

POLITICAL INTERESTS IN SYRIAN HUMANITARIAN AID

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 Analysis

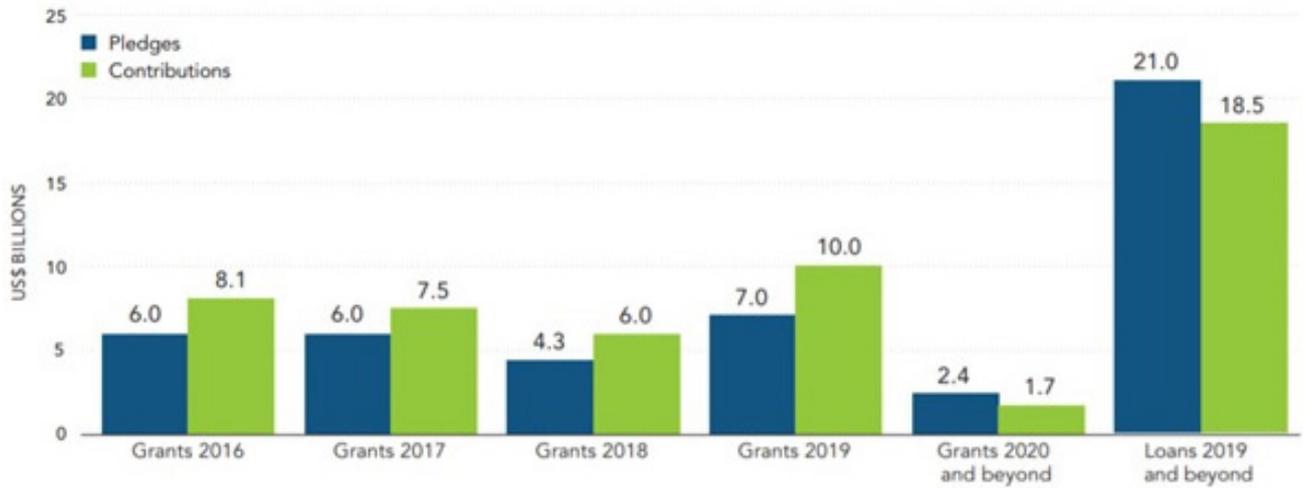
On June 29-30, 2020 “IV Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” was held. With the participation of 80 governments and non-government organizations, the conference succeeded in mobilizing aids to Syrians inside the country and in neighboring countries, including aids for hosting communities, through pledges totaling 5.5 billion USD for 2020, and multi-year pledges of around 2.2 billion USD for 2021. The pledges were focused solely on humanitarian aid, not reconstruction aid, which will have to

wait for the war to end and an achieved political settlement to take place.¹

Unfair distribution, the downturn in aids

A report on donation in 2019-2020 shows that the pledged grants decreased; from 7 billion USD in 2019 to 2.4 billion USD in 2020 (65%). Meanwhile, the value of the grants has decreased from 5 billion USD in the first half of 2019 to 1.7 billion USD in the first half of 2020, i.e. it decreased by 65% as well.²

FIGURE 2.1: Funding contributed against funding pledged, a) grants 2016, b) grants 2017, c) grants 2018, d) grants 2019, e) grants 2020 and beyond (as of 27 February 2020), f) loans 2019 and beyond



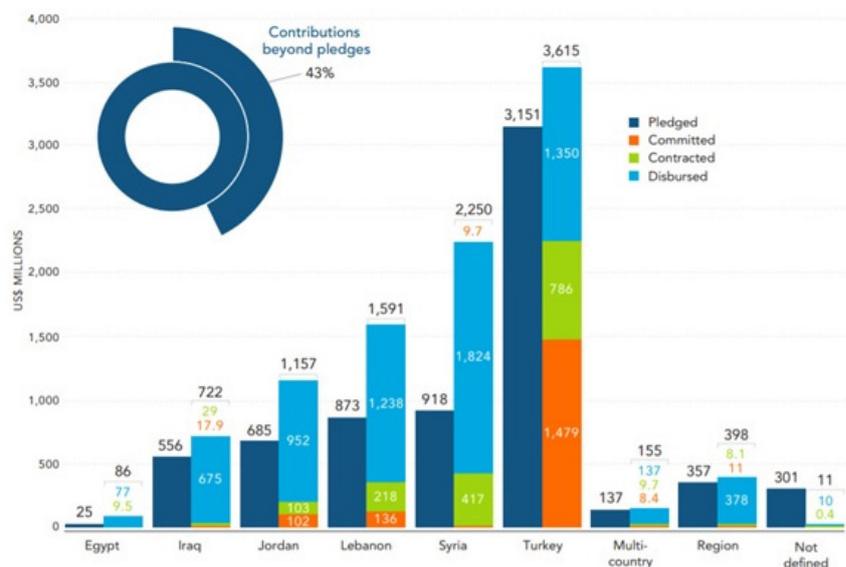
The report shows that in 2019, 10 billion USD of grants was contributed by donors for that year towards Syria and countries most affected by the Syrian crisis in the region (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt) exceeding 43% from the original pledge of 7 billion USD for 2019, of which 1.7 billion USD was already available,

with 71% of the 2.4 billion USD was pledged for 2020.

Also, in 2019, Turkey received the largest amount of grants at 3.6 billion USD (36% of the pledged fund). Almost a quarter of the funding was directed to Syria (2.2 billion USD), followed by Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

But in terms of grants for 2020 and beyond, the total contribution was only 1.7 billion USD. A quarter of this has been allocated to Jordan, and 18% to Lebanon. Less than a fifth (17%) was allocated to Syria and Iraq respectively. Aid to Turkey was 9% (152 million USD), and Egypt 2%.

FIGURE 3.1: Grant contributions against pledges by recipient country, 2019



These figures have led many Syrians to question the criteria of distributed aid because the need factor does not seem to suit this year's aid ratio distribution. Syria ranked fifth in the list of aid recipients, despite the fact that it is a country with the greatest need; Turkey also lags behind, even though it hosts more refugees than Lebanon, Jordan or Iraq.

Humanitarian aid is turning into political leverage.

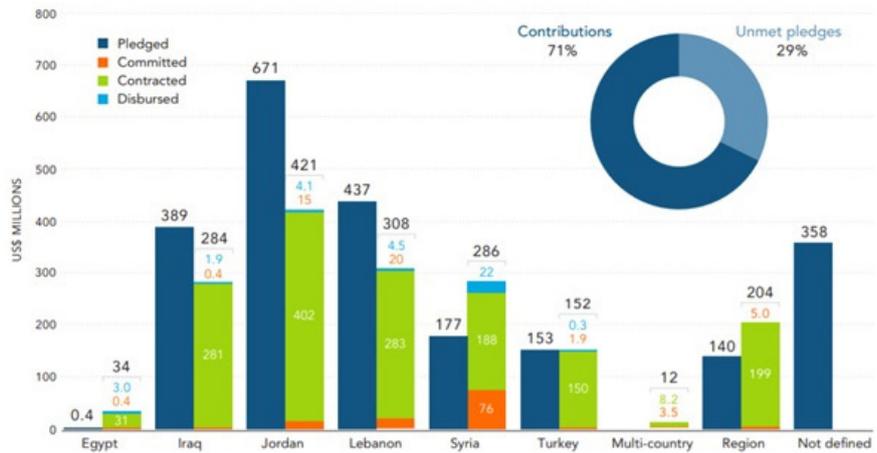
Russia has been trying to use the humanitarian dossier as a tool for political gain. Since the beginning of 2020, Russia has been able to restrict the entry of aids to Syria, opening access of only two Syria-Turkey borders. And then in July, it blocked any decision that seeks to extend the entry of aid from any crossing until the end of the year through its veto right.

Russia tries to ensure that all assistance is channeled through the Syrian government since transport and distribution of aid will provide indirect economic support to the Syrian regime and allow it to have control over, or access to, distribution areas.

Recently, Russia blocked the entry of cross-border aids especially through Al-Yarabiya crossing between Iraq and northeast Syria, an area controlled by Kurdish militias. This action has hindered the overall humanitarian response and disrupted the UN's ability to deliver specialized medical equipment to the area.

At that time, the UN informed its relief agencies that they were permitted to fund private charities operating in northeast Syria only if they were registered in Damascus and authorized to work there by the Syrian government. The funding

FIGURE 3.2: Grant contributions against pledges by recipient country, 2020 and beyond



Source: Development Initiatives based on data provided bilaterally by donors in February and March 2020 and UN OCHA FTS. FTS data downloaded 27 February 2020.
Notes: Data is partial and preliminary. 'Not defined' includes pledges and funding where data on recipient country was not specified by donors.

freeze comes as the World Health Organization (WHO) and other UN relief agencies have raised concerns that they lack sufficient access rights to respond to the health needs of some 2 million people in the region.³

This Russian/Syrian policy reminds us how they used aid as a weapon to starve the civilians.

In 2015, when Madaya and Zabadani (towns in Rif Dimashq governorate which had major famine) were suffering from the blockade, Assad forces prevented the UN from delivering any food and medical aid even when the people were dying because of hunger. They also stole much of the aid before it arrived. This policy was done in many areas in Ghouta or south Damascus.

Many Syrian activists believe that humanitarian aid should not be subject to a Security Council vote, nor should it be a place to settle political scores or be a lever for some countries for their own interests.

Others say turning aids into a political matter has led the UN to overlook its humanitarian role and allow it to present unconvincing justifications when they fail to help those in need.

Russia seeks to exacerbate the human suffering in areas outside the Assad regime control by

preventing the entry of humanitarian aid to the affected people inside Syria, and raising the resentment against the economic sanctions that the Caesar's law imposed on the Assad regime and its supporters.

On the other hand, Russia is trying to thwart America's efforts to pressure the Assad regime, and push it to lift or reduce these sanctions. It puts the US between two options, either to make the US appear to make an ill-considered decision by targeting civilians or force it not to object for the delivery of aids through the regime-controlled areas exclusively.

China's Ambassador to the UN - who just used veto power to thwart the entry of humanitarian aid from outside the border a few days ago - blamed unilateral sanctions against Syria, which have been imposed by the US and the EU, for exacerbating the country's humanitarian situation and urged that they be lifted.⁴

At least 30 billion USD worth of humanitarian aid went into Assad's pockets.

Foreign Policy newspaper mentioned that UN agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have permitted the Assad regime to take

control of the 30 billion USD of international humanitarian response, using donor funds to skirt sanctions and subsidize the government's war effort. The bulk of these billions in diverted funds are from the same Western governments that imposed the sanctions.⁵

The Syrian government has insisted that all operations of the UN Coordination Office for Humanitarian Affairs must be stationed in Damascus, and distributed through the government-controlled - Syrian Red Crescent.

It has also stipulated that no delivery of the Syrian Red Crescent aid should take place without the approval of the country's High Relief Committee, which requires signatures from the Syrian Minister of Health, the Air Security Branch, and the military intelligence agencies. This policy allowed the Syrian regime to control the places, distribution times, and beneficiaries of the aids.

The report estimated that between 2-18% of the total UN assistance reached those in regime-controlled areas, and the government used these aids to support fighters and those who were in the same political loyalty while depriving the opposition areas, even though they were in urgent need of it.

Endnotes

- ¹ At Syrian Aid Summit, a Struggle to Raise Enough to End 'Downward Spiral', The New York Times , 1/7/2020, <https://nyti.ms/30avrgc>
- ² Supporting Syria and the region:" Post-Brussels conference financial tracking, 30/6/2020, <https://bit.ly/2C6ANBf>
- ³ Bowing to Russia, U.N. Halts Funding for Pandemic

Relief in Northeastern Syria , Foreign policy , 13/5/2020, <https://bit.ly/3ez5TOT>

- ⁴ Russia and China Veto Cross-Border Aid to Syria's Northwest, The New York Times , 7/7/2020 , <https://nyti.ms/3eyYrn1>
- ⁵ How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped Up Assad, 20/9/2018 , Foreign affairs, <https://fam.ag/37Kk4il>