

The Humanitarian Response in Post-Earthquake Syria: An Urgent Need for Depoliticisation

by Munqeth Othman Agha

Less than four days following the deadly earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023, Syrians from the less-impacted areas in the northeast sent a convoy of 140 trucks carrying humanitarian aid toward the northwest.¹ Solidarity convoys drove successfully through checkpoints across different zones of control, including those controlled by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration (AA) in northeast Syria, the Syrian regime and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in Turkish-influenced areas in northern Syria. While doing so, they overtook other convoys sent by the AA and the UN Damascus that were stuck behind for different political and logistic reasons. Search and rescue activities in northwest Syria were primarily led by local efforts (in particular the Syrian Civil Defense or the White Helmets),²

with very few international rescue teams joining, especially in the early days.

Eyeing this, Syrians furiously, but also sarcastically, wondered how ordinary Syrians already living in harsh living conditions were able to mobilise more aid and deliver it faster than the UN and other INGOs. This event adds another episode to the long history of UN structural failure to deliver aid to disaster-struck zones in the country since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. As living conditions have never been worse in Syria, and the humanitarian system has never been more paralysed and politicised, there is no more rightful time than now to rethink the whole system of aid delivery.

Disaster amplified: When natural and human crises overlap

The magnitude 7.8 earthquake came to add another layer of destruction,

in Syria and Türkiye", in *Humanitarian Outcome*, February 2023, <https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/node/6863>.

¹ Mohammad Karkas, "Tribal Solidarities Prepare 140 Trucks Carrying Aid to Northwest Syria" (in Arabic), in *The New Arab*, 13 February 2023, <https://edgs.co/lxz22>.

² Alexa Swift et al., "Solidarity at Scale: Local Responder Perspectives and Learning from the First Week of the Earthquake Response

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devastation and struggle to areas that had already suffered enough from a protracted conflict for 12 years. As of 28 February, more than 7,259 Syrians have lost their lives in the earthquake, 2,534 in opposition-controlled areas, 394 in regime-controlled areas and 4,331 in Turkey.³ There have been more than 18,099 damaged buildings and 201,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northwest Syria.⁴ In regime-controlled areas, hundreds of buildings were affected in Aleppo and Latakia, where people already had almost no access to heat, electricity and water. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are a total of 8.8 million people affected by the earthquake.⁵

It must be remembered that this was not entirely a natural disaster. Decades of failed urban policies and violating building codes that involved corrupted contractors and government officials overlapped with a decade of battles and bombardment that had literally shaken the foundations of many properties. It is also safe to argue that most buildings that were constructed during the conflict to accommodate IDPs barely took any building standards into account. To make things just worse,

³ Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), *A Total of 7,259 Syrians, Including 2,153 Children and 1,524 Women, Died Due to the Turkey-Syria Earthquake*, 28 February 2013, <https://snhr.org/?p=59224>.

⁴ Syrian Response Coordination Group, "Northwestern Syria, a Month after the Earthquake" (in Arabic), *Facebook post*, 8 March 2023, <https://bit.ly/40bn7dv>.

⁵ OCHA, *Nearly 9 Million People in Syria Affected by Türkiye Earthquake, UN Launches \$400 Million Funding Appeal*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/node/957897>.

the Syrian regime and Russia have systematically targeted vital healthcare facilities and infrastructure during the conflict that would be otherwise put into service. Moreover, areas impacted by the earthquake in northwest Syria, especially in Afrin and northern rural Idlib, are overpopulated due to the multiple waves of IDPs arriving from areas captured by the Syrian regime (estimated at 2.9 million).⁶

The politics of humanitarian response in Syria

Since 6 February, three related events have taken place. The relaxation of US sanctions (10 February), and EU restrictive measures (23 February) on humanitarian transactions;⁷ the opening of two new crossings from Turkey into Syria (14 February),⁸ allegedly after Abdullah bin Zayed, the UAE foreign minister, personally requested Bashar Assad to authorise that;⁹ and finally, the adjustment of the Syrian pound/US dollar exchange rate to 7,200, after the Syrian Central Bank had already raised it from 4,522

⁶ OCHA, *North-West Syria Situation Report*, last updated 15 March 2023, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria>.

⁷ Federica Marsi, "US Exempts Syrian Earthquake Aid from Sanctions", in *Al Jazeera*, 10 February 2023, <https://aje.io/nqtbi4>; Council of the European Union, *Earthquake in Türkiye and Syria: EU Amends Restrictive Measures in Place Regarding Syria to Facilitate the Speedy Delivery of Humanitarian Aid*, 23 February 2023, <https://europa.eu/!xVBn7H>.

⁸ David Gritten, "Earthquake-hit Syria to Open Two More Border Crossings for Aid Delivery - UN", in *BBC News*, 14 February 2023, <https://bbc.in/3ZKgdvt>.

⁹ Laila Bassam et al., "Exclusive: Assad Approved Syria Quake Aid with a UAE Nudge, Sources Say", in *Reuters*, 23 February 2023, <https://reut.rs/3IXqQEx>.

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to 6,650 right before the earthquake.¹⁰ While these events might be seen by many as a boost to the humanitarian response, they are likely to have a limited impact on improving the living conditions of Syrians for one reason: the politicisation of aid. Indeed, manipulating and diverting aid has been one of the main characteristics of the Syrian conflict, a strategy that was pursued by most actors in the conflict for two objectives: blocking aid for particular communities as a political punishment, and looting it for self-enrichment.¹¹ The fact that the same government that is responsible for the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people is also in charge of delivering the vast majority of international aid in the country has amplified the politicisation of aid,¹² which has been lately witnessed at an unprecedented level after the earthquake. Indeed, four related challenges are likely to affect the post-earthquake response.

The first challenge pertains to low accessibility. Syria is still split into three main zones of control, and multiple areas of influence. The accessibility between such areas is highly, if not completely, restricted, especially between opposition- and regime-

controlled areas. In fact, pouring aid through Damascus is likely to have little impact on areas not controlled by the regime, which are the most affected by the earthquake. For example, in 2022, only 9 convoys of aid entered northwest Syria through the cross-line mechanism introduced by the UN Security Council in July 2021 that provides for the delivery of aid to areas outside the regime's control through domestic frontlines by the UN headquarters in Damascus. To put this into perspective, at least 600 trucks enter northwest Syria through the cross-border (that is, delivering aid through the Turkish borders without the consent of the Syrian regime) every month.¹³ Moreover, up to this day, no earthquake response convoys have been sent to northwest Syria through the cross-line,¹⁴ despite the regime receiving more than 65 per cent of the total earthquake response aid so far.¹⁵ Local governance structures in northwest Syria, such as the *Hay'at Tahrir Sham* in Idlib and Turkey-backed armed opposition groups in northern Aleppo, add further restrictions on humanitarian accessibility, leading to the blocking of some humanitarian convoys sent by the AA and the UN

¹⁰ "Syria's Central Bank Raises Exchange Rate to 7.200 SYP to USD", in *North Press Agency*, 9 March 2023, <https://npasyria.com/en/94486>; "Syria's Central Bank Raises Exchange Rate to 6.650 SYP to USD", in *North Press Agency*, 2 February 2023, <https://npasyria.com/en/91885>.

¹¹ Natasha Hall, "Rescuing Aid in Syria", in *CSIS Reports*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rescuing-aid-syria>.

¹² Annie Sparrow, "How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped up Assad", in *Foreign Affairs*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1123007>.

¹³ Margaret Besheer, "Aid Will Flow through Winter to Syrians in Northwest", in *VOA News*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6911170.html>; World Food Programme, *WFP Syria Country Brief, October 2022*, 5 December 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3913304>.

¹⁴ Gregory Waters, "Idlib Is Under Siege", in *MEI Insights*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/node/85192>.

¹⁵ Syrian Response Coordination Group, "Humanitarian Donations to Syria" (in Arabic), *Facebook post*, 27 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZJlqUd>.

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Damascus.¹⁶

A second challenge is aid diversion. Following the earthquake, social media were flooded with evidence showing food assistance looted by pro-regime militia groups and sold in local markets in Damascus and Latakia.¹⁷ Humanitarian workers claim that the regime's checkpoints covertly requested shares of the aid to facilitate their passage.¹⁸ This is not surprising considering the Syrian regime's long history of aid diversion and weaponisation,¹⁹ as well as manipulating exchange rates.²⁰ Furthermore, since the outbreak of the conflict, the Syrian regime has imposed two cooperation partners on the UN

and INGOs, namely the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the Syria Trust for Development (linked to Asma' Assad).²¹ For example, it is estimated that around 60 per cent of international aid in regime-controlled areas is channelled through SARC. While allegations of corruption and aid diversion vary from one SARC local branch to another, the organisation overall has a poor reputation,²² including systematic aid discrimination and embezzlement.²³

At the international level, a further challenge relates to the paralysis of the UN mechanism of aid. The UN seems to remain the favourite choice for international donors even though it has shown once again its limited capacity to respond to such urgent needs at the right time and place, a failure that was admitted even by the UN-appointed Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.²⁴ The

¹⁶ "After 9 Days of Turkish Refusal, AANES Decided to Return Relief Aid", in *Hawar News*, 16 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3IVba4D>; Timour Azhari and Maya Gebeily, "Syria Quake Aid Held up by Hardline Group, U.N. Says", in *Reuters*, 12 February 2023, <https://reut.rs/3SSihPY>; Amnesty International UK, *Syria: Government Forces and Turkey-backed Armed Groups Have Diverted Earthquake Aid*, 6 March 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/node/65167>.

¹⁷ "Syria Regime Representatives Accused of Stealing Earthquake Aid", in *The New Arab*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/node/2629941>.

¹⁸ Syria Stream, "A German Volunteer Exposes the Assad Regime and Reveals the Theft of Aid" (in Arabic), *YouTube*, 15 February 2023, <https://youtu.be/rXnKNPKeha8>.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Rigging the System. Government Policies Co-opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria*, June 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/node/331350>.

²⁰ By imposing a pound/dollar artificial exchange rate on international aid transactions into Syria, which is lower than the actual exchange rate in the market, the Syrian regime has siphoned off millions of dollars. See Natasha Hall, Karam Shaar and Munqeth Othman Agha, "How the Assad Regime Systematically Diverts Tens of Millions in Aid", in *CSIS Analysis*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-assad-regime-systematically-diverts-tens-millions-aid>.

²¹ Ayman Aldassouky and Sinan Hatahet, "The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities", in *Middle East Directions (MED) Research Project Report*, No. 2020/09 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2870/782952>.

²² Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), "Inside the Syrian Arab Red Crescent", in *SJAC Articles*, 8 August 2019, <https://syriaaccountability.org/inside-the-syrian-arab-red-crescent>.

²³ Syrian for Truth & Justice, *Syrian Arab Red Crescent Accused of Discrimination in UN Aid Distribution*, 16 July 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/?p=4475>; Nidal Betare and Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, "A Crisis of Conscience: Aid Diversion in Syria and the Impact on the International Aid System", in *New Lines Institute Dossiers*, June 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/human-security/a-crisis-of-conscience-aid-diversion-in-syria-and-the-impact-on-the-international-aid-system>.

²⁴ Emma Farge, "UN, Syrian Government Implicated in Syria Aid Failures after Quake - Commission", in *Reuters*, 13 March 2023, <https://>

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organisation failed to activate any emergency protocol and insisted on seeking Damascus's authorisation, despite plenty of legal alternatives.²⁵ The slow response to the earthquake is not only logistic, as claimed by the UN, but also political. The first UN aid shipment arrived in Damascus two days after the earthquake, while impacted areas in northwest Syria had to wait for four days.²⁶ Indeed, the failure of the UN to deliver aid to those most in need in Syria has been well documented since the outbreak of the conflict.²⁷ This is primarily derived from the inability of the organisation to resist structural restrictions imposed by the Syrian regime on its operations, such as independently conducting need assessments, and selecting partners, locations and beneficiaries, which leaves it bound to the government's choices and priorities.

Finally, the earthquake widened the gap between rising humanitarian needs and declining humanitarian and economic resources. The earthquake has doubled the humanitarian needs for Syrians both in Syria and Turkey. At least 40,000 Syrian refugees returned to Syria by the end of February,²⁸ most

of them having lost their properties and financial assets in Turkey. This will add further humanitarian vulnerability and jeopardise economic and financial flows between Turkey and Syria. Syrians remaining in Turkey might face additional pressure due to the surge of anti-refugee sentiments after the earthquake, leading to an increase in people travelling back to northwest Syria as well as a decrease in incoming financial flows.

A call for change

The earthquake came as a golden opportunity for the Syrian regime to break its political and financial isolation by engaging in a sort of disaster diplomacy.²⁹ Multiple countries, in particular Arab states, have sent not only aid shipments to Damascus but also their foreign ministers. On a different level, international donors seem to continue to adopt the same approach that gives Damascus (and Russia) the privilege to decide how, when and where the aid is delivered. Operating through the Syrian regime's institutions and networks not only ends up rewarding Assad for the damage he caused, but is also the least effective way to deliver aid to people who deserve it.

In contrast, with their timely response after the earthquake, Syrians have proved that alternatives exist and are worth exploring. Over the last month, local Syrian NGOs and initiatives did an outstanding job in negotiating with local governance

reut.rs/3FpncCw.

²⁵ See the website of the campaign Cross Border Aid Into Syria Is Legal: <https://www.crossborderislegal.org>.

²⁶ Sara Kayyali, "Syria's Earthquake Exposes Broken Aid Machine", in *Bawader*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=24800>.

²⁷ Carsten Wieland, *Syria and the Neutrality Trap. The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021.

²⁸ Timour Azhari, "Around 40,000 Syrians Return from Turkey after Quake", in *Reuters*, 28 February 2023, <https://reut.rs/3YpGQoA>.

²⁹ Hanna Davis, "'Disaster Diplomacy': Earthquake Emboldens Syria's Assad after Years of Isolation", in *The New Arab*, 27 February 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/node/2671307>.

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structures, resisting aid interference and delivering aid at a faster pace with better cost-effectiveness. Moreover, local organisations have shown a high capacity to implement those activities that are most needed following the earthquake, such as cash and in-kind assistance, debris removal, rehabilitation of water infrastructure and psychosocial support.

International donors must test new approaches giving more attention to these local initiatives and solidarity chains.³⁰ Considering the territorial fragmentation of the country, donors must develop a separate strategy for each zone of control. Transporting aid from one zone to another will make aid prone to politicisation by conflict actors. Thus, the first step of depoliticising aid is to limit their influence over aid delivery decisions.

For northwest and northeast Syria, donors should develop new mechanisms to gradually replace the UN-led response (both cross-border and cross-line) that is highly controlled by the Syrian regime and Russia. This can be done by establishing independent humanitarian funds that directly contract domestic NGOs or, at early stages, sub-contract them through independent international organisations. The establishment of the Interim North Syria Aid Fund (INSAF) in 2022 by a number of international donors to provide humanitarian aid to northwest Syria can be a good example to follow.³¹

³⁰ Alexa Swift et al., "Solidarity at Scale", cit.

³¹ Sahar Atrache and Sabiha Khan, "Transforming Syria's Lifeline. A Plan for

In regime-controlled areas, international donors must encourage countries that have already taken the road of normalisation with Damascus (such as the UAE, Jordan and Egypt) to press the Syrian regime into allowing greater access for local NGOs (bypassing SARC and Syria Trust for Development) and authorising cross-border for a longer period until alternative mechanisms are put in place.

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Sustaining Cross-Border Aid in Northwest Syria", in *Refugees International Reports*, July 2022, p. 6, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3873479>.

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