Syrian Aid Workers Break with UN Relief Effort Over its Assad Ties

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Scores of Syrian non-government humanitarian agencies working in the battered country have suspended their coordination with the United Nations, whose relief efforts, they charge, are controlled by the brutal Bashar Al-Assad regime.

They have also called for an investigation  into, among other things, the “political influence of the Syrian government on humanitarian actors in Damascus,” and creation of a new monitoring body  that includes their participation “to ensure that all Syrians have sufficient and sustained access to aid and that international law is respected.”

The gesture by the 73 Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provide aid to some 7 million Syrians in areas outside the control of the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, is largely symbolic. Many if not most of them perform their work from bases outside Syria, especially in neighboring Turkey and Jordan, often alongside U.N. aid efforts, and will continue to do so.

And besides, as they put it, “We are not hopeful that UN agencies based in Damascus…will take concrete action to respond to the violations of human rights in Syria in a way that might protect the Syrian people.”

However, the boycott will reduce the amount of information that may be available to the U.N. about relief efforts, attacks on medical personnel, and other important issues.

But so far as the protesting organizations are concerned, that so-called Whole of Syria (WoS) information has been “failing miserably,” according to Dr. Ahmad Tarakji, president of the Syrian-American Medical Society (SAMS), a U.S.-based humanitarian organization that is one of the protesting groups.

“The Whole of Syria effort was supposed to make U.N. aid efforts more efficient, transparent and independent,” he told Fox News. “Instead it is flagging other areas of the world that this kind of political influence is possible.”

The press spokesman for U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Stephane Dujarric, acknowledged receipt of a letter from the protesting organizations, praised the NGOs for their “tremendous work,” and said blandly that “we will continue to engage with them, and all humanitarian partners, in order to improve our collective efforts and reach as many people in need as possible in Syria.”

Diplomatic responses aside, the move is nonetheless an additional embarrassment to the U.N., which has been criticized with increasingly severity for several years for its compliant relationship with the Damascus government. Even an internal U.N. evaluation published earlier this year declared that its Damascus operations are badly fragmented and [excessively concerned with its relationship with the regime’s](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/03/21/uns-syria-relief-effort-internally-divided-intimidated-by-assad-study-says.html).

The WoS coordination mechanism that the Syrian NGOs are now stepping away from was in fact  set up to provide that badly-needed overall information about aid needs and challenges across the entire country, which the U.N. previously was not getting due to the fragmentation of U.N.  aid efforts, which are divided between the Damascus-centered internal operation and other relief efforts centered in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

The protest by the aid groups comes at another dark trough in the six-year Syrian civil war, while U.N. sponsored peace efforts are in tatters, the regime’s encirclement of the largest center of resistance, in the northern city of Aleppo, is once again tightening, and when regime efforts to interfere with the humanitarian effort, including attacks on medical workers, seizures of medical relief supplies, and refusal to evacuate desperate cases, may be even bolder than ever.

At bottom, the protest points once again to the  essence of the U.N.’s humanitarian challenge in Syria, which is that  the world organization’s overall approach to relief efforts, while publicly neutral, has been to coordinate first and foremost with the host government—in this case the Assad regime.

As a result, U.N. efforts to provide aid to areas outside regime control have been pallid and intermittent, and usually stymied in Damascus even after the U.N. Security Council passed resolutions mandating cross border shipments to some of the most desperate besieged communities. Permission for those convoys still comes from Damascus, and has been rarely given and often revoked, despite growing international indignation.

Dozens of besieged areas around the country have received only symbolic amounts of U.N. relief, and even those supplies have been cut as the emboldened regime, backed by Russian air support, has gone on a renewed offensive.

In regime-controlled areas of the country, U.N. aid deliveries are coordinated with the Assad government and its designated non-government aid organizations, and according to Tarakji, there are “many reports of relief supplies ending up in Syrian military camps.”

The U.N. has always denied such outright misappropriation, though it has complained frequently about the removal of vital humanitarian supplies from relief convoys headed to contested areas.

The minutes of a U.N. humanitarian coordination meeting earlier this week, obtained by Fox News, show that the Syrian government removed more than 10 tons of medical supplies, including lifesaving equipment intended for children, from two U.N. relief convoys. In one convoy, only 440 pounds of medical supplies, out of 5.3 tons, were allowed through.

The sequestered good also included anti-pneumonia and anti-diarrhea medicines, as well midwifing supplies.

Nothing is said in the report about where the supplies went.

The minutes also reveal that 36 tons of humanitarian supplies held by the World Health Organization, and supposedly intended for the areas of eastern Aleppo that are holding out against Assad assaults, have been stockpiled in the western parts of the city controlled by the regime—only the latest of a number of shipments warehoused in the same fashion.

The supplies supposedly will be moved immediately “once approval is received for cross-line support from west to east Aleppo,” under a proposed 48-hour humanitarian ceasefire in the city that currently is going nowhere. The same document says drily “it is worth noting though that no cross-line delivery to east Aleppo is envisaged under the proposed and above mentioned Aleppo Emergency Response Plan.”

The minutes also confirm the lengthy bureaucratic delays that cripple medical responses and evacuations of non-combatants in besieged areas, even when the victims are children.

(A “revision to the current process for medical evacuations in Syria,” including “new protocols…to ensure that medical evacuations remain…free form the influence of political negotiations and interests,” is also one of the demands of the 73 protesting Syrian organizations.)

The minutes note that the WHO “followed up on 14 cases with developed symptoms of meningitis since the beginning of August in the besieged area of Madaya “ and says medicines were given to local doctors. It noted laconically, “access remains a problem.” The same notation occurs next to brief mentions of two evacuations of children elsewhere.

The largest portion of the evacuation discussion is concerned with elaborate investigation procedures that include a puzzle:  “To understand the modalities put in place by the GoS  [government of Syria] for accompanying family members of people in need of medical evacuation.”