CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

"Leave a space for us to act": What Syrian humanitarian leaders want us to know

CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP POLICY BRIEF

Syria is at a critical juncture. The fall of the Assad regime has opened a space for institutional reform and the rebuilding of a Syria where its people can flourish. At the same time, in 2026 an estimated 15.6 million people need assistance, 5.5 million people are internally displaced, and societal infrastructure has been devastated after fifteen years of war.[1]

In 2025, the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) at Deakin University spoke to 20 Syrian humanitarian leaders providing life-saving humanitarian assistance across the country. These humanitarian leaders were taking part in the CHL Crisis Leadership Program. Interviews were conducted remotely, in Arabic, with transcripts translated into English. We asked them to share their perspectives on the humanitarian response to date, how assistance has been supported or hindered by the International Humanitarian System (IHS) and its agents, and their priorities at this pivotal moment in Syrian state formation. This policy brief distils and presents these perspectives.

Across our conversations, Syrian humanitarian leaders delivered a consistent and urgent message to the IHS: do not displace local leadership in this critical period. Support Syrian civil society at a distance, respect their capacities, and leave space for them to act.

Do not displace local leadership in this critical period. Support Syrian civil society at a distance, respect their capacities, and leave space for them to act.

Fifteen years of civil war have forged a capable and legitimate Syrian civil society

"Self-organised initiatives based on community efforts" (T124) have always existed in Syria. However, prior to the civil war, due to the former regime's policies "civic work in Syria was banned" (T065) and civil society structures were almost entirely absent. This "drought when it comes to NGOs" (T199) resulted in little understanding of civil society's "role, place and what kind of relationships it should have with incumbent authorities and the society itself" (T031).

This changed with the outbreak of civil war, as Syrian local leaders organised themselves to provide relief and assistance within their communities. As the IHS was effectively blocked from providing direct assistance, its resources were channelled through local organisations. The IHS invested in capacity-building of these local partners, predominantly within a limited range of activities focused on risk management and compliance, standardised action, and principled assistance according to established normative frameworks.

One local leader explained how budgets for capacity-building enabled "organisational structures and procedures" to be built, allowing organisations to "undertake specialised training, paying for monitoring and evaluation and financial audit services provided by third-party companies, or obtaining ISO certification" (T033). This type of capacity-building "gave local organisations the opportunity to develop themselves, their own policies, and regulations" (T084), through which "we have become more professional, moving

from merely implementing activities to designing those activities and new programs. We became more technical" (T065). Local organisations leveraged these opportunities to build their capacities and gain legitimacy, positioning them to take on a directing role in their interface with the IHS.

This is particularly true in Northwest Syria. The IHS was largely prevented from entering the region with international staff, which saw Syrian diaspora and civil society build significant capabilities. These local organisations are now often considered "the ones to count on, after God Almighty, to transfer experience and exchange skills" to the rest of the country (T065). Indeed, many Syrian organisations "now surpass many international organisations in terms of their internal system, policies, and regulations, as well as donors' satisfaction that they receive direct funding" (T084). Another leader affirmed that "today, in 2025, Syrian organisations are on par with international organisations and can even secure funding that their international counterparts are not able to secure. They reached that level through continuous development" (T092).

Structural inequalities between local and international actors persist and undermine the response

The conditions of the Syrian context, including the IHS's limited access and its channelling of resources through, and investment in the capacities of, local organisations, have given rise to a hybrid system in which IHS norms, processes and procedures have merged with place-based approaches and the operational realities of local responders. However, the terms of this hybridisation were largely set by the IHS: what counted as capacity, what standards applied, and what compliance looked like were determined not by Syrian civil society but by the IHS. The structural inequalities embedded in this arrangement have produced persistent challenges that Syrian humanitarian leaders continue to navigate.

One such issue is the standardisation of response options and "bringing practices from other contexts" without appropriate contextualisation (T092), resulting in unsuitable items in food baskets and women's dignity kits, inappropriate bathroom structures (T177), as well as culturally ignorant framing of protection principles (T092, T124), demonstrating yet again that 'one size fits none'. Another issue is the linguistic barrier through which local knowledge and expertise about needs on the ground and what constitutes appropriate response becomes inaccessible or is lost entirely. With coordination meetings conducted primarily in English, one leader shared how "Syrian organisations used to leave these meetings without making a fuss because we simply could not understand what was going on" (T084).

Syrian responders consistently emphasised the IHS's inflexible processes (T092, T056, T033), "red tape, routinised procedures and bureaucracy" (T093), as well as its short-term funding cycles and temporary solutions (T056, T088), which hinder both timely response and long-term planning. Other common issues were intermediaries that enforce stringent due diligence without providing attached funding (T152, T138, T199, T033) and labour inequities resulting in leadership drainage from local organisations (T152, T179, T088).

The issues that have arisen at the interface between Syrian and international systems have had a profound effect on local ownership and decision-making. Rather than being driven by their own strategies and priorities, local organisations find themselves in a response that is "not planned according to your own strategy, but rather a reaction to calls issued by international organisations" (T033), where "donors will not just give you money to work according to your own convictions" (T031), leaving local organisations to "not object because they do not want to upset international organisations" for fear of losing funding (T179).

One Syrian leader described how even though "we are the ones working on the ground, and we are better positioned to determine what works best for the current Syrian context [...] local organisations are subject to the control of international organisations" (T041). Another leader emphasised that international organisations "partnered with local organisations not out of commitment to the principles of partnership or to localisation. These were just a byproduct." (T033). The experiences of these local humanitarian leaders are not unique to Syria. They highlight the persisting failure of the IHS to address well-documented challenges and deliver on agreed reforms, and echo recent experiences shared by Sudanese humanitarian leaders.[2]

Syrian leaders are charting their own path from relief to recovery and calling for a different kind of support

With the fall of the Assad regime, the local humanitarian leaders with whom we spoke are clear about the role civil society should play in Syria's state formation. As one described, with the state previously absent, the role of civil society has gone from service delivery to now supporting and holding government to account. Importantly, "civil society should be guided by rights as its compass", documenting the atrocities that have taken place (T009). This leader was adamant that:

The government should not assume oversight over us. We are the ones who should take on the role of oversight. This is very sensitive, and we need to establish it now. (T009)

The leaders we spoke to perceive the role of civil society as supporting institutional reform and accountability, with a "focus on governance issues and civil society, including introducing Syrian society to the concept of civil society and what it represents" (T031) and "serving as a counterpart to the government, particularly in relation to infrastructure that supports local communities" (T067). As they expressed, "we believe that it is the role of civil society to monitor the government" (T031) and act as a counterpart to the new government (T065).

Yet after fifteen years of war and a constant state of emergency, Syria's image as a productive and self-reliant society has been distorted by what leaders describe as a culture of aid dependency. Leaders describe assistance rarely going beyond "simply giving people a food basket" (T009), causing people to become "overly dependent and passive" (T067), and Syria becoming "a population that always asks for help" (T124). This state of aid dependency has "created the perception that this is a society perpetually vulnerable and fragile" where "all you need is to stay at home and aid will come to your door" (T031). These perceptions stand in stark contrast to the heart of Syrian society, which "has long been known as a productive society capable of interacting with its environment and utilising its resources" (T031).

In order to transition away from aid dependency, "the plan must change" (T138) and Syrian civil society leaders are mapping how Syria can move from relief to recovery, reconstruction and peacebuilding. This includes how to "identify the right modality for engaging with governmental institutions" (T084), and work across civil society and government to support livelihood opportunities and rehabilitate the education, health and agricultural sectors, securing "water networks, infrastructure and bread, which is such an essential component of Syrian culture" (T067). As one leader pointed out, however, "emergency response donors are not the same as early recovery or development donors" (T199). This challenge is also consistent with inadequacies identified within the IHS to effectively link the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus, which has significant practical implications for how Syria's civil society can be supported to lead the transition from relief to recovery and peace.[3]

An influx of international actors now threatens to displace the civil society Syria has built

With the easing of sanctions and restrictions, Syria has experienced an influx or "frenzy" (T138) of the IHS and its agents seeking to set up offices and commence direct operations. As one Syrian leader described it, "following liberation, our relationship shifted from collaboration to competition between national and international NGOs" (T199). Similarly, another Syrian leader explained how international organisations, "instead of coordinating and forming partnerships, they prefer to work alone" giving excuses that Syrian organisations "are not ready" or "we need new due diligence" or "whatever demands that are just baseless" (T065). This has resulted in "a sizable number of Syrian organisations that have completely shut down, they no longer exist" (T065) or civil society structures where "high-ranking positions are mostly occupied by foreigners", even though its work "could be carried out by locally trained staff with accumulated experience over the years" (T084).

"following liberation, our relationship shifted from collaboration to competition between national and international NGOs"

The IHS's drive to establish a direct presence and replicate its own operational structures risks undoing what the last fifteen years have built: a locally rooted expertise and civil society capability that could drive a future of dignity and opportunity for the Syrian people. As one leader expressed, "I do not want to go back to the Syria I grew up in — I want a home, citizenship, and rights", adding that "we are ambitious, but it needs time" (T031).

For Syria to move forward, those with whom we spoke argue that "there has to be more trust in Syrian organisations, and more flexibility when it comes to program designs. We should not work according to ready-made frameworks, but rather continue to innovate, adapt and remain flexible" (T009). Decision-making power must shift to local leaders, as one leader noted: "this is the most important point relating to the international humanitarian system, its structures and coordination channels" (T152). One leader emphasised that international organisations should "not maintain a long-term and permanent presence" but rather "put an executable plan for handing over responsibilities to Syrian organisations within a defined framework" (T084). Echoing this sentiment, another Syrian leader stressed that "international organisations should

gradually withdraw from anything that can be done instead by local organisations, because they are more sustainable" (T152).

In our conversations with local leaders, we consistently heard them call upon the IHS and its agents "to listen to us because these are our communities" and while "local communities, local organisations, as well as international organisations should all be involved in the process, collaboratively" (T041) the IHS "needs to leave a space for us to act" (T093), and "step back and let Syrian organisations fulfil their role" (T199). One leader stressed that "there must be a clear plan for supporting Syria at least for the next five years, so that it rises from the abyss it is drowned in", noting that "the Syrian people are able through their efforts and work to overcome this and reach higher stages, God willing" (T065). Indeed, leaders emphasised that "as Syrians, we are flexible and able to move in the direction where we are truly capable of succeeding in any project we take on" (T092).

Perhaps most fundamentally, "local or national organisations are the country's own people. They are the survivors. They are Syrian themselves" (T056). As such:

> ***It is important for us to be an essential part of leading the humanitarian response, given our history, contextual knowledge, understanding of the different segments of society, and our ability to build relationships with state institutions and carry out interventions through them. (T056)***

The Syrian humanitarian and crisis leadership is calling for the IHS and its agents to support at a distance and without direct control. What remains to be seen is whether the IHS can resist ingrained behaviours and dare to act differently.

Endnotes

[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) (2026). Syrian Arab Republic: 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (April 2026).
[2] Hartelius, J., Elmaki, M., & Kelly, M. (2026). *What Sudanese Crisis Response Leaders Want the International Humanitarian System to Know.* Centre for Humanitarian Leadership Policy Brief. Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. https://www.centreforhumanitarianleadership.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/CHL_Sudan-Policy-Brief_APRIL-2026.pdf
Alexander, J., & Kerkvliet, E. (2022). *Lessons of lessons: a window into the evolution of the humanitarian sector.* ALNAP Paper. London: ALNAP/ODI
Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B. and Spencer, A. (2021) The Grand Bargain at five years: an independent review. HPG commissioned report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-grand-bargain-at-five-years-an-independent-review).
[3] Brown, S., Mena, R., & Brown, S. (2024). The peace dilemma in the triple nexus: challenges and opportunities for the humanitarian–development–peace approach. *Development in Practice.* https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2024.2334774

PUBLISHED BY
The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership
Deakin University
© 2026
info@cfhl.org.au
centreforhumanitarianleadership.org.au

Suggested citation: Hartelius, J., Selim, A., & Kelly, M. (2026). "Leave a space for us to act": What Syrian humanitarian leaders want us to know. Centre for Humanitarian Leadership Policy Brief. Centre for Humanitarian Leadership.

Image © Delil Souleiman / Save the Children

This policy brief draws upon research funded in part by Deakin University, Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP) and Fondation de France (FDF). CHL is grateful for their support.

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP