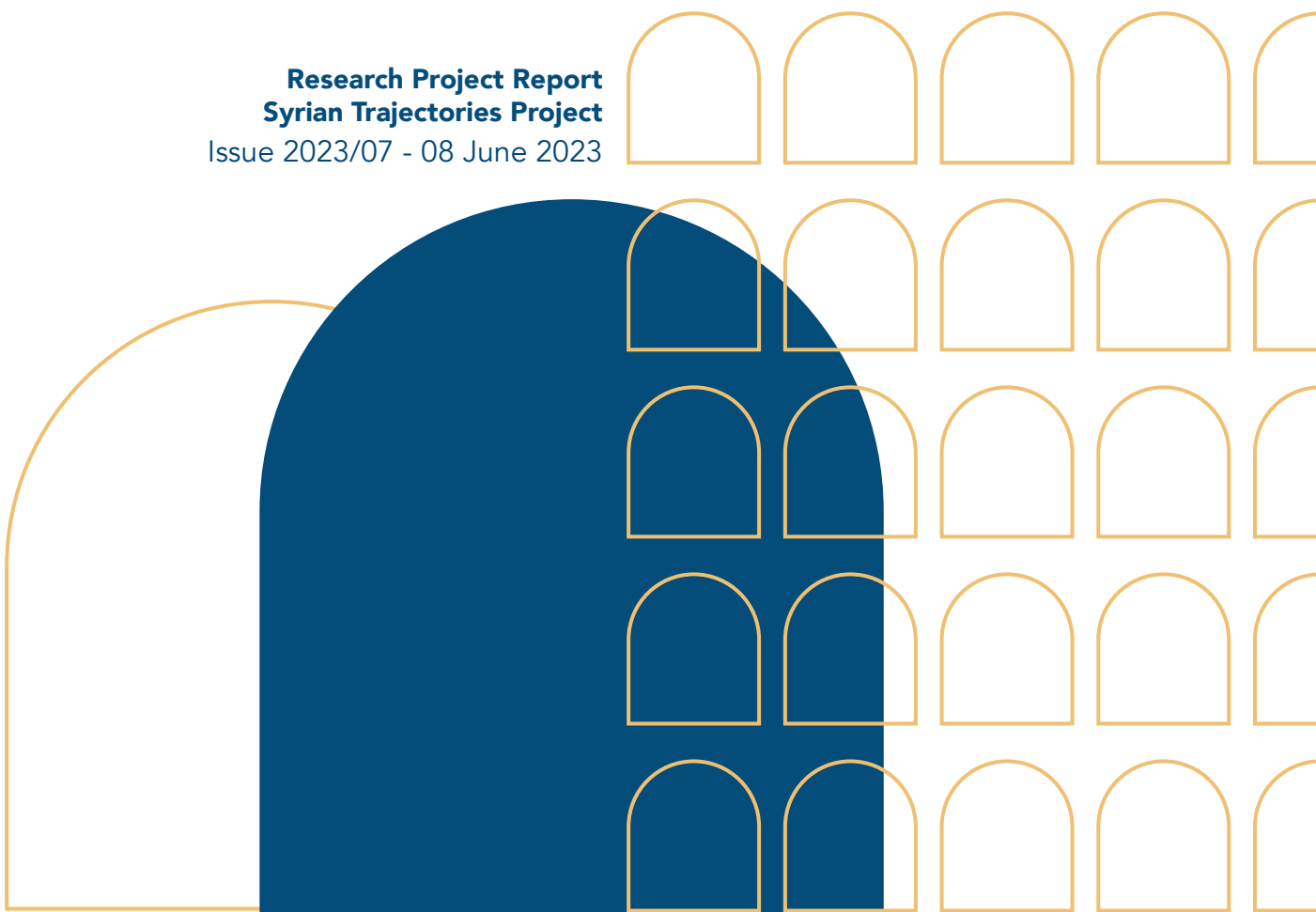


Troubled Solidarity: How Communities in Southern Syria Responded to the 2023 Earthquake Disaster

Abdullah al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi

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Troubled Solidarity: How Communities in Southern Syria Responded to the 2023 Earthquake Disaster

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Executive Summary

Following the devastating earthquake that hit northern Syria in February 2023, local communities in the Daraa and Sweida southern governorates launched local initiatives to offer those affected aid and support. Nevertheless, deep-seated political tensions and unresolved conflicts in these peripheral regions resulted in fragmented and disjointed humanitarian efforts.

In Daraa, variations in the level of regime control led to two types of campaigns. In areas firmly controlled by the regime, government officials and state institutions broadly intervened in and directed local initiatives aiding affected populations residing in regime-held areas in Aleppo and the coastal region, whereas areas where the regime only has tenuous control saw relatively autonomous campaigns. Largely triggered by family ties, these initiatives focused on offering immediate humanitarian assistance to internally displaced families originally from Daraa but which moved from the region to rebel-held areas in Idlib and northern Aleppo after the regime returned to the south in mid-2018. In Sweida, two parallel campaigns emerged. The first consisted of state-led efforts by state institutions, the Baath Party and a constellation of local NGOs supported by the Syria Trust for Development, while the second was by semi-autonomous NGOs funded by the diaspora from Sweida.

Despite significant efforts and a widespread desire to contribute, the turnout for the initiatives by the local population was low and financial contributions collected for the quake aid response in Daraa and Sweida governorates were relatively small. This was mainly due to a the overall dire economic situation, reluctance on the part of the population to take on responsibilities that are traditionally assumed by the state, depletion of resources due to previous local initiatives which were launched to improve service provision, and a preference to contribute to community-led initiatives that immediately benefited the locals.

Although this made it difficult for the regime to leverage humanitarian efforts to make significant economic gains, it sought to take advantage of the emergency aid response to promote its power structures and reaffirm its authority in the two peripheral regions. Wherever a window of opportunity existed, the Baath Party sought to intervene in community-driven initiatives to showcase its organisational capabilities. Moreover, it used the consequences of the quake to rally public support and call for Western sanctions on Syria to be lifted.

Introduction

On 6 February 2023, southern Turkey and north-western Syria were struck by a crippling earthquake and a series of strong tremors and aftershocks. The earthquakes affected at least 8.8 million people in Syria.¹ In regime-held areas, where approximately 6 million people were affected,² 1,414 people were reportedly killed and 2,357 others were injured.³ The infrastructure in areas affected by the earthquake suffered significant damage. This included health facilities, schools⁴ and power,⁵ communication and water networks.⁶ The situation was particularly dire for the population residing in rebel-held areas in north-western Syria. These areas were hardest hit by the earthquake, with 148 cities and towns affected, including seven major cities with a combined population of 374,514.⁷ The natural disaster resulted in more than 4,500 deaths and 8,700 injuries, and left thousands of people homeless as more than 10,600 buildings were partially or completely destroyed.⁸

Recent reports have extensively covered the earthquake and its repercussions, with considerable emphasis on responses by both state and non-state actors to this natural disaster. While some studies examine the Syrian regime's exploitation of the crisis to exert control over the organisation and delivery of humanitarian aid while also leveraging it to promote political normalisation and regional reintegration,⁹ other studies examine the various approaches adopted by non-state actors to address the aftermath of the earthquake in rebel-held areas.¹⁰ Nevertheless, little attention has been given to local initiatives by local communities in response to the quake. This is particularly true of areas that were not directly affected by the earthquake, such as southern Syria, yet which still witnessed solidarity campaigns aimed at aiding those impacted by the natural disaster.

To fill this gap, this paper examines responses by local communities in Daraa and Sweida to the aftermath of the quake that struck northern Syria in February 2023. The regional focus on southern Syria allows us to examine how territorial fragmentation and limitations to the regime's authority gave rise to various patterns of local initiatives. To reflect this situation, we use the term *troubled solidarity* to illustrate how deep-seated political tensions, unresolved conflicts and economic hurdles undermined willingness to engage in aid responses and resulted in fragmented and disjointed humanitarian efforts.

Relying on evidence derived from semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2023 with state and non-state actors in southern Syria, this paper undertakes the following tasks. First, it explores the patterns of aid efforts in Daraa and Sweida governorates. Second, based on inductive research, it investigates the factors that limited participation in local initiatives. Third, it examines how the Syrian regime leveraged local initiatives for political gains. While the empirical evidence is of local initiatives that emerged after the earthquake, the analytical framework is intended to be more broadly applicable to community-driven initiatives during crises and emergencies in southern Syria. This includes exploring their dynamics and challenges, and the roles of various actors involved.

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- 1 OCHA, "Flash Appeal: Syrian Arab Republic Earthquake," 14 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3m3sD3o>
 - 2 Data Friendly Space, "Syria Earthquake February 2023 Government-Controlled Areas," 28 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3Jps6AE>
 - 3 Al-Baath, "The Minister of Health Announces the Final Outcome of the Earthquake Victims in Syria" (in Arabic), 14 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3FChYDI>
 - 4 Data Friendly Space, "Syria Earthquake February 2023 Government-Controlled Areas."
 - 5 Sputnik, "Damascus: The losses in the electricity sector as a result of the earthquake are more than 1.5 million dollars and are subject to increase" (in Arabic), 9 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3yPWwHo>
 - 6 World Bank Group, "Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation (GRADE) Report," 20 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3mWFWTn>
 - 7 Aid Coordination Unit. 2023, "Humanitarian Situation in North-West Syria Following the Devastating Earthquake," 21 March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3luAcjx>
 - 8 OCHA, "Earthquakes: North-west Syria Situation Report," 8 March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3YStvVP>; Aid Coordination Unit 2023, "Humanitarian Situation in North-West Syria Following the Devastating Earthquake."
 - 9 Joseph Daher, "The Aftermath of Earthquakes in Syria: The Regime's Political Instrumentalization of a Crisis," Research Project Report, (Florence, European University Institute: Syrian Trajectories Project, February 2023), <https://bit.ly/3GHWpSg>
 - 10 Sinan Hatahet, "Local Governance Structures and Earthquake Humanitarian Response in North-West Syria," Research Project Report, (Florence, European University Institute: Syrian Trajectories Project, May 2023), <https://bit.ly/3CnwtsN>

1. Parallel Local Initiatives: Dynamics, Resources and Beneficiaries

The devastating earthquake that hit northern Syria left many people struggling to cope with the aftermath. In Daraa and Sweida governorates, the local population launched local initiatives to offer aid and support to those affected in both regime- and rebel-held areas. A close examination of these local initiatives in southern Syria reveals distinct patterns, with various dynamics, processes and actors involved in relief efforts, and different beneficiaries targeted.

1.1. Politicised Solidarity in Daraa Governorate

Tragically, the natural disaster claimed the lives of at least 46 people from Daraa governorate, including two in Lattakia, 11 in north-west Syria and 34 in southern Turkey.¹¹ In the aftermath of the quake, local communities in Daraa governorate showed solidarity by mobilising to provide those affected with assistance. However, these efforts were fragmented in nature and heavily influenced by the prevailing political order. In fact, two territorially distinct types of emergency response campaigns emerged in Daraa, each of which was characterised by unique dynamics, the actors involved, the beneficiaries targeted and particular processes. Localities with tenuous regime control saw autonomous campaigns organised by local committees and volunteers, with significant involvement by former rebel leaders. The main driving forces behind these campaigns were family connections between local communities in Daraa governorate and the population displaced to rebel-held areas in northern Syria after the southern region was recaptured in mid-2018.¹² The campaign focused primarily on offering immediate humanitarian assistance to more than 1,500 internally displaced families from Daraa which moved from the region to rebel-held areas in Idlib and northern Aleppo. Given the geographical distance and the risks involved in transferring in-kind aid through regime-held areas, local initiatives aimed instead to collect financial aid to provide it to the affected population residing in rebel-held areas in northern Syria.

On 7 February, the ‘Faz’a of Hauran People to Liberated Northern Syria’ campaign was launched in al-Hrak city in response to appeals made by displaced people to their local communities in Daraa.¹³ To facilitate efficient communication and coordination, WhatsApp groups were set up to link two committees. One committee based in northern Syria provided regular updates on the needs of the affected population. The other committee located in al-Hrak city mobilised local residents and oversaw the collection of donations.¹⁴ This campaign, together with a ‘Do them a Favour’ initiative launched in western Daraa, reportedly managed to raise, and transfer about SYP 1 billion (equivalent to approximately USD 221,000 at the official exchange rate of SYP 4,522 per USD in this period)¹⁵ in multiple instalments.¹⁶ While they responded and contributed to the two campaigns, the diaspora launched an initiative named ‘Faz’a of Hauran people,’ which depended on a network of individuals residing in Arab and European countries who mobilised and collected financial donations from Syrian communities and transferred them to northern Syria.¹⁷ The committees that received the funds used them to provide affected families in north-western Syria with shelter, food and stipends.

11 Daraa 24, “The Earthquake Disaster and More than 46 Dead from Daraa Governorate” (in Arabic), 21 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3maPnOY>

12 Abdullah al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations,” Working Paper (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/2CDpfIK>

13 The term *faz’a* refers to rapid acts of solidarity, particularly in times of crisis or adversity, when people are summoned by local communities to aid those in immediate danger or distress.

14 Interview with local activists, Daraa, February 2023.

15 This rate is used throughout the text.

16 Interview with local activists in Daraa, March 2023.

17 Series of interviews with civilians in Daraa, March-April 2023.

The second type of campaigns took place in localities that were under strict regime security control and consequently witnessed broad interventions by government officials and state institutions. Although the state officials avoided explicitly identifying the beneficiaries, the campaign was directed towards aiding affected populations residing in government-held areas in Aleppo and the coastal region. Under the banners of 'Syria is One Family' and 'Faz'at Hauran,' on 8 February 2023 an extensive meeting was held in a cultural centre in Daraa city and state officials, clan sheikhs and local notables were convened to discuss organising emergency response efforts.¹⁸ The governor of Daraa, Luay Kharita, and the Secretary of the Baath Party Branch, Hussein al-Rifai, appealed to the public to donate using discourse that emphasised solidarity and national responsibility.¹⁹ The meeting produced an action plan, which included forming local committees and opening tents to receive in-kind donations. Supervised by a centralised entity, local committees were entrusted with receiving and depositing financial donations in a special bank account at the Daraa branch of the central bank.²⁰



'Syria is One Family' donation tent in Daraa city (left)
Financial donations in Eastern Ghariyah town (right)
Source: Local activist

In the wake of the quake, the Daraa governorate dispatched rescue teams and provided heavy machinery, including cranes and dump trucks, to assist in rescue efforts and clear away debris.²¹ State institutions, syndicates and unions sought to collect contributions from their staff and members. For instance, many employees at the Health Directorate joined doctors and private hospitals in raising a total of SYP 60 million (approx. USD 13,270).²² Following suit, doctors, lawyers and engineer syndicates collected financial donations from their members. The Director of Daraa Endowment, Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayadi, instructed imams to appeal to their congregations to donate.²³ The Eparch of the Archeparchy of Bosra-

18 SANA, "A Preparatory Meeting to Coordinate the Efforts of the People of Daraa to Deliver Aid to Affected People in a Number of Syrian Governorates" (in Arabic), 8 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ZNmiqL>

19 Al-Thawra, "Daraa Launches its 'Faza' to Help those Affected by the Earthquake" (in Arabic), 9 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3KfdTXk>

20 The author obtained an official document indicating the approval of the central bank to open an account at its Daraa branch. The account was named "The initiative of the people of Daraa governorate for those affected by the earthquake in the various Syrian governorates." The document is addressed to the governor of Daraa and dated 9 February 2023.

21 Interview with medical staff in Daraa, February 2023.

22 Interview with medical staff in Daraa, February 2023.

23 Interview with a civilian in Daraa, February 2023.

Hauran made a SYP 20 million (approximately USD 4,400) contribution.²⁴ Simultaneously, local NGOs accepted financial and in-kind contributions, which consisted of essential items such as canned food, clothing, blankets, medications and baby formula. For example, Syria's Youth Imprint (SYI) and the 'Good Deeds and Social Services Association' were active in receiving, packaging and preparing aid convoys heading from Daraa city to affected areas in Aleppo, Latakia and Hamah governorates.²⁵ At the peak of the campaign on 11 February, the financial donations reportedly exceeded SYP 750 million (approximately USD 166,000), with the contributions mainly coming from 19 localities.²⁶ From that point onwards, participation wound down.²⁷

1.2. Uneasy Coordination in Sweida Governorate

Following the earthquake, various local initiatives were launched in Sweida governorate which aimed to provide the affected population with aid. Since the earthquake did not result in any casualties among the Druze people living in the Jabal al-Summaq area in Idlib governate, which is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or among those residing in regime-held affected areas, family and religious ties did not play significant roles in initiating these efforts. Instead, local initiatives were driven by a widespread sense of sympathy and national solidarity.²⁸ On 6 February, the House of the Druze Monotheistic Muslims in Syria, and the Men of Dignity Movement, the largest armed faction in Sweida governorate, issued statements in which they expressed their readiness to secure shelter and housing for the people affected.²⁹ Indeed, dozens of families from affected areas, especially in Aleppo, arrived in Sweida and received housing and donations from local NGOs, most notably the Emergency Response Team and *Bayti Ana Baytak* (my home is your home). In addition, many spontaneous initiatives focused on facilitating the return of university students from affected areas to their hometowns. Several buses were sent to universities in the Aleppo, Latakia, Hama and Homs governorates and they brought about 1,500 students back to the city of Sweida. While exiled political opponents and some local NGOs in Sweida governorate collected and directed funds and aid to some affected rebel-held areas in Idlib governorate,³⁰ two parallel emergency response campaigns emerged in Sweida governorate.

24 Thawra, "20 Million Pounds from the Archdiocese of Bosra, Horan and Jabal al-Arab for Affected People" (in Arabic), 14 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3KNHW9Y>

25 Established in 2011 and licensed in January 2012, Syria's Youth Imprint (SYI) is an example of an NGO that has evolved into an ad hoc structure in regime-held areas. The 'Good Deeds and Social Services Association' was established in 1959 in Daraa city. The association focused its efforts on providing care for marginalised groups in society, such as orphans, the elderly and individuals with disabilities.

26 The author has received a list of localities where participation in the government campaign was concentrated, along with the donations made up to 11 February 2023.

27 Series of interviewees in localities that witnessed participation in the government campaign, Daraa, 10-20 February 2023.

28 Interview with local activists in Sweida governorate, February 2023.

29 "Men of Dignity Movement Page," Facebook, 6 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3zZfJH4>, "The Druze Monotheistic Muslims in Syria page," Facebook, 6 February, <https://bit.ly/41h3ams>

30 Interview with local activists in Sweida governorate, March 2023.



Receiving in-kind donations (left)
Aid truck from Sweida en route to Lattakia governorates (right)
Source: Local activist

The first was directed by the state and consisted of state institutions, the Baath Party and a constellation of local NGOs supported by the Syria Trust for Development, which is led by Asmaa al-Assad. To coordinate aid efforts and secure relief materials for the affected areas, the governor of Sweida, Bassam Parsec, held meetings to coordinate with members of the provincial council and its executive office, members of the Baath Party, the secretary-general of the governorate and the head of the Sweida Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Under the supervision of a relief sub-committee formed by the governorate, the 'From the Family to the Family' and 'One Country...One Hand' campaigns collected and sent convoys of humanitarian and relief aid, including mattresses, blankets, infant formula, diapers and canned food. Donations were largely provided by members of the Chambers of Industry and Commerce, federations and unions, such as the Sweida branches of the Pharmacists Syndicate and the Medical Association, and Family Funds in coordination with the Syrian Trade Corporation. Moreover, local NGOs, such as the *Mersat* Foundation and the *Sawaidna* Charity, contributed to the humanitarian efforts. In most cases, the aid and donations were delivered through one of two main channels: the High Committee for Relief, which is chaired by the Minister of Local Administration and organises relief work in Syria, or the Syrian Trust for Development. By mid-February 2023, this campaign had reportedly raised about SYP 700 million (approx. USD 155,000).³¹

The second type consisted of semi-autonomous campaigns by NGOs funded by the diaspora from Sweida.³² These campaigns aimed to coordinate volunteer efforts in a transparent and efficient manner. Among them was the 'To Our People...from Sweida' initiative, which was launched by a joint supervisory body which included religious entities in Sweida such as the Druze house of 'Maqam Ain al-Zaman' and the Sweida Great Mosque, together with the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical churches. This nascent entity received support and donations from various sources, including local NGOs such as the 'Humanitarianism Unites Us' initiative and 'Jana for Sustainable Development' (in Sweida) and NGOs abroad such as the 'Swaida American Society,' which was formed by the Druze diaspora in the United States in 2019. This entity communicated with civilian entities operating in affected areas assessing

31 Talal al-Kafiri, "Donation Campaigns Continue in Sweida, and Three Trucks are Heading to Lattakia Today" (in Arabic), 15 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3zW4ZsO>

32 Interview with local activists in Sweida governorate, March 2023.

needs. Working with the relief sub-committee in Sweida, the entity gathered approximately SYP 200 million (approximately USD 44,200) which it sent to local NGOs working in affected areas. The funds were then distributed to over 1,000 families impacted by the disaster.³³

2. Limitations to Engagement in Humanitarian Efforts

Despite significant efforts and a widespread desire to contribute, the turnout for initiatives by the local population in Daraa and Sweida governorates was low, and financial contributions collected for the quake aid response were relatively small. There are three main reasons for this.

First, people are more likely to donate when they have excess resources available, but are unlikely to do so when they are in need of aid themselves. For many in southern Syria, the overall dire economic situation and diminishing resources limited people's ability to engage in aid efforts and hindered their capacity to provide quake response campaigns with financial support.³⁴ Second, there is a widespread belief in Daraa and Sweida governorates that the state has become largely reliant on local initiatives and resources in times of crisis and emergencies. Many locals stated that they frequently feel compelled to use their resources to fill the vacuum caused by the inability of state institutions to handle disaster response efforts.³⁵ Previously, when Covid-19 hit Syria in March 2020, many locals in Daraa decided to organise collectively, raise money and mobilise cross-border networks and diaspora communities to launch local initiatives to counter the pandemic.³⁶ Similarly, in neighbouring Sweida local NGOs and the diaspora launched and funded initiatives to buy oxygen cylinders and provide Covid-19 patients with medical care.³⁷ In this context, the preference of many individuals to abstain from contributing to earthquake initiatives was justified by their reluctance to use limited resources to assume what is traditionally a state responsibility.³⁸



Collecting financial contributions in Inkhil city, Daraa governorate (January 2023)
Source: Local activist

33 "House of the Druze Monotheistic Muslims in Syria Page," Facebook, 27 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3zYMm7D>

34 Series of interviews in Daraa and Sweida, March-April 2023

35 Series of interviews in Daraa and Sweida, March-April 2023.

36 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-conflict in Syria, May 2020), <https://bit.ly/2SKkcYS>

37 Interview with a civilian in Sweida, February 2023.

38 Series of interviews in Daraa, March-April 2023.

Third, local initiatives which were launched to improve service provision already imposed a significant economic burden on a population that is heavily dependent on remittances, resulting in depletion of its resources and undermining its ability to make additional contributions to earthquake response aid initiatives. In Daraa between December 2022 and February 2023, more than 20 local initiatives raised over 20 billion SYP (approximately USD 4.4 million). These funds were used by local councils to reconstruct public schools, pave roads, repair wells, install solar panels for street lighting, organise waste disposal and purchase buses to facilitate transport.³⁹ In Sweida, locals have constantly used their resources to contribute to local initiatives to repair wells to access drinking water, finance renewable energy projects to power water pumps and a communication network, and provide free transport for students. In 2022, locals raised a substantial amount of over SYP 212 million (approximately USD 47,000) to link drinking water wells to networks that are immune from rationing.⁴⁰

Last, given the magnitude of the natural disaster and reports circulating of an influx of international and regional aid, many locals considered that their donations would not have a substantial impact. A lack of confidence in the channels responsible for delivering donations further reinforced this perception. Therefore, many locals opted to hold back from contributing to quake response initiatives and instead diverted their contributions to initiatives that immediately benefited the local population based on the principle that ‘charity begins at home.’⁴¹ In Sweida, many spontaneous initiatives focused on donations to secure heating fuel, bread, medicine and blankets for people in remote villages. This was especially the case at the time of a heavy snowfall which led to roads between Sweida city and most of the southern and eastern villages being cut. In Daraa, numerous locals chose to contribute to initiatives to provide poor families and orphans with food and stipends during the month of Ramadan and the Islamic festival of *Eid al-Fitr* (the fast-breaking feast), which marks the end of Ramadan.⁴²

3. Leveraging Local Initiatives for Political Gains

Weak security control by the regime has been a main defining characteristic of the south of Syria. In Daraa governorate, the limited regime authority is attributed to Russia’s approach to regime return in 2018, which was forged with consideration of regional politics.⁴³ Although subsequent settlement agreements contributed to dismantling vital networks of civil resistance and allowed the regime to expand its influence,⁴⁴ the regime’s authority beyond its main outposts remains largely contested. In Sweida governorate, on the other hand, Druze neutrality over the 2011 uprising and the ensuing insurgency allowed the regime to reduce its military and security presence in the region and direct its attention to active warzones elsewhere in the country.⁴⁵ Civilian and armed non-state actors filled the security vacuum left by the partial withdrawal of the regime and the relatively dysfunctional provision of services by state institutions.⁴⁶ Despite the continued presence of state institutions and military and security forces, the regime’s control in Sweida governorate remains tenuous and is contested by *de facto* forces.

39 Data collected in interviews with locals involved in these initiatives in several localities in Daraa, January and February 2023.

40 SANA, “Community Initiatives in Villages of Sweida to Address the Lack of Drinking Water” (in Arabic), 5 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/419bwfY>

41 Interview with a local notable in Sweida, April 2023.

42 Series of interviews in Daraa, February and March 2023.

43 Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria,” Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020), <https://bit.ly/34nt2jL>

44 Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria,” Policy Brief, (Florence, European University Institute: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, October 2021), <https://bit.ly/3BX1SzH>

45 Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, “The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts,” Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 2019/12), <https://bit.ly/3UDoMHI>

46 Nizar Ahmad, “Kidnapping for Ransom: Gangs Threaten Civil Peace in Sweida,” Policy Briefs (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, March 2022), <https://bit.ly/416ZDao>

In these circumstances, the regime continued to deploy various tactics to re-assert its authority in the border regions, one such tactic being broad interventions in post-disaster relief and recovery efforts. This strategy of it leveraging humanitarian crises for economic and political ends is not new and was reported during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁷ The recent earthquake presented the regime with another opportunity to achieve its objectives. However, the low turnout for local initiatives by the local populations in Daraa and Sweida governorates, and the relatively small amount of financial contributions collected for the quake aid response made it difficult for the regime to leverage humanitarian efforts to make significant economic gains. In spite of this, the regime sought to take advantage of the emergency aid response to promote its power structure so as to reaffirm its authority in the two peripheral regions.

In the wake of the natural disaster, the Baath Party – a major component of the regime’s authority – broadly intervened in local initiatives with the aim of consolidating its influence in the political and social arenas in southern Syria. The Party intervened in local initiatives at two levels. First, it intervened at the organisational level by exerting control over local initiatives. In Sweida and in areas that fell under its security control in Daraa governorate, the Baath Party played an integral organisational role in aid response initiatives by taking charge of various tasks such as preparing for meetings with officials, issuing public statements, forming relief committees and supervising monetary and in-kind donations. Active involvement by the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU), the Baath Party’s youth branch, in preparing aid convoys was reported.⁴⁸ The absence of the Baath Party was felt in emergency responses in areas characterised by tenuous regime control in Daraa governorate.



RYU members loading aid into trucks in Sweida (left) and Daraa (right)
Source: Local activist

Second, the Baath Party sought to exploit the aftermath of the quake to showcase its ability to mobilise as a means of projecting popular support, especially vis-à-vis external audiences. The Party used the consequences of the quake to rally public support and call for a lifting of western sanctions on Syria. On 27 February, Daraa city witnessed a protest which gathered together state officials, government employees and students. Masses marched in the city and carried banners expressing solidarity with the population affected by the quake and demanding the lifting of western sanctions. While these protests resonated with some locals in Daraa who sympathised with the earthquake victims and were suffering from Syria’s economic plight, others viewed it as manipulation of a natural disaster by the regime for political purposes.⁴⁹

47 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria.”

48 Series of interviews in Daraa, February-March 2023; SANA, “As Part of the ‘Faz’a of the People’ Campaign... the Youth Branch of Sweida Drives an Aid Vehicle to Lattakia” (in Arabic), 23 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3L6q767>

49 Series of interviews in Daraa, February-April 2023.



A protest against sanctions in Daraa city (27 February 2023)

The banner reads, "The siege on Syria constitutes a war crime that violates human rights and all international laws"
Source: Local activist

In Sweida the regime sought to mobilise the public to achieve an additional objective. By organising public demonstrations, the regime aimed to overshadow the civil resistance movement, which has been a defining characteristic of the governorate since 2020, and to deflect attention away from public discontent with security chaos, corruption, poverty and deteriorating living conditions.⁵⁰ The organisers of a weekly silent sit-in, which began more than two months ago, held a minute of silence for the souls of earthquake victims in the city of Sweida on 6 and 13 February, to confirm the peacefulness of the movements in Sweida and to demand peaceful political change and the implementation of international resolution No. 2245 and the release of political prisoners and an improvement of living conditions.



A protest in Sweida city (13 February 2023)

Banners read, "From Sweida, this is Aleppo", "From Sweida, this is Idlib", "Freedom for forcibly disappeared people"
Source: Local activist

50 Mazen Ezzi, "Sweida Protests: The Start of a New Syrian Revolution?" Syrian Trajectories Project, 16 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/40GrU7n>; Mazen Ezzi, "What's New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?" Syrian Trajectories Project, 12 December 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ZPAkYV>

The participants raised banners in solidarity with the Syrians in all the affected areas and denounced the closure of crossings and the politicisation of the disaster. On 19 February 2023, independent opposition civilian groups organised a stand in solidarity with the victims of the earthquake in Sweida city centre, marking the first instance of participation by both men and women. As the civil movement gained momentum, on the next day the Baath Party mobilised government employees and school and university students for a sit-in, demanding the lifting of sanctions on Syria and abolition of the Caesar Act. It is worth noting that the Baath Party deliberately scheduled the sit-in at the same location and time as the opposition's weekly silent sit-in. Although the opposition postponed their sit-in to the following day in order to prevent any interruption of the civil movement by the Baath Party,⁵¹ a fight broke out between two people near the protest site. One of the individuals involved threatened to throw a hand grenade, which the organisers deemed a significant escalation of the threat level, leading them to halt their protest.⁵²

Conclusion

In recent years, local initiatives have become a defining characteristic of southern Syria. In the absence of functional state institutions, locals in Daraa and Sweida governorates have stepped up to fill the void to meet their basic needs and ensure survival. While community-led initiatives have undoubtedly played a crucial role in meeting the needs of communities in southern Syria, one should not view them as sustainable substitutes of state functions. This is mainly because they are often limited by their resources and capacities, and they may not be able to address complex challenges and crises. The local humanitarian efforts that emerged in southern Syria after the February 2023 earthquake are instances of troubled solidarity. This is illustrated first by fragmented and disjointed humanitarian efforts resulting from deep-seated political tensions and unresolved conflicts. And second by limitations imposed on the desire and willingness to engage in humanitarian assistance. These include a reluctance on the part of the population to take on responsibilities that are traditionally assumed by the state, the dire economic situation and diminishing resources, and a preference to contribute to community-led initiatives that have immediate benefits for locals.

The low turnout for local initiatives by the local populations in Daraa and Sweida governorates, and the relatively small amount of financial contributions collected for the quake aid response made it difficult for the regime to leverage humanitarian efforts for significant economic gain. Nevertheless, the regime tried to use the reaction of the relief community to the emergency to reaffirm its authority in the south. Wherever a window of opportunity existed the Baath Party broadly interfered in aid efforts by taking control of various operations. The Party used the aftermath of the natural disaster to showcase its ability to mobilise as a means of projecting popular support, especially vis-à-vis external audiences, and to interrupt the civil resistance movement. For the regime, the ultimate objective remained to promote its power structure in order to reaffirm its dominance in the two peripheral regions.

51 Sweida 24, "As-Suwayda Civil Movement: We Will Not Be Dragged into Childish Behaviour" (in Arabic), 19 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3GKB1fc>

52 Al-Modon, "Sweida: Suspension of Protests Against al-Assad After Threats and Pressure" (in Arabic), 28 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3mzvQrH>

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