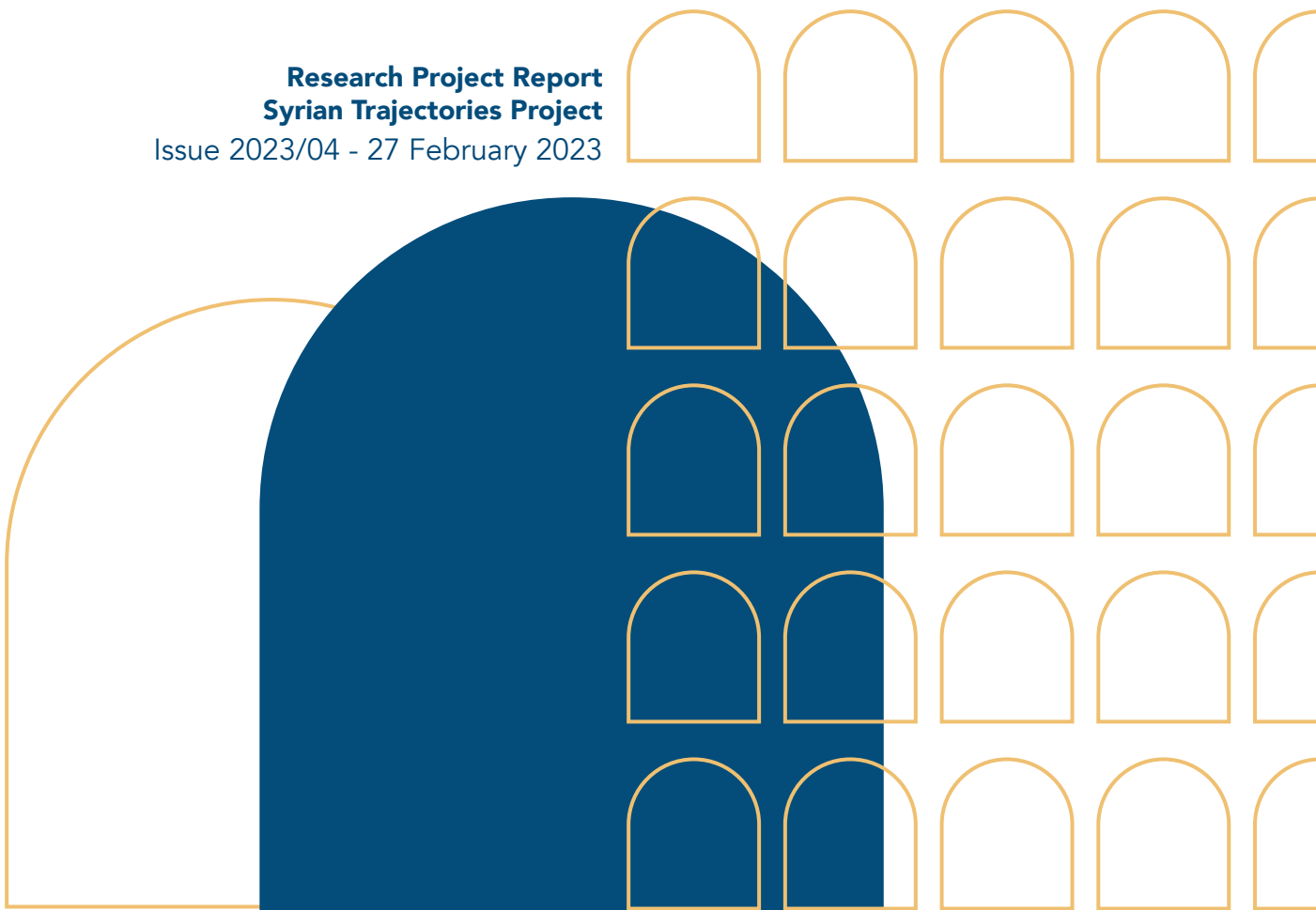


The Aftermath of Earthquakes in Syria: The Regime's Political Instrumentalisation of a Crisis

Joseph Daher

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Joseph Daher*

* Joseph Daher is a part-time affiliate professor at the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). He works under the aegis of the 'Syrian Trajectories' research project in the Middle East Directions Programme. He has completed a doctorate in Development Studies at SOAS, University of London (2015), and a doctorate in Political Science at Lausanne University, Switzerland (2018).

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Executive Summary

The earthquakes of the 6 February impacted around 8.8 million people in Syria and resulted in massive destruction and damage to infrastructure, including health facilities, schools and residential buildings in the Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia and Hama governorates. There was a large imbalance in the volume of humanitarian assistance and speed of emergency responses by regional and international actors in favour of the Syrian regime compared to rebel-held areas in the northwest.

The Syrian regime instrumentalised the humanitarian crisis and its destructive effects to regulate, or at least influence, the organisation and delivery of humanitarian assistance in the country. In the areas under its control, Damascus intervened to oversee the organisation of humanitarian assistance through its institutions and networks of power to enhance its rule over society. Regime officials also tried to exploit the evolving humanitarian crisis to reduce Syria's political isolation and enhance normalisation processes with regional and international actors. This has been partially successful, although mostly limited to the humanitarian field.

A potential reconstruction process in the areas affected is very much linked to the progress of Damascus's normalisation process. This process could take place at the regional and international levels in the short and medium terms, but significant obstacles exist.

Introduction

The earthquakes of 6 February 2023 killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey and Syria.¹ In Syria, it mostly affected the Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia and to a less extent Hama governorates, resulting in massive destruction and damage to infrastructure, including health facilities, schools and residential buildings.² At least 6,200 people were reportedly killed and more than 14,700 injured, most in areas outside regime control (about 4,500 deaths and 8,500 injured in the northwest). In total, on 14 February, at least 8.8 million people were reported to have been affected by the earthquakes and the UN launched a flash appeal for USD 397 million to help the around 5 million Syrians in most acute need for a three-month period.³

As of the day of writing (25 February 2023), more than 30 states have delivered humanitarian assistance to regime-controlled areas through air, land and sea shipments.⁴ So far, Iraq and the UAE have provided the most assistance to regime-held areas. Baghdad delivered over 10,000 tonnes of aid, and nearly 4 million litres of fuel oil,⁵ while Abu Dhabi sent more than 4,000 tonnes of aid,⁶ and announced an allocation of USD 100 million to support disaster relief in Syria.⁷ In contrast, Russia and Iran, Syria's allies, have respectively transferred only 372 and 280 tonnes of humanitarian assistance,⁸ a total of just 652 tonnes.⁹ After the EU¹⁰ and some European Union members states (mainly Italy and Romania) delivered assistance to regime-controlled areas through Lebanon, four air shipments from Denmark, Germany and the EU were sent directly to Damascus airport between 14 and 26 February.¹¹

In contrast, despite it being more affected than regime-held areas international humanitarian assistance in the northwest of Syria has been very restricted and slow. The first UN aid convoy only entered through the Bab al-Hawa crossing on 9 February, four days after the earthquakes. By 25 February, the total number of UN trucks arriving had only reached 385, which was far fewer than the average number of trucks entering the northwest prior to the earthquakes (which was estimated at around 600 per month in 2022).¹² In addition, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the EU have delivered aid by air or road via Turkey to northwest Syria.

Drawing on interviews with Syrian activists and humanitarian actors, reports by international organisations, official media coverage and social media, this paper seeks to analyse the regime's political instrumentalisation of this new humanitarian crisis at both the national and international levels and the obstacles to a potential reconstruction process in the regime-controlled areas. It is divided into two main sections.

- 1 Reuters, "Earthquake Death Toll Surpasses 50,000 in Turkey and Syria," 24 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3kwFlI2>
- 2 UNHCR, "UNHCR Syria Emergency Response to the Earthquake: Flash Update #12 (20 February 2023)," *Relief Web*, 20 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3SjGSwB>
- 3 OCHA, "Flash Appeal: Syrian Arab Republic Earthquake (February – May 2023)," 14 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3YKI8eC>
- 4 By 25 February, there had been 245 air shipments transporting for a total estimated volume of 6,656 tonnes to regime-held areas. Noor Abdulfattah, Suhail al-Ghazi, Tarek Hamdan, "Aid Shipments by Air to the Areas Controlled by the Syrian Government Since 7 Feb 2023," *Microsoft Power BI*, 20 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/41iJdvM>
- 5 Munzer Aid, "10 Thousand Tons of Aid and About 4 Million Litres of Fuel Arrived From Iraq Until Yesterday," (in Arabic) *al-Watan*, 23 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Z6zY0I>
- 6 Abdulfattah, al-Ghazi, Hamdan, "Aid Shipments by Air to the Areas Controlled by the Syrian Government Since 7 Feb 2023."
- 7 Ayush Narayanan, "UAE to Provide Syria with Additional \$50 million in Aid after Deadly Earthquakes," *Al-Arabiya English*, 15 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3Ktr8W8>
- 8 On his side, the Consul General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Aleppo, Salman Nawab Nuri, stated on 25 February that 387 tons of Iranian humanitarian aid had been delivered to Syrian airports by the 13 Iranian planes. The Islamic Republic News Agency, "The 13th Iranian Aid Plane for the Victims of the Earthquake Lands at Aleppo Airport, Syria," (in Arabic), 25 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3EFNeAW>
- 9 Abdulfattah, al-Ghazi, Hamdan, "Aid Shipments by Air to the Areas Controlled by the Syrian Government Since 7 Feb 2023."
- 10 The EU sent aid through Beirut port on 17 February, alongside with Italy.
- 11 US officials, on the other hand, stated that Washington will increase its assistance to partner organisations in Turkey and Syria, with a total pledge of USD 185 million, but will not coordinate with Damascus to facilitate humanitarian aid deliveries USAID, "The United States to Provide \$100 Million in Additional Assistance for the People of Türkiye and Syria as Humanitarian Crisis Deepens," 19 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3JJEK9>
- 12 OCHA, "Earthquake: Türkiye and North-West Syria Flash Update No. 3 as of 8 February 2023," *Relief Web*, 8 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3XXSvVw>

1. Controlling the Distribution of Humanitarian Assistance and Attempts to Reduce Political Isolation

The earthquakes prompted the Syrian regime to work in two directions. First, the ruling authorities tried to re-affirm the centrality of Damascus through their attempts to control, or at least influence, the organisation and delivery of humanitarian assistance across the whole country. In opposition-held northwest Syria, this policy resulted in late approval by Damascus, more than a week after the earthquakes, of the reopening of two border crossings controlled by the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (Bab al-Salamah and al-Rai), through which the UN is allowed to deliver aid for three months. For several days the Damascus authorities also blocked an aid convoy composed of 100 trucks transporting fuel and a medical team from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to Syrian Democratic Force-held neighbourhoods in Aleppo city (Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh). The Syrian regime only accepted its delivery after taking half of the aid. In regime-controlled areas the Damascus authorities sought to control the management of humanitarian assistance through government institutions and regime networks.¹³ In the field, the Syria Trust for Development (STD), led by Asma al-Assad, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) are leading local humanitarian efforts in coordination with UN Agencies, INGOs and local associations. Syrian governorates have also provided humanitarian efforts with in-kind donations and cash and dispatched convoys.¹⁴ Chambers of Commerce and Industry have been gathering donations and organising humanitarian assistance on the ground in affected areas, while the Baath party and its affiliated organisations, such as the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) or Revolutionary Youth Organisation, have also been active.¹⁵

Second, the Syrian regime is trying to reduce its political isolation regionally and internationally. Syrian officials and Syria's allies have launched a new campaign calling for the lifting of Western sanctions, arguing that they have deeply hindered emergency responses and humanitarian relief operations. More importantly, Damascus is instrumentalising this new tragedy in a continual attempt to push forward the normalisation process with regional and international actors, which has been led by the UAE since the beginning of 2019 after it reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018. Several regional leaders including Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and King Hamad of Bahrain have expressed solidarity with Syria by telephoning al-Assad¹⁶ and some states have signalled further political rapprochement, such as Tunisia, which has increased its level of diplomatic representation in Syria. Damascus also welcomed for the first time since the eruption of the uprising in 2011 visits by Ayman Safadi, Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates,¹⁷ and Sameh Shoukry, Egyptian Foreign Minister.¹⁸

In addition, a delegation of senior Arab lawmakers, headed by the Iraqi Speaker Muhammad al-Halboosi, travelled to Damascus to meet with al-Assad. The delegation included several top parliamentarians from various Arab countries, including Egypt, the UAE, and Jordan, among others.¹⁹ For the first time since 2012 the KSA sent a plane to Syria, which landed at Aleppo airport on 14 February. Moreover, on 18 February at the Munich security forum Saudi Arabia's foreign minister declared that a consensus was forming among Arab states that Syria's isolation was not functioning and that dialogue with Damascus

13 Joseph Daher, "State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria," Research Project Report, Syria Transition Challenges Project, EUI MEDirections and The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lgC72a>

14 The Syria Report, "Government Responds to Major Earthquake That Left Thousands Dead in Turkey and Syria," 7 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3XJBivz>

15 Interview with a Syrian activist based in Germany, 16 February 2023; Informal discussions with various Syrian activists in exile, 17 February 2023.

16 State Information Service Gateway to Egypt, "President El-Sisi Speaks with Syrian President," 7 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZtvAIP>

17 SANA, "Mikdad: Syria Grateful to Jordan for Aid it Provided... Safadi: We Stand by Syria," 15 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZtvT6r>

18 SANA, "Egyptian Foreign Minister Arrives at Damascus International Airport," 27 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3xWAlPi>

19 Kareem Chehayeb, "Top Arab Lawmakers in Syria For Talks with President Assad," AP News, 26 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3y1eRAX>

was needed at some point to at least address humanitarian issues, including a return of refugees.²⁰ Two weeks after the earthquakes, al-Assad even travelled to Oman for the first time since the outbreak of the uprising in 2011 in an official state visit to discuss further political and economic collaboration, including with other Arab states. Outside the region, some European states, including Italy, Greece, Romania, Cyprus and Austria, are seeking to deepen the normalisation with Damascus through this humanitarian crisis. This could create further divisions among European countries regarding the policy to adopt regarding Syria and the EU consensus based on no normalisation, no lifting of sanctions and no reconstruction before a political transition.²¹

Damascus's political normalisation continues to progress at the regional and international levels with calls for political and economic relations to be strengthened. Once again, the UAE is the leading actor in efforts to further the normalisation process with Damascus in a continued attempt to harmonise relations between Arab states and Syria. This is also part of a broader policy to strengthen authoritarian stability in the region, which it shares with other influential countries in the region such as Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia, although differences exist on how to reach such a situation. The earthquakes represented a new opportunity to put forward this agenda. However, the success of the Syrian regime's normalisation still remains limited, with only a few regional states having consolidated relations with Damascus, which are generally restricted to collaboration in the humanitarian field. Furthermore, the US and important European states, including France and Germany, have not shown strong willingness for any political rapprochement, while Saudi Arabia is still reluctant to move forward and deepen its relations with Syria without political return on several issues, especially regarding Iranian influence in the country. A change in Riyadh's approach to Damascus would be a significant game-changer and open the door to wider normalisation of the Syrian regime.

2. Obstacles and Challenges in a Potential Reconstruction Process?

While the emergency aid response is continuing to provide the affected population with basic necessities, questions are already arising as to how to provide alternative housing to people left homeless, who are estimated at several hundreds of thousands, and rebuild damaged infrastructure and buildings. In this context, the issue of a potential reconstruction process is arising once again, but in a more acute way following February's earthquakes.²² It is, however, marred with interconnected obstacles: the international sanctions undermining potential investments and state capacities; shortcomings in Syria's political situation; the absence of a secure and stable economic situation; lack of financial capacity; damaged infrastructure; and shortages of qualified manpower.

In this context, the sanctions and their effects still represent obstacles to reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and buildings. Transfers of money and donations through the banking system from outside Syria to individuals and local organisations in regime-controlled areas have generally been forbidden or severely obstructed by overcompliance, de-risking and an unwillingness on the part of banks to deal with anything related to Syria. Direct bank transfers to Syrian banks have become illegal or very difficult in many countries because of the multiple sanction regimes.²³ In addition and in connection with these overcompliance and de-risking practices by banking and financial institutions, Syrian individuals,

20 Reuters, "Arab States Need New Syria Approach, Saudi Minister Says," 19 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3ldbgEj>

21 Ashark al-Awsat, "Quake Pushes Forward Normalization Efforts with Syria as Assad Heads to Oman," 19 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3KEjW9R>

22 After the recapture of Eastern Aleppo by Syrian regime forces and its foreign allies in December 2016, many questions were raised on the international scene about a potential early reconstruction process in Syria. Joseph Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction: a Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2018), <https://bit.ly/3gKeBq3>

23 Joseph Daher, "The Private Banking Sector in Syria: Between Survival and Opportunity," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 28 May 2021), <https://bit.ly/3U34S7D>

humanitarian organisations and NGOs in neighbouring countries and in Europe working on the Syrian crisis have also faced delays or refusals to transfer finance and closing of banks accounts, which have had consequences for their projects and paying their staff. The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury has decided to issue Syria General License (GL) 23, which for 180 days authorises all transactions related to earthquake relief that would otherwise be prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations (SySR) and could potentially facilitate foreign transactions to INGOs and NGOs located in regime-held areas.²⁴ In addition to this, the US Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security also accelerated on 20 February, the processing of export licence applications for items needed to aid survivors of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria,²⁵ while the Council of the EU adopted on 23 February an additional humanitarian amendment to further facilitate the speedy delivery of humanitarian assistance for a period of six months.²⁶ The effects of these decisions remain to be seen in the following weeks, but could potentially temporarily facilitate the transfer of funds and import of particular items to humanitarian actors in Syria.²⁷

Moreover, in the medium and long term early economic recovery and any reconstruction process of basic civilian infrastructure in the damaged areas and elsewhere in the country are seriously obstructed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act signed by US President Donald Trump in December 2019.²⁸ The text of the bill allows, for example, punishment of any government or private entity considered to aid the regime or groups and entities connected to it, or considered to contribute to the reconstruction of Syria. This represents an obstacle to potential investments in the country, particularly by Gulf monarchies. The US President can sanction any international company or individual that invests in Syria's energy, aviation, construction or engineering sectors, and anyone who lends the regime funds (Section 102).²⁹ Similarly, the ability of private and public actors in Syria to import energy commodities (fuel oil and gas) is greatly impeded, creating severe shortages. This results in a lack of electricity provision as the majority of Syrian power plants operate on fuel oil.³⁰ The lack of fuel oil in Syria remains a major challenge to economic recovery, including in the productive sectors of the economy, and reconstruction. In addition, the very broad definition of dual-use goods, meaning goods that can be used for both peaceful and military purposes, is particularly problematic on the humanitarian front and in a potential reconstruction process as it encompasses pipes, water pumps, spare parts for electrical generators, industrial machinery and many kinds of essential construction equipment. Specific licences are needed for every transaction involving such goods, resulting in added costs, financing difficulties and long processing delays.³¹ More generally, the overlapping sanction regimes have created so much doubt and uncertainty about how to comply with all the measures that banks, exporters, transport companies and insurance companies have nearly completely refused to conduct business in Syria. This is despite the existence of humanitarian exemptions and general licences allowing particular activities.

24 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Issues Syria General License 23 To Aid In Earthquake Disaster Relief Efforts," 9 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3EmDY4q>

25 Bureau of Industry and Security, "Syria," 20 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3ILn8yJ>

26 Council of the EU, "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://bit.ly/3SwaEJT>

27 At the same time, the possible positive impact of these decisions on the short term in terms of bank de-risking may however be followed by stronger overcompliance after the end of these temporary amendments in August 2023 in case of non-renewal. Interview with an INGO source from Damascus, Syria, 24 February 2023.

28 The latest decisions mentioned above by the US and the Council of the EU do not include any amendments regarding long term reconstruction process.

29 Congress. "H.R.31 - Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019," 3 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/2WY63QX>

30 Sinan Hatahet and Karam Shaar, "Syria's Electricity Sector, After a Decade of War: A Comprehensive Assessment," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 30 July 2021), <https://bit.ly/3IPUgN7>

31 Joseph Daher and Erica Moret, "Invisible Sanctions: How Over-Compliance Limits Humanitarian Work on Syria – Challenges of Fund Transfer for Non-Profit Organizations Working on Syria," *Impact*, June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2YVxeWB>

While the sanctions constitute an impediment to promoting a viable context for a reconstruction process, a recovery of the economy and reinforcing state capacities, they are by far not the only element. First, the absence of a secure and stable economic situation in the country represents an important obstacle to encouraging local and foreign investments in the country. Many Syrian diaspora communities, including businessmen supportive of the regime, were reluctant before the earthquakes to invest in the country because they considered that the necessary political, economic and security conditions were not yet met.³² They are generally especially concerned about the highly insecure business environment in Syria.³³ This is unlikely to change in the near future, despite messages and solidarity visits,³⁴ including regarding wide participation in reconstruction of the areas affected.

Second, the Syrian regime has been unable to improve the country's financial situation and stop the continual depreciation of the Syrian pound, which constitutes a serious deterrent for investors. Already before the earthquakes Damascus had made several attempts to attract more funding through formal channels in Syria, especially regarding remittances sent by Syrian diaspora communities,³⁵ in order to curb depreciation of the exchange rate and price rises, and facilitate exports and imports. Since the beginning of February 2023,³⁶ the Central Bank of Syria, for instance, raised on several occasions the exchange rate for Money Transfer and Cash Foreign Exchange Companies (SYP 7,100 per USD on 26 February) to close to the value of the Syrian Pound against the US dollar on the black-market exchange rate (SYP 7,450 per USD on 26 February). In addition, the CBS has removed the daily withdrawal limit for individuals and companies exchanging foreign currency or receiving remittances. Remittances represent a major source of cash inflows to Syria. They are estimated at several billions of USD per year and became in the past decade important supports for the livelihood of large segments of the population. Following the earthquakes, a large volume of funds was sent by the Syrian diaspora to Syria, mostly to help families and close ones to deal with urgent needs. In addition to this decision, on 9 February the CBS modified the exchange rate for transfers by UN, international and humanitarian organisations for emergency responses to the areas affected by the earthquakes to 6,650 SYP/USD instead of 4,500 SYP/USD, a value again close to the black-market exchange rate, to encourage humanitarian funds to be sent through financial institutions in Syria.³⁷ However, after a very short improvement in the value of the Syrian Pound in the first two days after the earthquakes, these measures did not prevent the continuing depreciation of the Syrian pound afterwards, which for the first time exceeded SYP 7,000 per USD. The main causes of the depreciation of the Syrian Pound are deeply structural and reflect the instability of the economy.³⁸ This situation weakens the attractiveness of potential rapid and medium-term returns and profits on investments in Syria and therefore does not engender any incentive to invest, whether from inside or outside the country.

32 Joseph Daher, "Syrian Entrepreneurs and Investors in Egypt and their Relations with Syria," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Syria Trajectories, 2 February 2023), <https://bit.ly/3XEexSQ>

33 Sinan Hatahet, "To Stay or To Leave? The Dilemma for Independent Syrian Businessmen," Policy Brief, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, November 2021), <https://bit.ly/3P73TkR>

34 A Syrian business delegation from Egypt led by the head of the Association of Syrian Arab Expatriates in Egypt, Basel Sammakiya, visited Aleppo in the aftermath of the earthquakes and met the chairmen and members of Aleppo's chambers of industry and commerce, and Aleppo's Governor Hussein Diab. SIA, Syrian Investment Agency, Facebook, 21 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ln15xd>

35 The main way to transfer them within Syria has been informally, including through informal networks of money transfers (*hawalas*) and hand to hand.

36 On 1 February 2023, the CBS split the Banks and Financial Institutions rate into two rates: 1) the Money Transfer and Cash Foreign Exchange (MTC) rate and 2) the Banks Exchange rate. The MTC rate has since then been changing each week depending on the black-market exchange rate.

37 It has long been requested by UN and international humanitarian actors to change this rate in order to not lose funds in the process and reduce Damascus's attempts to make economic gains from the difference between the exchange rate it was imposing on these transactions and the value of the USD against the SYP on the black-market, which is generally higher than the official rate. All financial transfers to humanitarian actors in Syria outside the scope of the earthquake emergency response are, however, still required to use the rate of SYP 4,500/USD.

38 Joseph Daher, "The Deep Roots of the Depreciation of the Syrian Pound," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 16 December 2019), <https://bit.ly/35reYq5>

Third, the country has insufficient financial capacity, in both the public and private sectors, and lacks functioning infrastructure and a skilled labour force. The Syrian government lacks funds and in previous years allocated very small investments to rebuilding or developing its infrastructure, instead devoting most of its spending to the war effort, public sector wages, and subsidies, although these are decreasing. More generally, the destruction and damage to Syrian infrastructure and means of transport are also significant obstacles to large reconstruction going forward. Despite some small improvements and repairs, Syria's 2,500-kilometer rail network is still very severely damaged, and the chairman of the Syrian Federation of International Freight Forwarders, Muhammad Kishor, stated in November 2020 that if reconstruction operations started in Syria, the country would need to double the currently available transport fleet, whether for land, sea or air transport.³⁹ The capacities of the private sector are also limited in scale by the very small number of large companies, which constitute less than 1% of all private entities.⁴⁰ The financial capacities of private and public banks are not sufficient to significantly contribute to large-scale reconstruction of the country and its economy.⁴¹ In November 2022, the total deposits in private banks in Syria were, for instance, estimated at USD 1.96 billion (at the official exchange rate of 3,015 SYP/USD at the time), compared to USD 13.87 billion in 2010.⁴² Remittances are hardly able to play a role in a wider reconstruction process, as the monthly average amount sent to a family is between USD 100 and 200. The contribution of remittances will most probably be restricted to particular small initiatives in affected communities and to helping relatives purchase or rent new or alternative housing. In addition to the lack of sources of funding, Syria suffers from a shortage of qualified manpower, which is associated with continual and extremely high rates of emigration by young graduates.⁴³

In this context characterised by sanctions, economic and security instability, and insufficient funds, infrastructure and skilled manpower, with the support of its allies Damascus will promote reconstruction as much needed humanitarian assistance. The level of support by regional and international actors for reconstruction operations will largely depend on the progress of normalisation of the Syrian regime. As the political isolation of Damascus decreases, the space for an improved reconstruction process will increase.

39 Ramez Mahfouz, "Kishore to Al-Watan: The Jordanian Authorities Have Not Allowed Entry of Syrian Trucks Stranded in Egypt Until Now..." (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 25 November 2020, <http://bit.ly/3p5Kblf>

40 The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Commission (SMEDC) in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics stated in July 2021 that the overwhelming majority of Syrian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are small, with 65% defined as micro-enterprises and 30% as small projects, while only 4% are categorised as medium-scale enterprises. Large scale projects represent fewer than 1%. The Syria Report, "Survey Highlights Challenges for Small and Medium Enterprises in Syria," 21 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Im6Mv5>

41 Joseph Daher, "The Private Banking Sector in Syria: Between Survival and Opportunity."

42 Syrian Days, "A Decision by the Central Bank Contributes to Raising the Total Deposits of Private Banks by 841 Billion," (in Arabic), 29 January 2023, <https://bit.ly/3lZHprL>

43 Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes and Destinations," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 6 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3fy6mE4>

Conclusion

Although earthquakes are natural disasters, the Syrian regime is the main actor responsible for the scale of this new human catastrophe in Syria. It has created the conditions for it with the destruction it caused during its war against large sections of the population, its economic policies, corruption and mismanagement, and by weaponising humanitarian assistance and hindering its delivery to opposition-controlled territories.

In the aftermath of this latest tragedy, the Syrian regime is continuing to behave in a predatory way by seeking to control and regulate the distribution and organisation of local and to a lesser extent international humanitarian assistance. At the same time, Damascus is attempting to weaken its political isolation by exploiting the consequences of this new humanitarian crisis to demand the lifting of international sanctions and trying to strengthen relations and collaboration with countries both in the region and elsewhere. The endeavour is having a little success, although it remains mostly limited to the humanitarian field.

The rapidity and scale of future potential reconstruction and international support for it will be significantly determined by the progress of the normalisation process. The challenges involved in a successful reconstruction process are however multiple and combined, as has been explained above.

While today the priority is to maximise the humanitarian emergency response for the population affected in Syria, particularly in opposition-held areas lacking large international support and necessary infrastructure and equipment, there is already a need to tackle additional intensified political, social and economic challenges resulting from the earthquakes and their effects, whether within Syria or regarding Damascus's relations with the outside world. Measures and initiatives to alleviate the harm to impacted communities in the short term must continue and increase, but wider and more innovative ones should also be planned and implemented for the medium and long term. In other words, and in a context of continual re-legitimisation of the Syrian regime, practical solutions have to be found to frame and organise a potential future reconstruction process, and an economic recovery based on serving the interests of local communities, with a focus on the areas affected by the earthquakes, and not on strengthening the Syrian regime and fulfilling its objectives.

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