[How the U.N. Let Assad Edit the Truth of Syria’s War](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/27/syria-madaya-starvation-united-nations-humanitarian-response-plan-assad-edited/)

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By [Roy Gutman](http://foreignpolicy.com/author/roy-gutman)

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Its title is prosaic and its content dry, but the stark statistics in the U.N.’s annual summary of relief programs tell the story of Syria’s humanitarian nightmare. This is a country on life support: 13.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, Syrians are being displaced at a rate of 50 families per hour every day, and at least 1 million people in displaced persons camps receive no international aid.

But to close readers of the [U.N. Humanitarian Response Plan](http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2016-syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-response-plan-january-december), which was published on Dec. 29, the big surprise was what the 64-page document failed to mention. The United Nations, after consulting the Syrian government, altered dozens of passages and omitted pertinent information to paint the government of Bashar al-Assad in a more favorable light.

By comparing the final document to an earlier draft that was obtained by Foreign Policy, it is evident that 10 references to “sieged” or “besieged” areas, such as that in Madaya — the town in southwestern Syria that saw 23 people die of starvation over several months before the arrival of a U.N. aid convoy in mid-January — were removed. Gone was any mention of the program to clear mines and unexploded ordnance, such as the “barrel bombs” the regime drops indiscriminately on populated areas. Gone were all mentions of Syrian relief groups that shepherd the aid to civilians in rebel-held areas.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) indicated that the alterations were made at the behest of the Syrian government.

“It is standard procedure in each country for the UN to consult with the government of the country,” wrote Linda Tom, an OCHA spokeswoman, when asked about the deletion of references to “siege” or “besieged.” Amanda Pitt, OCHA’s chief spokeswoman, affirmed that point. “I assume it was done in consultation with a range of partners including the Government, as is normal practice,” she said in an email to FP.

OCHA declined to make any senior official available for an interview or to respond to further questions.

The U.N.’s deletion of any mention of sieges is particularly noteworthy, because the Madaya crisis is far from over. Although the Syrian government allowed U.N. agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to truck in food and some medical supplies beginning on Jan. 11, Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia and the regime blocked the evacuation of hundreds of people with acute malnutrition who doctors want taken to hospitals, relief officials said. Hezbollah and Syrian army forces also restricted the delivery of fuel, allowing only a fraction of what the U.N. had planned.

Thirteen more civilians died after the arrival of the aid convoys, Mohammad Yusuf, coordinator of a local Madaya medical unit, told FP on Wednesday. One teenage boy passed away before the eyes of a UNICEF official.

The U.N. ordinarily says little about the situation in regions under siege, preferring quiet diplomacy — but that approach didn’t work in 2015, as the Syrian government turned down nine out of 10 requests to send food and medicine to areas that the U.N. classified as besieged or “hard to reach.” The international body has come under widespread criticism for [staying silent](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/15/u-n-knew-for-months-madaya-was-starving-syria-assad/) for months on Madaya until the photos of children who had died of starvation began to circulate.

In a “[Flash Update](http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-flash-update-2-madayabqine-17-january-2016)” made public on Jan. 17, however, U.N. officials disclosed that they had been unable to obtain approval for medical evacuations. The update said at one point that “several cases” require urgent specialized care outside Madaya, and elsewhere that “dozens of individuals” needed such help. “While 10 people were evacuated in the last days, approvals for the evacuation of others [remain] pending,” it said.

Representatives of two Syrian relief organizations told FP that the OCHA bulletin drastically underestimated the number of people in need of urgent case, saying that as many as 400 people need to be evacuated.

Hezbollah has tightened the siege still more in recent days, forcing dozens of families on the road to Zabadani to leave their homes for Madaya, according to two NGOs and a town resident. But the U.N. hasn’t issued a bulletin on the situation in the town since Jan. 17.

Meanwhile, criticism of the U.N.’s handling of sieges hasn’t only been over Madaya.

Five Syrian relief organizations charged that the U.N. had set an “unacceptable precedent” in negotiating the wording of the report with the Syrian government. Removing all references to besieged areas “downplays the severity of the violations” of international law by the Assad regime, and removing the references to mine clearing was an implicit validation of the Syrian government’s position that mine removal constitutes military action, they said in a [letter](https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2693023/HRP-2016-a-Letter-From-Syrian-Networks-20151230.txt) sent on Dec. 30.

Some aid workers believe that the U.N.’s willingness to toe the Syrian government’s line is due to the international body’s fear of being booted out of Damascus. In a separate letter on Jan. 13, 112 relief workers from government-besieged areas [complained bitterly](https://drive.google.com/a/thesyriacampaign.org/file/d/0B4TiJ54YuM0qeHFZWHFfYTI1cUZzZGREbkd6VmZXNjhPSXY4/view?pref=2&pli=1) that staff in the U.N.’s Damascus office “are either too close to the regime or too scared of having their visas revoked by the same powers that are besieging us.”

“Why are you silencing our suffering? As if refusing to break the sieges were not enough, it now seems the UN is even afraid of uttering the words,” Syrian relief workers and civil society activists wrote.

Both letters were addressed to Stephen O’Brien, the U.N. undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, who [replied](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/ERC%20Stephen%20OBrien%20letter%20to%20Syria%20NGOs%2017Jan2016.pdf) in a Jan. 17 letter to “members of Syrian civil society” that appeared to respond to both complaints. He asserted that the U.N. was not “too close to any party” and was not “acting in such a way to encourage the use of siege tactics.”

He said the U.N. had “repeatedly and unequivocally called for an end to siege as a weapon of war against civilians and for full, unhindered, unconditional and sustained access to all people in need in besieged and hard-to-reach areas in Syria.” He also said he was “angry and frustrated about the situation in besieged areas in Syria and the terrifying toll it is having on its children, women and men.”

There is no suggestion, however, that U.N. officials will review their standing policy of negotiating in secret for approval to deliver food and medicine, a mission that the U.N. Security Council has unanimously endorsed.

Kevin Kennedy, the U.N.’s regional coordinator for the Syria crisis, pushed back more vigorously earlier this month in Gaziantep, Turkey, during encounters with international and independent Syrian relief agencies. In those discussions, he dismissed the importance of the Humanitarian Response Plan, according to two attendees.

“He said the document is meaningless, and it will be put back on the shelf,” said a Syrian relief staffer who attended one of the meetings.

While the U.N. describes the Humanitarian Response Plan as “the collective vision of the international humanitarian community and its national partners for responding to the assessed humanitarian needs in Syria,” Kennedy downplayed its influence at the Gazientep meeting. “He said donors don’t care about this document,” the relief staffer said.

“It was a very bad meeting, with irritating answers,” said a second aid agency official, who is a representative of an independent Syrian organization. “There is no willingness to make any change.”

The biggest single donor to the U.N.’s $3.2 billion program, the United States, also played down the dispute. The U.S. Agency for International Development, in an email to FP, called the Humanitarian Response Plan “an operational plan, not an advocacy or fundraising document.”

But some aid organizations are not willing to dismiss it so quickly. The document, in the words of one senior official of a U.S. relief organization, “sets the direction and the tone” for the international response to the crisis. Some fear the language in official documents can also take on a life of its own — with the Assad regime using it for its own purposes, regardless of how U.N. officials see it.

“If it’s important, don’t let the government of Syria do whatever it wants to with it,” said the second aid official.