

Syria Arab Republic and Surrounding Countries Emergency – Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) CONOPS

This Concept of Operations is a live document. Activities will be adapted and revised as the situation unfolds and as further communications needs are expressed by the response community.

Last update: 05/08/2019

Background

As the Syria crisis enters its ninth year, the scale, severity and complexity of humanitarian needs remain extensive. This is the result of continued hostilities in localized areas, new and protracted displacement, increased spontaneous returns and the sustained erosion of communities' resilience during more than eight years of crisis. Syria is still one of the biggest and most complex crises globally, and it is far from over.

Across Syria, an estimated 11.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. While there has been a reduction in violence in many parts of the country over the past year, the impact of present and past hostilities on civilians remains the principal driver of humanitarian needs in Syria. Humanitarian access to people in need in Syria remains constrained by the ongoing conflict.

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated in Syria on 14 January 2013, with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) appointed as Local Cluster Lead, to provide shared security telecommunications and Internet connectivity services to the humanitarian community responding to the crisis. The ETC is operating under the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach which comprises activities in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan for an effective humanitarian response inside Syria.



Map Sources: ESRI, UNCS.
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map created in Sep 2013.

Telecommunications infrastructure throughout Syria has suffered significant damage after over eight years of the crisis. While Damascus has good coverage, telecommunications services in other locations – including important urban locations such as Aleppo, Al Qamishli and Homs – are far more limited. A lack of electricity is a challenge for the whole country and regular power outages impact the communication network across Syria. These gaps are the main impediments to enable humanitarian programming and ensuring the safety of humanitarian actors when working in a complex operational environment.

Needs Assessment

- Under the coordination of the Inter-Agency Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Working Group set up in November 2012, two ETC Coordinators based in Damascus and Amman conducted a preliminary needs assessment in January 2013 to determine ICT capacity and gaps:
 - Due to limited Very High Frequency (VHF) coverage in some areas, a lack of operational repeaters in the field, significant damage to existing telecommunications infrastructure and minimal internet coverage in remote areas, the need was found for provision of security telecommunications (HF/VHF radio and radio programming) and internet connectivity services for the humanitarian community in five common operational areas, namely Damascus, Aleppo, Tartous, Al Qamishli and Homs.
 - The need for common ICT services – particularly telecommunications – in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon was also identified.
 - To date, the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) network is reliable and commonly used by humanitarian staff in country and is used in parallel by other UN agencies. However, the Security Management Team (SMT) recommends keeping an independent security communication network, which currently is radio communication.
- More than eight years of continuous conflict in Syria means that in 2019:
 - Telecommunications infrastructure remains impaired. However, as security conditions improve, particularly in parts of the south, telecommunications infrastructure and services are steadily improving. While Damascus has good coverage, telecommunications services in important urban centres such as Aleppo, Al Qamishli and Homs are limited.
 - Reliable internet connectivity remains a major challenge throughout the country and upgrading connectivity services is key to ensure acceptable services performance for humanitarian staff.
 - A lack of electricity is a challenge for the whole country and regular power outages impact the communication network across Syria.
 - There is a need for the continued provision of shared connectivity and security telecommunications services in the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey where ongoing humanitarian activities support operations inside Syria.
- With the confirmed ban on using some types of radio equipment within Syria, there is an urgent need to migrate the existing security communications infrastructure to a different brand. As the country is under sanctions, movement restrictions mean that local technical staff face serious challenges in attending the training sessions on the new systems needed to facilitate the effective delivery of telecommunications services.

- There may be a need for scale-up of ETC services in 2019 as UN agencies seek to further decentralize the response and to prepare for increased levels of returnees and displaced people, including refugees. Planning includes the possible establishment of an additional four UN hubs in areas recently recovered by the Syrian government – Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, Raqqa and Dar’a or As Sweida – which will require shared connectivity and security telecommunications services.
- Contingency staffing and financial resources are needed to run *ad hoc* projects based on ongoing assessments.

ETC Response:

The ETC in Syria aims to address critical communication gaps by undertaking the following activities:

- **Coordination:** Coordinate ICT activities within the response community (including liaising with commercial entities and government authorities) to minimize duplication of efforts and maximize the use of available resources. Liaise with government authorities to provide guidance on importation and licensing of communication equipment to the humanitarian community.
- **Information Management:** Consolidate and share operational information, with the aim of enhancing operational decision making. This includes maintaining information sharing platforms, contact lists, country webpage on www.ETCcluster.org, ETC dashboards, infographics, generating regular situation reports and disseminating operational information with relevant stakeholders as required.
- **Telecommunications:** Provide reliable telecommunications services to the humanitarian community in common operational areas approved by the SMT, including security telecommunications, radio programming and end-user training on security telecommunications procedures.
- **Internet connectivity:** Provide reliable internet services to the humanitarian community in common operational areas, namely in the humanitarian hubs.
- **Capacity Building:** Transfer knowledge of IT emergency management and response to key IT staff from WFP and other UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), government entities and relevant stakeholders involved in emergency operations by conducting capacity building exercises and ensuring preparedness strategies in future emergencies.

The response is planned in three phases, as follows.

Phase I: ETC activation and initial service setup (Jan 2013–Dec 2018)

Coordination, setup and maintenance

- Mobilized dedicated staff, including an ETC Coordinator.
- Began coordination of ETC operations from offices in Damascus and Amman.

- Developed all project related activities including budgets, fundraising and reporting.
- Carried out ICT and telecommunications assessment missions across Syria and the surrounding countries to address gaps and establish capacity in communications services.
- Signed a service agreement with other agencies to allow the importation of Non-Food Items (NFIs) into Syria through the various corridors.
- Liaised with government authorities on behalf of the humanitarian community to license and import telecommunications equipment.
- Established ETC services at 11 common operational areas across Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan for the entire humanitarian community.
- Attended regular inter-agency meetings and collaboration with existing groups.
- Conducted regular maintenance missions to ensure full operability of the deployed ETC communications services.
- Provided support services to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and other partners when required.

Security Telecommunications

- Carried out assessments and mapping of regional telecommunications infrastructure in common operational areas.
- Procured telecommunications equipment to support the humanitarian community.
- Expanded security telecommunications services to 11 locations in: Turkey (Antakya, Gaziantep, Kilis, Sanliurfa), Lebanon (Beirut), Jordan (Amman) and Syria (Damascus, Al Qamishli, Aleppo, Tartous, Homs).
- Supported the establishment of six UNDSS-managed radio rooms (now referred to as Security Operations Centres – SOCs) with equipment and installation in Damascus, Aleppo, Al Qamishli, Homs, Tartous and Gaziantep.
- Assisted UNDSS in the upgrade of the common security telecommunications network in Lebanon to digital technology, bringing enhanced features that enabled a safer response.
- Installed security telecommunications systems at Azraq and Zaatari refugee camps in Jordan, managed by UNHCR.
- Strengthened Ultra High Frequency (UHF) radio network coverage to assist humanitarian missions in south-eastern Turkey.
- Reviewed the existing security telecommunications infrastructure and services in Syria and in line with the needs of humanitarian organizations on the ground and began to engage with the global Telecommunications Security Standards (TESS) project to decide on the most suitable option for the Syria operation.

Data connectivity

- Centralized the procurement of connectivity equipment on behalf of the humanitarian community.

- Prepositioned IT equipment in surrounding countries to increase capacity for data connectivity on the ground and put in place a tracking system to monitor equipment location and usage.
- Established Internet connectivity services in Damascus (now phased out), Homs and Gaziantep.
- Established data connectivity services at Azraq refugee camp, managed by UNHCR.
- Set up a dedicated Internet connectivity and ICT helpdesk at the UN hub in Gaziantep to facilitate the implementation of humanitarian activities.

Installation and programming of VHF/HF radios

- Began installation and programming of VHF/HF radios starting with humanitarian organizations based in Damascus.

Tracking systems

- Developed vehicle tracking systems in collaboration with UNDSS.

Capacity building

- Conducted two Let's Comm Digital training sessions for 28 humanitarian participants involved in the WoS operation, providing them with the skills to deploy and maintain security telecommunications network to UN standards.
- Carried out refresher courses for UNDSS radio operators.
- Delivered an IT Emergency Management workshop alongside WFP's Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergency and Support Team (FITTEST) to build the IT response capacity of 14 participants from nine UN agencies and NGO organizations in the region.
- Provided radio training to 70 interagency participants in 2017, ensuring humanitarians follow the correct procedures and ensuring their safety on the ground.

Phase II: Expansion of services/support/maintenance (Jan–Dec 2019)

To support humanitarian efforts and to ultimately ensure lifesaving assistance reaches those who need it most, the ETC in Syria will:

- Continue to conduct **coordination and information management activities**: The ETC will participate in relevant cluster meetings and organize regular dedicated ETC coordination meetings. The ETC will also continuously assess communications needs of the humanitarian community during frequent field missions. The ETC Information Management Officer (IMO) will develop regular and accurate ETC operational information products, including but not limited to dashboards, situation reports, operational documentation and meeting minutes, and disseminate them among global and local partners and post on the Syria emergency page on the ETCluster.org platform.
- **Security telecommunications infrastructure**: Installation of radio repeaters and fully manned radio rooms to increase emergency telecommunication services in all new UN operational areas (Deir Ez-Zor) and to enhance the safety and security of the UN, humanitarian agencies and SARC (Tartous).

- **Data Connectivity:** Deploy a connectivity solution at the new UN hub in Deir Ez-Zor. The ETC also will map the common ICT requirements in Dar'a, Raqqa and As Sweida where a further three UN hubs are planned, to be ready to support the provision of shared communication services.
- **Capacity Building:** The ETC is working together with WFP FITTEST training services in Dubai to deliver data connectivity and voice capacity training for IT staff in Syria.

Phase III: Exit strategy

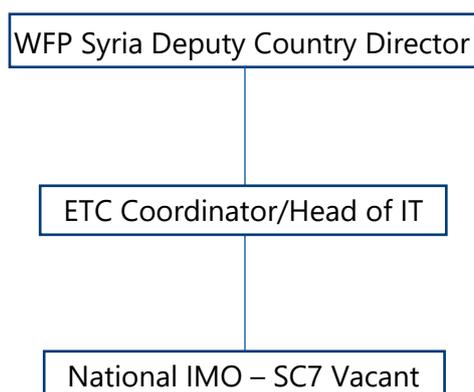
The ETC will transition all ICT services from the emergency to the recovery phase when there are no ICT gaps on the ground. Any deactivation of the ETC in Syria will be done in close consultation with the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) with support from senior management at the WFP Syria Country Office. WFP's Regional IT Emergency Preparedness and Response Officer has been involved in this operation from the onset of the emergency and will be able to ensure business continuity during the disengagement process remotely. Handover documents should be produced, and all information and supporting documents transferred to a previously agreed asset management system to ensure a proper handover at the end of the operation.

In locations where ETC services are no longer required, or can be transitioned to a local service provider, the ETC will inform recipient organizations of the proposed cut-off time. In locations where longer-term service provision and support is required, the ETC may identify a local organization to lead service provision and implement a cost-recovery model to maintain services beyond the emergency response plan. As the ETC in Syria is still in the deployment and maintenance phase, the ETC will continue evaluating the needs on the ground to propose an appropriate date to start its transition strategy.

In the last six months of its response, the ETC will:

- Ensure provision and maintenance of services established until the cut-off date beyond which the ETC will either shut down or hand over the services to another responsible party.
- Communicate the transition plan to all partners and users.
- Ensure a thorough handover with local entities to continue service provision after deactivation of ETC.

Staffing



Budget

The ETC has requested **US\$1,000,000** to implement its activities to support the humanitarian response in 2019. So far, the ETC has received **US\$850,000** from the government of Germany and an additional **US\$100,000** carried over meaning it is **95%** funded. Additional funding is needed to conduct the following activities:

- Installation of radio repeaters and fully staffed SOCs to increase emergency security telecommunications services in all new UN operational areas (Deir-Ez-Zor) and to enhance the safety and security of UN agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) (Tartous).
- Deployment of UN shared satellite services in newly established common UN operational areas to provide data connectivity to humanitarians.
- Provision of regular maintenance and capacity building to ensure ETC services are fully functional.
- Installation of solar power solutions to ensure continuous operations of SOCs in Syria.
- Prepare for potential scale-up of ETC services in common operational areas where support is needed, including in the context of an anticipated scale up of humanitarian response during 2019.
- Delivery of ETC capacity building for IT humanitarian staff from UN agencies and NGOs SARC and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Risks and Challenges analysis

Potential Risks/challenges	Proposed Mitigation measures
<p>Volatile security situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage closely with UNDSS and HCT to access priority locations. • Ensure identified premises are secured before equipment setup.
<p>Staff ceiling in (location)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage closely with UNDSS and HCT on allocating minimum ETC staff slots to deploy services. Staff rotation between in-country locations and potential outside locations to be integrated into ETC plan.
<p>ICT equipment importation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with national authorities on rules and regulations for importing equipment. • Identify local suppliers and solutions. • Engage with other organizations through the local ICT working group to gather common requirements, avoid duplication and jointly prioritize ICT needs. Importation requirements to be gathered through one focal point (i.e. ETC Coordinator) to liaise with national authorities.
<p>Security communications limitation – VHF to be extended</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize provision of security communications services in all locations. • Engage with UNDSS and Security Management Team (SMT) to advise and confirm solutions to be used and inform humanitarian organizations accordingly.

City power is unreliable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include power sources (generators, solar power solutions) to ensure ETC services (security communications and data connectivity) are operating 24/7 without relying on city power.
Transportation issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with civil authorities/military authorities/Logs Cluster/UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) on possible solutions for equipment transportation and/or personnel.

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Acronyms

ConOps	Concept of Operations
DCD	Deputy Country Director
ETC	Emergency Telecommunications Cluster
FITTEST	Fast IT and Telecommunications Intervention and Support Team
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
HF	High Frequency
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IMO	Information Management Officer
IT	Information Technology
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NFI	Non-Food Items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SMT	Security Management Team
SOC	Security Operations Centre
TESS	Telecommunications Security Standards
UHF	Ultra High Frequency
UN	United Nations

UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety and Security
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme
VHF	Very High Frequency
WoS	Whole of Syria

All information related to ETC/ETC operations can be found at
<https://www.etcluster.org/emergencies/syria-conflict>

For more information, or to be added or removed from the mailing list, contact: Syria.ETC@wfp.org