SYRIA
Data and analysis ecosystem

OVERVIEW

Since 2011, Syria's various conflicts have led to a multifaceted and prolonged humanitarian crisis with numerous stakeholders, shifting alliances, and divided geographies. Significant challenges and gaps remain despite the growing number of responders working in research and analysis. Navigating Syria's humanitarian data and analysis ecosystem is as intricate as navigating its political situation, as the complexity of the various protracted conflicts and the intensity of external influence have led to many security challenges and access constraints. These constraints have influenced the operating environment for data collection and analysis.
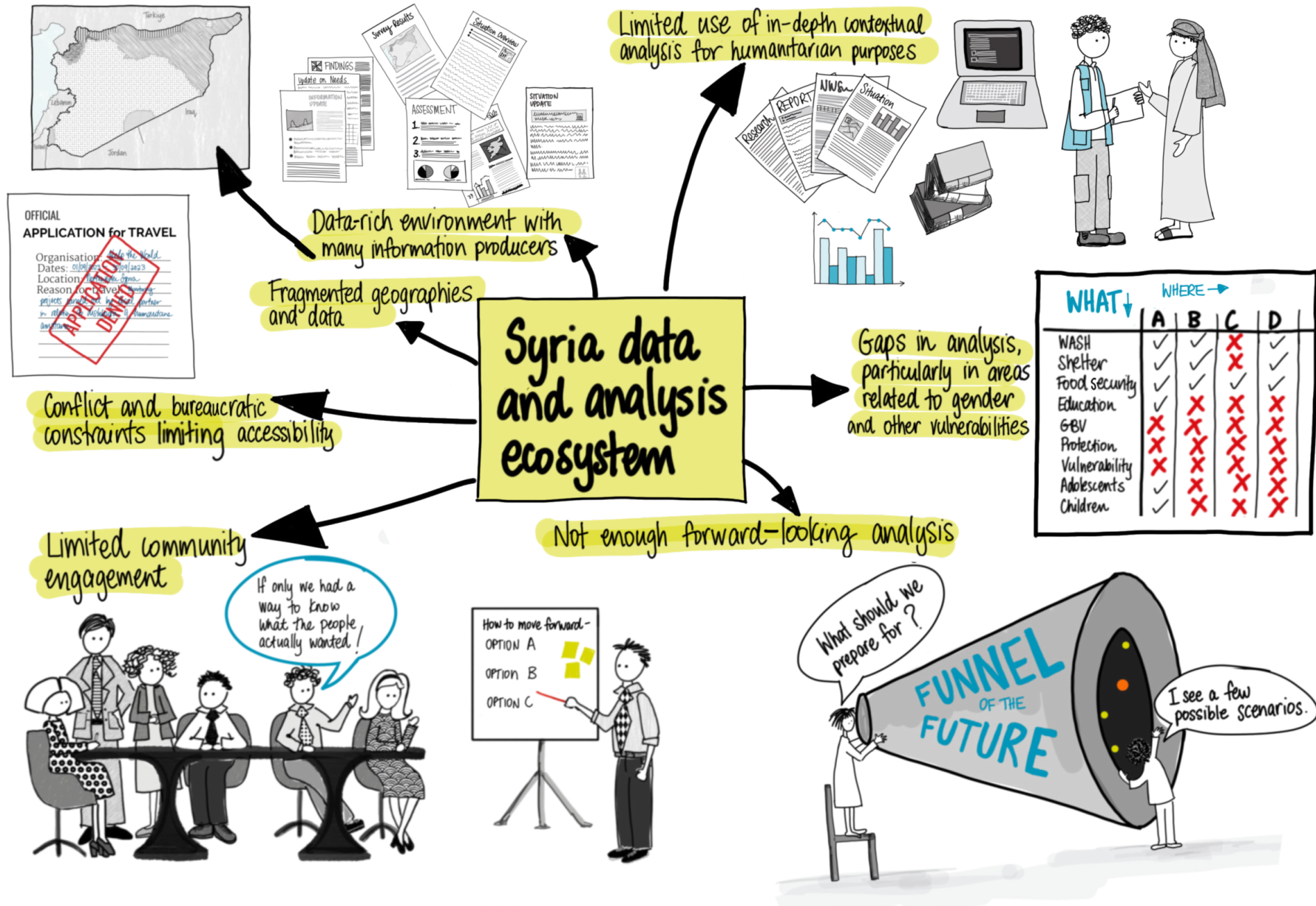
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Humanitarian analysis should be at the forefront of informing new donor strategies to reflect Syria's evolving situation.** It is impossible to design a humanitarian response without data and analysis sufficiently informing it. Funding for the humanitarian response is declining, making better analysis vital for prioritising the response.

- **An increased focus on conflict sensitivity and context knowledge could ensure that the humanitarian response in Syria, including data collection, does not inadvertently worsen conditions for Syrians.** To avoid this, humanitarian organisations should establish planning criteria that ensure that humanitarian assessments and analysis efforts work closely with existing dynamics.

- **Research, analysis, and data collection partnerships between international and Syrian-led organisations must shift from an implementation-focused relationship to an equitable partnership. This shift means involving local organisations in research design and validation.** Where appropriate, and in conflict-sensitive terms, donors may consider clearer requirements for localisation and capacity-building efforts and adapted mechanisms to allow national researchers and organisations to access funding directly.

- Survey fatigue is omnipresent and influences data quality. **Improved data-sharing protocols and the coordination of field data collection and research** could reduce the number of assessments and survey fatigue. This change would improve data quality and ensure that the humanitarian response respects the needs and desires of the people it serves.

- **Humanitarian workers need to increase their engagement with academic literature and publications from national and international think tanks.** This shift could offer multidimensional perspectives on improving Syria's analysis ecosystem.

- **More anticipatory analysis could strengthen emergency preparedness and contingency and strategic planning.** A forward-looking analysis is key for humanitarian responders to become more adaptable and responsive to context changes. This change could include outlooks, forecasting, and both sectoral and whole-of-sector threat and risk assessments.

- **Ensuring an inclusive work environment and fostering gender-inclusive networking and mentoring opportunities will strengthen the role of female researchers.** Those engaged in research and data collection could strengthen diversity and inclusivity in hiring practices to address structural barriers in recruitment. Making additional accommodations available for women would also address these barriers. Humanitarians involved in research and analysis may also develop networking and mentoring systems for women to provide guidance and support and create opportunities for knowledge-sharing, professional growth, and visibility.

- **More effort is necessary to ensure that women can safely reach research locations or for researchers to reach women where they are.** This could include establishing safe and secure transportation, adjusting research timelines to suit availability, or visiting women where they are most comfortable.

- **Ensure research and analysis includes an intersectional approach to vulnerability**, enabling policymakers, researchers, and humanitarian organisations to understand and address diverse and interconnected needs.

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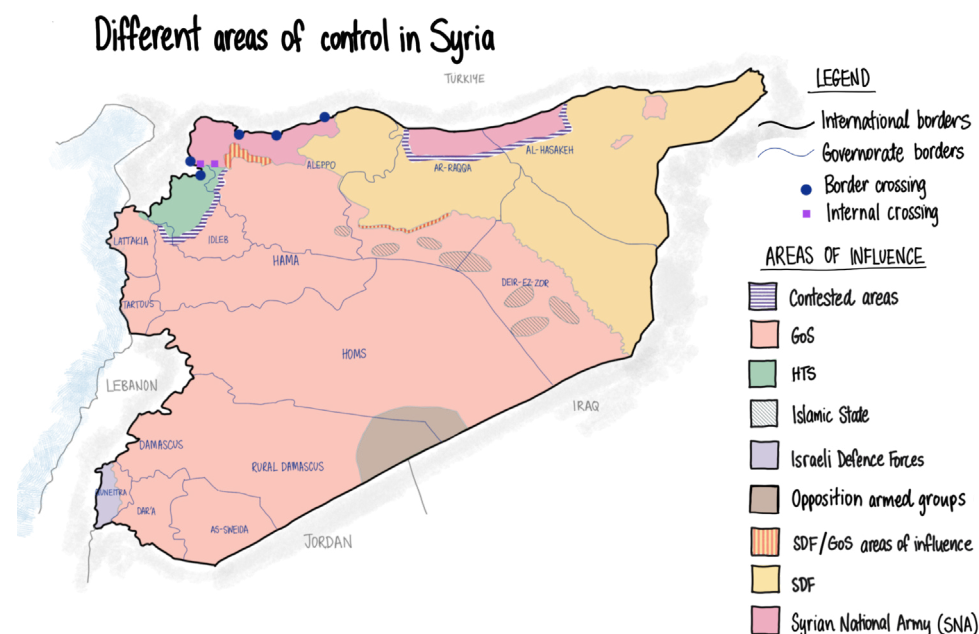# DATA AND ANALYSIS ECOSYSTEM OVERVIEW

Source: ACAPS

About this report

Aim: this report highlights the main information producers in Syria, the dynamics around data collection and analysis, and the associated challenges. It also seeks to improve the understanding of humanitarian analysis in Syria.

Methodology: this report is based on a tripartite methodology. The first involved a desk review of publicly available literature, including data and reports from UN agencies, national and international NGOs, the media, and academic sources. The second was a meta-analysis of key primary documents on the registry of available assessments for Northwest Syria from before and after the earthquake, as well as ReliefWeb reports published between 1 January and 30 June 2023. Finally, the last included 12 key informant interviews with humanitarian analysts and context experts to complement the literature review and enrich the analysis.

Scope: this report looks at information products, needs, and access constraints across Syria, including Northwest Syria (NWS), Northeast Syria (NES), and government-controlled areas.

Limitations: this report only focuses on publicly available information. The quantity of information produced since 2011 makes it impossible to include all available data sources and analyses on the Syrian humanitarian response. This report focuses on the most commonly available and frequently used data and information producers.

INFORMATION COLLECTION AMID SYRIA'S FRAGMENTED GEOGRAPHIES

Source: ACAPS. See full map on page 11.

Many factors limit the ability of humanitarians to collect data nationally, including the politicisation of data and the existence of rival governing bodies with control over different regions. Each area of political control has different bureaucratic requirements, significantly constraining data access.

Syria has grappled with a complex and protracted humanitarian crisis for 12 years. The Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES), also known as the Self Administration, has civil control of the northeast, but the Kurdish-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have military control (EUAA accessed 13/07/2023). The northwest region is divided into two areas of control: the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and its associated armed group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), control the greater Idleb area. The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and the Syrian National Army (SNA) run the areas north of Idleb and Aleppo, the latter of which is held by the Government of Syria (GoS). The Government of Türkiye maintains general oversight across this entire area (MEI 18/01/2023). In summary, the GoS controls around 60% of the country, the Syrian Democratic Forces control 30%, and HTS and the SNA control around 10% (ISPI 27/06/2023; Govt. Türkiye 07/08/2023).

The political context has severely limited how humanitarians can consolidate data nationally. Between 2018–2023, IOM hosted the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP), which collected data across Syria in government and opposition-controlled areas (Devex 12/05/2023). HNAP was crucial in providing regularly updated datasets on the population, IDPs, returnees, and humanitarian needs at the community level. Over 1,000 organisations involved in the humanitarian response could access the data. A lack of funding caused IOM to discontinue the programme, and there is also evidence that IOM faced difficulties in hosting the platform and maintaining a working relationship with the GoS (Devex 12/05/2023). This situation is a prime example of the complexities around data collection and the politics behind humanitarian access in Syria.

After the discontinuation of the HNAP, the resulting lack of comprehensive, regular data was strongly felt following the earthquakes that hit Syria (and Türkiye) on 6 February 2023. While different organisations carried out many assessments, the fragmented coverage prevented the depiction of a full picture of the needs of earthquake-affected Syrians. The end of the programme highlighted the importance of data and analysis in ensuring an evidence-based response.

RESPONSE ARCHITECTURE

The response architecture is complex and not fully understood by many humanitarians (KII 10/08/2023). The response is built from three separate response modalities, based in either Damascus, Gaziantep, or NES respectively (KII 13/08/2023).

The first is the Syria Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) coordinated response, which is based in Damascus and coordinates humanitarian assistance from areas controlled by GoS, including from GoS-controlled areas to NES, (KII 13/08/2023). The second is the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) coordinated response, which oversees humanitarian assistance delivered cross-border from Türkiye and from areas of NWS controlled by non-state armed groups. Last, the NES NGO forum coordinates the humanitarian response delivered by NGOs from Iraq, or from the areas of NES controlled by local authorities (KII 13/08/2023).

These were originally designed to have a UN component and one built around NGOs. The UN component was typically centred on the cluster system under a local OCHA Head of Office, while the NGO component was typically an INGO forum. The evolution of the response over the years has meant that this structure is no longer uniform. In NWS, the NGO component has struggled to be effective, but there is no OCHA Head of Office in NES, meaning the response is solely NGO-run (KII 10/08/2023; KII 13/06/2023). Damascus is the only hub that has both an OCHA Head of Office and a functioning NGO forum, but the system works under the close auspices of the GoS.

The Strategic Steering Group (SSG), which sits above the tripartite structure provides overall strategic leadership and guidance to this general structure, harnessing the collective capacity of response efforts in the different areas of Syria (KII 13/08/2023). This is aided by the Inter-Sector Group (ISG), which provides both technical and coordination support from its sectoral role at hub level (that is, in Damascus, Gaziantep, and NES), thereby ensuring the SSG has an effective understanding of the different realities facing these hubs, and that crisis-wide priorities feed into the humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) for Syria (KII 13/08/2023).
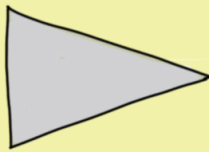
The fragmented geographies of the humanitarian response in Syria means an organisation's physical positioning significantly affects the type of work they can do, their geographical focus, and the political lens through which regulatory authorities view their work, including data collection.

HUMANITARIAN ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS RESPONDERS

Much information has been produced on Syria before and after the start of the conflict in 2011. Between 1 January and 30 June 2023, ACAPS conducted a secondary data review of reports and datasets about Syria published on ReliefWeb to map current contributing stakeholders. Context knowledge from information producers whose products do not appear on ReliefWeb complemented this mapping. The summary list of stakeholders contributing to Syria's information landscape below is not exhaustive, as it does not include all contributors and excludes think tanks and private sector data collection entities. Many humanitarians rely on private sector data collection entities to collect primary data.

Types of stakeholders contributing to Syria's information landscape

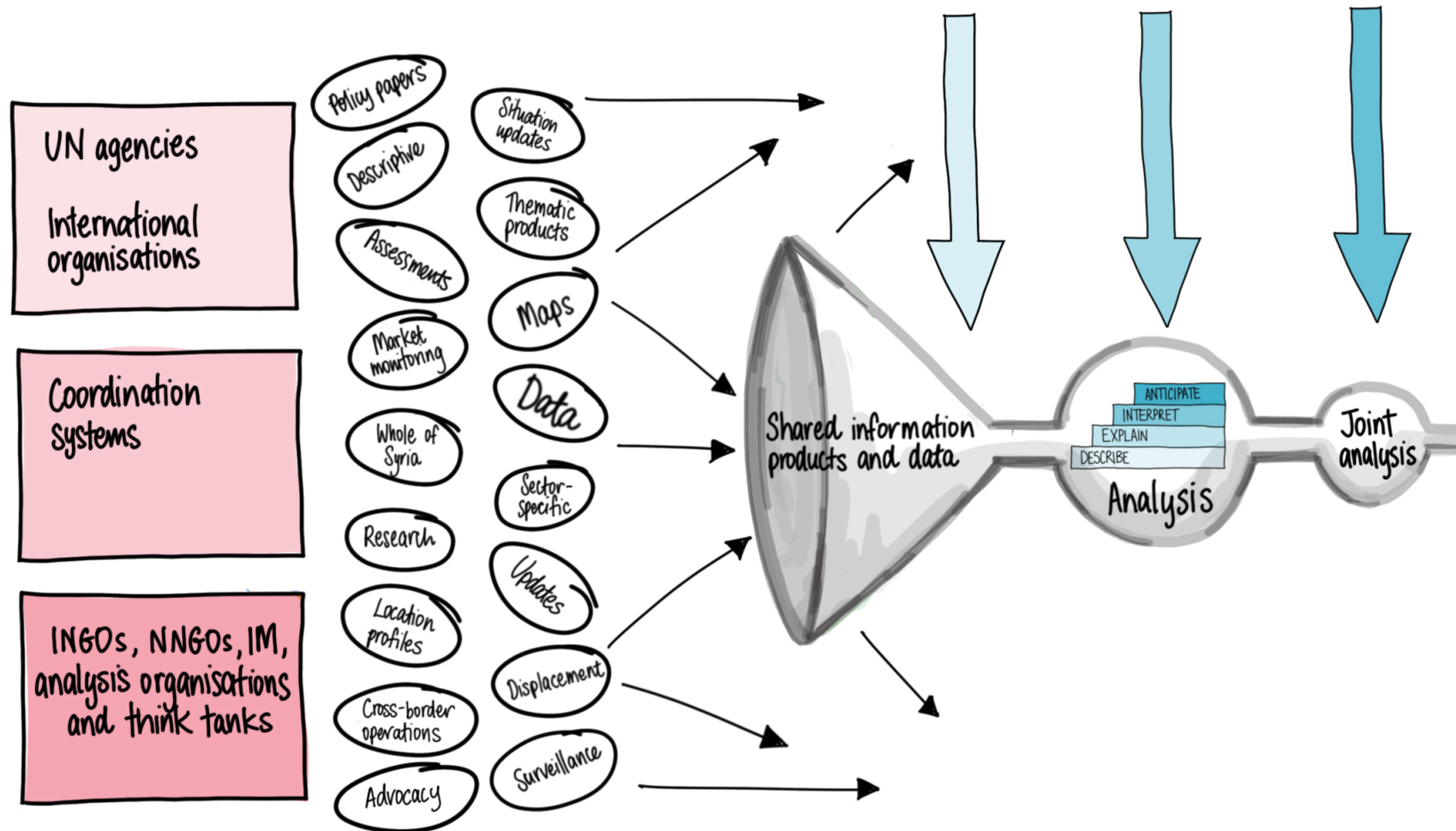Humanitarian assessment and analysis responders

Information products of different types, themes, regularity, and coverage.

Some are shared, some are for internal use only.

There are different types of analysis.

A few involve joint analysis.

UN agencies

International organisations

Coordination systems

INGOs, NNGOs, IM, analysis organisations and think tanks

Policy papers
Descriptive
Assessments
Market monitoring
Whole of Syria
Research
Location profiles
Cross-border operations
Advocacy

Situation updates
Thematic products
Maps
Data
Sector-specific
Updates
Displacement
Surveillance

Shared information products and data

Analysis

ANTICIPATE
INTERPRET
EXPLAIN
DESCRIBE

Joint analysis

Source: ACAPS

5

UN agencies and international organisations

The **UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** is responsible for information management (IM) functions under a collaborative framework that includes UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and the GoS (OCHA accessed 08/07/2023). This collaborative mechanism is responsible for assessment coordination and production, sectoral analysis, and reports detailing level of response, gaps, and operational capacity on existing and emerging needs. OCHA also produces Syria's annual Humanitarian Needs Overview (OCHA 22/12/2022).

The **UN Development Programme (UNDP)** periodically publishes situation updates and reports on early recovery and livelihood interventions in Syria (UNDP 18/03/2023). It also produces the annual Regional Refugees Resilience Plan with UNHCR (UNDP & UNHCR 27/04/2023).

The **UN Population Fund (UNFPA)** supports various data management, collection, and analysis capacities in Syria, including OCHA's population task force. It regularly produces reports and thematic analysis on gender-based violence, maternal health, and situation reports (Protection Cluster et al. 07/06/2023; GBV Cluster 28/03/2023).

The **UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** regularly produces data on refugees, IDPs, returnees, and host communities in Syria's complex humanitarian crisis and co-leads the Shelter and Protection Clusters. These products inform response coordination, planning, and the dissemination of relevant information to the wider humanitarian response in Syria (UNHCR 01/06/2023 and 18/05/2023).

The **UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)** regularly disseminates humanitarian data, including thematic products on health, nutrition, education, and child protection, focusing on children in Syria. UNICEF further reports on the WASH, nutrition, and protection programmes and situations in which it is operational, including NWS, NES, and GoS areas (UNICEF 14/06/2023).

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** publishes monthly situation and operational updates, food security indicators, commodity prices monitoring, and market systems analysis across Syria, mainly via its Vulnerability Assessment Mapping unit (WFP 02/07/2023 07/03/2023).

The **World Health Organisation (WHO)** collects data and disseminates monthly health surveillance reports and weekly epidemiological updates in Syria's 14 governorates (WHO 25/06/2023)

The **International Organisation on Migration (IOM)** collects and disseminates data on population movement, displacement status, and border movement between Syria and neighbouring countries (IOM accessed 07/08/2023). IOM also supports the humanitarian community in the WoS response with displacement management functions. It disseminates data from joint assessments, such as situation reports on NWS and the WoS response plan. IOM used to manage HNAP.

Coordination systems

The response architecture in Syria uses the cluster system, which provides structure and framework for a coordinated humanitarian response between UN agencies and NGOs. Most clusters have dedicated IM units and are tasked with several roles, including coordinating assessments and data collection activities that inform humanitarian and intersectoral needs.

Various NGO forums function as response coordination platforms and facilitate the production of contextual and thematic information products within their regions.

The **NWS NGO forum** is the coordination body for NGOs operating in NWS and the cross-border aid response between Türkiye and Syria. It disseminates information products on key humanitarian issues and situation reports in NWS (OCHA accessed 08/08/2023).

The **NES NGO forum** is the coordinating body for NGOs operating in NES. It also has an IM component, producing, coordinating, and supporting IM functions between forum members and groups in the sector (NES NGO forum accessed 08/08/2023).

The **Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF)** is a body that gives one voice to INGOs engaged in humanitarian assistance in Syria. Among its core pillars are IM and advocacy. The SIRF regularly produces member updates and joint advocacy pieces (SIRF accessed 08/08/2023).

The **Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA)** is an umbrella body of civil society organisations concerned with humanitarian affairs in Syria. It publishes regular advocacy pieces on the Syrian humanitarian response (Syrian NA accessed 08/08/2023).

Information management (IM) and analysis organisations informing the humanitarian response

The **Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)** is a Syrian-led organisation with a robust IM unit that conducts data collection and assessments, primarily in education and health. This unit is operationally present in NWS but regularly contributes information products on all of Syria (ACU accessed 21/07/2023).

The **Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)** is an international consultancy that provides independent analysis of Syria, including in-depth thematic or geographic contextual analysis, such as location profiles (COAR accessed 17/07/2023).

Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR) is an analytical unit focused on understanding Syria's drivers of conflict, crisis, and need using mixed-methods approaches. This unit provides flash reports on significant incidents, in-depth thematic analysis, and predictive-modelling scenarios and forecasts (CA-SYR accessed 17/07/2023).

iMMAP provides IM support to clusters and produces research, analysis, data, and maps for coordinating groups and operational responders (iMMAP accessed 21/07/2023).

The **International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO)** specializes in the safety and security coordination of NGOs operating in high-risk humanitarian operations. It produces the Quarterly Safety & Access Review, a monthly NGO incidents overview, and thematic products that aim to enhance the operational efficiency of humanitarian organisations in volatile places (INSO accessed 17/07/2023).

REACH produces thematic analysis on Syria and conducts rapid and periodic joint assessments in NWS and NES. These assessments include the monthly Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (REACH accessed 17/07/2023).

International and national NGOs and think tanks

Much of the information that national and international NGOs produce is descriptive and seeks to inform humanitarian and development operations via situation updates, thematic analysis, and independent research. Providing a comprehensive review of the numerous bodies known as think tanks that produce independent research, policy papers, and academic analysis is not part of this paper, but these groups play a crucial role in advancing policy ideas and reforms in Syria. These organisations prioritise highlighting the needs and experiences of Syrians in their analysis beyond the typical conflict narrative. They often undertake evidence-based dialogue to bridge the gap between research and policymaking in Syria.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is crucial in informing humanitarian gaps and programming needs. Across Syria, overt politicisation, security challenges, bureaucratic obstacles, and a lack of trust towards humanitarian organisations significantly hamper data collection. These factors restrict the number of groups capable of collecting data and limit the geographic areas where such work can happen.

All data collection processes face a high risk of political exploitation, but some areas are more sensitive than others. The sensitive nature of the subject matter makes data on protection issues and gender-based violence more difficult to collect. Any data that would question (even indirectly) the effectiveness of governance, service delivery standards, or the legitimacy of any polities is also difficult to collect and considered highly sensitive (KII 09/06/2023).

Many larger organisations outsource data collection to private companies, which can safely access areas with heightened security risks and have a network of informants. It is unclear how many of these private companies operate in Syria, and they are often the de facto entity operating behind the scenes. This position means they directly contribute to the data published in the humanitarian response (KII 13/06/2023).

The politicisation of information and data

The nature of Syria's various conflicts and the exigencies of the polities that have emerged in the breakdown of central authority since 2011 have politicised data and information, particularly around prospective humanitarian interventions. While this is the case to some degree across all of Syria's operating polities, organisations collecting data have had the most difficulty interacting with the GoS.

The GoS does not see humanitarian data collection and analysis as a neutral and impartial source of information about where aid should be delivered. Instead, it sees the control of such information as a critical part of successfully facilitating its political aims. For the GoS, aid is a strategic part of its survival in the face of international sanctions. It also sees aid as a means to undermine, weaken, and separate opposition groups and interests inside Syria (The Guardian 29/08/2016). In this sense, the GoS has withheld or diverted aid from areas it wanted to bring into line and implemented a wider strategy of besiegement and starvation of rebel enclaves (Reuters 15/03/2018). Aid diversion still occurs in GoS-held areas, and authorities consistently attempt to redirect aid away from areas perceived as disloyal to the GoS (New Lines Institute 01/07/2022). The humanitarian system has often been complicit in this political project, whether directly and indirectly (The Guardian 29/08/2016; New Lines Institute 01/07/2022; AI 06/03/2023).

For example, the GoS had long sought the end of the HNAP, declaring it an "illegal espionage operation that breaches Syrian sovereignty " Devex 12/05/2023. Donors said that money still existed to continue the programme, but IOM declared that a lack of funding forced the programme's closure. This move has led other individuals and organisations to accuse IOM of seeking to preserve its relationship with the GoS(Devex 12/05/2023). Although this is the most extreme example of the politicisation of information and data, it indicates a dynamic across Syria that continues to be a pressing issue for humanitarians involved in research and data collection.

Access constraints

Syria's longstanding political challenges and conflicts significantly constrain access and limit data collection in large parts of the country (OCHA 02/07/2023). These access constraints affect data collection activities that inform the entire humanitarian response, such as the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessments that feed into the Humanitarian Needs Overview (REACH 31/12/2022). Access constraints vary depending on the governing authority.

Northwest Syria

The contextual environment of information access in NWS is complex and varied, and the challenges related to data collection depend on the dynamics in a given operating area. There is considerable variability in the type and quality of information, depending on the assessment type and who is collecting the data. Some organisations have good access to parts of NWS, but many others face impediments. This variability is acute enough that data availability and quality often depend on personal networks (KII 14/06/2023).

Some generalisations can be made across the context. The Syrian Salvation Government/ HTS is generally willing to create favourable conditions for humanitarian relief in the greater Idleb area, enabling structural factors (KII 13/06/2023). There may be better access to fixed vulnerable populations, e.g., settled IDP camps, but rural areas or those close to HTS troop movements will likely remain more difficult to access. Fears of spying are ever-present and must be carefully considered for reasons of duty of care. Organisations seeking to collect data should also consider other issues related to conflict activity, such as GoS/Russian air strikes, which hamper access.

Areas under the oversight of the SIG/SNA face different challenges. Most of these areas are under the supervision of the Government of Türkiye, which provides better structure and oversight. That said, the SNA also controls some parts of the region, and these have become prone to economically incentivised behaviour towards outsiders (KII 13/06/2023). The politics and sensitivities in these areas make it difficult to collect impartial data.

Northeast Syria

In the northeast, the environment for data collection is relatively free from external influence but can struggle because of context. Access can be highly selective and context dependent. For example, much of Al-Hasakeh governorate is easily accessible. In contrast, insecurity, uneven governance, local-level intracommunal tensions, and the smaller number of NGOs present mean that much of Deir-ez-Zor governorate and the Menbij area remain fraught with difficulties. As a result, local authorities in Deir-ez-Zor and Menbij do not always approve humanitarian assessment requests. There is also a lack of baseline data for NES.

Underfunding of the NES response has led INGOs to prioritise easily accessible areas and places where they can run financially viable programming. Underfunding has resulted in a general lack of capacity and knowledge in data collection best practices. Lines of control run across governorates (and sometimes districts). These divisions result in discrepancies in data grouping during collection, meaning that accuracy can only be guaranteed at the community level (KII 10/08/2023). For example, there are two different areas of control in Aleppo governorate, so any data presented at the governorate level will not accurately depict any related differences.

The AANES in Al-Hasakeh has to approve data collection in NES. Delays in data collection approvals are rare, but there have been some cases of organisations waiting for months (KII 13/06/2023; KII 14/06/2023; KII 10/08/2023). Recent AANES efforts to increase control over local media have had little impact on humanitarian data collection.

Areas under the control of the Government of Syria

Working in GoS-held areas offers complex challenges for humanitarian organisations, often with no good solutions given tight controls around data collection and analysis. The GoS has to authorise all assessments, which are often directed to areas perceived as pro-GoS. The GoS' long campaign to retake areas outside its control has often led to significant destruction, meaning these areas will likely have higher humanitarian needs. The GoS restricts access to such areas as part of its strategy to instrumentalise aid for its interests and agenda (MEI 27/06/2023; The Guardian 29/08/2016). As a result, some organisations have faced suspicionsabout working under such conditions and potentially furthering the war aims and objectives of the GoS (The Guardian 29/08/2016). The end of the HNAP exemplifies this possibility.

Survey fatigue

Since 2011, humanitarian organisations have conducted many data collection activities in Syria, often conducting multiple assessments independently. This practice has resulted in significant survey fatigue. Assessments are necessary to inform humanitarian needs, but over-researching affected populations can cultivate mistrust or psychologically wear down participants. Over time, this effect diminishes the quality of data collected. The severity and scale of survey fatigue came to light following the earthquake in NWS when organisations launched overlapping rapid needs assessments. This environment duplicated data collection efforts and resulted in an over-researched population (AFNS 21/03/2023).
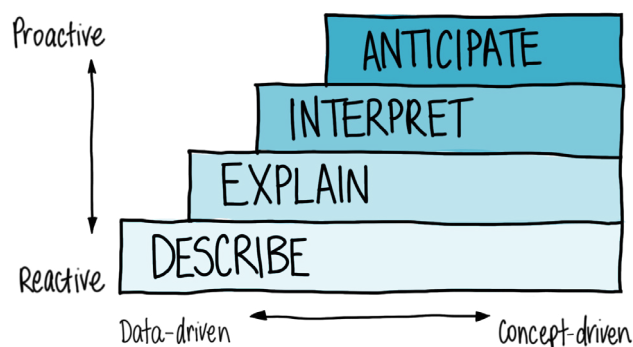
Data collection and difficulties in recruiting female enumerators and researchers

There are significantly fewer female researchers and enumerators in Syria than men, primarily because of the precarious security situation and unsafe transportation. The scarcity of female enumerators leads to significant gaps in analysis, particularly in gathering gender-sensitive information, as many women do not feel comfortable speaking with men. As men traditionally occupy most positions of power in Syria, women are rarely interviewed as key stakeholders, leading to further gaps in gender-sensitive data collection (KII 21/06/2023).

In research and assessments, experience and personal networks are important success factors (Dalati 28/04/2021). The prolonged crisis has limited the social space for women, and mobility restrictions have contributed to a skills gap between female enumerators and their male counterparts. Men have more opportunities for social engagement inside and outside their immediate social circles. This social environment directly results in limited market opportunities for female enumerators (KII 20/06/2023). Involving more women before the data collection stage in the design of assessment tools would also further improve the information landscape (KII 21/06/2023).

ANALYSIS ECOSYSTEM

Source: ACAPS

Analysis can be viewed along a spectrum. Each level of the analysis spectrum builds on the previous and requires an increasing sophistication of methodological rigour.

- **Descriptive analysis** identifies the who, what, when, where, and how. The data is often organised in a way that is easy to comprehend and recall, usually through visuals, dashboards, maps, and other infographics.

- **Explanatory analysis** provides context to the results, pointing out possible cause-and-effect relationships.

- **Interpretive analysis** examines the significance of a problem or topic of interest as it relates to the interests of a specific audience, using logic to outline what is most important and why.

- **Anticipatory analysis** explores how a situation may evolve within a given time frame and considers possible consequences of current events (ACAPS accessed 25/07/2023).

There appears to be adequate **descriptive analysis** in Syria. Since the early years of the crisis, the response has needed more in-depth assessments to present meaningful conclusions, and there has been a shift towards more in-depth and **explanatory analysis** (OCHA 05/2016; UNHCR et al. 01/01/2014). The response still lacks interpretive and anticipatory analysis that is useful to humanitarians or integrated into planning and action during humanitarian interventions. The Syrian crisis is dynamic and requires adapting forward-looking strategies (COAR 18/01/2023). The Middle East and northern Africa have improved their forecasting of meteorological and hydrological hazards, but challenges in data-sharing, communication, and the integration of different types of climatic hazards persist (ODI/WFP 09/08/2022).

Humanitarian organisations rarely have subject matter experts who can support context analysis and integrate conflict sensitivity (KII 14/06/2023). The response could also benefit from more community-based context analysis in strategic planning and programming (KII 20/06/2023).

Limited engagement with literature outside the humanitarian sphere

A paradigm centred around UN- and INGO-produced narratives has long dominated humanitarian aid, with limited use of information and analysis produced outside these spheres (KII 21/06/2023; KII 14/06/2023; KII 13/06/2023; Hilhorst 10/09/2018). This overemphasis on humanitarian literature limits the exploration of diverse perspectives or contextual knowledge from beyond the humanitarian sphere. More engagement with academic literature, publications from national and international think tanks, and Arabic-language sources would improve the analysis ecosystem, overall programming, and response.

Limited Syrian-led analysis in humanitarian research

Traditionally, humanitarian research has prioritised institutions more closely related to donor countries, while institutions and researchers from crises affected countries have frequently faced marginalisation or limited participation (USAID et al. 14/03/2023; Shivakoti and Milner 19/07/2021). The response has reproduced this pattern in Syria, where organisations use Syrian researchers for data collection but do not involve them in research conceptualisation or design (KII 13/06/2023).

In the context of the Syrian crisis, centralised, remote, and top-down programme management frequently results in organisations treating local workers like subcontractors, not equal partners. There are some examples of greater cooperation that include design and evaluation, but these remain comparatively rare (HPN 25/05/2021).

Community engagement and accountability

Communities where data is collected possess in-depth understanding and contextually localised knowledge about their area and experiences. Including this raw understanding of issues would add nuance and breadth to the analysis if assessments included feedback sessions that allowed communities to access, query, and participate in the overall analysis framework (UNHCR accessed 08/08/2023). However, organisations conducting assessments in Syria often overlook this critical step, partly because of the sensitivity of data and the need to limit the dissemination of findings, often restricted to an organisation's internal use (KII 20/06/2023; KII 13/06/2023).

Limited in-depth analysis of vulnerabilities

There is a pressing need for a more thorough analysis beyond conventional vulnerability categories. Typically, the concept of vulnerability is employed for groups with the most common sensitivities around an issue, including women, children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities (Zhukova 17/09/2020). Current information on vulnerabilities in Syria focuses primarily on limited aspects, like access to services and aid delivery (COAR 25/03/2023).

As social groups are rarely homogenous, this one-dimensional view of vulnerability lacks an intersectional approach and nuanced understanding of how vulnerabilities overlap and how social identities intersect and shape unique vulnerabilities and experiences (ODI 03/04/2019; Zhukova 17/09/2020). For example, a woman from a minority ethnic group may face unique challenges that differ from those for a woman from a majority ethnic group or a man from the same minority group. Recognising and addressing these gaps is crucial in providing comprehensive and effective aid to those in need.

Current gender research in the aid sector often reinforces the mistaken notion that gender issues primarily or solely revolve around women, excluding men from being considered vulnerable. This trend attributes vulnerability to the individual (the woman or child) instead of recognising that specific threats, challenges, and situations shape vulnerabilities. In certain cases, this approach has led to implementation gaps in addressing Syrian refugee men's vulnerabilities and pressing needs in humanitarian responses (MEI 29/11/2016). Gender analysis also often assumes that gender dynamics are unchanging and that standardised frameworks can easily address them. Gender research in the response also often overlooks marginalised groups' diverse needs and experiences, such as those of LGBTQIA+ people (COAR 15/07/2022). Sometimes this is because of accessibility, risk, or a lack of resources to engage with populations in hard-to-reach areas.
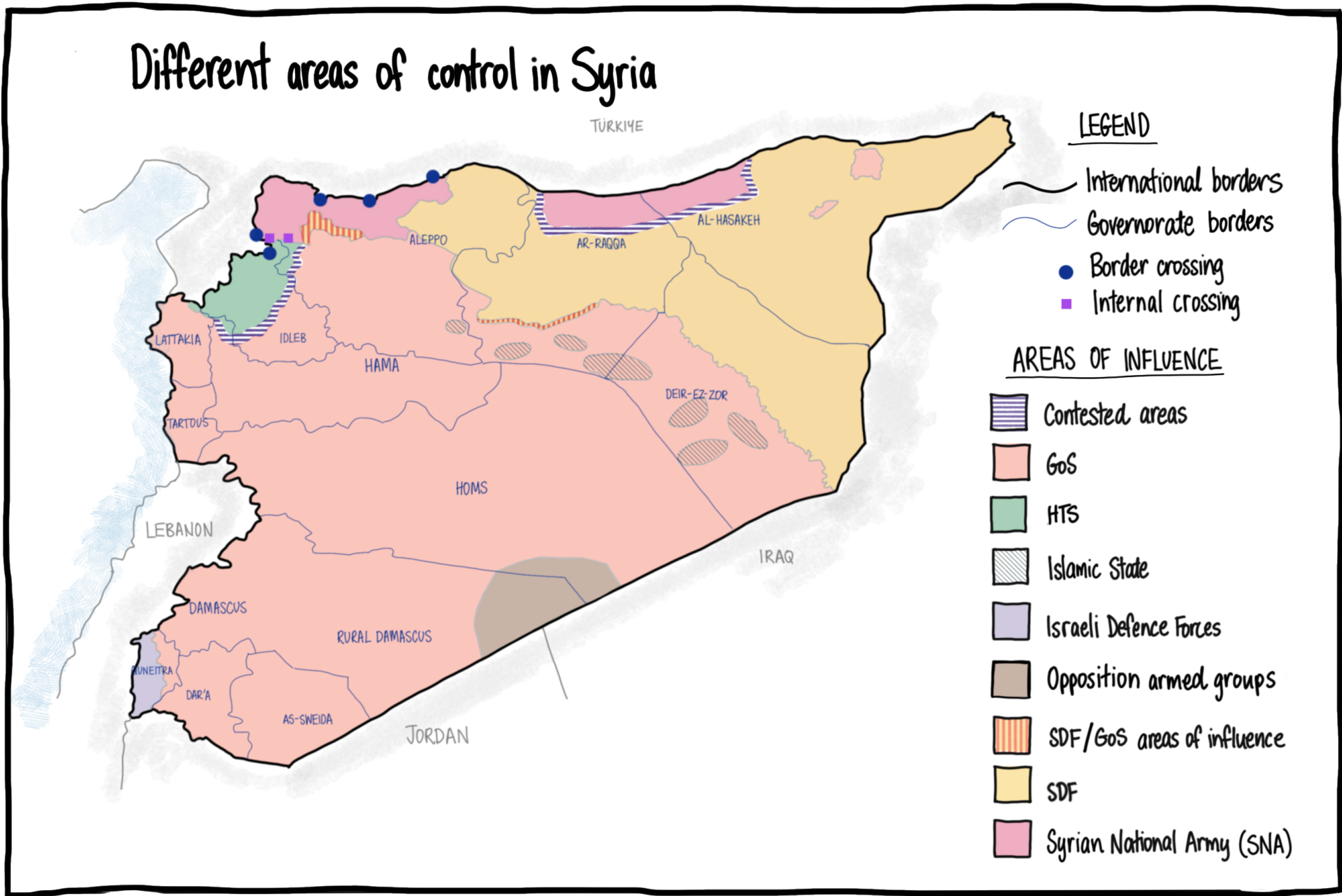
Quality, usability, and coordination

The production of humanitarian knowledge for Syria has faced several criticisms, including concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, the limited research scope, the lack of inclusivity and representation of diverse perspectives, and potential politicisation or bias in the interpretation of findings (KII 09/06/2023; Devex 12/05/2023;Mounzer and Stenhoff 04/09/2022; Avenir Analytics 08/06/2021). There is also a need for more analyses' recommendations for humanitarian action drawn from evidence-based data to inform donors and implementing groups (KII 14/06/2023).

There are concerns about the effectiveness of knowledge translation and dissemination and the extent to which research findings are incorporated into practical policies and interventions. These criticisms highlight the need for improved methodologies, increased collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, and a more comprehensive and accountable approach to humanitarian knowledge production in Syria (KII 05/07/2023).

Despite the challenging data collection and analysis environment in Syria, there is potential for an improved evidence-based response. The declining funding of Syria's humanitarian response plan reduces the opportunity for organisations to plan analysis in a way that would guide strategies and prioritisation (OCHA 31/05/2023). In such a context, it is important to incentivise coordination and increase the use of anticipatory analysis in decision-making. Addressing these issues is essential in improving the quality and usability of research in Syria and enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts (KII 13/06/2023).

Different areas of control in Syria

TÜRKIYE

AL-HASAKEH

AR-RAQQA

ALEPPO

LATTAKIA

IDLEB

HAMA

DEIR-EZ-ZOR

TARTOUS

HOMS

LEBANON

IRAQ

DAMASCUS

RURAL DAMASCUS

QUNEITRA

DAR'A

AS-SWEIDA

JORDAN

LEGEND

- ⌇⌇⌇ International borders
- ⌇⌇⌇ Governorate borders
- ● Border crossing
- ■ Internal crossing

AREAS OF INFLUENCE

- Contested areas
- GoS
- HTS
- Islamic State
- Israeli Defence Forces
- Opposition armed groups
- SDF/GoS areas of influence
- SDF
- Syrian National Army (SNA)

Source: ACAPS