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International Aid in Transitional Syria: Traps Donors Must Avoid

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Summary

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 transformed the operating environment for international aid in Syria. Frontlines disappeared, previously inaccessible areas became accessible and donors began shifting from humanitarian relief towards early recovery, reconstruction and support for refugee return. Yet greater access has not produced a corresponding increase in aid volume. Instead, the transition has coincided with shrinking humanitarian funding, persistent banking constraints, institutional re-centralisation and pressure to redirect resources across the country.

The experience of north-west Syria (NWS) offers lessons for navigating this transition. This policy brief connects that experience to national challenges relating to funding, the geographical redistribution of aid and institutional capacity. For more than a decade, the UN- and NGO-led humanitarian response across the Türkiye–Syria border developed localised systems for service delivery, procurement, financial transfers and remote accountability under exceptionally difficult conditions, operating alongside de facto governance structures dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its Syrian Salvation Government. The rapid integration of this system into a Damascus-centred "Whole of Syria" response risks dismantling capacities that remain essential to effective aid delivery.

This policy brief identifies four traps that donors should avoid in Syria:

- **A premature transition** that combines shrinking humanitarian funding with a rapid shift towards early recovery, reconstruction and support for refugee return before basic needs are met and essential services have improved.
- **Sanctions relief on paper without functioning financial channels**: removing formal restrictions while the correspondent banking system and the domestic financial system remain unable to transmit aid and investment reliably.
- **Zero-sum geographical redistribution**: extending aid to newly accessible areas by reducing support to still-vulnerable communities, particularly in NWS.
- **Re-centralisation and de-localisation**: relocating international operations to Damascus while weakening Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and subnational institutions and eroding the expertise developed through the cross-border response.

Donors should support humanitarian relief, early recovery and reconstruction simultaneously according to conditions on the ground. Donors and their partners should protect essential humanitarian services; establish functional financial channels; strengthen local and subnational delivery capacity; allocate scarce resources transparently according to need across all governorates; and support the return of refugees and internally displaced people only where independent protection and technical assessments confirm that conditions are suitable for return. The central challenge is to ensure that international engagement strengthens rather than dismantles the institutions and operational capacities on which effective recovery depends.

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Introduction: three competing logics, one fragile transition

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 ended more than five decades of authoritarian rule and marked a turning point after nearly 15 years of violent conflict, fundamentally altering the institutional environment for the aid response in Syria. Across European capitals, multilateral development banks and regional donor headquarters, this political transformation prompted renewed efforts to engage with Syria's transition. Yet this political and institutional engagement has not been matched by an increase in humanitarian funding; instead, greater access has coincided with declining resources for the response, against a backdrop of global humanitarian funding cuts. The concern in Syria is therefore not that the funding contraction is unique to the country but that it coincides with a major political transition and the reorganisation of aid delivery. Alongside this global contraction, donors and UN agencies are increasingly framing the aid response in Syria around early recovery, changing funding priorities and programming approaches before humanitarian needs have substantially declined.

Although humanitarian needs, geopolitical interests and commercial opportunities might all be expected to encourage greater support, they do not necessarily translate into a shared commitment to financing the humanitarian response: Diplomatic engagement and prospective investment can expand even as relief budgets shrink. International engagement with post-Assad Syria is therefore shaped by three distinct and only loosely coordinated donor logics, each operating at a different speed and answering to different domestic constituencies:

- **The humanitarian logic:** This is driven by acute, life-threatening needs across a population in which more than seven million people face severe food insecurity and only 18 per cent are food secure (WFP, 2026a). This logic is needs-based and cyclical, yet it is currently operating within an environment of severe cuts to global humanitarian funding.
- **The geopolitical and strategic logic:** This logic is driven by Western and Gulf donors seeking a stable, non-radicalised and internationally aligned transition. This is reflected in high-level diplomatic gestures, such as the European Union's (EU) reinstatement of its Cooperation Agreement with Syria. This logic is milestone-based, rewarding visible political developments, such as constitutional declarations, security arrangements and administrative appointments, regardless of whether service delivery and institutional capacity on the ground have kept pace.
- **The economic and commercial logic:** This logic reflects the interests of foreign commercial entities, regional investors and development finance institutions seeking reconstruction contracts, energy concessions and access to trade routes. This logic prioritises commercial returns, although risk tolerance varies: Regulated investors remain sensitive to residual legal exposure, weaknesses in financial governance and institutional instability.

These three tracks frequently work at cross-purposes. While diplomatic bodies declare the crisis "over" and commercial actors search for bankable infrastructure assets, the humanitarian system is undergoing severe retrenchment. The academic literature on post-conflict transitions cautions that the immediate post-transition window is a critical juncture at which institutional capacity, governance legitimacy and the boundaries of external aid are contested and renegotiated (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). Where state capacity has been hollowed out, rapid shifts towards development-oriented approaches frequently falter and can have severe unintended consequences (Ndikumana, 2016). The humanitarian–development–peace nexus offers a framework for coordinating aid across these overlapping needs. However, as Mühlberger (2025, pp. 28-30, 34-35) shows in the cases of Iraq and Libya, divergent mandates, financing channels and institutional systems complicate its implementation, while humanitarian needs persist despite declining relief funding. For Syria, this

means coordinating humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding around shared, context-specific outcomes rather than treating the transition simply as a handover from relief to recovery.

In Syria, this critical juncture is marked by a mismatch between expanded political and territorial access and the capacity to translate it into effective assistance. Humanitarian funding has contracted amid global aid cuts, while the rapid reorganisation of the response has disrupted established delivery arrangements and exposed persistent institutional weaknesses. NWS, where a cross-border humanitarian ecosystem operated for more than a decade under a fragmented and politically constrained de facto governance order, provides an indispensable evidence base for international donors. This brief therefore proceeds in three steps. It first traces the roles of key actors in NWS before and after the transition, because the operational dynamics, institutional frictions and coordination bottlenecks that have emerged since December 2024 are the source of the lessons that follow. It then distils these lessons into four structural traps that await donors expanding their engagement across Syria and translates each trap into observable warning signs and indicators that donors can monitor. Finally, it sets out actionable recommendations for bilateral donors, multilateral institutions, UN agencies, implementing NGOs and the transitional authorities.

Lessons from north-west Syria: who did what and what changed?

From 2012, as the Assad regime lost control of NWS, international aid to opposition-held areas was delivered across the border from Türkiye. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2165 (July 2014) formalised this arrangement, authorising UN operations through the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam crossings and establishing a dedicated coordination hub in Gaziantep. Within this system, roles were clearly distributed. Donors financed the response through pooled funds and bilateral grants managed from Türkiye; UN agencies coordinated clusters remotely; international NGOs acted primarily as intermediaries; and Syrian NGOs – many founded by displaced doctors, engineers and teachers – became the principal implementers on the ground. In the absence of a central state, municipal councils, local service providers and technocratic bodies such as the Idlib and Aleppo health and education directorates managed basic services on a large scale for a population that grew to more than four million people, more than half of them displaced (Shaban, 2025a).

This system did not operate outside politics. In much of Idlib and other areas of NWS, HTS exercised de facto coercive control, while the Syrian Salvation Government performed civilian administrative functions, including licensing, local regulation and administration of selected service sectors. Humanitarian organisations therefore worked within a constrained and closely regulated operating environment. Yet Syrian NGOs, municipal and service bodies, and technical directorates retained operational knowledge, delivery networks and close ties to local communities that were indispensable to the cross-border response.

The system faced repeated constraints. Security Council authorisation was narrowed to a single crossing in 2020. Following the February 2023 earthquake, the Syrian government permitted UN deliveries through two additional crossings. The Council's authorisation for Bab al-Hawa expired in July 2023 and was not renewed after Russia vetoed a proposed extension; subsequent UN cross-border operations relied on permission from the Assad government. Yet the humanitarian system in NWS adapted: Remote management drove the development of advanced third-party monitoring and digital verification tools; cash and voucher programming leveraged resilient local markets; and funds moved through the Turkish postal system (PTT) and informal money transfer (*hawala*) networks because no correspondent banking channel existed (Shaban, 2025b).

The fall of the Assad regime changed all of this within months. Donors and UN agencies consolidated the cross-border and Damascus-based responses into a single "Whole of Syria" framework coordinated from Damascus; the Gaziantep hub was wound down; international NGOs relocated their headquarters to Syria and reclaimed direct implementation roles; and Syrian and international NGOs had to re-register under a licensing system split between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. An alternative would have been to integrate the two responses gradually into a national framework while retaining subnational coordination and Syrian-led delivery capacity. These institutional shifts coincided with the sharpest contraction of humanitarian funding in the history of the response to the Syrian crisis, with sanctions relief that has so far had little effect on the banking system, and with intense pressure from refugee-hosting countries for refugees to return. Viewed against this timeline, the experience of NWS yields four lessons, each of which points directly to a trap that donors risk falling into across Syria:

- **Needs did not disappear with the frontlines.** Material deprivation, physical destruction and contamination by explosive ordnance in NWS persist, while funding priorities and donor programming categories have shifted towards early recovery and support for return, together creating the premature transition trap (Trap 1).
- **Markets worked; the financial channels did not.** Vetted local procurement and index-linked cash assistance consistently outperformed slow, centralised in-kind pipelines, but every transfer depended on precarious transfer channels through the PTT and *hawala* networks. Sanctions relief that leaves this financial architecture untouched reproduces the same fragility nationwide (Trap 2).
- **Geographical expansion without additional funding is redistribution, not expansion.** NWS, with the largest displaced population in the country, has been a net loser from the shift to the "Whole of Syria" framework, as agencies moved assets south without providing new resources (Trap 3).
- **Subnational, localised delivery worked and is being dismantled.** Municipal and technocratic coordination, Syrian-led implementation and institutionalised third-party monitoring delivered services at scale under extreme conditions. The relocation to Damascus has instead brought re-centralisation, direct implementation by international agencies, wage deflation, staff poaching and an acute loss of institutional memory following the dissolution of the cross-border platforms (Trap 4).

The traps donors must avoid

These lessons crystallise into four interconnected structural traps. Each is already observable in NWS and in the newly accessible governorates, and each can be avoided elsewhere in the country if donors recognise the warning signs in time.

Trap 1: Premature transition from humanitarian relief to recovery and return

The central risk in transitional Syria is that donors treat political change and expanded territorial access as evidence that humanitarian needs have receded. As outlined in the introduction, donors and UN agencies are increasingly framing the response around early recovery while humanitarian funding contracts. These developments require separate scrutiny: Declining budgets constrain the volume of assistance, while changing priorities influence which needs, activities and institutions receive support.

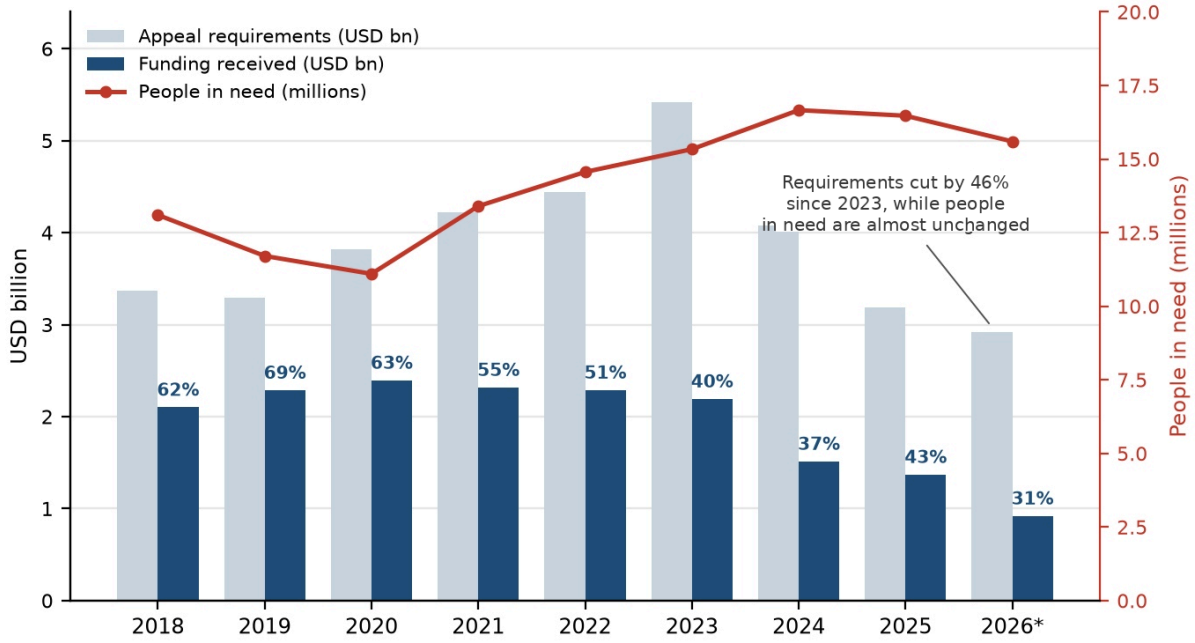
The funding pressures are already visible:

- **Cuts to essential humanitarian assistance.** The World Food Programme (WFP) has reduced emergency food assistance from 1.3 million to 650,000 people and ended a bread-subsidy programme that had supported up to four million people daily (WFP, 2026b). WFP attributed these reductions to funding

shortfalls rather than a commensurate decline in need.

- **A shrinking response amid persistent need**. Between 2023 and 2026, the funding response to Syria's coordinated humanitarian appeal declined from USD 5.4 billion to USD 2.9 billion, while the number of people assessed to be in need remained broadly stable at around 15 to 16 million. By late September 2026, only about USD 0.9 billion had been received, covering less than one-third of the 2026 requirements (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Funding requirements for Syria's coordinated humanitarian appeals, funding received and people in need, 2018-2026



Note: Percentages of funding requirements met are shown above the funding bars; *2026 funding received and coverage figures reflect the position as of 25 September 2026 (year to date).

Source: Financial Tracking Service (FTS, 2026)

These figures demonstrate a decline in humanitarian funding received and planned provision despite persistent need; they do not establish that resources have been transferred to early recovery. The funding shortfall also reflects a broader global contraction in humanitarian aid rather than a trend unique to Syria. WFP explicitly attributes its reductions to funding shortfalls, while the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs describes unprecedented funding cuts across the global response.

Humanitarian relief, early recovery and reconstruction should therefore operate alongside one another according to conditions on the ground rather than as sequential stages. Early recovery and social cohesion can contribute to longer-term peacebuilding (Biehler, Kobler, & Meier, 2023; Mross, Fiedler, & Grävingholt, 2022), but their value depends on how they complement urgent assistance. A transition towards development-oriented programming does not remove the need for food assistance, healthcare, water, shelter and protection where acute deprivation persists.

Two related risks illustrate the consequences of moving faster than material conditions permit:

- **Premature and unsustainable return.** Political pressure in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and EU member states is increasing support for refugee return, camp clearance and decamping. Yet many prospective return areas

remain characterised by destroyed housing, explosive ordnance, damaged water and electricity networks, a lack of schools and healthcare, and weak local markets. Support for return should be guided by independently assessed conditions and households' voluntary choices rather than treating movement out of displacement sites as evidence of recovery.

- **The completed-asset illusion.** Short-cycle recovery projects can prioritise physical outputs while neglecting the recurrent costs that make them useful. Repairing a clinic without funding staff, medicines and other recurrent operating costs or rehabilitating a water pumping station without provision for fuel, maintenance and tariff arrangements creates a physical output rather than a functioning service. Such projects can leave communities with abandoned liabilities rather than durable recovery.

The practical implication is not to postpone early recovery but to combine it with continued humanitarian assistance and credible service financing. Donors should assess proposed funding shifts in terms of their likely effects on essential services, finance recovery packages that include recurrent operating costs and align support for return with verified standards for safety, housing and basic services. Where budgets cannot expand, transparent prioritisation and phased programme changes are necessary to prevent the transition from creating avoidable gaps in assistance.

Trap 2: The "Paper Relief" sanctions and correspondent banking mirage

A critical operational challenge concerns the financial architecture through which international aid and investment are expected to flow. The legal landscape has evolved rapidly: The EU removed broad economic sanctions in 2025 while retaining targeted restrictions; the United States terminated comprehensive sanctions in June 2025, repealed the Caesar Act in December 2025 and rescinded the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation in August 2026.

However, sanctions relief remains largely on paper. The easing of legal restrictions has not been matched by the restoration of ordinary international correspondent banking relationships. International commercial banks remain reluctant to engage because of compliance concerns and de-risking practices, pricing in high residual risks despite the easing of legal restrictions. The Syrian domestic banking sector remains severely dysfunctional, lacking foreign exchange liquidity, suffering from weak supervision and facing limited access to international payment channels. The International Monetary Fund has underscored the need for comprehensive banking legislation, asset-quality reviews and robust anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorist financing frameworks, while the World Bank's USD 100 million financial-sector modernisation grant, approved in August 2026, highlights the early stage of structural banking reform.

Donors who design multi-million-euro early-recovery grants without establishing viable channels for transferring funds force implementing partners into precarious and potentially non-compliant workarounds. These may include continued reliance on the PTT, which charges high transaction fees, enforces restrictive withdrawal caps and cannot legally serve operations in central or southern Syria, or a return to informal, unregulated value-transfer networks (*hawala*). Such arrangements raise transaction costs, create legal and compliance risks, and make the predictable, multi-year financing required for recovery difficult to sustain. They also distort the wider investment environment: When legitimate donors and regulated, risk-conscious investors cannot use safe and transparent channels, opaque capital flows and short-term investments seeking rapid returns may face fewer practical barriers. This risks directing investment towards quick profits rather than essential services, productive activity and long-term recovery in Syria. Restoring functional correspondent banking relationships is therefore not a technical adjunct to recovery; it is a prerequisite for directing aid and investment through accountable channels and supporting durable economic recovery.

Trap 3: The zero-sum "Whole of Syria" redistribution trap

As formerly regime-held governorates became accessible, donors and UN agencies shifted towards a unified "Whole of Syria" operational framework. In principle, expanding aid to vulnerable populations irrespective of geography is a humanitarian imperative. In practice, however, this geographical expansion has proceeded without a corresponding increase in overall funding.

An overall funding envelope that is shrinking in real terms is now spread across a vastly expanded operational caseload within Syria. Under the "Whole of Syria" umbrella, international agencies have shifted resources and operational assets towards newly accessible populations in Damascus, Homs, Hama and the coastal governorates while cutting programmes in the north-west. The result is a zero-sum redistribution of aid rather than an increase in the overall volume of assistance across the country.

NWS, which hosts more than two million displaced people and continues to face extensive destruction and humanitarian need, has consequently seen a substantial reduction in aid resources. Agency withdrawals and programme closures have affected primary healthcare, water and sanitation services, and food assistance, leaving already vulnerable communities with fewer essential services.

This retrenchment is also generating a growing sense of abandonment and anger among communities in north-west Syria. Rather than benefiting from an anticipated "peace dividend" in the form of improved services and living conditions, many residents perceive the transition as bringing further material losses. Before the collapse of the Assad regime, the region had developed a relatively established ecosystem of cross-border aid, Turkish-linked markets, local service providers and Syrian NGOs. Although conditions remained extremely difficult, many residents experienced more stable prices and more consistent access to some basic services than during the subsequent transition. Expectations that the end of the regime would improve living conditions have therefore collided with rising costs, deteriorating services and declining international aid. For communities that endured years of conflict and displacement, the perception that international attention and resources are now shifting elsewhere risks reinforcing a sense that NWS is once again being marginalised.

The problem is not the expansion of aid to other parts of Syria but the allocation of shrinking resources through abrupt, politically driven shifts rather than on the basis of comparable assessments of need across all governorates. A credible "Whole of Syria" approach should extend support to newly accessible populations while protecting essential services for communities that remain acutely vulnerable, including in NWS. Where additional funding is not available, donors and humanitarian agencies should prioritise assistance transparently according to the severity of need, displacement levels and service gaps rather than geography or political visibility. They should also phase any reductions so that they do not trigger avoidable breakdowns in food assistance, healthcare, water supply or sanitation services. Otherwise, reallocating aid without clear criteria or transition arrangements risks deepening regional grievances, eroding confidence in the transition and undermining longer-term peacebuilding.

Trap 4: The re-centralisation and de-localisation trap

Syria's political transition requires the gradual restoration of a coherent national framework for governance, coordination and the restoration of public services. A nationally coordinated response should incorporate existing local delivery capacity through a phased integration process that avoids gaps in essential services. During the conflict, the cross-border response developed decentralised delivery systems in which Syrian NGOs, municipal bodies and technical directorates provided services at scale under highly constrained conditions. The current transition risks losing those operational capacities before credible national systems are able to replace them.

This does not mean that the former cross-border system was politically neutral or that its local institutions operated free from coercion. In much of NWS, humanitarian and service-delivery actors worked under the de facto control of HTS and the regulatory authority of the Syrian Salvation Government. However, the flaws and constraints of that governance environment do not negate the operational value of the Syrian NGOs, technical bodies, municipal networks and accountability mechanisms that developed within it. Re-centralisation should therefore not be assumed to produce more effective governance; without a credible institutional handover, it may instead dismantle existing delivery systems before national systems are ready to take over their functions.

A unified national framework is necessary, but it should be built on subsidiarity and structured handover: Functions should move to national institutions only where they can be performed at least as effectively, accountably and accessibly as they are by the local systems they would replace.

Moving headquarters to Damascus is frequently conflated with localisation. However, an office in Damascus is not, by itself, localisation. A humanitarian structure is truly localised only when national actors share authority over agenda-setting, project budgets, risk management and institutional governance. As international NGOs and UN agencies establish formal headquarters in Damascus, they are increasingly reducing funding for Syrian partners' management and overhead costs, reclaiming direct implementation roles and reducing experienced Syrian NGOs to short-term subcontractors.

Furthermore, the rapid relocation of international agencies has disrupted the humanitarian labour market. Interviewees reported salary reductions of 30 to 50 per cent for Syrian staff relocating from Türkiye to Syria, relative to their previous Türkiye -based salaries, with organisations citing lower local operating costs. International agencies have also recruited skilled personnel from ministries, municipal directorates and local NGOs. Field evidence points to sudden redundancies, unresolved cross-border social insurance arrangements and an acute loss of institutional memory. Treating relocation as a purely administrative exercise rather than an institutional transition disrupts delivery capacity across the country.

Recognising the traps in time: warning signs and indicators

Table 1 translates the four traps into observable warning signs and a small set of indicators that donors, UN agencies and implementing partners can track across Syria. None of these indicators requires new data systems; most can be derived from existing financial tracking, cluster reporting and partner audits.

Table 1: Warning signs and monitoring indicators for the four traps

Trap	Warning signs already visible	Indicators donors should track
1. Premature transition trap	Emergency food assistance halved and bread subsidy ended while needs remain unchanged; the amount requested through humanitarian funding appeals fell by 46%* compared with 2023; early-recovery and return initiatives advance despite destroyed housing, contamination by explosive ordnance and non-functional services; rehabilitated facilities lack operating budgets.	Share of total funding for Syria allocated to humanitarian relief and early recovery; funding per person in need; coverage of food assistance, healthcare and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services; independently published return-area assessments of housing conditions, contamination by explosive ordnance and access to basic services; share of rehabilitated facilities with funding for recurrent costs still in place 12 months after rehabilitation; proportion of returnees who become displaced again.
2. The "Paper Relief" sanctions and correspondent banking mirage	Legal restrictions lifted, but no correspondent banking relationships restored; NGOs still dependent on the PTT and *hawala*.	Number of active correspondent banking relationships with Syrian banks; average transaction cost and processing time for NGO fund transfers; share of programme funds moving through formal channels.
3. Zero-sum "Whole of Syria" redistribution trap	Agencies relocating assets from NWS to newly accessible governorates without additional funding; clinic closures and withdrawal of water-trucking services in camps.	Funding per person in need by governorate; number of functioning primary health facilities and water-trucking sites in NWS camps compared with a 2024 baseline; net change in total aid funding in Syria.
4. Re-centralisation and de- localisation trap	Salaries reduced by 30 to 50% for Syrian staff relocating from Türkiye; Syrian NGOs reduced to subcontractors; Gaziantep hub dissolved without a structured handover.	Share of grants awarded directly to Syrian NGOs (target ≥35%); overhead costs paid to national partners; turnover rate among Syrian staff; former cross-border staff in cluster leadership.

Source: Author's calculations; *based on FTS (2026)

Actionable policy recommendations

The following recommendations address the four traps identified above. They should be pursued together: Protecting humanitarian baselines requires viable financial channels; needs-based allocation requires transparent monitoring; and national coordination requires locally grounded delivery capacity.

- **Bilateral and multilateral donors and Western governments**

  Addressing Traps 1 and 3: Protect minimum humanitarian services, including food assistance, primary healthcare, and water and sanitation services, in all high-vulnerability areas while support for early recovery and return expands. Where funding cannot be increased, allocate resources transparently according to the severity of need, displacement levels and service gaps, and phase reductions to avoid abrupt service collapse. In parallel, work with financial authorities and commercial banks to establish safe, transparent channels for verified transfers to Syria.

- **Syrian financial authorities, multilateral financial institutions and bilateral development banks**

  Addressing Trap 2: Syrian financial authorities should lead banking-sector reforms, supported by multilateral financial institutions and bilateral development banks, to enable formal transfers and responsible investment. Priorities include asset-quality reviews, digital clearing capacity and safeguards against money laundering and terrorist financing.

- **UN agencies and the Humanitarian Country Team**

  Addressing Traps 1, 3 and 4: Publish a quarterly transition dashboard showing humanitarian and early-recovery funding, funding per person in need by governorate, service coverage, transfer costs, direct funding to Syrian NGOs and independently assessed conditions in areas of return. Use these indicators to protect humanitarian baselines, guide transparent needs-based allocations and ensure that any support for return is conditional on verified standards for safety, housing and basic services being met.

- **Donors, international and Syrian NGOs, and transitional authorities**

  Addressing Trap 4: Build nationally coordinated but decentralised delivery systems by retaining subnational decision-making and local implementation where these remain more effective, accessible and accountable than centralised alternatives. Donors and international NGOs should provide Syrian NGOs with direct funding, full coverage for overhead costs and meaningful decision-making roles; transitional authorities should simplify registration and permit procedures, empower provincial coordination bodies and protect civil society autonomy. Cross-regional NGO partnerships, fair salary arrangements and continued use of remote monitoring and community feedback systems should support a structured handover rather than a loss of operational capacity.

Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime has removed the political and territorial barriers that fragmented the response to the Syrian crisis for 14 years, but it has not eliminated the conditions that made the response necessary. The experience of NWS since the fall of the Assad regime illustrates what happens when access expands while resources, financial infrastructure and local institutions contract: Essential assistance is withdrawn in the name of recovery, money cannot be legally transferred, vulnerable regions compete for scarce resources and a decade of hard-won localisation is undermined due to relocation.

The four traps identified in this brief and summarised in Table 1 are evident in the response, but their effects can still be mitigated and the traps can still be prevented from becoming further entrenched. Doing so requires changes in how donors prioritise needs, channel funds, allocate resources, support local partners and assess conditions for return. For the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the EU, and other bilateral and multilateral donors, the measure of successful re-engagement is therefore not the speed of the shift from relief to recovery or the visibility of a presence in Damascus, but whether aid reaches Syrians on the basis of verified need – through functioning channels and in ways that strengthen rather than displace the local institutions that sustained essential services in the country. An evidence-based transition, informed by the experience of NWS, offers a stronger foundation for recovery than one driven by political milestones or institutional relocation alone.

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