

The Aftermath of the Earthquake in Syria: An Opportunity for Peace?

by Anna Cervi



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The numbers used to describe the condition of Syria today are overwhelming. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, more than 300,000 civilians have been killed.¹ Over 12 million people remain in forced displacement, and more than 15 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance.² To rebuild the country's infrastructure it would take between

250 and 400 billion US dollars – if not more.³ In addition, countless have been the human rights and humanitarian law violations in the country. The earthquake that hit the north of Syria in February 2023 added further destruction and loss of life to these accounts, making the situation even more untenable in the country and in the region.⁴

¹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *UN Human Rights Office Estimates More than 306,000 Civilians Were Killed over 10 Years in Syria Conflict*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/102991>.

² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*, December 2022, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/node/287603>.

³ Muriel Asseburg, "Reconstruction in Syria", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 11 (July 2020), p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020RP11>.

⁴ World Bank, *Earthquake Undermines Syria's Economic Outlook, Compounding Dire Socio-Economic Conditions, and Internal Displacement*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/03/17/earthquake-undermines-syria-s-economic-outlook-compounding-dire-socio-economic-conditions-and-internal-displacement>.

Anna Cervi is Associate of the School of Development, Innovation and Change (SDIC) and a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN).

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Despite these staggering accounts, for 12 years the incentives and interests responsible for fuelling the crisis in the country have hardly shifted. However, in the geo-political climate generated by the war in Ukraine, Arab countries have increasingly prioritised efforts in support of regionally led initiatives to bring stability to their area. In parallel, China and Russia have taken more decisive steps in the Middle East, reconfiguring and consolidating their spheres of influence.⁵ It is within this framework, in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake and in the wake of the Saudi-Iranian agreement, that the reinstatement of Syria in the Arab League was recently announced.⁶ As these events rapidly unfold, there is a renewed risk of leaving behind Syrians and any resemblance of meaningful inclusion of their views in fundamental decisions pertaining the future of their country.⁷

Earthquake in Syria: Hindrance or opportunity for peace?

The earthquake which hit the north of the country in February 2023 brought to the fore policy failures,⁸ unaddressed

sanctions reforms⁹ and politicisation of much-needed humanitarian aid.¹⁰ The mobilisation of the international community which followed failed to address these outstanding dilemmas and internal pre-2011 grievances,¹¹ which to date are far from being resolved if not irretrievably exacerbated.

And since “the complexity of the Syrian war is only matched by the multiplicity of efforts to bring it to a negotiated end”,¹² some fear that the earthquake and its aftermath may push warring sides further away from peace.¹³ Others, on the contrary, see in this a pragmatic opportunity for giving peace (another) chance.¹⁴

Despite an overwhelming sentiment of solidarity among Syrians post-earthquake, contentions nonetheless arose between opposing regional authorities regarding disaster relief

Karam Shaar, “How Syria Fell into Irrelevance for the West”, in *Al-Jumhuriya*, 24 February 2022, <https://aljumhuriya.net/?p=34665>.

⁹ Julia Sakr-Tierney, “Syria’s Earthquake Horrors Have Underlined the Urgent Need for Sanctions Reform”, in *Open Society Foundations Voices*, 21 February 2023, <https://osf.to/3Zb39ix>.

¹⁰ Kholoud Mansour, “Why We Need to Address the Politicisation of Aid in Syria Now More than Ever”, in *Azure Insights*, 24 February 2023, <https://azure-strategy.com/?p=1424>.

¹¹ Lorenzo Trombetta, *Siria. Dagli Ottomani agli Asad. E oltre*, Milano, Mondadori Università, 2013.

¹² Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani, “Engendering Civicness in the Syrian Peacemaking Process”, in *Journal of Civil Society*, Vol. 18, No 2 (2022), p. 183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068625>.

¹³ Lina Khatib, “Earthquakes Drag Syria’s Warring Sides Away from Peace”, cit.

¹⁴ Abby Sewell, “UN Envoy Calls for Renewed Syrian Political Talks Post-Quake”, in *AP News*, 8 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/c9ceb1fdf4d7d3f873f50ef45c42eb97>.

⁵ Karim Mezran and Valeria Talbot (eds), *The MENA Region in Times of Global Challenges*, Milan, ISPI, November 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en?p=96802>.

⁶ Bassam Barabandi, “West Should Back Arab Effort to Resolve Syrian Crisis, Provide More Leverage on Assad”, in *Al Arabiya English*, May 2023, <https://ara.tv/wdscm>.

⁷ Lina Khatib, “Earthquakes Drag Syria’s Warring Sides Away from Peace”, in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/31193>.

⁸ Samir Aita and Zedoun Alzoubi, “The Earthquake in Syria: A Crisis of Nature and Politics”, in *MENASource*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=625249>;

aid. Unfortunately, this political “noise” that surrounded the aftermath of the earthquake overshadowed the incredible intra-Syrian solidarity, which mobilised across conflict lines both domestically and internationally in concrete support to the areas that witnessed the most damages and losses.¹⁵ This included bipartisan support to Syrian-led initiatives on the ground across conflict lines for search and rescue and for the delivery of relief aid and shelter, coupled with higher-level advocacy aimed at governments involved in the Syrian crisis.¹⁶ The earthquake proved it possible for Syrians to act in ways that transcend the “geo-spatial categorisation” of the Syrian population – which much too often has led policy makers and humanitarian organisations to draw conclusions on political affiliations and crystallise further divides.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the earthquake, this could become a pivotal element to renew efforts towards meaningful inclusion of the Syrian society in the future of their country.

Inclusion and constructive solution-oriented engagement

Positions within the Syrian population, both inside and outside the country, remain polarised. However, a decade

of sustained Syrian civil and political dialogue has proved the importance of a more inclusive, constructive and mature solution-oriented engagement, informed by accurate context-specific analysis, and able to transcend geographical and social boundaries.

An example of this is the role of Syrian women in promoting sustainable peace. Albeit slow to be adequately considered,¹⁸ and despite the complexity of overlapping peace mediation processes,¹⁹ Syrian women have incrementally succeeded in positioning themselves in localised peace efforts, which included playing a key role in brokering local ceasefires and prisoner swaps across the country.²⁰ Further, they have expanded their influence and reach through Regional Women Mediators Networks,²¹ and in

¹⁵ Akram Bunni, “What Divides the Syrian People and What Unites Them!”, in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 17 March 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/4217901>.

¹⁶ Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) et al., *Statement: Solidarity to Counter Repercussions of the Earthquake in Syria*, 10 February 2023, <https://scpr-syria.org/?p=12256>.

¹⁷ Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani, “Engendering Civicness in the Syrian Peacemaking Process”, cit., p. 189.

¹⁸ Bela Kapur, *The Participation of Syrian Women in Political Processes 2012-2016, Literature Review*, Stockholm, The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation, 2017, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/participation-of-syrian-women-in-political-processes>.

¹⁹ Ako Muto, “Exploring Mediation Efforts amid Systemic and Domestic Constraints: The Case of the Syrian Conflict”, in Cedric de Coning, Ako Muto and Rui Saraiva (eds), *Adaptive Mediation and Conflict Resolution. Peace-making in Colombia, Mozambique, the Philippines, and Syria*, Cham, Springer, 2022, p. 137-163, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92577-2_6.

²⁰ Hugo Slim, Lorenzo Trombetta and Lewis Sida, *Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis Update*, New York, UN OCHA, August 2015, p. 19, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/node/185866>.

²¹ Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, *Syria: The Role of Women in the Elaboration of Durable Solutions to the Syrian Crisis*, November 2022, <https://womenmediators.net/?p=32151>; Ilaria Bertocchini, “Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?” in *Documenti IAI*, No. 23|02 (February 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16561>.

the Geneva Peace Process through the Women's Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room.²² However, their meaningful inclusion, together with other segments of the Syrian society, remains imperfect at best. It lacks more concrete political recognition and backing by parties to the conflict and their allies, which leaves their voices confined to the outskirts of the main decision-making fora.²³

The aftermath of the earthquake and the renewed international attention to the Syrian crisis represents an opportunity to scale-up efforts towards meaningful engagement and dialogue. This could help "elevate and legitimate the role of civil society".²⁴ Networks, including Regional Women Mediators Networks, could be powerful vehicles for change in inclusion patterns. Their flexible nature could help in further strengthening the transboundary connection among Syrians while seizing concrete opportunities to promote trust-building dialogue initiatives to foster in-country buy-in to Syrians' participation in conflict resolution and reconciliation.²⁵ However, to unlock

²² Ashley Bandura and Mercedes Blackwood, "Women's Role in Achieving Sustainable Peace in Syria", in *U.S. CSWG Policy Briefs*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/12th-us-cswg-may22-2018-v2.pdf>.

²³ Hinad Al Shuhuf et al., "Effective Participation and Inclusion in the Syrian Peace Process", in *International Alert Research Papers*, February 2022, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/effective-participation-and-inclusion-in-the-syrian-peace-process>.

²⁴ Marika Theros and Rim Turkmani, "Engendering Civicness in the Syrian Peacemaking Process", cit., p. 197.

²⁵ Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, "Formality, Informality, and the Resilience of the Syrian

the networks' potential, they would need to be adequately resourced, truly representative of the whole Syrian society, strategically led and linked to decision-making processes.²⁶ This would require also "de-sanctioning" direct engagement by a wider range of actors in government-controlled parts of Syria, enabling a more direct inclusion in these initiatives of women and men living in those parts of the country.²⁷

Conclusion

What Syria used to be will not come back. However, what Syria has yet to become cannot be a country increasingly rampant with degrading human living conditions, widening inequalities, and absent any form of accountability with no solution in sight. At least, not for those Syrians who, since the onset of the crisis, have not given up on their country and have pushed for the inclusion of all segments of the Syrian society in resolving the conflict.

As the United States, China and Russia reconfigure and consolidate their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East, the humanitarian situation in the country and its spillover in the region become increasingly untenable.

Political Economy", in *GCSP Research Project Reports*, June 2021, <https://www.gcsp.ch/node/1616>.

²⁶ Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj et al., *A Roadmap for the EU Engagement with Syrian Civil Society. Final Report*, February 2023, p. 55-57, <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/node/125108>.

²⁷ European Council on Foreign Relations, "Syrian Voices: Where Next for European Policy?", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 11 March 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syrian_voices_where_next_for_european_policy.

This is shifting the regional incentives and interests that have fuelled the crisis in Syria for over 12 years.

The aftermath of the earthquake represents an opportunity for a more inclusive, constructive and mature solution-oriented engagement in the country. Regional actors, including the EU and the Arab League, could have a fundamental role to play in this. Civic networks, including Women Mediators Networks, could act in support of engagement efforts, if enabled to influence policymaking and to transcend existing divides. This could help lay the foundations for a shared and endogenous national identity able of “accepting the ‘other’”,²⁸ which could pave the road to peace. Failing to recognise these opportunities could ultimately introduce Syria to a sort of “peace” that is nowhere near its true meaning, and that may not enable Syrian citizens to reconcile and pave the way for their own crisis-free and prosperous future.

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²⁸ Hinad Al Shuhuf et al., “Effective Participation and Inclusion in the Syrian Peace Process”, cit., p. 21. See also James A. Reilly, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land. The Modern History of Syria*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2019.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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