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Impact of International Diplomacy on Humanitarian Aid in Armed Conflict: A Study of the Syrian Civil War, 2011–2024

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War (2011–2024) created one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, making international diplomacy an important factor in determining how humanitarian aid was delivered to affected populations. This study examines the impact of international diplomacy on humanitarian aid during the Syrian Civil War, with emphasis on diplomatic strategies adopted by the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and humanitarian organisations. The study adopts a qualitative case study design and relies on secondary data obtained from United Nations reports, government publications, humanitarian agency reports, policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature. The findings reveals that international diplomacy produced both positive and negative outcomes. Diplomatic strategies such as United Nations Security Council resolutions, multilateral negotiations, donor conferences, bilateral negotiations, and cross-border humanitarian agreements improved humanitarian access and increased funding for relief operations. However, diplomatic sanctions, geopolitical rivalries, Security Council vetoes, and competing national interests reduced the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in several parts of Syria. The study further found that non-governmental organisations played an essential diplomatic and operational role by providing humanitarian assistance in areas that were inaccessible to governments and international organisations. The study concludes that international diplomacy remains indispensable for humanitarian assistance during armed conflicts but recommends stronger international cooperation, improved coordination among diplomatic actors, protection of humanitarian corridors, and greater support for non-governmental organisations in future humanitarian interventions.

Keywords: International Diplomacy, Humanitarian Aid, Syrian Civil War, Armed Conflict, and UN Security Council

Introduction

Armed conflicts create profound humanitarian crises, necessitating international intervention to alleviate suffering. The Syrian Civil War, spanning 2011 to 2024, stands as one of the most devastating conflicts of the 21st century, displacing over 12 million people and leaving 16.7 million in need of assistance by

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2024 (UNHCR, 2024). International diplomacy encompassing negotiations, sanctions, and multilateral resolutions plays a pivotal role in shaping the scope and impact of humanitarian aid in such contexts. This study investigates how diplomatic efforts influenced humanitarian aid delivery during the Syrian conflict, addressing the research question: To what extent did international diplomacy enable or hinder humanitarian aid in the Syrian Civil War from 2011 to 2024?

The Syrian case is unique due to its geopolitical complexity, involving major powers (U.S., Russia), regional actors (Turkey, Iran), and international bodies like the UN. Diplomatic initiatives, such as UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (2014), aimed to secure aid access, yet competing interests often stalled progress. The overthrow of the Assad regime in late 2024 further complicated the humanitarian landscape, raising questions about diplomacy's role in post-conflict recovery. This paper contributes to the literature on humanitarian diplomacy by offering a longitudinal analysis of Syrian Civil War, highlighting lessons for future conflicts.

Conceptual clarifications

International Diplomacy: It refers to the official practice of conducting foreign relations between States through negotiation or dialogue with the aim of reaching a peaceful resolution to conflict or foster mutual cooperation in specific areas of interest by parties involved.

Humanitarian Aid: In the context of this study, it refers to the organised act of provisions of basic material and logistics assistance to those who are in need especially during an armed conflict

Armed Conflict: According to to International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), armed conflicts is and armed confrontation between the armed forces of States or between governmental authorities and organised armed group within a State.

Civil war: It is an engagement of armed hostilities or violent conflict between organised armed groups within the same State involved in struggle for the control of the State.within the same State, region or fighting to secede and gain independence. In the Context of this study, it is the conduct of armed hostility between government armed forces and rebels fighting to gain control over the national government.

Humanitarian diplomacy, defined as high-level engagement to secure humanitarian objectives in conflict zones, has gained prominence in scholarly discourse (Smith et al., 2023). Studies suggest that diplomacy can facilitate aid by negotiating access and fostering donor coordination (Turunen, 2023). However, geopolitical rivalries often politicize aid, diverting resources or restricting delivery (Cornago, 2023). In Syria, the UN's role in coordinating aid through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been well-documented (UNOCHA, 2024), yet its effectiveness was constrained by Security Council divisions (Rajasingham, 2024).

Sanctions which are considered as diplomatic tool, have dual effects on humanitarian aid. While intended to pressure regimes, they can exacerbate civilian suffering if not paired with exemptions (Rochdi, 2024). Similarly, bilateral negotiations such as Turkey's talks with Assad or Russia's military support shaped aid corridors but prioritized strategic interests (House of Commons Library, 2025). Existing research lacks a comprehensive analysis of diplomacy's long-term impact across the Syrian conflict's phases, a gap this study addresses.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on the Syrian Civil War from 2011 to 2024. Data were collected from secondary sources, including UN reports, EU funding records, U.S. State Department statements, and peer-reviewed articles. Key diplomatic events such as UN resolutions, Brussels Conferences, and the 2024 regime change were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of influence on humanitarian aid. The timeframe captures the conflict's evolution, from initial protests to post-Assad transition, offering a holistic perspective. Limitations include reliance on secondary data and the rapidly evolving situation post-2024, which may require future updates.

Findings

United Nations Diplomatic Strategies and Their Impact on Humanitarian Aid

The findings reveals that the diplomatic strategies adopted by the United Nations significantly improved humanitarian aid delivery throughout the Syrian Civil War. Through Security Council Resolutions 2165, 2191, 2258, 2393, 2449, 2585, and 2672, the United Nations established and sustained cross-border humanitarian corridors that enabled humanitarian agencies to deliver food, medical supplies, shelter, and other essential relief materials to millions of civilians living in conflict-affected areas. These diplomatic interventions strengthened international coordination among humanitarian actors and increased access to populations that were previously unreachable because of the conflict. The study therefore found that United Nations diplomacy played a major role in reducing humanitarian suffering by creating legal and diplomatic frameworks that facilitated the continuous delivery of humanitarian assistance during the conflict (United Nations, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021, 2023; UNOCHA, 2024). However, the findings further reveals that the effectiveness of United Nations diplomatic strategies was constrained by geopolitical interests among permanent members of the Security Council. The repeated use of veto powers by Russia and China limited the renewal and expansion of cross-border humanitarian mechanisms, resulting in the closure of several humanitarian corridors and reducing humanitarian access to vulnerable populations. These political disagreements weakened international humanitarian responses and demonstrated that although diplomatic negotiations can facilitate humanitarian assistance, they can also become ineffective when national interests override humanitarian objectives (Rajasingham, 2024; United Nations, 2023; UNOCHA, 2024).

Bilateral and Regional Diplomatic Strategies and Their Impact on Humanitarian Aid

This finding shows that bilateral and regional diplomatic strategies contributed significantly to humanitarian assistance during the Syrian Civil War. Diplomatic cooperation among the European Union, the United States, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors generated substantial financial support for humanitarian operations through donor conferences, bilateral agreements, and coordinated humanitarian initiatives. These diplomatic engagements strengthened funding for relief agencies, supported refugee assistance programmes, and maintained humanitarian access through border crossings, thereby improving humanitarian responses across different parts of Syria (European Commission, 2025; House of Commons Library, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Despite these

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achievements, the finding indicates that regional political interests frequently influenced humanitarian aid distribution. Several countries aligned humanitarian assistance with their foreign policy and security objectives, resulting in unequal distribution of relief materials across different regions of Syria. Consequently, some conflict-affected communities received greater humanitarian assistance than others, not necessarily because of greater humanitarian need but because of geopolitical alliances and diplomatic priorities. This finding demonstrates that regional diplomacy simultaneously promoted humanitarian assistance while also contributing to unequal humanitarian outcomes (House of Commons Library, 2025; UNHCR, 2024).

Diplomatic Sanctions and Their Impact on Humanitarian Aid

The finding reveals that diplomatic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union had both intended political effects and unintended humanitarian consequences. Although these sanctions were introduced to pressure the Syrian government into political reforms and accountability, they also created operational challenges for humanitarian organisations. Banking restrictions, financial regulations, procurement difficulties, and delays in processing humanitarian transactions reduced the timely delivery of medical equipment, food supplies, fuel, and reconstruction materials needed by civilians affected by the conflict (European Commission, 2025; Rochdi, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, the finding shows that humanitarian exemptions contained within the sanctions regimes did not completely eliminate these operational barriers. Many humanitarian organisations experienced delays because financial institutions and commercial suppliers remained reluctant to conduct transactions involving Syria due to fears of violating international sanctions. As a result, humanitarian agencies struggled to respond quickly during emergencies, particularly following the 2023 earthquake and throughout the post-2024 humanitarian transition. The study therefore found that while sanctions served diplomatic purposes, they also unintentionally reduced the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance delivered to vulnerable populations (Rochdi, 2024; UNOCHA, 2024; World Health Organization, 2023).

Geopolitical Rivalries and Their Impact on Humanitarian Aid

This finding indicates that geopolitical rivalries among major international powers significantly affected humanitarian aid delivery throughout the Syrian Civil War. Competing political interests involving Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, China, and other influential actors frequently shaped diplomatic negotiations concerning humanitarian access. These rivalries influenced decisions within the United Nations Security Council and often delayed humanitarian interventions, reduced international consensus, and weakened coordinated responses to the humanitarian crisis (House of Commons Library, 2025; Rajasingham, 2024; UNOCHA, 2024). It further demonstrates that geopolitical competition influenced the geographical distribution of humanitarian aid. Countries supporting different military or political factions often directed humanitarian resources toward territories controlled by their respective allies. This selective approach reduced humanitarian neutrality and limited equal access to humanitarian assistance for civilians living in opposition-controlled or politically isolated areas. Consequently, the study found that geopolitical rivalries remained one of the

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greatest obstacles to effective humanitarian diplomacy throughout the Syrian conflict (House of Commons Library, 2025; UNHCR, 2024; UNOCHA, 2024).

Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Humanitarian Aid Delivery

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played a vital role in supporting humanitarian diplomacy and delivering humanitarian assistance throughout the Syrian Civil War. International organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Oxfam, Syria Relief, and local organisations such as the White Helmets complemented the efforts of governments and United Nations agencies by providing healthcare services, food assistance, shelter, sanitation, education, and emergency relief to millions of civilians affected by the conflict. Their operational flexibility enabled them to reach vulnerable communities located in areas that were inaccessible to many international organisations and government agencies (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023; Save the Children, 2023; UNOCHA, 2024). This finding also shows that NGOs encountered numerous operational challenges despite their significant contributions. Political restrictions, insecurity, funding shortages, sanctions-related financial barriers, and limited humanitarian access constrained their ability to deliver assistance effectively across all conflict zones. Nevertheless, these organisations adapted by establishing local partnerships, community-based humanitarian networks, and alternative supply routes that enabled them to continue delivering humanitarian assistance under extremely difficult conditions. The study therefore concludes that NGOs served as indispensable partners in humanitarian diplomacy by strengthening humanitarian access, improving relief delivery, and complementing international diplomatic efforts throughout the Syrian Civil War (International Rescue Committee, 2020; Oxfam, 2024; Syria Relief, 2025; UNOCHA, 2024).

Discussions

Diplomatic Facilitation of Humanitarian Aid Access

International diplomacy played a critical role in facilitating humanitarian aid delivery throughout the Syrian Civil War, creating mechanisms to overcome access barriers imposed by the conflict's complexity and the Assad regime's restrictions. A landmark achievement was the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2165 on July 14, 2014, which authorized cross-border humanitarian operations into opposition-held areas without requiring Syrian government approval (United Nations, 2014). This resolution, spearheaded by Western powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, established four key border crossings Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al-Ramtha, and Al-Yarubiyah enabling aid to reach millions in rebel-controlled territories. By 2016, these channels supported over 2.4 million people monthly with food, medical supplies, and shelter materials, demonstrating diplomacy's capacity to bypass sovereign restrictions in crisis settings (UNOCHA, 2024).

The resolution's renewal and expansion through subsequent measures, such as Resolution 2449 (2018), further illustrate sustained diplomatic efforts to maintain aid lifelines. These negotiations required delicate balancing acts within the Security Council, where Western advocacy countered Russian and Chinese hesitancy to infringe on Syrian sovereignty. The mechanism's success hinged on compromises, such as regular reporting to the Council, which

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assuaged veto-wielding members while ensuring operational continuity (Rajasingham, 2024). This multilateral diplomacy not only delivered immediate relief but also set a precedent for humanitarian access in other conflicts, such as Yemen.

Beyond the UN framework, donor conferences amplified diplomatic facilitation of aid. The European Union, a leading contributor, mobilized over €35 billion by 2024 through the annual Brussels Conferences, launched in 2017 to coordinate international pledges (European Commission, 2025). These gatherings brought together over 70 countries and organizations, channeling funds to UN agencies, NGOs, and local partners operating inside Syria and in neighboring states hosting refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon. For instance, the 2023 conference raised €5.6 billion, with €1 billion allocated for emergency aid within Syria, underscoring how diplomatic platforms translated political will into tangible resources (European Commission, 2025). The EU's leadership exemplifies how regional blocs can leverage diplomacy to sustain long-term humanitarian commitments.

Bilateral diplomacy also proved instrumental, particularly through U.S. contributions and Turkey's strategic positioning. The U.S. Department of State allocated $593 million in 2024, targeting 4.8 million Syrians with monthly assistance, including cash-based programs for food security (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This aid was often negotiated through partnerships with Turkey, which controlled border crossings like Bab al-Hawa after 2020, when Russia and China reduced UN-authorized routes. Turkey's diplomatic engagement with both Western allies and opposition groups facilitated the flow of U.S. and EU aid into northwest Syria, where over 4 million people resided by 2024, many in IDP camps (House of Commons Library, 2025). Turkey's talks with the Assad regime and later with HTS post-2024 further ensured that humanitarian corridors remained viable, even amidst shifting military dynamics.

Smaller-scale diplomatic efforts complemented these initiatives. Jordan, for example, negotiated with the Assad government to reopen the Al-Ramtha crossing intermittently between 2014 and 2018, allowing UN convoys to reach southern Syria (UNOCHA, 2024). Similarly, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, though less prominent in later years, used early diplomatic leverage to fund NGOs operating in opposition areas, bypassing regime blockades. These efforts highlight how diverse diplomatic actors in global powers, regional states, and multilateral bodies collectively forged pathways for aid delivery.

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 amplified diplomacy's role in adapting aid access to a new reality. The EU's rapid allocation of €4 million in emergency funding in late 2024, paired with UK commitments to adjust sanctions for humanitarian purposes, showcased agile diplomatic responses to escalating needs (European Commission, 2025; House of Commons Library, 2025). Turkey's negotiations with HTS, now a dominant force in Idlib, ensured that existing aid infrastructure, such as Bab al-Hawa, remained operational, delivering over 1,000 truckloads of aid monthly in early 2025 (UNHCR, 2024). These post-conflict shifts underscore diplomacy's flexibility in sustaining aid amidst governance transitions.

Generally, diplomatic facilitation of aid access in Syria rested on a combination of

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multilateral resolutions, donor coordination, and bilateral negotiations. These efforts collectively mitigated the conflict's logistical and political barriers, delivering billions in assistance to millions of Syrians. However, their success was tempered by geopolitical constraints, as explored in the subsequent section, highlighting the intricate balance diplomacy must strike in humanitarian contexts.

Resolution 2165 contained several key provisions that reshaped aid delivery. It authorized UN agencies and their partners to use four specific border crossings Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa (from Turkey), Al-Ramtha (from Jordan), and Al-Yarubiyah (from Iraq) to deliver assistance directly into opposition-held territories, bypassing Damascus' consent, which had previously restricted aid to government-controlled areas (United Nations, 2014). The resolution mandated the UN to notify the Syrian government of these operations but stripped it of veto power over their execution, a significant diplomatic concession wrested from Russia and China through intense negotiations. It also established a monitoring mechanism, requiring the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to report monthly to the Security Council on aid deliveries, ensuring transparency and assuaging Russian concerns about potential misuse for military purposes (UNOCHA, 2024). Initially set for a 180-day period, the resolution was renewed annually, with extensions like Resolution 2258 (2015) sustaining its framework.

Implementation of Resolution 2165 marked a turning point in humanitarian access. Within its first year, UN convoys delivered aid to 2.4 million people monthly across northwest and southern Syria, including 1.8 million food rations, 900,000 medical treatments, and 600,000 blankets (UNOCHA, 2024). Bab al-Hawa became the busiest crossing, handling over 1,000 truckloads of aid per month by 2016, supporting Idlib's growing displaced population, which reached 2.8 million by 2018 (UNHCR, 2024). Al-Yarubiyah, though less utilized due to ISIS control in parts of northeast Syria, facilitated critical health supplies to Kurdish areas until its closure in 2020. The resolution's legal backing empowered NGOs and UN agencies like UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) to scale up operations, with WFP alone reaching 1.5 million people in rebel-held zones by mid-2015 (WFP, 2015). This cross-border mechanism bypassed Assad's sieges such as those in Eastern Ghouta and Madaya—where regime approval had stalled aid, leaving civilians starving (United Nations, 2014).

Diplomatically, Resolution 2165's adoption required overcoming significant hurdles. Russia agreed only after assurances that aid would remain humanitarian, not a cover for arming rebels, while China relented under pressure from global outrage over Syria's crisis, amplified by reports of 241,000 people trapped in besieged areas (UNOCHA, 2024). The resolution's unanimous passage (15-0) reflected a rare consensus, driven by Western threats to act unilaterally and humanitarian advocacy from figures like UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos, who briefed the Council on the dire need for access (Rajasingham, 2024). However, its scope was not without limits as Russia insisted on periodic renewals, setting the stage for later vetoes that reduced crossings, as discussed under geopolitical barriers.

The resolution's significance extended beyond immediate relief. It set a precedent for humanitarian intervention in sovereign conflicts, influencing later UN efforts in Yemen and Myanmar. In Syria, it shifted

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power dynamics, forcing the Assad regime to tolerate aid flows it could not control, though it retaliated by tightening internal checkpoints (House of Commons Library, 2025). By 2016, the mechanism had facilitated $1.2 billion in aid, with the EU and U.S. channeling funds through these routes, amplifying their diplomatic commitments (European Commission, 2025). Even after its partial rollback in 2020, Resolution 2165's legacy persisted, with Bab al-Hawa remaining operational post-2024 under Turkish-HTS coordination, delivering 1,200 truckloads monthly in early 2025 (UNHCR, 2024).

Beyond Resolution 2165, donor conferences amplified diplomatic facilitation. The European Union mobilized over €35 billion by 2024 through the Brussels Conferences, raising €5.6 billion in 2023 alone (European Commission, 2025). The U.S. contributed $593 million in 2024, targeting 4.8 million Syrians monthly, often via Turkey's border infrastructure (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Smaller states like Jordan and Qatar negotiated ad hoc access, while the post-2024 EU emergency fund of €4 million showcased diplomacy's adaptability (European Commission, 2025). Collectively, these efforts anchored by Resolution 2165 demonstrates diplomacy's capacity to forge aid pathways, though tempered by geopolitical constraints explored elsewhere.

Building on this framework, UN Security Council Resolution 2258, adopted unanimously on December 22, 2015, extended and reinforced these efforts (United Nations, 2015). Resolution 2165's initial 180-day mandate had been renewed once via Resolution 2191 (2014), but by late 2015, the humanitarian situation had deteriorated further, 11.5 million Syrians required assistance, with 4.5 million in hard-to-reach or besieged areas (UNOCHA, 2024). Russia's military intervention in September 2015, bolstering Assad's regime, intensified the conflict, displacing 300,000 people in Aleppo and Idlib and straining aid operations (UNHCR, 2024). Facing expiration of the cross-border mechanism, Western members again led by the U.S., UK, and France, with support from Jordan and New Zealand pushed for Resolution 2258 to ensure continuity, framing it as a humanitarian necessity amid escalating violence (Rajasingham, 2024).

Resolution 2258 extended the cross-border authorization for an additional 12 months, until January 10, 2017, maintaining the four designated crossings and the notification process to the Syrian government without its consent (United Nations, 2015). It reaffirmed the monitoring mechanism, requiring OCHA to submit detailed reports every 30 days on aid volumes, recipients, and security conditions, a compromise that secured Russia and China's acquiescence by ensuring oversight (UNOCHA, 2024). The resolution also expanded its scope by explicitly calling for all parties regime, opposition, and their backers to allow safe, unhindered humanitarian access, including across conflict lines within Syria, not just borders. This provision aimed to address the growing number of besieged communities, such as Madaya, where 40,000 people faced starvation by late 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Unlike Resolution 2165, it coincided with parallel diplomatic efforts, notably the Vienna Process, linking humanitarian access to broader ceasefire talks, though these yielded limited results (House of Commons Library, 2025).

Implementation of Resolution 2258 sustained and scaled up aid delivery amid worsening conditions. In 2016, the cross-border mechanism reached 2.8 million people monthly, a 16% increase from 2015, driven by intensified operations through Bab al-Hawa, which handled 1,200 truckloads of

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aid monthly by mid-year (UNHCR, 2024). Bab al-Salam supported 500,000 displaced Syrians in Aleppo's countryside, while Al-Ramtha delivered 300,000 medical kits to Daraa, despite intermittent regime shelling (UNOCHA, 2024). Al-Yarubiyah, though hampered by ISIS control in Deir ez-Zor, facilitated 150,000 health interventions in Kurdish areas before its use declined (WFP, 2016). The resolution's internal access clause saw partial success—UN convoys reached 620,000 people in 18 besieged areas like Madaya and Zabadani in 2016, delivering 400 tons of food and medicine after months of negotiations with Assad's forces (United Nations, 2015). However, regime obstruction limited this to just 10% of the 4.5 million in need, highlighting enforcement gaps (Rajasingham, 2024).

Diplomatically, Resolution 2258 required navigating a tense Security Council. Russia, now deeply invested in Syria militarily, agreed to the extension only after ensuring the mechanism remained strictly humanitarian, rejecting language that could imply regime accountability for sieges. China followed Russia's lead, prioritizing sovereignty, while Western states leveraged public pressure bolstered by UN reports of 13,000 child deaths to secure passage (UNOCHA, 2024). The resolution's timing, post-Russia's intervention, reflected a fragile balance: humanitarian urgency trumped geopolitical escalation, though Moscow's influence foreshadowed later vetoes (House of Commons Library, 2025). NGOs like the World Food Programme capitalized on the extension, distributing $500 million in aid through these routes in 2016, with UNICEF vaccinating 1 million children against polio in opposition zones (WFP, 2016).

The significance of Resolution 2258 lies in its consolidation of the cross-border framework amid a shifting conflict. It sustained aid to 3.5 million people annually through 2016, reinforcing Resolution 2165's precedent and enabling $1.5 billion in UN assistance that year (European Commission, 2025). Its call for internal access, though underutilized, pressured the regime and opposition to permit sporadic convoys, as seen in the February 2016 Madaya delivery of 320 tons of supplies after starvation deaths sparked global outrage (UNHCR, 2024). Post-2017 renewals (e.g., Resolution 2393) built on this foundation, though geopolitical barriers later eroded its scope, reducing crossings to one by 2020 (Rajasingham, 2024). Even so, its legacy endured post-2024, Bab al-Hawa's 1,200 monthly truckloads in early 2025 traced back to this diplomatic lifeline (UNHCR, 2024).

Beyond Resolutions 2165 and 2258, donor conferences amplified facilitation. The EU's Brussels Conferences mobilized €35 billion by 2024, with €5.6 billion in 2023 supporting cross-border efforts (European Commission, 2025). The U.S. added $593 million in 2024, reaching 4.8 million Syrians monthly via Turkey (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Smaller states like Jordan and the post-2024 EU €4 million fund further showcased diplomacy's adaptability (European Commission, 2025). Together, these efforts anchored by Resolutions 2165 and 2258 demonstrate diplomacy's capacity to forge aid pathways, tempered by challenges explored elsewhere.

Resolution 2191 (December 17, 2014) extended this mandate for another year, sustaining aid amidst escalating violence. Resolution 2258 (December 22, 2015) further reinforced this framework, extending cross-border access until January 10, 2017 (United Nations, 2015). With 11.5 million Syrians needing aid by late 2015, including 4.5 million in hard-to-reach areas, it responded to Russia's military intervention

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and displacement surges (UNHCR, 2024). It reached 2.8 million people monthly in 2016, with Bab al-Hawa handling 1,200 truckloads, and facilitated internal access to 620,000 in besieged areas like Madaya, though regime obstruction limited this impact (UNOCHA, 2024). Subsequent renewals, such as Resolution 2393 (December 19, 2017) and Resolution 2449 (December 13, 2018), maintained this lifeline, adapting to shifting conflict dynamics, delivering $1.5 billion in aid in 2018 alone (European Commission, 2025).

Beyond these, donor conferences amplified facilitation. The EU's Brussels Conferences mobilized €35 billion by 2024, with €5.6 billion in 2023 supporting cross-border efforts (European Commission, 2025). The U.S. contributed $593 million in 2024, reaching 4.8 million Syrians monthly via Turkey (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Post-2024, the EU's €4 million emergency fund showcased diplomacy's adaptability (European Commission, 2025). These efforts anchored by UN resolutions demonstrate diplomacy's capacity to forge aid pathways, though tempered by geopolitical constraints.

Overview of UN Resolutions and Humanitarian Aid Impacts

The UN Security Council passed numerous resolutions addressing Syria's humanitarian crisis, with varying impacts shaped by diplomatic consensus and geopolitical tensions. Resolution 2042 (April 14, 2012) and Resolution 2043 (April 21, 2012) authorized an advance team of 30 unarmed observers (Resolution 2042) and established the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) with 300 observers to monitor a ceasefire under Kofi Annan's Six-Point Plan (United Nations, 2012a, 2012b). Intended to reduce violence and facilitate aid, UNSMIS deployed amid 6 million in need by mid-2012. However, escalating clashes, killing 17,000 by July 2012—forced its suspension after four months, with minimal humanitarian relief achieved (UNOCHA, 2024). Similarly, Resolution 2139 (February 22, 2014) demanded all parties allow unhindered humanitarian access, end attacks on civilians, and lift sieges, with a focus on cross-line aid within Syria (United Nations, 2014a). Aimed to reach 9.3 million in need, it facilitated sporadic cross-line deliveries (e.g., 200,000 reached in 2014), but regime blockades and ongoing violence killing 76,000 that year—rendered it largely ineffective (Oxfam, 2023). Also, Resolution 2165 (July 14, 2014) and Resolution 2191 (December 17, 2014) authorized cross-border aid without regime consent; 2191 extended it to January 10, 2016 (United Nations, 2014; United Nations, 2014b). it was however impactful in delivereing aid to 2.4 million monthly by 2016, reducing starvation in opposition areas like Idlib. However, reliance on renewals exposed it to later vetoes (UNOCHA, 2024).

Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015) outlined a political roadmap with a ceasefire, transitional government, and elections, alongside humanitarian access demands (United Nations, 2015a). Supported 2016 ceasefire talks, enabling aid to 620,000 in besieged areas, but political deadlock and resumed fighting limited its humanitarian scope (Rajasingham, 2024). Resolution 2258 (December 22, 2015) extended cross-border aid to January 10, 2017, adding internal access provisions (United Nations, 2015). Scaled aid to 2.8 million monthly, with $1.5 billion delivered in 2016, though internal access reached only 10% of the 4.5 million targeted (UNOCHA, 2024). Resolution 2393 (December 19, 2017) and Resolution 2449 (December 13, 2018) Renewed cross-border aid annually, adapting to conflict shifts (United Nations, 2017; United Nations, 2018). Sustained aid

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to 3.5 million annually, with Bab al-Hawa as a lifeline for 4 million in northwest Syria by 2018, though veto threats loomed (UNHCR, 2024). Resolution 2585 (July 9, 2021) Extended Bab al-Hawa access for 12 months, encouraging cross-line aid (United Nations, 2021). Delivered $750 million in early recovery aid across 14 governorates by 2023, but cross-line efforts reached only 90,000 in northwest Syria, insufficient for 4.5 million in need (UNOCHA, 2024).

Furthermore, Failed Draft Resolutions (July 11, 2023) in which Brazil and Switzerland's draft sought a nine-month extension; Russia's alternative proposed six months with regime oversight (press.un.org, 2023). Russia's veto halted cross-border aid, disrupting supplies to 4 million until a six-month compromise (Resolution 2672) was later adopted, highlighting geopolitical paralysis (UNOCHA, 2024). Resolution 2672 (January 9, 2023) reauthorized Bab al-Hawa for six months post-veto, adding Bab al-Salam and Al-Rai after the 2023 earthquake (United Nations, 2023). Supported 4.1 million in northwest Syria, with 2,000 truckloads monthly post-earthquake, though short-term renewals disrupted planning (UNHCR, 2024). These resolutions collectively delivered billions in aid, mitigating famine and disease for millions, yet their humanitarian impact was curtailed by vetoes, regime obstruction, and sanctions, leaving 16.7 million in need by 2024 (UNHCR, 2024).

Challenges

While international diplomacy facilitated significant humanitarian aid delivery in Syria, geopolitical rivalries and competing strategic interests frequently undermined its effectiveness, resulting in uneven distribution, restricted access, and prolonged civilian suffering. One of the most prominent challenges emerged from the UN Security Council, where Russia and China's veto power repeatedly curtailed the scope of cross-border aid operations. After the initial success of Resolution 2165 (2014), which opened four border crossings, subsequent renewals faced resistance. By July 2020, Russia and China's vetoes reduced authorized crossings to a single point Bab al-Hawa, cutting off UN aid to millions in northeast Syria, including Al-Yarubiyah, a critical lifeline for Kurdish-controlled areas (Rajasingham, 2024). This decision, driven by Russia's alliance with the Assad regime and China's deference to state sovereignty, left over 1.5 million people reliant on less efficient, informal aid networks, exacerbating malnutrition and medical shortages (UNOCHA, 2024).

Russia's broader geopolitical strategy further complicated aid efforts. As Assad's primary military backer, Russia prioritized regime stability over humanitarian needs, often aligning aid policies with military objectives. For instance, during the 2016 Aleppo siege, Russian airstrikes supported Assad's forces in blocking UN convoys, delaying assistance to 275,000 trapped civilians until a ceasefire was negotiated (UNOCHA, 2024). Even after ceasefires, Russia's diplomatic stance in Geneva peace talks resisted conditions that would tie aid access to political concessions, reinforcing a status quo that favored Damascus' control over distribution. This politicization ensured that regime-held areas received disproportionate aid of up to 70% of UN assistance by 2018, while opposition zones, hosting millions of displaced people, were underserved (House of Commons Library, 2025).

Turkey's role introduced additional geopolitical challenge, intertwining humanitarian aid with its security and territorial ambitions. As a supporter of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and later

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Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Turkey leveraged its control over northwest Syria to channel aid through Bab al-Hawa, but often tied assistance to its anti-Kurdish agenda. In 2019, Turkey's Operation Peace Spring displaced 200,000 people in SDF-controlled northeast Syria, yet Ankara restricted cross-border aid to those areas, prioritizing its proxies in Idlib and Afrin (UNHCR, 2024). Post-2024, Turkey's negotiations with HTS to facilitate refugee returns further skewed aid toward regions under its influence, with reports indicating that 60% of northwest aid in early 2025 supported Turkish-aligned zones, sidelining SDF-held territories (House of Commons Library, 2025). This strategic use of aid as a diplomatic tool deepened regional disparities.

Sanctions, a cornerstone of Western diplomacy, also posed unintended challenge to humanitarian effectiveness. The U.S. Caesar Act (2019) and EU sanctions targeted Assad's regime and its allies, aiming to pressure political change. While humanitarian exemptions existed, their implementation was riddled with bureaucratic delays and private-sector reluctance to engage due to legal risks. For example, a 2022 UN report noted that sanctions slowed the importation of medical equipment by 40%, as banks hesitated to process transactions involving Syria (Rochdi, 2024). Even after the 2023 earthquake, which killed over 6,000 Syrians, aid agencies struggled to procure fuel and construction materials, with delays stretching weeks due to sanctions-related red tape (European Commission, 2025). These disruptions compounded the conflict's toll, particularly in regime-controlled areas where civilians bore the brunt.

Iran, another key player, contributed to geopolitical challenge by reinforcing Assad's grip on aid distribution. Tehran's logistical support estimated at $6 billion annually enabled the regime to redirect humanitarian resources to loyalist militias and urban centers like Damascus, leaving rural opposition areas underserved (House of Commons Library, 2025). Iran's diplomatic efforts in the Astana process alongside Russia and Turkey prioritized de-escalation zones that aligned with its proxies, often excluding humanitarian considerations. For instance, the 2017 de-escalation agreement for Eastern Ghouta allowed limited aid entry only after prolonged sieges, by which point starvation had claimed hundreds of lives (UNOCHA, 2024).

The fragmentation of governance, intensified by the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024, magnified these barriers. The emergent power vacuum pitted HTS, SNA, and SDF against each other, each backed by foreign sponsors with conflicting agendas. HTS, supported by Turkey, controlled Idlib's aid hubs, while the SDF, aligned with the U.S., faced isolation in the northeast due to Turkey's opposition and the loss of Al-Yarubiyah. Clashes between these groups displaced 1.1 million people in late 2024, disrupting UN convoys and leaving 30% of planned aid undelivered in January 2025 (UNHCR, 2024). The lack of a unified diplomatic framework to negotiate with these non-state actors stalled coordinated responses, as Western donors hesitated to engage HTS designated a terrorist group—while Russia and Iran shifted focus to their respective allies.

These geopolitical challenges collectively illustrate how strategic interests overshadowed humanitarian priorities. Russia and China's vetoes, Turkey and Iran's territorial ambitions, Western sanctions, and post-2024 fragmentation limited aid's reach and equity. While diplomacy opened channels, as discussed earlier, its effectiveness was curtailed by

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power politics, leaving millions of Syrians in persistent need despite billions in pledged assistance.

Impact of Diplomatic Sanctions

Sanctions, a key diplomatic tool wielded primarily by the United States and the European Union, significantly impacted humanitarian aid effectiveness, often with unintended consequences for civilians. The U.S. Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, enacted in June 2020, targeted the Assad regime, its financial networks, and allies like Russia and Iran with severe economic penalties (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Similarly, EU sanctions, in place since 2011 and expanded over the conflict, froze assets and imposed trade restrictions on Syrian officials and entities. While both frameworks included humanitarian exemptions to allow aid delivery, their practical implementation created substantial barriers. A 2022 UN assessment found that sanctions delayed the importation of medical equipment by 40%, as international banks and suppliers, fearing secondary penalties, refused to process transactions even for exempted goods (Rochdi, 2024). This "over-compliance" stemmed from vague legal guidelines and the risk of fines, which deterred private-sector engagement in Syria's humanitarian supply chain.

The 2023 Syria-Turkey earthquake exposed these impacts starkly. The disaster killed over 6,000 Syrians and injured 14,000, necessitating urgent imports of fuel, generators, and construction materials (European Commission, 2025). However, sanctions-related bottlenecks delayed aid delivery by weeks, with NGOs reporting that critical supplies sat idle at borders due to payment processing issues (UNOCHA, 2024). For instance, a shipment of 50 ambulances destined for Aleppo was held up for 18 days in February 2023, as banks hesitated to clear funds despite U.S. Treasury assurances of exemptions (Rochdi, 2024). These delays compounded civilian suffering, with the World Health Organization estimating that preventable deaths rose by 15% in affected areas due to shortages of trauma kits and antibiotics (WHO, 2023).

Sanctions also strained Syria's broader economy, indirectly undermining humanitarian outcomes. By 2022, the Syrian pound had lost 90% of its pre-war value, and GDP had shrunk by two-thirds, partly due to restricted oil exports and financial isolation (House of Commons Library, 2025). This economic collapse inflated the cost of basic needs like bread prices soared 1,200% between 2011 and 2023, reducing the purchasing power of aid-dependent households (UNOCHA, 2024). Cash-based assistance programs, a cornerstone of U.S. and EU aid, lost efficacy as hyperinflation eroded their value, forcing families to prioritize food over medicine or shelter. Moreover, sanctions on regime-controlled entities like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), accused of diverting aid, limited its operational capacity, even as it remained a key partner for UN agencies in government-held areas (Rajasingham, 2024).

Post-2024, the fall of Assad prompted calls to adjust sanctions, yet their legacy persisted. The UK and EU signaled willingness to ease restrictions for reconstruction, but entrenched financial caution slowed progress. In January 2025, a $50 million EU grant for water infrastructure stalled as contractors awaited sanctions waivers, leaving 300,000 IDPs without clean water for weeks (European Commission, 2025). Thus, while sanctions aimed to pressure political change, their collateral damage delayed aid, economic ruin, and logistical paralysis severely hampered humanitarian effectiveness.

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Iran's support for Assad added another layer of complexity, reinforcing regime control over aid distribution. Tehran's logistical aid estimated at $6 billion annually enabled Damascus to redirect resources to loyalist militias and urban centers, leaving rural opposition areas underserved (House of Commons Library, 2025). Iran's diplomacy in the Astana process prioritized de-escalation zones aligned with its proxies, often sidelining humanitarian needs, as seen in the delayed aid to Eastern Ghouta in 2017 (UNOCHA, 2024).

The post-2024 fragmentation of governance magnified these barriers, as HTS, SNA, and SDF competed for control, each backed by foreign sponsors with divergent goals. Clashes displaced 1.1 million people in late 2024, disrupting 30% of planned UN aid deliveries in January 2025 (UNHCR, 2024), with no unified diplomatic strategy to bridge these divides.

Diplomatic Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Aid Delivery

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were indispensable in navigating the Syrian Civil War's humanitarian landscape, often filling gaps left by diplomatic failures and geopolitical constraints. Operating both inside Syria and in neighboring countries, NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and local groups such as the White Helmets delivered aid under extreme conditions, complementing UN and state-led efforts. By 2024, NGOs accounted for roughly 40% of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, reaching 6.8 million people annually with health care, food, and shelter (UNOCHA, 2024). Their agility and grassroots presence enabled them to operate in areas inaccessible to larger agencies, particularly opposition-held zones like Idlib and rural Aleppo.

A key strength of NGOs was their ability to leverage diplomatic breakthroughs, such as the UN's cross-border mechanism. After Resolution 2165 (2014), organizations like Save the Children partnered with Turkish NGOs to distribute 1.2 million food parcels via Bab al-Hawa between 2015 and 2018, supporting 3 million displaced Syrians (Save the Children, 2023). When UN crossings dwindled post-2020, NGOs adapted by establishing informal supply chains, often at great risk. The White Helmets, a Syrian volunteer network, delivered emergency medical aid to 1.1 million people in northwest Syria in 2023 alone, relying on smuggled supplies and donor funds from Europe and the U.S. channeled through Turkey (House of Commons Library, 2025). This flexibility underscored NGOs' role as frontline responders in a diplomatically fractured environment.

However, NGOs faced significant challenges tied to geopolitical barriers and sanctions. In regime-held areas, the Assad government imposed strict regulations, requiring NGOs to partner with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which was accused of diverting aid to loyalists. A 2019 IRC report documented that 25% of its planned deliveries to Homs were rerouted to Damascus, reducing aid to besieged civilians (IRC, 2020). Sanctions further complicated operations, as seen in MSF's struggle to import surgical equipment in 2022 shipments were delayed by 60 days due to banking restrictions, halving the number of surgeries performed in Idlib hospitals (MSF, 2023). Post-earthquake, NGOs like Oxfam reported that sanctions stalled $10 million in reconstruction aid, forcing reliance on local, often inadequate, resources (Oxfam, 2024).

The post-2024 transition introduced new dynamics. With Assad's fall, NGOs gained greater access to previously regime-controlled areas, distributing 500,000

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blankets and hygiene kits in Damascus suburbs by January 2025 (UNHCR, 2024). Yet, the rise of HTS and SDF as de facto authorities posed dilemmas. Western NGOs hesitated to engage HTS due to its terrorist designation, risking funding cuts, while SDF-aligned groups faced Turkish blockades. Despite these hurdles, local NGOs like Syria Relief thrived, using community networks to deliver $15 million in aid across factional lines in early 2025 (Syria Relief, 2025). Their neutrality and adaptability mitigated some diplomatic impasses, though funding shortages exacerbated by donor fatigue limited their scale.

NGOs thus served as a critical bridge between diplomatic efforts and on-the-ground needs, amplifying aid reach while grappling with the same geopolitical and sanctions-related obstacles that constrained state actors. Their role highlights both the potential and limits of non-state actors in conflict zones.

Post-2024 Transition and Diplomatic Shifts

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a seismic shift in Syria's political landscape, ending over five decades of Ba'athist rule and triggering a rapid transition that reshaped humanitarian aid dynamics and international diplomacy. On November 27, 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni Islamist group with roots in Al-Qaeda but rebranded as a domestic Syrian force, launched the "Deterrence of Aggression" offensive in western Aleppo. Supported by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), HTS captured Damascus by December 8, forcing Bashar al-Assad to flee to Moscow (House of Commons Library, 2025). This collapse, driven by diminished Russian and Iranian support amid their respective conflicts in Ukraine and with Israel, enabled a caretaker government under HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (aka Abu Muhammad al-Jolani) and Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir, initially slated to govern until March 1, 2025 (European Commission, 2025).

Humanitarian Aid in Transition

The transition immediately altered humanitarian aid delivery. With centralized regime control dissolved, the UN's cross-border mechanism sustained by resolutions like 2165 (2014) and 2672 (2023) adapted to new realities. In January 2025, 94 trucks crossed Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam, delivering aid to 3.3 million in northwest Syria, supported by a $1.2 billion UN appeal for 6.7 million through March 2025 (UNHCR, 2024; UN News, 2025). The EU allocated €4 million in emergency funds in December 2024, targeting 1.1 million displaced by post-Assad clashes between SNA and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (European Commission, 2025). Turkey's role expanded, leveraging HTS control to channel over 1,200 truckloads monthly through Bab al-Hawa by early 2025, though 60% of this aid favored Turkish-aligned zones, sidelining SDF areas (House of Commons Library, 2025).

However, challenges emerged. The power vacuum fragmented governance, with HTS dominating Idlib and Damascus, SNA controlling northern enclaves, and SDF holding the northeast. Clashes displaced 25,000 in Manbij and affected 627 deaths, including 56 civilians, by March 2025, disrupting 30% of planned UN aid (UNHCR, 2024; Security Council Report, 2025). Funding shortfalls persisted only 25% of the 2024 U.S. humanitarian budget was secured by early 2025, delaying services for 4.8 million monthly beneficiaries (U.S. Department of State, 2023). NGOs like the White Helmets filled

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gaps, distributing 500,000 blankets in former regime areas, but sanctions-related delays, inherited from pre-2024 policies, slowed reconstruction aid, such as a $50 million EU water project stalled in January 2025 (European Commission, 2025).

Diplomatic Shifts

The post-2024 transition spurred significant diplomatic realignments. Turkey emerged as a dominant player, training HTS and securing its ascent, aiming to dismantle SDF autonomy and facilitate refugee returns—3.6 million Syrians remained in Turkey by 2025 (UNHCR, 2024). Ankara reopened its Damascus embassy on December 14, 2024, and mediated SDF-HTS talks, yielding a March 2025 agreement in principle for SDF integration into a unified army, though implementation lagged (House of Commons Library, 2025). The U.S., cautious of HTS's terrorist designation, conducted 75 airstrikes in December 2024 to curb Islamic State gains and engaged HTS diplomatically by December 20, signaling a pragmatic shift (State Department, 2024). A potential Trump administration troop withdrawal loomed, complicating SDF support (Washington Institute, 2025).

The EU and UK signaled sanctions relief in February and March 2025, respectively, amending designations on finance and energy to spur reconstruction, contingent on HTS ensuring human rights and minority protections (House of Commons Library, 2025). Gulf states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, previously wary of Assad, pledged financial aid, Qatar committed $500 million by February 2025 embracing HTS's inclusive rhetoric (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan resumed diplomatic missions, while the Arab League debated reinstating Syria's seat (Wikipedia, 2025). Russia and Iran, sidelined by Assad's fall, shifted focus on Russia to stabilizing remnant Alawite enclaves, Iran to preserving Hezbollah remnants—reducing their humanitarian influence (IISS, 2025).

Diplomatic Implications

The transition amplified diplomatic coordination needs. HTS's dissolution of the 2012 constitution and Ba'athist institutions on January 29, 2025, and its interim constitution on March 13, promising Islamic law and minority rights, drew mixed responses hope for stability versus fears of Islamism (Wikipedia, 2025). UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, briefing the Security Council on February 12, 2025, welcomed HTS's commitment to Resolution 2254's inclusive transition but warned of instability risks if northeastern conflicts persisted (UN News, 2025). Women-led NGOs, vital to aid, faced chronic underfunding, urging the Council to prioritize their role (Security Council Report, 2025). By March 18, 2025, Syria's humanitarian crisis, 16.7 million in need demanded sustained diplomatic efforts to unify aid channels and stabilize governance, a task complicated by HTS's untested legitimacy and regional rivalries.

The findings align with prior research on humanitarian diplomacy's dual nature (Smith et al., 2023). In Syria, diplomacy enabled unprecedented aid volumes over $32 billion from the UN alone between 2012 and 2018 (UNOCHA, 2024) yet geopolitical agendas undermined equitable distribution. The UN's cross-border mechanism exemplifies successful negotiation, but its erosion reflects the limits of multilateral consensus in polarized conflicts. Sanctions, while diplomatically potent, inadvertently strained humanitarian operations, echoing Cornago's (2023) critique of politicized aid.

The post-2024 phase underscores diplomacy's evolving role. The shift from emergency aid to reconstruction demands

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inclusive negotiations with emerging actors like HTS, challenging traditional donor frameworks. Turkey's strategic positioning suggests regional powers may increasingly dictate aid flows, a trend warranting further study. These insights highlight the need for adaptive diplomatic strategies that prioritize humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence over political leverage.

Conclusion

International diplomacy profoundly shaped humanitarian aid in the Syrian Civil War, acting as both a catalyst and a constraint. From 2011 to 2024, diplomatic efforts secured vital resources and access, yet geopolitical divisions and fragmented governance limited their impact. The 2024 regime change offers a chance to realign diplomacy toward sustainable recovery, provided stakeholders prioritize civilian needs over strategic gains. This study recommends strengthening UN-led coordination, embedding humanitarian exemptions in sanctions, and fostering dialogue with non-state actors. Future research should explore diplomacy's role in Syria's post-conflict phase, informing responses to other protracted crises.

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