

Exploring Russia's Humanitarian Intervention in Syria

by [Marika Sosnowski \(/experts/marika-sosnowski\)](/experts/marika-sosnowski/), [Paul Hastings \(/experts/paul-hastings\)](/experts/paul-hastings/)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Marika Sosnowski \(/experts/marika-sosnowski\)](/experts/marika-sosnowski/)

Marika Sosnowski is an admitted lawyer and researcher at the University of Melbourne. Her work focuses on ceasefires, statebuilding, and governance, with a particular interest in the Syrian civil war.

[Paul Hastings \(/experts/paul-hastings\)](/experts/paul-hastings/)

Paul Hastings is the pseudonym of a Middle East based security analyst who has focused on Syria and the region since 2010. His research focuses on humanitarian access, ceasefire and reconciliation agreements, and conflict analysis.



Brief Analysis

Normal 0 false false false EN-US JA AR-SA /* Style Definitions */ table.MsoNormalTable {mso-style-name:"Table Normal"; mso-tstyle-rowband-size:0; mso-tstyle-colband-size:0; mso-style-noshow:yes; mso-style-priority:99; mso-style-parent:""; mso-padding-alt:0cm 5.4pt 0cm 5.4pt; mso-para-margin:0cm; mso-para-margin-bottom:.0001pt; mso-pagination:widow-orphan; font-size:12.0pt; font-family:"Cambria",serif; mso-ascii-font-family:Cambria; mso-ascii-theme-font:minor-latin; mso-hansi-font-family:Cambria; mso-hansi-theme-font:minor-latin;} From September 2015, Russia's military intervention into the Syrian civil war succeeded in turning the conflict's momentum from the opposition back to the Syrian government. However, in the past few years Russia has simultaneously undertaken a quieter intervention in the Syrian conflict through humanitarian institutions.

While there has been a recent [rise \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria) in the overall number of international humanitarian organizations seeking to register and operate in government-controlled areas of Syria, Russia has also ramped up its humanitarian efforts over the past two years. At least thirteen Russian humanitarian organizations have operated in-country since 2016, with almost [all \(http://www.ippo.ru/world/article/o-razdele-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-ippo-15994\)](http://www.ippo.ru/world/article/o-razdele-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-ippo-15994) of these groups beginning operations in Syria soon after Russia's military involvement. And like Russian military efforts, this 'soft-intervention' is also likely to have consequences for Syria's future, particularly in shaping the future of humanitarian aid to the country.

In some cases, the link between Russian military and humanitarian efforts is explicit: Russia primarily uses its Ministry of [Defense-linked Russian Reconciliation Center for Conflicting Sides in Syria \(https://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12079277@egNews\)](https://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12079277@egNews) to conduct regular [high-profile \(http://tass.com/world/1007967\)](http://tass.com/world/1007967) distributions of aid around the country. Since its establishment in early 2016, Russia has also distributed several aid shipments in Syria through the [Armenian Russian Humanitarian Response Center \(https://www.tert.am/en/news/2018/07/13/syria/2741409\)](https://www.tert.am/en/news/2018/07/13/syria/2741409).

However, there are a number of other Russian humanitarian entities with less clear links to military operations on the ground. These groups include [The Russian Humanitarian Mission \(http://www.rhm.agency/?fbclid=IwAR1hD6XGtHFzV21vmEOzv9Sbjo0WCrWrV5HDOM5CF3azLjxgLTvw5Rp0Tvw\)](http://www.rhm.agency/?fbclid=IwAR1hD6XGtHFzV21vmEOzv9Sbjo0WCrWrV5HDOM5CF3azLjxgLTvw5Rp0Tvw), [The Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation \(http://fondkadyrova.net/\)](http://fondkadyrova.net/), [The Fair Aid International Foundation \(https://doctorliza.ru/\)](https://doctorliza.ru/), [The Russar Charitable Foundation \(https://www.frussar.com/\)](https://www.frussar.com/), and [The Russian Military Veterans Brotherhood Organization \(https://bbratstvo.com/project/siriyskiy-rubezh\)](https://bbratstvo.com/project/siriyskiy-rubezh). At least six religious-aligned Russian entities have also conducted operations in Syria during the conflict, including [The Muslim Coordination Center of the North Caucasus \(http://kcmsk.ru/\)](http://kcmsk.ru/), [The Russian Orthodox Church \(http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5303131.html\)](http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5303131.html), [The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society \(http://www.ippo.ru/world/article/o-razdele-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-ippo-15994\)](http://www.ippo.ru/world/article/o-razdele-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-ippo-15994), [The Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith \(http://www.russianpentecostal.org/\)](http://www.russianpentecostal.org/), [The Spiritual Heritage of the Holy Apostle Paul Foundation \(http://pavelfond.ru/obrashhenie-fonda/\)](http://pavelfond.ru/obrashhenie-fonda/), and [The Foundation of St Andrew the First \(http://www.fap.ru/\)](http://www.fap.ru/).

One reason so many Russian organizations exist is the relative ease for them to operate in government-controlled areas. While Western counterparts [must \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria) go through a complex, invasive, and time-consuming process in order to receive permission to officially work inside government-controlled areas, Russian organizations have a murky registration status in the country. Among other signs that these groups operate outside of the official registration process for international NGOs, Russian groups do not typically participate in meetings reserved for officially registered NGOs in Syria.

Due to this ambiguity, [regulations \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/1/22/assad-regime-maintains-strangle-hold-over-humanitarian-access-in-syria) placed on other international NGOs working in the same geographical areas are, in some cases, not required of Russian organizations. For example, the Russian Reconciliation Center and the Armenian Russian Humanitarian Response Center appear to be able to sometimes operate without a local partner, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent or the Syria Trust, in government held areas of the country, which is a general requirement for international NGOs.

In late 2017 and again in mid-2018, Russia [offered \(https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html\)](https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html) to assist a number of western NGOs seeking to register to operate in government-controlled areas, including several cross-border actors. However, despite several meetings, no tangible benefit has yet been produced for the organizations involved eighteen months later—the same [time \(https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html\)](https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html) - [frame \(http://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html\)](http://inosmi.ru/politic/20180813/242981062.html) as the official Syrian controlled INGO registration process.

The unclear framework for Russian humanitarian organizations inside of Syria also means that they often operate outside of broader humanitarian coordination frameworks, notably those of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). Although not without its own problems, UN coordination ensures aid is delivered in a timely way, that those most in need are prioritized, and that aid efforts are not duplicated between organizations. Instead, the alternative Russian system rivals established humanitarian systems like the UNOCHA. While these two systems co-exist at present, the Russian system could easily become a political tool for Russia to undermine adversaries (by, for example, determining what aid gets delivered and who it goes to)—much as Russia used the [Astana \(https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/16/7-years-into-the-syrian-war-is-there-a-way-out/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/16/7-years-into-the-syrian-war-is-there-a-way-out/) talks to prioritize its own interests during the Geneva process.

Russia's ability to circumvent the Syrian government's official registration process and operate outside typical UN coordination mechanisms has effectively created a shadow system of aid delivery in Syria inaccessible to outside organizations. This parallel system not only highlights the double standards of the Syrian government in its

preferential treatment of Russian humanitarian organizations but also shapes the current overall humanitarian landscape in Syria, in tandem with Russia's military intervention.

Russia's Humanitarian and Political Goals

While undeniably used for real humanitarian purposes, Russia also views the strategic use of aid in the Syrian context as deeply linked to their 'soft power' efforts. As far back as 2007, an official Russian policy paper **[noted](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2011/may/25/russia-foreign-aid-report-influence-image)** (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2011/may/25/russia-foreign-aid-report-influence-image>) that the role of its foreign aid was to "strengthen the credibility of Russia and promote an unbiased attitude of the Russian Federation in the international community." Russian experts also **[highlight](https://www.ft.com/content/e034bdde-96f0-11e8-b747-fb1e803ee64e)** (<https://www.ft.com/content/e034bdde-96f0-11e8-b747-fb1e803ee64e>) that Russian humanitarian activity in Syria aims to "significantly improve the image of Russia in the Middle East and in the Arab world as a whole, in order to show that Russia also takes care of the population."

A link between the state and aid is also seen in the makeup of several Russian humanitarian organizations. For example, the Russian Humanitarian Mission's chairman is **[Evgeny Alexandrovich Primakov](http://rhm.agency/onas.html)** (<http://rhm.agency/onas.html>)—a current **[member](http://duma.gov.ru/en/duma/persons/1055900/news/)** (<http://duma.gov.ru/en/duma/persons/1055900/news/>) of the Russian Duma (parliament) and member of the Duma's Committee on International Affairs. The Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation is headed by **[Aymani Nessievna Kadyrova](http://fondkadyrova.net/o-aimani-kadyrovoi.html)** (<http://fondkadyrova.net/o-aimani-kadyrovoi.html>), the mother of Chechnya's Russian-backed authoritarian ruler Ramzan Kadyrov. The Fair Aid International Foundation also has strong links to the Kremlin through Fedotov Mikhail Alexandrovich, the foundation's chairman and an adviser to President Putin. And the President of The Russian Charitable Foundation, **[Oleg Ivanovich Fomin](https://www.frussar.com/team/oleg-fomin/)** (<https://www.frussar.com/team/oleg-fomin/>) is a member of the 'experts council' of the Russian Military Veterans Brotherhood Organization. Even organizations not directly linked to the state are often working in line with state goals in Syria. The Foundation of St Andrew the First, for example, explicitly **[states](http://www.fap.ru/)** (<http://www.fap.ru/>) on its website that it aims to 'strengthen Russian statehood' and has a specific **[military patriotic program to promote Russian youth identification with the military](http://www.fap.ru/programs/voenno-patrioticheskie-programmy/)** (<http://www.fap.ru/programs/voenno-patrioticheskie-programmy/>).

These political uses of aid are amplified by the fact that many of Russia's humanitarian actions in Syria are **[one-off](https://www.france24.com/en/20180720-france-russia-jointly-deliver-humanitarian-aid-syria-eastern-ghouta-refugees)** (<https://www.france24.com/en/20180720-france-russia-jointly-deliver-humanitarian-aid-syria-eastern-ghouta-refugees>), symbolic operations. While efforts may generate headlines, they are not geared towards long-term sustainable programming. Such was the case with the **[joint](https://www.france24.com/en/20180720-france-russia-jointly-deliver-humanitarian-aid-syria-eastern-ghouta-refugees)** (<https://www.france24.com/en/20180720-france-russia-jointly-deliver-humanitarian-aid-syria-eastern-ghouta-refugees>) French/Russian humanitarian convoy to Eastern Ghouta in July 2018, which was never repeated. Russian operations are also often less forthright with information regarding the reach of their aid: rather than follow **[typical](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AhHol_EN_sitrep3_May_6.pdf)** (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AhHol_EN_sitrep3_May_6.pdf) methods of aid delivery that outline the number of aid items delivered, which aid **[sectors](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach)** (<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach>) were supported, and what requirements are needed for the sustainability of future operations, Russian operations often only refer to the number of **[tons of aid](http://rhm.agency/smi/253-rossiyskie-voennye-peredali-siriyskim-detyam-15-tonny-novogodnih-podarkov.html)** (<http://rhm.agency/smi/253-rossiyskie-voennye-peredali-siriyskim-detyam-15-tonny-novogodnih-podarkov.html>) delivered and people served. At best, the lack of relevant information made public shows Russian humanitarian actions as inept, inexperienced, and not transparent; at worst, it suggests that this soft power activity is purely symbolic.

Ultimately, by prioritizing symbolism over efficacy while failing to ensure ease of access for international organizations, Russia's current humanitarian aid efforts in Syria look certain to undermine other current and future aid efforts in the country.

Humanitarian Operations Undermined

By prioritizing Russia's image and political goals, Russia's shadow aid system is also threatening to undermine the value of humanitarian aid in Syria. On a moral and ethical level, the close connection between the Russian state and humanitarian operations in Syria rejects the **humanitarian principles** (https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf) that guide humanitarian action, especially neutrality and independence.

These **principles** (<https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MAG-Policy-Brief-Why-Principles-Matter.pdf>), which are rooted in international humanitarian law but have been **strained** (https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/fileadmin/pictures/publications/en/studies_analysis/2018-syria-humanitarian-crisis.pdf) by the Syrian government during the conflict, provide a standardized framework to allow those in need of assistance and those who provide this to do so as equally and safely as possible. These principles are also vital for ensuring continued trust in the aid system: **facilitating** (<https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MAG-Policy-Brief-Why-Principles-Matter.pdf>) community trust, sustainable access, effective programming, improved cooperation, and building the groundwork for long-term operations in the areas that are most in need.

Growing anti-Russian sentiment in government-held southern Syria from both **opposition** (<http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=122268>) groups and **government** (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/4/4/Syria-Weekly-Russia-sides-with-former-rebels-in-Daraa>) forces highlights the effects of ignoring these values. Russia's partisan, unprincipled attitude towards aid is affecting views of Russia, but may also lead Syrians to mistrust other aid systems in the future and erode the necessary conditions for future sustainable humanitarian action.

Russia's shadow aid system and preferential treatment by the Syrian government further clouds an already complex environment in which humanitarian organizations operate. **Concerns** ([http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/582039/EPRS_ATA\(2016\)582039_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/582039/EPRS_ATA(2016)582039_EN.pdf)) over **corruption** (<https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-chechnya-akhmad-kadyrov-fund/27057288.html>), **fraud**, and **abuse of powers** (<https://en.crimerrussia.com/financialcrimes/employees-of-dr-liza-s-fair-aid-foundation-asked-for-questioning/>) have been leveled at a number of Russian entities operating in Syria, including the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation and the Fair Aid International Foundation. In a country already plagued with **corruption** (<https://www.transparency.org/country/SYR>), and where humanitarian aid is a major **source** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-09-20/how-un-humanitarian-aid-has-propped-assad>) of revenue for the regime, the lackadaisical way Russia and Russian organizations conduct humanitarian operations could further amplify these damaging practices.

Studies (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2568.pdf>) have shown that beneficiaries of aid are often unable to differentiate between the different humanitarian entities that provide them with aid. If Russian organizations squander trust among Syrians, these activities could significantly affect the perception and reputation of aid within Syria as a whole. The same **case** (<http://www.smf.org.uk/is-it-possible-to-repair-reputational-damage/>) studies also suggest that this loss of trust can take decades to repair.

Responding to the Challenge

An international response to Russia's shadow aid system requires a multi-faceted approach. It also requires caution, especially from practitioners on the ground, since they are most at risk of inadvertently legitimizing Russia's political use of aid and could be most impacted by Russian organizations' unfulfilled promises. If aid organizations are not careful, they may also become burdened by an unequal partnership with an inexperienced and poorly

managed entity.

Immediate efforts can be prioritized around improving Russia's understanding of humanitarian principles and how they are a valuable tool for conducting effective operations. At minimum, international organizations should push Russian entities to distance themselves from the Russian state and military as well as the Syrian military. In particular, this distance should include executive, board, or operational personalities within an organization. Doing this would strengthen the non-partisan profiles of these entities, allowing them to build trust and effective long-term partnerships on the ground and help them build resilience to any changes to Russian-Syrian relations in the future.

Strong attempts should also be made to encourage Russian humanitarian entities to integrate into existing coordination structures in Syria, especially UNOCHA. This includes Russian entities officially registering and operating in Syria (such as with a local partner) as western NGOs currently do. Leaving Russian entities outside these systems will only further strengthen their positions, undermine existing structures, and leave the shadow aid system vulnerable to political manipulation by the Russian or Syrian state in the future.

Finally, more experienced international entities should attempt to provide significant support to build the capacity of Russian entities to focus on best practices, such as preventing corruption, improving transparency, and developing sustainable long-term programming.

These efforts are conditional on addressing the elephant in the room: the current complex humanitarian landscape in Syria is still, and will likely continue to be, heavily controlled by the Syrian regime. Ultimately, if nothing changes here with how the regime perceives international aid, it will be ordinary Syrians who continue to suffer.



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