but that factionalism remained.

Despite the wide range of actors operating in a relatively small area, participants focussed on the central role that the Turkish authorities play in facilitating humanitarian access and the influence they are able to bring to bear on Syrian parties in northern Aleppo.

The governors' offices of Gaziantep, Kilis and Hatay emerged as important interlocutors, as did a number of line ministries and the country's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Some participants said coordination had to happen first with Turkish authorities before involving local councils in northern Aleppo.

In contrast to Idlib, participants said they felt much more comfortable signing memorandums of understand (MoUs) with local councils in northern Aleppo.

The Turkish-dominated system is not without its layers of complex bureaucracy, but some participants said Türkiye's role in northern Aleppo had helped to reduce NSAGs' ability to interfere in humanitarian programming. They noted that over the course of several years civil authorities had taken on more prominent roles in managing local affairs. One participant felt the SIG was an easier authority to deal with than the SSG, which also appears to have reduced humanitarians' need to engage with NSAGs in the area.

If any access issues arose with an NSAG at a border crossing or checkpoint, participants mentioned three ways they would attempt to resolve the issue. They might engage directly with the group, call on the UN for support or bring the issue to the attention of their Turkish interlocutors. Several said the Turkish authorities held significant sway over NSAGs in northern Aleppo, but one participant said they would only use this channel as a last resort. One UN official also noted that direct outreach to armed groups in northern Aleppo was complicated by their sheer number.

3

THE ROLE OF ACCESS COORDINATION

PURPOSE: Highlight the role played by the HAWG

This section provides an overview of how the HAWG in north-west Syria is structured and how it supports engagement with the DFAs and NSAGs in the region. The following section looks at the challenges the HAWG faces in trying to ensure humanitarian are able to operate in as principled a way as possible.



📷 IDPs in Idlib Governorate

3.1 STRUCTURE

Humanitarian access coordination in north-west Syria revolves around two main connected forums, the HAWG and the Humanitarian Affairs Briefing group (HAB).

The HAWG is a smaller group of 14 organisations that is meant to dedicate more time and effort to working on access issues of collective concern. It is co-chaired by a UN staff member and by an NGO staff member and meets once a month. It reports to the Humanitarian Leadership Group (HLG).

The HAB is largely an information-sharing platform with a much larger membership. Its monthly meetings are sometimes attended by more than 50 participants. In theory, both forums should be tightly linked, with the issues the HAWG discusses replicated in the HAB.

Before the two groups were established in 2021, one access working group existed with a membership of more than 80. Some participants said the creation of two groups was largely motivated by a perception that having such a

large group of organisations was not conducive to much more than members being briefed by the UN on access developments. They said briefings had consisted of an overview of the latest access constraints, trends over time and an overview of conflict dynamics.

Rather than abandon the larger group a decision was taken to create the HAWG, and the HAB as a larger briefing group. One participant said it would have been difficult to abolish a forum that every organisation could attend because people had grown accustomed to participating in it.

Some HAWG members felt the smaller group contributed to more meaningful discussions and greater openness about access challenges faced in the field. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some participants said the HAB continued to struggle as a space where people could share information openly.

Those who touched on the subject were happy that donors did not attend the HAWG or HAB meetings, because they feared it would further impede information sharing. Donors for their part said they would like to have a greater understanding of the access environment and the HAWG's work.

Membership

The HAWG is made of six UN agencies, three international NGOs, three national NGOs, the NGO Forum and the co-chair's NGO. Its members were selected via a call for expressions of interest and criteria including a preference for representatives based in Türkiye and with access expertise. A mix of organisation type, and sectors and geographic areas in terms of interventions, was also sought, along with a gender balance among the members.

Several research participants from organisations that are not part of the HAWG felt that its membership did not include enough implementers on the ground, and that by extension its ability to understand the access environment was limited. Another questioned whether the current HAWG members were collectively willing and able to achieve the group's objectives.

One of the same participants balanced their criticism by acknowledging that there were many factors to be considered in deciding the

membership, and that it would be always difficult to have a perfect mix without the group growing in size. They said the access challenges members faced varied widely depending on where the organisations were working, in which sector, whether they were national or international and whether they were implementing activities directly or via partners. Another suggested that some organisations were motivated to be part of the HAWG in part to "look good" in front of their donors.

“If you look at who is sitting in the access working group at this moment, and there are few actors who actually have direct access ... so there is still this approach here in Gaziantep that very few people can talk about what they saw [themselves].”

NGO official

Coordination

The more traditional HCT structure has been replaced in north-west Syria by the HLG. Some participants with experience across various crises said the latter's composition meant its dynamics were different to those of an HCT. Not all its member UN agencies or NGOs have senior representation in Gaziantep, with some organisations' senior staff based in Amman, Damascus, or Istanbul.

In terms of the HAWG's interaction with coordination forums such as the HLG, participants quickly focussed on the positive role played by the deputy regional humanitarian coordinator (DRHC), who departed in late 2022.

Many said the DRHC had been extremely attentive to the humanitarian community's needs, and proactive and effective in addressing their concerns. They felt the DRHC had been instrumental in negotiating cross-line convoys, improving communication with DFAs and preventing interference in humanitarian operations.

One participant said there was potentially one unintended consequence of the DRHC's popularity, in that access issues were raised directly to them. This reduced the possibility of a phased approach to addressing them. They said this had sometimes increased pressure on

lower-level UN staff to address an issue that required more influence than they were able to exert on an external stakeholder to resolve.

They also said that taking issues immediately to the DRHC - and rightly so if they were urgent – meant the HAWG was not always in a position to strategise on how to address them, and that more generally the group had had to fight to for a space in the non-traditional humanitarian architecture in north-west Syria.

Few participants spoke about the role of the HLG as a coordination body in directing the HAWG's work, and some suggested that the latter's links with more senior UN officials were stronger than those it had with the HLG. The HAWG reports to the HLG on paper, but one UN official said the relationship was not strong enough.

“ He [the DRHC] was a great HC, very hardworking, listening and understanding. Because he was so close to the humanitarian community, a lot of the stuff came to him directly because people had this perception that like, if he handles it like, you know, it would be magically solved.”

UN staff member

When the research for this case study was conducted a new unit was being set up under a UN agency to manage and address some of the risks humanitarian partners face. It was thought it would work closely with the HAWG and other coordination forums. In a follow-up interview, however, one UN official said that although unit had been fully staffed it was having difficulties in collecting information on sensitive topics such as aid diversion.

“ I have the sense that his role has been super appreciated by everybody, both by Syrian NGOs, UN agencies and by [donors]. He invested a lot on many fronts not only related to access - interference, neutrality and impartiality but also on cross-line as well. So he did quite a lot on that.”

Donor official

3.2 ACTIVITIES

In describing the work of any HAWG, participants often say that the line between what the UN or NGO co-chair do in their organisational roles and what the group does collectively is often blurred. Activities such as access severity mapping, for example, might happen even in the absence of a HAWG, because the outcome tends to be seen as a UN product. HAWGs can contribute to such activities, but they tend not to be seen as a HAWG product.

Information sharing, discussion and advice

Participants said that one of the most useful functions of the HAWG in north-west Syria was as a forum to share information about access challenges and discuss the experiences of the UN and NGOs in addressing them. They said such discussions helped to avoid organisations setting harmful precedents such as acceding to authorities' or NSAGs' demands, and that the variety of organisations among the HAWG members provided a range of perspectives and experiences to draw on.

Some UN participants said the HAWG meetings complemented the access reports generated from the UN's access monitoring and reporting framework (AMRF), offering them an opportunity to improve their understanding of the situation on the ground, given their lack of presence in north-west Syria.

Other participants said the HAWG offered an opportunity to solicit the UN co-chair's advice about access issues, and particularly engagement with HTS and the SSG.

In a follow-up discussion, one participant said that in the current environment, following the end of the cross border resolution, the HAWG needed greater NGO perspectives to be shared in the group's discussions.

External engagement

While not a HAWG-led activity, participants noted that the group helped to set the agenda for the external engagement its UN co-chair and other UN staff conduct with NSAGs, DFAs and the Turkish authorities by distilling the most pressing and relevant issues alongside common messages and negotiating positions.

Issues such as interference in activities, including requests to share beneficiary data, were most commonly cited by HAWG members as those they would ask the UN for external support on, with the engagement taking place in person in Türkiye and digitally with stakeholders in Syria. Fielding such requests for support was said to take up the majority of the UN co-chair's time.

With the UN's improved access to the north-west in 2023, more of this engagement was able to take place in person in Syria. UN agencies conducted more than 225 missions between February and October, a huge increase on previous years, and more are planned. One UN participant said it was now logistical constraints such as the availability of vehicles and drivers that were limiting the number of cross-border missions that could be conducted.

One participant said the UN's contacts with DFAs and NSAGs had fluctuated over time depending on who was in its access unit, but that the current team was steadily improving its connections. Another echoed this view, saying previous experience had shown that relationships were vulnerable to being "lost" when certain UN staff members left their posts. They said external engagement on behalf of the wider humanitarian community needed to be systematic and not rely on specific individuals.

Joint operating principles

The 2022 update of the joint operating principles (JOPs) for the humanitarian community in north-west Syria was the most commonly cited example of a product that the HAWG had worked on collectively. One UN participant said it could have been completed without a HAWG, but that the group had made more technical and in-depth discussions on its content possible.

Another participant whose organisation is not part of the HAWG, however, felt the process, including implementation guidance, had taken

too long. They also felt it would have been more beneficial to ask DFAs and NSAGs to endorse the document rather than it being more for "internal use". The 2017 version of the JOPs had apparently been presented to a group of NSAGs for their signature, which was seen as positive by the participants who mentioned it.

Two NGO participants felt the drafting process should have been more inclusive of donors. They said that any JOPs which did not take into account or attempt to change restrictions donors placed on their implementing partners reduced its impact. One participant felt it was hard to reconcile elements of the 2022 update that encouraged engagement with local authorities with the fact that one of their donors did not permit contact with the SSG or HTS. For them, the JOPs did not reflect the reality many implementing organisations faced.

Challenging activities

Several participants mentioned activities they wished the HAWG would undertake to better support the humanitarian community. These included scenario planning, actor mapping and analysis and more context analysis. Some of those who hoped for more analysis products, however, also noted that an NGO security platform was also very active in producing such work.

Those who mentioned scenario planning felt it would help to improve long-term plans and strategies. Another participant said they had sought contributions for an actor mapping exercise they were carrying out but had received no feedback from UN agencies or NGOs.

Access severity mapping is largely UN-led, but several HAWG members said they had contributed to the bi-annual exercise. Those that mentioned the activity felt the output had not been as useful as it might have been because it had become diluted or less detailed when it was fed into the Whole of Syria product. They felt ways should be found to make it more relevant to those operating in the north-west.

In a follow-up interview, one participant said the current environment meant the HAWG needed to undertake more analysis, and that its members needed to play a more proactive role in doing so.

3.3 PERCEPTIONS OF THE HAWG

Participants' perceptions of the HAWG were generally positive and seemed to reflect the view in Gaziantep of the UN's support to the humanitarian community, given that so much of the UN co-chair's time was dedicated to troubleshooting partners' constraints alongside more senior UN staff.

There was significant appreciation of these efforts, and participants acknowledged that the UN's ability to communicate with DFAs and NSAGs and to resolve issues had improved over time. One said that one of the main benefits of the HAWG was that everyone had a common understanding and strategy in terms of access negotiations with key stakeholders.

Some participants were less glowing about the role the HAWG and the UN played, however, particularly those from organisations that were not part of the group and had larger programmes, who felt they were able to address access issues themselves. They also mentioned previous negative experiences in seeking UN support and being unaware of work the HAWG's collective work.

“ I wish the access working group could produce more jointly. But you know, it's difficult with this type of group to come up with a really concrete output that is being done together.”

UN staff member

4

ACCESS COORDINATION CHALLENGES

PURPOSE: Highlight the internal and external barriers that effect access coordination

Participants raised a number of often overlapping and interlinked issues that represented access barriers for their organisations and partners, and that were also challenges to broader access coordination efforts. Those outlined below are not an exhaustive list, but represent those that came up most frequently during the interviews for this case study.



📷 The ruins of a collapsed house in Northwest Syria

The issues raised sometimes focussed directly on the HAWG, but they were often relevant across the whole humanitarian response. They largely focus on issues inside Syria, but also on the role the international community plays in the north-west.

Several interviews touched upon challenges organisations face in their engagement with the Turkish government and local authorities, which some described as more significant than those in Syria. Given this paper's focus on DFAs and NSAGs, those issues are not addressed here.

4.1 THE IMPACT OF SANCTIONS AGAINST HTS

All participants said that sanctions against HTS had influenced the way they engaged with both it and the SSG, including the additional time and resources required to clarify how to do so, or whether they engaged at all. They also described how the sanctions and donors' interpretations of them had affected their operations, including compromising the humanitarian principles.

“ We realised at some point that some of the NGOs they complain of the donors more than they complain about the SSG.”

UN staff member

“ We are not saying to partners you can engage, you cannot engage. It's a little bit their responsibility. We're not encouraging, hey, go and engage with [the SSG and HTS].”

Donor official

Engagement

Participants portrayed both western and non-western donors as conservative in their willingness for their partners to engage with HTS and the SSG, seemingly largely driven by the sanctions regimes. Some do not allow their partners to meet either group at all, or insist that any engagement is kept to an absolute minimum.

Some of the donors interviewed for this research said they would never encourage their partners to speak to the SSG or HTS, and would prefer they asked the UN to engage on their behalf. That said, they

felt that regardless of the SSG's links with HTS, the former constituted a “safe umbrella” for their partners to engage with and an acceptable middle ground given the proscription of HTS. They felt it provided a way for the UN and other humanitarians to engage with the dominant party in Idlib while largely avoiding direct contact with HTS.

“ I mean, if my humanitarian mandate allows me to speak with every actor in the field, why can't I do it with HTS. Why this difference? Why are we not allowed to speak to them?”

NGO staff member

For some humanitarians this at times conservative approach meant their network of contacts was limited and that in the absence of the UN they might struggle to identify and engage with relevant stakeholders, particularly in an emergency.

Amid the chilling effect sanctions have had, participants said the reality of how humanitarians engaged with HTS and the SSG was often difficult to ascertain. Some said organisations at times understated and at times overstated their engagement, and that this created confusion for those trying to decide their own approaches.

“ If its OK for the UN to deal with these groups then why not other NGOs?”

NGO staff member

One participant said the humanitarian community should be firmer with more problematic donors in stressing that humanitarians can and should speak to all those who can facilitate or constrain their operations, whether the interlocutors are proscribed or not.

“ We're all in the same boat. We all receive funding from western donors and those have zero tolerance. We're not allowed to speak to the [SSG and HTS]. So no one is going to risk speaking to the [SSG] and risk the funding or being put on a blacklist.”

NGO staff member

Payment of services, fees and taxation

Participants spoke of various issues related to donors' refusal to allow for the payment of services, fees or taxes in Idlib. Examples included payment of electricity from generators owned by the DFA, payment of rent for premises claimed as the authorities' own, or payment for services provided by an academic institution under the control of the SSG. They also mentioned the SSG seeking fees for registering vehicles or taxation when commercial vehicles from areas outside HTS control crossed into Idlib.

They said that in some cases donors were willing to compromise on such issues, but that this was never documented. Participants welcomed such compromises, but said the lack of documentation left them feeling vulnerable. In other cases they said refusal sometimes meant their organisations had to resort to more expensive solutions.

They said they were not advocating for the payment of taxes or fees to the SSG, but were reflecting on the question of how humanitarians can expect to hand over activities if the international community prevents the DFAs in Idlib from generating revenue.

Non-emergency programming

A number of participants mentioned donors' aversion to supporting longer-term programming in north-west Syria. They said they recognised the "political" challenges of engaging with HTS and the SSG, but that shying away from longer-term interventions was not a sustainable solution.

Examples were given of humanitarians running education-in-emergencies activities "for 10 years" and of the difficulties of negotiating education activities with both donors and the SSG. One participant felt the SSG was increasingly likely to reject informal education activities and have them take place in areas outside its control. Another suggested that donors' reticence to support long-term programming in areas controlled by SSG and HTS might prove counterproductive and further entrench their control over north-west Syria.

Information sharing and requests

Another issue that arose concerned the restrictions that sanctions and donor interpretations of them were perceived to place on the sharing of information such as staff lists with authorities, having to register staff with authorities or demands for beneficiaries to have SSG-issued identity documents. Participants did not necessarily see these issues as access barriers in the immediate term, but they spoke of confusion about how to navigate such requests given the sanctions in place.

“ Attack, abductions and of course general things like taxation, things which can create a challenge between us and donors just like this. All the risks are actually handed over to us as a humanitarian community here. I think there's a lot of distrust about this.”

NGO official

Across all issues related to sanctions, a number of participants felt donors unfairly shifted too much responsibility onto partners and that they were not proactive enough in clarifying and discussing what was permitted in terms of their operations and engagement with sanctioned parties.

4.2 DEMANDS FOR UN ACCESS SUPPORT

A number of participants referred to the significant requests for support made of the UN's access team in Gaziantep. The topic emerged across nearly all interviews, and some participants said the number of requests was higher than in other countries.

These were partially driven by the effects of sanctions and the ensuing lack of clarity in terms of how humanitarians could engage with proscribed entities, but also by the remote and cross-border nature of operations. Participants said they had not only sought the UN's direct support in negotiations with the SSG but also its advice and endorsement of engagements and positioning.

Requests were sometimes driven by a lack of connections with the SSG, but also by fear that without the UN's endorsement of an engagement or position the humanitarian organisation in question was opening itself up to backlash from its donors, possibly in the form of having its funding cut.

One participant said their organisation was far more comfortable dealing with the SSG if the UN was present in the meeting or if it had confirmed in writing that it was OK to engage. Without this cover, they said their organisation would do its best to avoid engaging with the SSG and even more so HTS. Another, from an implementing organisation, said there was a dearth of guidance on how they should approach such engagements, and in its absence they felt it safer to request the UN's support.

One participant said donors were passing the risks associated with sanctions and the wider environment onto their partners, who in turn tried to mitigate them by seeking the UN's support. One donor participant acknowledged that the risks lay with implementing partners, and another said donors needed to make more efforts to explain to their partners what levels of engagement they would permit.

Other participants said it was also a negotiating tactic to call for the UN's support. In their view, if the SSG knew the UN was aware of an NGO's issue it might think twice about placing too much pressure on that organisation.

Others still said the overall dynamic was not without consequences. A number said the UN access team had to adopt a troubleshooting or firefighting approach to its work that left little time to coordinate joint activities or engage in longer-term HAWG work. Some participants said the UN team simply did not have enough personnel to address partners' individual requests and properly manage the HAWG.

The situation prompted numerous reflections and views from participants. Some said it was completely

understandable that demand for the UN access team was high in north-west Syria because many humanitarians had genuine concerns about donors suspending their projects and funding if they engaged "improperly" with the SSG or HTS. Another, however, felt humanitarians were often too quick to seek the UN access team's support and should put more effort into their own engagements before doing so.

One NGO participant suggested the UN was, perhaps unintentionally, pushing NGOs to engage more with the SSG without donors first explicitly saying that their partners would not face repercussions for doing so. Another participant said there should be greater clarity across the humanitarian community on which issues should be escalated to the UN and which issues implementing organisations should at least initially try to address themselves. They also said that it was not feasible for a UN team based in Türkiye or Jordan to be a first port of call for humanitarians in distress in Syria.

“ Because of the political pressure for [the UN] to absorb the political costs for actors, they're kind of caught in a reactive loop where they have to consistently react and problem solve. They're having to troubleshoot more and more, which is an absolute headache. So they're not doing other access things that I'm sure they would love to do.”

UN official

“ Donors want us to implement and, in essence, hope for the best and not negotiate access or security guarantees. Some donors tell us, you're not even allowed to meet with [the SSG and HTS].”

NGO official

Not all implementing organisations relied on UN support and endorsement to the same extent. Some participants spoke of having strong access focal points and connections in north-west Syria and being willing and able to negotiate directly with the SSG.

4.3 REMOTE MANAGEMENT

At the time of the interviews in 2022, the fact that the humanitarian response was largely run from Türkiye rather than implementing locations in north-west Syria was a frequent topic of discussion, with participants highlighting the difficulty in understanding the access landscape given many senior humanitarian staff rarely ever travelled to Syria.

In the months since the interviews UN staff have increasingly travelled into Syria to engage with DFAs and NSAGs, conduct assessments and monitor projects, which has mitigated some of the concerns initially expressed. They are still discussed below, however, to demonstrate issues that arise when cross-border access is more limited.

The UN in north-west Syria

The UN's lack of presence in the north-west was the most common focus during the initial interviews for this case study, and a number of participants discussed the challenges the UN faced in visiting the region or establishing a permanent base there.³ Some, including UN staff members, gave different reasons for why the UN was not more present, which made it difficult to ascertain the real reasons for its relative absence.

These ranged from the GoS and Russia vetoing any increased presence and UN security experts assessing that security conditions had not been met, to the UN's senior leadership not wanting to

³ One participant mentioned a plan to establish a UN office in Idlib city that was later dropped.

authorise cross-border movements or a permanent presence and an overly conservative interpretation of previous UNSC resolutions on cross-border operations.

Some of those who spoke about security questioned the impartiality of the assessments that drove a narrative that north-west Syria was too unsafe for an increased humanitarian presence. They felt humanitarians operated in equally dangerous locations elsewhere in the world. One participant felt that assessments of the security situation in Idlib and Aleppo were still rooted in times when it was more dangerous.

Despite these differing perspectives, there was more consensus that politics, including the cyclical negotiations on the UNSC's cross-border resolution, played too great a role in thwarting efforts to move away from remote management.

Understanding the access landscape

The remote management of much of the humanitarian programming in north-west Syria was said to significantly complicate efforts to understand the access landscape in the region. This was highlighted as a challenge for both UN agencies and NGOs, but more so for the former, who relied on their NGO partners to inform their understanding of the situation. Inputs from national NGOs were said to be pivotal.

Participants said it was often difficult to assess how prevalent access issues were, verify reports and gain an accurate understanding of the dilemmas implementing organisations faced. One UN staff member described the work of triangulating access reports remotely as “hellish”, and one NGO participant said that doing so helped to fuel rumours that some would believe before determining their truthfulness.

Participants said one of the reasons it was sometimes difficult to understand the situation was insufficient reporting of access constraints or dilemmas into the AMRF or through the HAWG and HAB. One also said that access issues reported through the HAWG were sometimes different to those discussed with their peers in private.

Participants mentioned a number of reasons for implementing organisations sometimes being hesitant to report access constraints to either the HAWG or their donors. In no particular order these included:

- Neither the HAWG nor the UN were seen as resolving partners' constraints, so organisations do not report.
- In cases of aid diversion, there was concern that reporting it would lead to repercussions from donors.
- There was scepticism that any amount of reporting could paint an accurate picture of the access landscape given the range of organisations present and their different operating modalities.
- There was a lack of trust in how the information would be used and who it would be shared with, including concerns that reporting organisations would be named to donors or NSAGs with the potential for some form of backlash.
- Given organisations' competing priorities, reporting access constraints was not high on their list.
- There was a lack of understanding about who attends HAB meetings, which fostered hesitancy to speak openly.
- Staff based in Syria feared their safety could be compromised if they were known to be reporting access issues.
- There were concerns that reporting access issues to donors could give a bad impression of how implementing organisations managed their operations.

Some participants whose organisations did not report frequently to the AMRF or the HAWG acknowledged that it impeded understanding of the access landscape and put coordination at a disadvantage.

Participants said the issue of a lack of reporting was prevalent among both large and small organisations. UN agencies interviewed spoke frequently of trying to encourage reporting and dispel perceptions that doing so could get partners in trouble. Some participants said the presence of third-party monitors (TPMs) in Syria pushed them to report access constraints for fear the TPMs would report incidents to their donors first.

“ If there's clarity on what [engagement] could be done, then hopefully that would then allow organisations to come forth with certain information that would be beneficial as compared to hiding it because of fear of retaliation or getting in trouble with donors or such because it just seems there's not [clarity].”

UN staff member

In terms of the HAWG's knowledge of the access landscape, participants noted that some members, particularly UN agencies, had never set foot in Syria. They felt this limited the group's understanding of the situation and the discussions it held. A number of participants spoke of donor and humanitarian visits to northern Aleppo, but visits to Idlib appeared less common.

“ I told people [other NGOs] many, many times, don't hide anything. Because that's what will break the trust between us.”

NGO official

Engagement

Some participants said the remote management of humanitarian operations made it more difficult to have sustained, in person engagement with NSAGs and DFAs, which they felt made protecting the humanitarian space more challenging. One said remote management put pressure on Syrian staff based in Idlib or Aleppo to take on more responsibility for negotiations than might normally be expected.

Another said remote management led to information gaps that in turn resulted in a lack of transparency about how humanitarian operations worked in Syria and ultimately it made it hard to hold humanitarians accountable. They said at the time of their interview that the status quo of operating from Türkiye had prevailed for so long that changing it seemed an unlikely prospect.

4.4 UNSC CROSS-BORDER RESOLUTION

At the time of the research for this case study there was cyclical uncertainty about whether the cross-border resolution would be renewed or not, which loomed large in nearly every interview. Most participants believed that even if the resolution were to pass one more time, Russia would eventually veto it permanently. This scenario led to significant concerns about the impact it would have on the humanitarian response in north-west Syria.

“ If [the UN] disappears, we need to keep the [HAWG] platform working. It's going to be very challenging, because to take the responsibility on behalf of other NGOs, that's heavy. Coordination has to start on the ground but Gaziantep has to be actively involved because let's face it, you cannot put our teams on the ground at risk.”

NGO official

A number of participants feared that if the resolution were not renewed it would lead to an automatic reduction in the size of the UN operation. That included concerns that the HAWG would cease to exist without UN leadership and support, and that the access support the group's UN co-chair provided would disappear.

“ The story of the access working group is complicated because UN agencies are bound by the UNSC resolution. They don't know if it will get renewed. There is always a lot of uncertainty. What is the future of the UN in north-west Syria? It depends on the renewal of the resolution. That doesn't help anyone. That is not the fault of the UN. It's the UNSC who votes on the resolution.”

Donor official

Were this to happen, some participants felt DFAs and NSAGs would interfere more in NGOs' operations, and that it would be more difficult for the humanitarian community to adopt coordinated approaches to their negotiations. Other participants felt that in such a scenario

they would have to increase their engagement with proscribed groups, and they were concerned about how donors might react to such a development.

With this in mind, a number of participants said some form of access coordination mechanism would have to be maintained in Gaziantep even if the UN were no longer able to support it. There was interest in preserving such a forum in Türkiye, but participants felt that coordinated engagement needed to increasingly take place in-person in Syria and that any future mechanism needed to be able to accommodate that. They also acknowledged that taking on leadership roles in any HAWG replacement would be a significant burden on the organisation(s) involved.

Given these concerns, some participants said they were frustrated at what they felt was a lack of clarity from the UN on contingency plans for scenarios in which the resolution was not renewed. They felt the UN offices in Amman, Gaziantep, Geneva and New York were communicating different and sometimes contradictory messages on the issue, to the consternation of those interviewed.

Participants also felt that the constant uncertainty about the humanitarian architecture in Gaziantep meant the HAWG struggled to focus on longer-term work.

The costs of securing renewal

A number of participants also raised concerns about the impact of the precarious renewal process on the access environment in north-west Syria, including the work of the HAWG. Some felt the UN was hesitant or unwilling to advocate on other access issues for fear of jeopardising Russian Federation support for the resolution. Another felt the UN was not pushing for a permanent staff presence in Syria for the same reason.

Participants also suggested that the conflict in Ukraine had increased fears of Russia vetoing the resolution. Some felt, by extension, that there was less appetite in the UN to be perceived as antagonising Russia on Syria.

Cross-line assistance

Participants recognised that in trying to renew the cross-border resolution, the UN needed to show Russia that it was making efforts to negotiate the delivery of cross-line assistance into the north-west from GoS-controlled areas. There was frustration, however, at the significant time and effort put into these negotiations versus the paltry amount of aid delivered, which participants said paled in comparison with what was being delivered cross-border.

Participants' frustration was not aimed at the UN's negotiating ability, but rather at the politicisation of the situation. They also understood the difficulties inherent in trying to negotiate with various warring parties for access in frontline areas that were subjected to frequent artillery fire and airstrikes.

Participants recognised the former DHRC's successes on this issue, but many felt the efforts the UN in Gaziantep expended on the negotiations were to the detriment of its support for its cross-border partners. Some also said the efforts of the UN in Gaziantep were not matched by those of the UN in Damascus to push the GoS to allow more cross-line deliveries.

One donor participant said their community needed to be more proactive in highlighting how difficult these negotiations were, the dangers inherent in moving aid across an active frontline and the impact the deliveries were having compared with what was being moved cross-border.

“Many people, they don't want to be served by government-controlled areas. They want still to be served by Gaziantep. But at the same time, we have to demonstrate that we're making that effort [so as] not to give those kinds of weapons to the Russians to say at the Security Council that you didn't make any effort, that you didn't try.”

UN official

4.5 THE NEW CROSS-BORDER MODEL

The new cross-border model mentioned in this paper's introduction has allowed humanitarians to continue serving communities in the north-west as before. In the eyes of one participant the response's neutrality and independence has for now been maintained despite the defeat of the UNSC resolutions.

“Our concern is for the next period, and time is running out. What is the vision for 2024? What is going to happen?”

NGO official

The fears participants shared in 2022 about the potential demise of the UNSC resolution came to pass in the months after the interviews were conducted. Many similar concerns were also raised in follow-up discussions with a small number of participants in October 2023.

With the GoS's consent for the use of three border crossings expected to expire in the months to come, these concerns, which participants said required urgent attention, primarily revolved around the potential downscaling or closure of the UN operations that serve the north-west.

→ **Programming and funding:** What will happen to the pooled fund and funding directed through UN agencies? Concerns were expressed about the impact the loss of such significant funding would have on people in need in Syria, and that if required alternative means needed to be found to channel funding to implementing NGOs.

→ **Access:** Who will take on access engagement on behalf of the NGO community? Fears were shared that in the absence of a functioning HAWG and/or the UN's strategic coordination efforts, individual organisations would have to assume the role.

In order to address these and other concerns, participants said the UN and NGOs urgently needed to engage in contingency and business continuity planning.

One participant also noted that in seeking the renewal of the current framework the UN would have to avoid a repeat of the scenario in which the SSG felt excluded from negotiations.

In discussing such a potential renewal, some participants said it was unclear how negotiations would happen, and if they failed what avenue would exist to continue serving communities cross-border. One suggested that if a principled agreement could not be struck between all parties and a new UNSC resolution was not forthcoming, the range of differing legal interpretations about cross-border deliveries would impede the humanitarian community's ability to continue delivering assistance and protection.

4.6 POLITICAL RECOGNITION OF DFAS AND NSAGS

Several participants said the humanitarian community needed a thorough understanding of the political ambitions of the DFAs and NSAGs in north-west Syria and how it might inadvertently be dragged into supporting them. They cautioned that the “mere” act of negotiating access with such groups might further their ambitions by bestowing legitimacy on them.

“Whether [opposition groups] are Islamic or not, hardliners or not, they're trying to position themselves as an alternative to the Syrian government. Part of this is providing help for people. That's what governments do. So they are trying to do that and they are trying to utilise us, exploit us, to make some kind of advertisement, to kind of show off to people. 'We bring you some good organisations that will help you. That's because of us. We brought them here.' They don't bring us actually. We came.”

NGO official

Participants felt this issue was particularly pertinent for proscribed groups and those associated with them, who sought to improve their political standing in Syria and abroad. Some felt the SSG had calculated that the more the humanitarian community engaged with it, the better the chances were of HTS being delisted as a terrorist organisation.

“ These are educated people [in the SSG]. And they very well understand what the humanitarian community, the international community wants to hear, which [is] ... sometimes maybe scary, because then it's not that clear [what their intentions are].”

NGO official

Participants gave several examples of how they felt the SSG had orchestrated such engagement. Some said it would sometimes not give timely responses to NGOs because it wanted the issue to be elevated to the UN so it could engage at that level. Some also felt it would sometimes deliberately create access issues knowing that they would be raised with the UN, which would then have to engage to seek a solution.

One NGO participant said the SSG's messaging was often very welcoming of the humanitarian community and that it took increasingly flexible positions, but that humanitarians should be aware that this could also be underpinned by political goals. The same participant also felt the SSG sometimes used humanitarians as unsuspecting messengers to donors and donor governments as it tried to improve perceptions of both itself and HTS.

Other participants described many of their NSAG interlocutors as political advisers or “PR officials” more interested in communicating a positive image of their group than discussing humanitarian affairs.

Many humanitarian organisations are cautious about engaging with the SSG and HTS, and about being drawn into supporting their political ambitions. Such concerns led one organisation to refuse the SSG's offer of free fuel for a facility it ran for fear of legitimising it.

One participant summarised the situation as follows: The SSG needs the humanitarian community to deliver services to communities under its control. The humanitarian community needs the SSG to secure access and ensure lower-level officials do not interfere in programming. It does not, however, want to become an unwitting player in the SSG's political ambitions and keeping a distance from such dynamics is extremely difficult.

“ HTS is becoming a small bit more flexible, but it is deliberate. In every meeting there's a speech about how 'we [should not be] a sanctioned group, we want to show the real national Syrian voice but in an Islamic, conservative way'. You know, in the past there was a lot of foreign fighters in Idlib but we seldom see any foreigner now in our visits.”

NGO official

Despite the focus on the SSG and HTS in participants' remarks, several said they were not the only organisations in the north-west to have political ambitions, and that the whole situation was highly politicised, something which inevitably seeped into the humanitarian sector.

“ They say: 'You know, we are not like Jabhat Al Nusra. We are better. All the leadership, the first rank leadership, they're all Syrians. No foreign fighters.' [They] were giving this, you know, positive messages for us to transport back to donors and others.”

NGO official

4.7 INTERFERENCE

The issue of NSAGs and DFAs interfering in humanitarian operations emerged across a number of interviews, but seldom in great detail. Those who mentioned it said that interference, including aid diversion, was not a significant problem, and that authorities in north-west Syria were more interested in aid being provided, partially to improve their image, than jeopardising its distribution.

Participants said interference was more common in Idlib given that more humanitarian programming was concentrated there. They highlighted examples that occur across many humanitarian responses, including attempts to direct programming to certain areas; to influence beneficiary lists, particularly for cash; and to influence the selection of suppliers, contractors and staff. They also said smaller national organisations were more likely to experience interference, and that the SSG was less likely to interfere in the operations of their larger counterparts or international NGOs because any

curtailment or suspension could harm its community acceptance.

One participant, however, said that after a decade of humanitarian interventions in the region attempts to interfere in activities were likely to have become more sophisticated and harder to spot. They cited examples of local authorities hiring former humanitarian staff with an intimate understanding of how the response worked and might know how the system could be exploited.

4.8 INSECURITY

Despite the ongoing conflict in the north-west, insecurity was one of the least discussed access challenges. Participants' comments focussed largely on high-risk areas along the frontline between HTS-held areas and GoS-controlled territory, where they said artillery shelling and airstrikes were a regular occurrence.

Away from the frontline, participants spoke about clashes between NSAGs, abductions, detentions and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that could affect both humanitarians and civilians. One also said that competition for control over smuggling routes fuelled insecurity in some areas.

There was general agreement that the security situation had improved in recent years, particularly in Idlib. One participant attributed this to the monopoly of power HTS exerted over the area. Opinions differed as to whether HTS-controlled areas of Idlib were safer than northern Aleppo, where other NSAGs are in control.

5

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The expiry of the UNSC's cross-border resolution was yet another challenge thrown at national and international humanitarian workers who for years have had to navigate a complex and uncertain access environment to help the millions of people in need in north-west Syria.



📷 Livelihoods and food security assistance in Idlib Governorate

The new-cross border framework has provided temporary respite, but its future is fraught with uncertainty. The questions that hung over the future of access coordination in late 2022 persist, and further work is needed to provide clarity.

In worst-case scenarios, where the UN presence is drastically reduced or disappears altogether, who will take on the responsibility of representing the humanitarian community in its engagement with the region's DFAs and NSAGs? Is the NGO community even in a position to take on more of that responsibility? From the narrow perspective of access coordination these are questions that require urgent answers.

Taking a step back from the machinations of mid-2023, it is noticeable from the interviews conducted for this case study that for a conflict setting the issues of interference and insecurity were discussed relatively infrequently, possibly the result of participants being based outside Syria. Instead, a highly politicised environment shaped by sanctions, the remote management of programming and the UNSC resolution dominated discussions. These overlapping constraints seem to have impeded the HAWG's potential and its support for engagement with DFAs and NSAGs.

The demands this constellation of factors has placed on the UN's access team and individual HAWG members leaves the strong impression there is simply not enough staffing or time to take the HAWG's work to a more strategic and effective level.

Many participants' assessments of the HAWG's ability to support engagement with NSAGs and DFAs were often tightly bound to the support the UN's access team was providing partners, rather than collective work the HAWG had supported or led on. Many viewed the UN support as positive, but organisations outside the HAWG seemed to find it difficult to see what concrete outputs the group was responsible for.

Participants often remarked that the more reactive work the UN's access team was doing, the less the HAWG's work could progress. One unexplored question that the situation gives rise to is whether this partial centralisation of access engagement through the UN actually fosters greater coherence across the humanitarian community in terms of the positions it adopts in its engagement with the SSG, HTS and other groups.

There was great uncertainty about the HAWG's future and the shape of the humanitarian response more broadly, but there was consensus that some form of access coordination mechanism was needed to support implementing organisations.

Beyond the need for such a forum, participants' recommendations spanned two main areas: the need for a more sustained, structured and proactive dialogue with NSAGs and DFAs; and for donors either to provide greater clarity about what level of engagement, coordination or cooperation with such groups was acceptable, or demonstrate greater flexibility in this regard in line with humanitarian principles.

There was also a desire for donors to reassess which risks they could assume from their partners. Nor is it a stretch to say that some donors' desire for their partners to centralise their engagement with the SSG and HTS through the UN could be promoting bad practice in which NGOs and UN agencies are not building their own networks with the key stakeholders in the areas they work. In such a situation, the loss of the UN's support would leave these organisations vulnerable.

RECOMENDATIONS

Aside from these overarching recommendations a series of others emerged in discussions that participants would like to see explored further. They included:

- 1 Increase funding for the UN's access team and a dedicated HAWG NGO co-chair that can provide full-time support to the group**
- 2 Seek to increase the presence of international staff in north-west Syria, including Idlib, to better support Syrian colleagues in engaging with NSAGs and DFAs**
- 3 Ensure there is funding and support for an alternative HAWG in the event the UN's role in Gaziantep is reduced**
- 4 Articulate guidance for implementing partners on the engagements they can pursue with NSAGs and DFAs in line with sanctions and key donor policies**
- 5 Develop guidance on which access issues should be immediately escalated to the UN team and which issues organisations should address themselves first**
- 6 Increase communication between the HAWG and donors on the access landscape in the north-west**
- 7 Ensure the JOPs and future iterations of them take donor policies that affect NGOs into account**
- 8 Increase efforts by the NGO Forum and NGO co-chair to bring a stronger set of NGO perspectives and information to HAWG discussions and initiatives**
- 9 Increase efforts by the humanitarian community to bolster the work of the UN's risk management unit**

