

Exploring Russia's Views on Humanitarian Aid in Syria

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Jan 4, 2023

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Brief Analysis

With the UN Security Council set to vote on whether to extend UN cross-border aid efforts into northwest Syria, Russia is once again poised to jeopardize humanitarian assistance to the 4.1 million civilians who rely on this lifeline to survive.

Each year since 2014, Russia has threatened to veto [Resolution 2165 \(http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2165\)](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2165) and its subsequent iterations, which govern the cross-border aid mechanism in Syria. Moscow does so for its own political aims, steadily [reducing \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/30/russia-assad-syria-un-china/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/30/russia-assad-syria-un-china/) the potency of this lifesaving measure to just one border crossing point into northwest Syria last year.

The growing gulf between Russia and the international community over the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has only further threatened the viability of this already fragile mechanism. Inside Syria, Russia has built considerable influence in Damascus compared to the UN, other humanitarian groups, and international aid donors. In fact, Russia has developed an insulated and self-sustaining [aid ecosystem \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/five-years-of-russian-aid-in-syria-proves-moscow-is-an-unreliable-partner/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/five-years-of-russian-aid-in-syria-proves-moscow-is-an-unreliable-partner/) of at least 26 government and masked-government entities in Syria that have delivered aid 3,090 times to at least 731 communities around the country since 2016. If the cross-border resolution fails to be renewed, there is a conceivable and not so distant future in which this Russian aid ecosystem will take a more prominent role in aid implementation in Syria.

But information on how the Russian state approaches its foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA) is woefully out of date in preparation for this scenario. The most recent [report \(https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2018298791/2018298791.pdf\)](https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2018298791/2018298791.pdf) from the U.S. Law Library of Congress on Russia's FHA is from 2011, while the latest [publication \(https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/582039/EPRS_ATA\(2016\)582039_EN.pdf\)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/582039/EPRS_ATA(2016)582039_EN.pdf) from the European Union (EU) is from 2016. While previous [articles \(https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/Russian-Foreign-Humanitarian-Assistance/\)](https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/Russian-Foreign-Humanitarian-Assistance/) by the author have attempted to explore Russia's humanitarian capacity in Syria, this article will aim to provide an updated view of the situation, describing four ways in which the Russian state approaches its notion of FHA. Ideally, this will help policymakers identify potential opportunities to counter Russia's problematic actions in the humanitarian space in Syria and elsewhere.

These conclusions draw from publicly available sources from the Russian government, key figures in Russia's aid community, and information collected from the websites of the entities mentioned in this article. While there are clear limitations with using open sources, such as the inaccuracy of self-reported or politically skewed information, they can still provide a valuable window into

Russia's motivations toward providing aid in Syria and the mechanisms that govern its aid operations.

The Four Ways Russia Views FHA

- Russia's understanding of FHA is young.** The origins of the Russian Federation's foreign humanitarian assistance can be traced back to the final years of the Soviet Union with the [establishment \(https://www.mchs.gov.ru/history/\)](https://www.mchs.gov.ru/history/) of the Russian Rescue Corps (RRC) in December 1990. Set up in response to the growing number of natural and industrial disasters in the USSR during the 1980s, the RRC soon became the [Ministry of Emergency Situations \(EMERCOM\) \(https://www.mchs.gov.ru/history/\)](https://www.mchs.gov.ru/history/) in 1994 as Russia's main responder to natural and human-made disasters domestically and abroad. Nearly ten years later, Russia released its first ever regulations guiding [the provision of FHA \(http://government.ru/docs/all/142009/\)](http://government.ru/docs/all/142009/) in 2000, and subsequently released its first ever [policy on FHA \(https://www.minfin.ru/common/img/uploaded/library/2007/06/concept_eng.pdf\)](https://www.minfin.ru/common/img/uploaded/library/2007/06/concept_eng.pdf) in 2007. Compared to the United States, which first established FHA policies in 1961 through [the Foreign Assistance Act \(https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/faa\)](https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/faa) that laid the groundwork for USAID, Russian FHA is in its infancy.
- Russian notions of FHA are more expansive than many other actors in the humanitarian community.** What the Russian state terms 'international humanitarian cooperation'—its version of FHA—tends to have a much broader meaning compared to other humanitarian entities. Not only does Russia's international humanitarian cooperation include emergency responses to [natural disasters \(https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/vse-novosti/4017467\)](https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/vse-novosti/4017467) and [conflicts zones \(https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/novosti/4015061\)](https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/novosti/4015061), as many in the rest of the world would recognize it, but it also encompasses [international development \(https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/64542\)](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/64542), [peacekeeping \(https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/11/russia-in-review-putins-peacekeepers.html\)](https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/11/russia-in-review-putins-peacekeepers.html), and 'public diplomacy [\(https://risingpowersproject.com/the-russian-approach-to-public-diplomacy-and-humanitarian-cooperation/\)](https://risingpowersproject.com/the-russian-approach-to-public-diplomacy-and-humanitarian-cooperation/)'—i.e. using cultural activities like academic, artistic, literary, language, and musical exchanges to promote a more positive view of Russia. Indeed, Yevgeny Primakov Jr., former head of the Russian Humanitarian Mission, stated in a media interview in 2019 that perceptions of humanitarian assistance in Russia are often more ["associated with the sphere of culture \(https://newizv.ru/article/general/08-04-2019/evgeniy-primakov-hvatit-nam-balalaek-v-gumanitarnoy-politike?fbclid=IwAROGJPMryV36sxeJ68Fm2AXccOg0iqHNDxunHZQeLbxIBsb_Luk6b535H6s&id=evgeniy-primakov-hvatit-nam-balalaek-v-gumanitarnoy-politike&published_date=08\)"](https://newizv.ru/article/general/08-04-2019/evgeniy-primakov-hvatit-nam-balalaek-v-gumanitarnoy-politike?fbclid=IwAROGJPMryV36sxeJ68Fm2AXccOg0iqHNDxunHZQeLbxIBsb_Luk6b535H6s&id=evgeniy-primakov-hvatit-nam-balalaek-v-gumanitarnoy-politike&published_date=08) than delivering food or medicine. As such, the Russian state's broader interpretations of FHA often do not align with the narrow definition of humanitarian action followed by much of the rest of the world, a definition that focuses on saving lives, alleviating suffering, or improving conditions.
- For many Russians, FHA is viewed negatively.** Humanitarian assistance is not always associated with morally right actions in Russia as it is in much of the wider humanitarian community. Instead, one word often associated with humanitarian assistance in Russia is [shame \(https://www.ridus.ru/news/244461\)](https://www.ridus.ru/news/244461), a perception that largely developed after the large and ["humiliating \(https://www.trrussian.com/mnenie/kak-zapad-postavlyal-gumanitarnuyu-pomosh-byvshim-respublikam-sssr-7920186\)"](https://www.trrussian.com/mnenie/kak-zapad-postavlyal-gumanitarnuyu-pomosh-byvshim-respublikam-sssr-7920186) international humanitarian [outreach \(https://amcmuseum.org/history/provide-hope/\)](https://amcmuseum.org/history/provide-hope/) sent to Russia following the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s. Such humanitarian efforts were often undermined by the extensive [corruption and profiteering \(https://www-trrussian-com.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/g/mnenie/kak-zapad-postavlyal-gumanitarnuyu-pomosh-byvshim-respublikam-sssr-7920186?_x_tr_sl=ru&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp\)](https://www.trrussian-com.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/g/mnenie/kak-zapad-postavlyal-gumanitarnuyu-pomosh-byvshim-respublikam-sssr-7920186?_x_tr_sl=ru&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp) of former Soviet government officials, a reality that likely contributes to the lack of trust in the altruistic motivations of humanitarian aid that is still felt today in [Russian society \(https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf_russia_givingreport_eng_final_web.pdf\)](https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf_russia_givingreport_eng_final_web.pdf). Importantly, Russian government documents make no mention of the four [humanitarian principles \(https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM_Humanitarian%2520Principles_Eng.pdf\)](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM_Humanitarian%2520Principles_Eng.pdf)—humanity, impartiality, independence, and neutrality—that govern much of the global humanitarian sector's work and is the essence of what makes humanitarian action largely trusted and respected.
- Russia views FHA as a tool to achieve its foreign policy goals.** Since Soviet times, the Russian state has viewed FHA as a tool to improve its image as a credible global power. Indeed, this legacy was omnipresent in Russia's [2007 FHA policy \(https://www.minfin.ru/common/upload/library/2007/06/concept_eng.pdf\)](https://www.minfin.ru/common/upload/library/2007/06/concept_eng.pdf), with seven of the nine overarching goals mentioned in effect describing how FHA and international development can be used to "promote an unbiased attitude to the Russian Federation in the international community" and strengthen international cooperation. After Russia's first year in Syria (2016), this link between FHA and foreign policy objectives became even more explicit, with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs [policy \(https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248\)](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248) stating that FHA was an "integral part of [Russia's] effort to achieve foreign policy objectives." In other words, FHA had become a key soft power

tool for the Russian state. When exploring FHA from the perspective of Russian military commentators, the outlook is even more stark. Humanitarian aid is often described as part of a hybrid warfare—non-conventional warfare used by Russia’s adversaries to undermine its foreign policy objectives. Valery Gerasimov, the head of the Russian Army, **stated** (https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf) as much in a Russian military journal in 2016, describing humanitarian activities as “military means of a concealed character.” Consequently, Russia also sees the humanitarian aid it provides as part of its own hybrid warfare tool kit to help it reach its foreign policy goals abroad. In 2017, a **RAND report** (https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf) described the **Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center** (<https://www.ihc.rs/>) as an example of Russia’s use of FHA in hybrid warfare.

Russian FHA in the Syrian Context

It is clear from publicly available sources that the Russian state does not align with the international community’s concept of humanitarian assistance. At best, Russia’s own FHA policies compel the state to disrupt efforts taken by other entities in the broader aid community. At worst, Russia’s aid apparatus—especially its military, which provides the **majority** (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russian-aid-in-syria-an-underestimated-instrument-of-soft-power/>) of Russia’s aid in Syria—aims to overcome the threat it perceives in the international community’s aid efforts. In any case, Russia will likely continue to prioritize its own self-interest over the needs of vulnerable people in northwest Syria, regardless of whether the cross-border resolution is extended in January 2023 or not.

On the ground, many Syrians **recognize** (<https://www.voanews.com/a/syrians-fear-effects-of-russia-blocking-aid-to-rebel-area-/6649727.html>) that Russia uses its aid as a political tool to punish or reward those in need. But Russia is likely unconcerned with these community views, much preferring to use its aid actions to amplify a positive narrative to a wider audience, one that deflects away from its hard military and political image in Syria. Many of Russia’s main media outlets regularly promote **stories** (https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1211723-%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A5%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B5%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25AD%25D9%2588%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B1%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7/) about Russia’s expansive aid actions in Syria in the Arabic language.

While it can be easy to underestimate this strategy compared to the international community’s commitment to meaningful FHA, examples from other contexts show how potent Russia’s approach could be in Syria. In a **2020 poll** (<https://www.rferl.org/a/who-gives-the-most-aid-to-serbia-/30660859.html>) from Serbia, respondents named Russia and China as two of the top contributors of foreign aid to the country, when in reality such aid overwhelmingly came from the EU. In the lead up to the poll, the Russian state had only conducted a handful of well-publicized aid deliveries in **2014** (<https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/vse-novosti/4018857>), **2015** (<https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/vse-novosti/4017376>) and **2017** (<https://en.mchs.gov.ru/for-mass-media/vse-novosti/4014914>), in addition to promoting the establishment of the previously mentioned **Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center** (<https://www.ihc.rs/>). With Moscow having long invested in utilizing Arabic language **media** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4209>) to promote pro-Russian perspectives to regional audiences, it would not be inconceivable that a similar process could be seen in relation to Russia’s aid provision in Syria.

If Russia’s insular and self-sustaining **shadow aid ecosystem** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploring-russias-humanitarian-intervention-syria>) becomes more dominant in Syria in the event of the UN cross-border aid resolution not being passed, Russia’s entrenched and divergent approach to humanitarian aid will become even more challenging to engage with. This ominous prospect is something that should not be overlooked or underestimated by the international community. ❖

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