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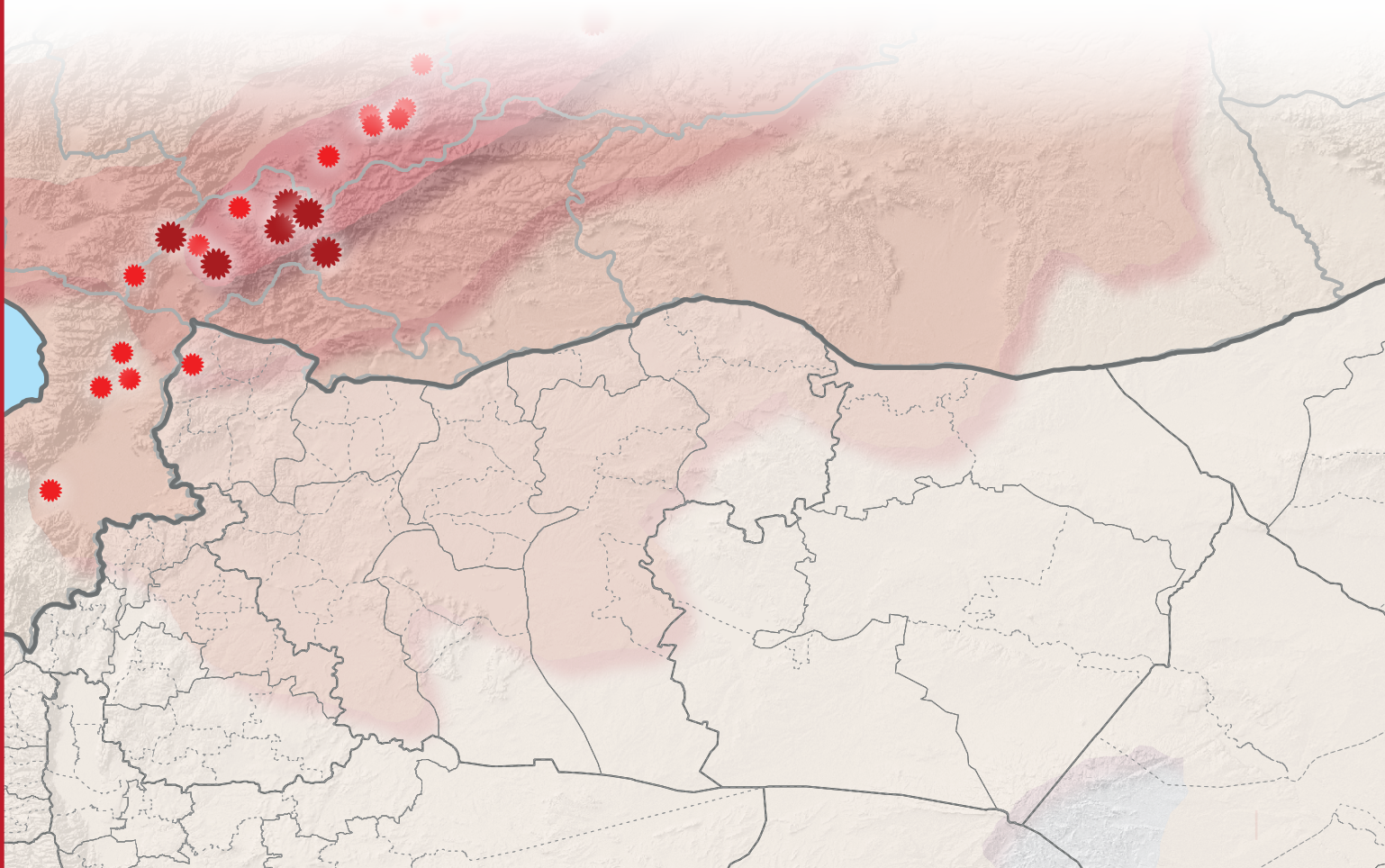


CONTEXT UPDATE

A Political Analysis of the Earthquake Response and its Impact on the Humanitarian Landscape in Syria.

Earthquake Edition

March 6, 2023



INTRODUCTION

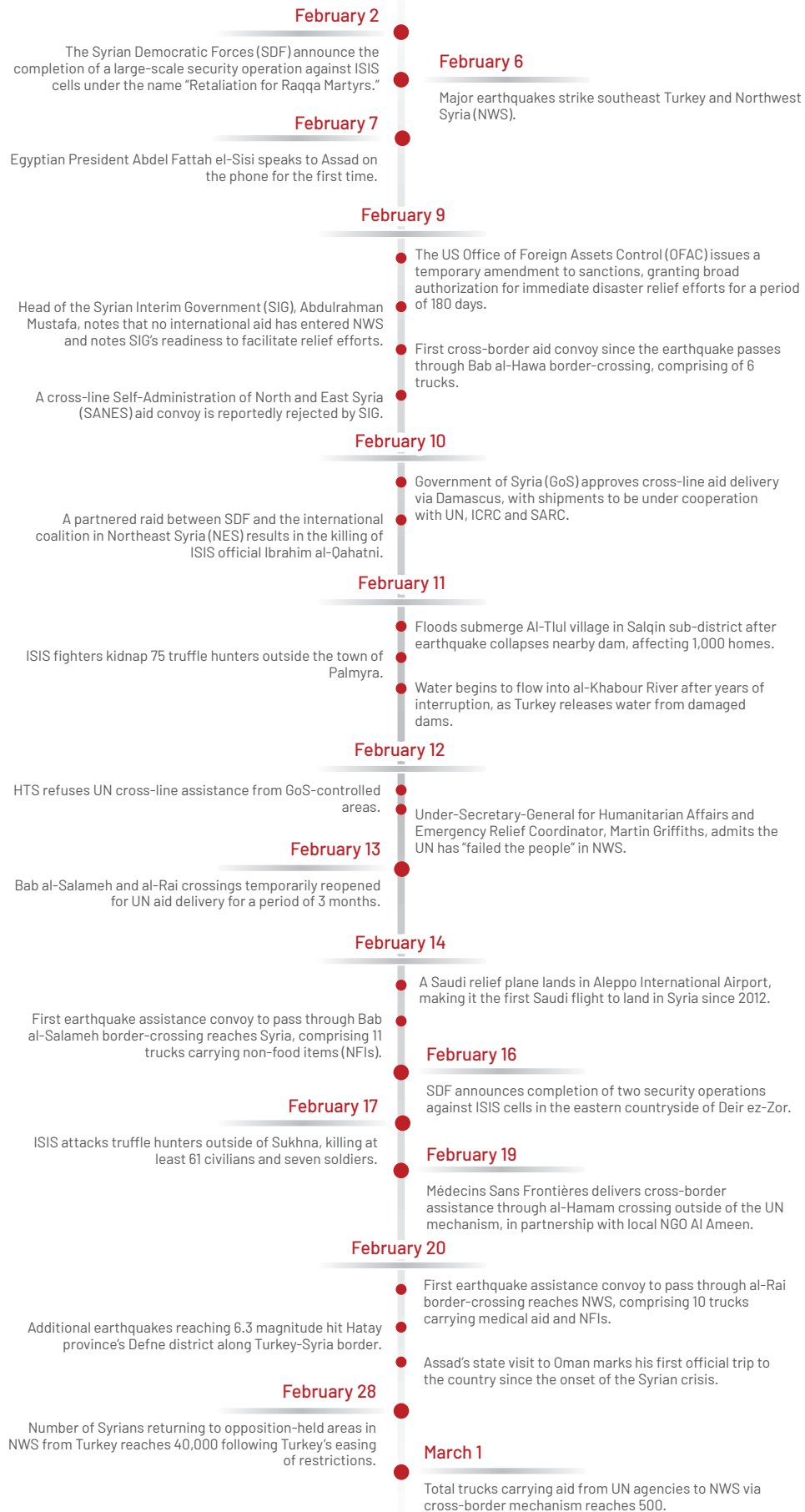
This report was generated by iMMAP using a combination of data service providers, key informant interviews, and open-source research to assist donors and partners in analyzing evolving security, governance, political, economic, and other dynamics that impact conditions in Northeast Syria, Northwest Syria, and Whole of Syria, as well as the operating environment for humanitarian actors. The contents of this report solely represent the analysis of iMMAP and do not represent the views or positions of iMMAP's donors and partners. Moreover, the names and designations used in this report do not imply acceptance by iMMAP's donors and partners.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Catastrophic damage caused by major earthquakes in Turkey and Syria has decimated an already fragile humanitarian landscape in Syria. Particularly in Northwest Syria (NWS), significant additional displacement has inflicted acute pressure on sanitation and mental health amid an underfunded medical sector, as earthquake-affected aid workers tackle widespread traumatization and an increasing risk of a cholera resurgence among the population.
- While bilateral assistance poured into affected areas, debates were reignited around the purpose and efficacy of sanctions in Syria as misinformation spread about their impact on earthquake relief, leading to the issuance of general licenses by key opponents. Accompanied by a comprehensive acceleration of normalization with the Government of Syria (GoS) by the Arab region, this has substantively changed the political calculation with which Assad is likely to approach future rapprochement with Turkey.
- Fatal delays in aid provision for NWS highlighted unprecedented politicization of cross-border assistance in Syria, and the deference and compromises made to the GoS over international aid by the UN Security Council (UNSC). As criticism mounts against the UN, it is important to look ahead to increase the capacity of alternative aid modalities and prevent such dependency on mechanisms that are vulnerable to political manipulation by the regime.
- Although some actors tried to attribute delays to refusals by opposition authorities to accept cross-line aid through Damascus, this aid modality is largely inconsequential for humanitarian relief in NWS relative to the scale of the cross-border operation. Pushes for it to replace cross-border can be interpreted as driven by GoS political motives, who has persistently diverted aid from opposition-held areas while systematically siphoning funding from the international community since the onset of the Syrian crisis.
- Cross-line shipments from the Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) to NWS were indeed prevented from crossing internal borders by the GoS, who extorted fuel from convoys in exchange for authorization to pass. Rejections of GoS assistance by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) supported its opposition credentials while its leader, al-Golani, employed efforts to promote his reputation as a credible governing actor. Although initially rejecting assistance from SANES-controlled areas, the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG) ultimately accepted convoys from a community assistance campaign in Northeast Syria (NES).
- The earthquake impact in NES largely focused on changes in water supply due to significant inflow to the al-Khabour river as Turkish authorities were forced to release water from damaged upstream dams. Both ISIS and anti-ISIS joint operations continued in February, demonstrating a continued post-earthquake security focus from the US in Syria.



TIMELINE



SUMMARY OF EVENTS

In the morning of February 6, southeast Turkey and NWS experienced the strongest earthquakes seen in the region since 1939. The epicenter of the strongest quake west of Gaziantep reached a magnitude of 7.8, while a second in Kahramanmaraş reached 7.7, causing extensive damage and an immediate humanitarian crisis. As often occurs with significant seismic shifts, subsequent earthquakes hit Hatay province's Defne district on February 20, with strong, lasting tremors seeing a magnitude of 6.3. The impact felt in NWS further destroyed buildings and displaced families who were not already living in temporary shelter for fear of subsequent aftershocks.

More than 50,000 deaths have now been recorded as a result of the earthquakes with official figures reporting 5,900 casualties in Syria, though this number is likely to be underreported.¹ In NWS, entire towns were leveled due to a lack of building regulations. As of February 25, more than 1,700 buildings were completely destroyed while more than 8,500 buildings are partially destroyed, with 60% of the latter reported in Harem and Afrin.² The city of Jindires, near Afrin, has been one of the most devastated communities, with over 1,000 of its residents dying in the destruction. With the damage inflicted upon already-vulnerable communities, the challenges facing efforts of a crippled humanitarian sector to respond to acute humanitarian need are numerous and difficult to overcome.

Pleas from authorities across Syria for humanitarian aid saw a subsequent influx of shipments into affected-areas, including the GoS from historically opposed foreign governments. This provided diplomatic pressure for key international donors, such as the US and EU, to temporarily waive sanctions to facilitate aid. Although there is common acknowledgement that the GoS has utilized the earthquake to push for sanctions relief, there has also been widespread questions over how sanctions can still be an effective tool in achieving the long-term objectives of political transition in the current Syrian context.

A series of diplomatic visits and communications led to significant progress by the GoS in its normalization with various Arab countries, although it remains unclear if these developments will translate into more substantial political changes. Statements claiming the current Syrian status quo is "unworkable" by historic Assad regime-opponents such as Saudi Arabia prompt

reconsideration of how future isolation from the international community through sanctions will bring about political resolution in Syria. Assad's diplomatic gains since the earthquake have also yielded him a more favorable negotiating position at the table with Turkey. As Turkish President Erdogan faces criticism for his government's earthquake response amid rising community tensions between Syrians and Turks, he will be under further pressure to expedite the normalization process to find a solution to the Syrian refugee crisis ahead of the presidential elections this June.

After significant delays to crucial cross-border assistance in the immediate period after the earthquakes, 500 trucks of humanitarian assistance have entered into NWS as of March 1,³ although this remains lower than last year's average rate. The initial absence of UN-coordinated cross-border operations has opened discussions over the politicization of aid for opposition areas by the GoS, as it renewed calls for an increase reliance on cross-line aid via Damascus. However, the limited scale of cross-line assistance, humanitarian organizations' fear of sanctions prosecution, the GoS's recorded and continued pattern of aid misappropriation, and opposition forces' refusal to accept aid from entities they consider opponents limit the efficacy of such a modality. These shortcomings of the available responses to such an urgent crisis have led to a reassessment of how aid modalities are integrated and deployed in managing the Syrian humanitarian and political crisis.

The earthquake had a relatively minor impact in NES relative to NWS, with the region seeing its al-Khabour river flowing once again as Turkey released water from damaged upstream dams. In response, the SANES mistakenly drained other dams for fear of flooding, leading to the suspension of Tishreen Dam's electrical generation capacity for the duration of a week. Turkey also continued its pattern of maintaining a politically antagonistic relationship with the SANES, manifesting in the initial refusal of cross-line earthquake relief assistance passing from NES to NWS. An extensive grassroots assistance campaign from NES communities eventually made it to affected regions, with the GoS continuing to force material concessions for access to NWS through cross-line border crossings into their territory.

ANALYSIS

| Humanitarian Needs Landscape

Prior to the earthquakes, Syria was seeing an all-time high of people requiring humanitarian assistance this year as a result of the 12-year long conflict.⁴ 90% of the 4.5 million inhabitants in NWS were particularly dependent on aid,⁵ as communities continued to battle conflict- and drought-driven displacement. The earthquakes have caused additional destruction on a colossal scale at a time when humanitarian shelter and healthcare was already crippled by diminishing funding and international attention. Even where assistance is now reaching areas to for distribution, the amount of aid available is not commensurate with the level of humanitarian needs in these communities, as significant gaps are identified across all sectors.

Relentless Displacement. The humanitarian response to the crisis rapidly evolved from emergency rescue to urgent relief provision. Focus was drawn to the overwhelming needs of IDPs and already stretched host communities in NWS, with winterization and shelter support and multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) identified as priority needs.⁶ Over the course of the Syrian conflict, two-thirds of the NWS population were already forcibly displaced, often multiple times, from other parts of Syria. 40,000 families have now reportedly been displaced again from and within their new communities in NWS as a result of the earthquake.⁷ Shelling by GoS forces has also reportedly continued against earthquake-affected opposition-held communities in northern Idlib, displacing tens of families again.⁸ Further airstrikes targeted the connecting road and key relief transport route between the Bab al-Hawa border-crossing and several IDP camps.⁹ In the previous week HTS had targeted GoS military positions in northern Lattakia, resulting in the death of several GoS soldiers.¹⁰

Many households have gathered in collective shelters in schools, mosques, and other community spaces following the collapse of their homes. There is widespread overcrowding across these informal facilities, raising urgent protection concerns regarding privacy, gender-based violence, and the rapid spread of communicable diseases. Due to its already extremely high IDP population, the establishment of further emergency tent-shelter in NWS has been met with hesitation by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), as they call for longer-term solutions. There nevertheless remains

an urgent need for temporary shelter units, including tents, as well as the adaptation of collective shelters and repair of damaged buildings. By February 18, more than 14,000 individuals have been provided with tents; but OCHA has noted that available stocks may well be insufficient to cover the assessed need in the region.¹¹

Destroyed health sector poses risks. As reported in iMMAP's [January Context Update](#), extensive funding cuts already forced medical facilities across NWS to close as the region continued to battle a cholera epidemic. A further 55 hospitals and primary healthcare facilities in NWS have reportedly been partially or completely destroyed as a result of the earthquakes.¹² 20% of communities now have no access to healthcare,¹³ with Janudiyeh and Bedama sub-districts identified as the most affected, as the latter reports that 69% of its residents are without access.¹⁴ These sub-districts lie along the key M4 highway in southwestern Idlib, whose surrounding communities have been repeatedly devastated by conflict between GoS and Turkish-supported positions. There are widespread reports of remaining functioning hospitals being completely overwhelmed by the immediate mass of casualties from the earthquakes, with urgent shortages of medical equipment and fuel for generators.

The threat to life posed by the diminished capacity of the health sector is compounded by rising concerns around sanitation and the spread of water-borne diseases, particularly among collective shelters, as the earthquakes have caused significant damage to WASH infrastructure in NWS. On February 11, floods submerged Al-Tlul village along the Orontes River in Salqin sub-district after an upstream dam collapsed, displacing approximately 7,000 people to nearby camps.¹⁵ Although machinery was deployed to mitigate the floods, the dam is still unable to be repaired. Risks of water contamination and secondary health emergencies are particularly high following natural disasters of this scale. Mercy Corps found eight boreholes to be unusable due to contamination, impacting water supply for 10,000 in the region.¹⁶ Increases in water turbidity soon led to the suspension of water trucking in Idlib, Jarablus and Atmeh.¹⁷ Although some trucking has resumed, interruptions to potable water supply, delays to a planned vaccination campaign, and overcrowding in camps and collective centers all pose acute vulnerabilities to the population at a time of a cholera epidemic.

Moreover, after the region was continuing to be impacted by 10-15 aftershocks a day, the second earthquakes on February 20 had particularly damaging impact on inhabitants' mental health. Elevated levels of psychological distress have translated into injury and hospitalization across NWS and GoS-controlled areas. Most cases at Harem hospital have reportedly been for treatment for nervous breakdowns, particularly among women and children,¹⁸ while 300 people visited hospitals in Aleppo with panic attack symptoms.¹⁹ The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) said it has treated a number of patients, including a 7-year-old boy, for heart attacks brought on by fear following the later earthquakes.²⁰ Although MHPSS sub-sector working groups have been established with increased training for trauma treatment, there remain significant gaps in the scale of services needed. Challenges to filling these gaps have been attributed to a lack of contracts with psychologists and psychiatrists during this period of the year.²¹ Other earthquake impacts, such as a lack of safe housing, interruption to education, and poor sanitation are compounding the mental health needs of Syrians, demonstrating the urgent need for a multi-sectoral, integrated approach to increase well-being among communities.

Impact on the humanitarian sector. The humanitarian sector itself, particularly in NWS, has been severely impacted by the earthquakes, with staff suffering many of the same impacts on mental health and displacement as the Syrians they work to protect. First responders are increasingly experiencing burnout and distress as a result of continued and intense response efforts in a devastated environment. At least 79 aid workers in NWS have passed away in the earthquakes in addition to countless relatives of survivors.²² This not only impedes the coordination and function of emergency and cross-border operations, but has an immeasurable impact on the emotional and mental well-being of colleagues. As a hub for NWS operations, many aid workers in Gaziantep and Antakya key to coordinating cross-border aid have themselves been living in shelters and cars, rendered homeless by damaged buildings or unable to return to offices and apartments until the danger of aftershocks has passed. With overwhelming sentiment that the international community, and the UN in particular, was fatally slow in their response to support the NWS aid sector, many have been left with feelings of abandonment in the shadow of a staggering humanitarian crisis.

| International Response

The extensive destruction caused by the earthquakes and subsequent shockwaves prompted varying responses from the international community, as actors offered a range of support including rescue teams, relief shipments, emergency shelter. Governing authorities across Syria, including the GoS, SIG and HTS, issued pleas for aid from all countries willing to send it. Some countries rushed to offer humanitarian support and rescue teams to GoS-controlled areas in the immediate aftermath, including Russia, Iran, the UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq.²³ The EU provided Syria with 10 million euros of humanitarian assistance and opened a humanitarian air bridge, with two planes landing in Damascus on February 26, as part of a wider assistance package for both government and opposition areas.²⁴ Additionally, many European countries eased the procedures and requirements for earthquake victims to acquire visas.²⁵ Despite political barriers to the delivery of aid to NWS, the head of the White Helmets, Raed Al-Saleh, noted that large deliveries of aid from Saudi Arabia and Qatar arrived in opposition-held territory ahead of UN deliveries.²⁶ SIG received aid from expected supporters, such as Turkey, as well as claiming receipt of shipments from unexpected sources such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).²⁷ The US stated that it would primarily channel aid via its local NGO partners. However, there are limitations to the benefits such funding can have if local partners are limited in their capacity to expand operations in response to urgent needs.

Sanctions debate. The topic of sanctions on the Assad regime was raised in UN Security Council (UNSC) meetings as recently as January by the GoS and its allies.²⁸ Debates over their effectiveness were reignited by the earthquakes, particularly over how they may impede humanitarian funding and lead to further deterioration of already-devastating humanitarian conditions. Many financial institutions have exhibited overcompliance to Syrian sanctions, refusing to process transactions due to the financial risk involved.²⁹ Currently more stringent than those applied to Iran, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) has identified that sanctions have complicated the process for the Syrian diaspora to provide remittances to relatives in Syria,³⁰ as well as affecting the financial processes of humanitarian organizations.³¹

Procurement procedures are also impacted, as although exemptions include medical and other items of explicitly humanitarian relief, essential support products such as fuel are restricted. As medical facilities and agriculture across the country are continually debilitated by ongoing fuel shortages, questions persist around their contribution to the severe health and food insecurity levels in Syria.

The US and EU have insisted that preceding sanctions do not inhibit humanitarian operations, with both reiterating that there are exemptions for various forms of humanitarian aid for Syria, provided it does not involve the GoS or affiliated persons and entities. Shortly after the first earthquakes, however, actors waived elements of their sanction programs. On February 9, The US Treasury's Office for Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) issued a temporary amendment under General License 23 (GL23)³² in which broad authorization is granted for immediate disaster relief efforts for a period of 180 days.³³ This included allowing individuals to make charitable donations directly to Syrian organizations,³⁴ instead of requiring transfer via third-party NGOs.³⁵ The EU also issued a general license amendment, removing the need for organizations to apply and obtain approval for licenses in advance to make transfers and provide services in Syria on a case-by-case basis.³⁶

US and EU positions remain that lifting any sanctions on the GoS is "conditional upon its commitment to a credible and inclusive political process."³⁷ However, critics note that sanctions are so far yet to lead to tangible political change in Syria, with prospects for such a commitment by the GoS and Assad becoming ever more unlikely under increasing normalization. The earthquakes have therefore brought into light both the efficacy and ultimate political objective of sanctions within the current conditions of the Syrian conflict. In conjunction with accusations against the GoS regarding the diversion and theft of aid, any analysis of the utility of sanctions in the post-earthquake context must account for the clear need to reinforce alternative aid mechanisms to those via Damascus and the cross-border mandate held hostage by Russian veto at the UNSC. To do this, smaller, local organizations must be empowered to partner with INGOs to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria, particularly in NWS, but are currently disproportionately impacted by the bureaucratic requirements of sanction licenses. Beyond earthquake response, US and EU sanctions and related advocacy must therefore be consistent with wider international humanitarian strategy that aims to tackle the ways in which Damascus benefits from international aid whilst restricting that provided to opposition-areas.

Misinformation. The tragic impact of the earthquake merited an overwhelmingly sympathetic response from governments and citizens across the world, with emergency response organizations launching funding appeals to donors and the international community. Significant funds were also collected through crowd-funding efforts targeting the general public. Although a sizable portion of these were genuine, there were multiple reports of fake campaigns on social media platforms which were capitalizing on the catastrophe to take advantage of individuals lacking knowledge of appropriate channels through which they can support relief efforts.³⁸ Key actors in the crisis also perpetuated misinformation to advance their own political objectives. Notably, among the Assad regime's vocal criticisms against Western sanctions, a misleading air-traffic graphic showing Syrian airspace seemingly vacant spread virally across social media platforms.³⁹ Although direct links cannot be made to regime advocacy efforts, the image was used to support claims that sanctions were the reason aid was not reaching Syrians, often accompanied with hashtags such as #StopSanctionsOnSyrians.⁴⁰

Normalization with the Arab region. In the days following the earthquakes, numerous Arab leaders reignited communication with Damascus to offer aid and support. While for some countries this represented a continuation of pre-earthquake efforts to start conversations with Damascus, for others, it marked significant developments in relations since the onset of the Syrian crisis. Despite cold relations between the two countries, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi reportedly spoke to Assad on the phone for the first time on February 7,⁴¹ while both Egyptian and Jordanian foreign ministers made their first visits to Syria since the onset of the crisis in 2011.^{42 43} The Egyptian Foreign Minister later noted that the visit "reflects the interest for relations between Egypt and [Turkey and Syria] to return to their normal status."⁴⁴ Moreover, on February 20, Assad made his first official visit to Oman since the outbreak of the war,⁴⁵ with Oman having already reinstated their ambassador to Damascus in 2020.⁴⁶

Sporadic efforts by Arab countries, predominantly led by the UAE, have recently tried to re-initiate Damascus into the Arab League after its suspension in 2011.⁴⁷ Most notably, Saudi Arabia had previously actively called for Assad's removal in 2011 and supported opposition forces in the early conflict, but softened its tone on the regime following the earthquake. After initially sending aid to NWS opposition areas through non-UN mandated border crossings, Saudi Arabia sent assistance to GoS-controlled

Aleppo International Airport on February 14, making it the first Saudi flight to land in Syria since 2012.⁴⁸

Although full normalization between Riyadh and Damascus is unlikely in the near future, the amalgamation of regional efforts to mend relations over the past month signals a more consolidated Arab approach towards Damascus. Regional leaders have steadily been accepting the idea that regime change in Syria is becoming increasingly untenable, with the Saudi Foreign Minister commenting at the Munich Security Conference that “there is a consensus growing that the status quo is not workable.” Particularly regarding the humanitarian and refugee crisis, he noted that another approach was “being formulated” but that it would “have to go through Damascus at some point in a way that achieves at least the most important of the objectives.”⁴⁹ This suggests an increasing appetite for political compromises driven by perceived benefits in countering Assad’s alliance with countries such as Iran. An increasingly prevalent belief among regional powers that Western strategies of sanctions and isolation have not yielded the desired results for a political solution may also incentivize previously hostile countries to allow for a larger reintegration of Syria into the Arab-fold.

Impact on Ankara-Damascus relations. Although it is too early to determine the exact impact on the Ankara-Damascus normalization trajectory, the earthquake has substantially shifted incentive calculations of stakeholders at the negotiating table, as examined in IIMAP’s recent Ad Hoc Report on [Syrian-Turkish Normalization](#). Facing re-election, questions raised regarding the diligence of Turkish earthquake preparation and response will make Erdogan ever more keen to ensure beneficial Syria bilateral relations emerge from the disaster. Rising communal tensions since the earthquake have also increased pressures to find a solution to the Syrian refugee crisis. Following the earthquake, Turkey did not permit Syrians to cross the border into Turkey, instead allowing Syrian refugees to temporarily return for three to six months to NWS without losing their right to return to Turkey.⁵⁰ This led to an estimated 40,000 Syrians returning to areas in NWS by February 28.⁵¹ As such, Turkey’s primary normalization incentives of maintaining Erdogan’s domestic standing and stemming the influx of refugees to Turkey remain motivating priorities, but will depend on subsequent displacement patterns from NWS.

Assad’s incentives to pursue normalization with Turkey, however, have undergone a substantial shift as a result of the earthquake, not least due to the plethora of Arab countries re-engaging with the regime to move on from the current status quo. Assad is in a noticeably

improved position relative to a few months ago and is less dependent on rapprochement with Turkey to achieve his objectives of enhanced legitimacy and the monopolization of humanitarian aid. GoS legitimacy as Syria’s sovereign government has been bolstered on the international stage, exemplified by widespread interviews with GoS officials on international media. This was further compounded by the UN’s deference to Assad over cross-border aid. The US has long been seen a veto player in the Syrian context against any normalization agreement that would jeopardize GoS accountability and what they deem to be a just political resolution to the Syrian conflict. However, as calculations change around the available political tools in the context of increasing regional rapprochement and criticism of the Caesar Act, the ultimate objective of continued US influence on Syrian international relations may become increasingly questioned by opponents.

Politized Aid Access to NWS

Whereas Turkey and GoS saw international aid rapidly flown in from all corners of the world, earthquake assistance for NWS was slow and politicized with fatal consequences. Despite actors’ pledges to mobilize resources, no cross-border specialized earthquake assistance had reached NWS four days after the earthquakes struck.⁵² As the only organization with intensive search and rescue expertise, urgent calls for man-power and machinery assistance by the White Helmets were unanswered, restricting their access to only 5% of affected areas in NWS.⁵³ During a natural disaster where a rapid response within an initial three-day period is paramount to minimize fatalities, this inaction was met with condemnation by international and local NGOs with growing accusations regarding barriers to access.⁵⁴ Initially attributed to earthquake-damaged roads between Gaziantep and the UN Transshipment Hub in Hatay, reports began to emerge of a reluctance by the UN to push for alternative border access as well as a lack of urgency in authorizing emergency shipments through OCHA logistics protocols. Notably, a spokesperson for the Bab al-Hawa border crossing questioned why road access permitted the transport of the bodies of Syrian casualties from Turkey into NWS, yet no aid convoys could get through.⁵⁵

The significance of Bab al-Hawa. The UNSC-mandated Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey is the primary delivery mechanism for international aid into NWS, as access via the alternative Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai border crossings has been steadily reduced over the course of UNSC resolution votes by Russia since 2017. The significance of UN-mandated border crossings for the NWS humanitarian landscape lies in the sheer mass of aid that is delivered to Syrian NGO implementing partners through coordinated, resource-intensive, logistical procedures each month.⁵⁶ The cross-border mechanism not only allows humanitarian partners to merely notify Syrian authorities of aid delivery without a need for prior vetting, but also shields organizations from potential repercussions of sanctions violations or import charges. It has facilitated the movement of tens of thousands of trucks of aid into NWS and is absolutely crucial to protect the lives of millions in the region.

Nevertheless, alternative crossings have still been used by some organizations throughout the Syrian crisis and remained commercially active during the earthquake, pushing some actors to bypass the UN aid mechanism. In response to the earthquake, Saudi Arabia and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) sent humanitarian convoys through al-Hamam crossing near Jindires,⁵⁷ while the Kurdistan Region of Iraq used Bab al-Salameh to send aid to Afrin.⁵⁸ In recent years, multiple organizations have advocated for the legal basis for aid delivery into NWS without UNSC approval.⁵⁹ The earthquake has emphasized a need to examine these arguments carefully to increase the capacity of crossings that are not held hostage at the UNSC. However, effective, large-scale coordination via these modalities presents new and substantial challenges for a humanitarian sector which has now itself been incapacitated by the earthquake.

UN response draws criticism. As the humanitarian impact of NWS's isolation became clear in subsequent days, criticism grew louder against the political choices and perceived lack of action by the UN. Following a visit to the region, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths admitted on February 12 that the international community had "failed the people in [NWS]" in its earthquake response.⁶⁰ The next day, having been approached by the UN with requests for permission several days earlier, the GoS issued its approval for the UN to expand cross-border operations to Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai for a limited period of three months. The GoS timed the decision strategically,

making the announcement just prior to a UNSC meeting where a proposed resolution was to be discussed, avoiding being seen as pressured by western powers. Furthermore, the extension is due to expire shortly before the next UNSC vote on Resolution 2254 is scheduled, which will determine future cross-border access. This has prompted estimations on the compromises Assad may attempt to force from the international community, such as the continuation of all border crossings in exchange for the lifting of sanctions and support of Syria's reconstruction.⁶¹

Criticism has been levelled at UN coordination agencies that waited to seek GoS approval or the passing of a UNSC resolution for further cross-border operations. This argument was raised at the onset of the earthquake by a coalition of international lawyers and legal experts, attributing the UN's reluctance to an overly cautious interpretation of international law that defers to a UNSC mandate or GoS approval as necessary for cross-border activities.⁶² Populations in NWS have called out the clear humanitarian ramifications of waiting for Assad's approval for urgent aid provision to a region it has spent over a decade suppressing. They have accused the UN of a misguided approach in response to the earthquake and have hung UN flags upside down on scenes of destroyed buildings.⁶³ Allowing Assad to determine such aid access instrumentally provides the regime with a level of sovereignty over territory controlled by opposition forces; while the delay in his response until the period of search-and-rescue had finished illustrates his lack of humanitarian motivation. It also exacerbates preceding concerns that the UN is unwilling to take authoritative positions regarding the humanitarian landscape in Syria without the regime's permission. Although rationalized by the fractured and fast-moving nature of the Syrian conflict in 2014, the UNSC's involvement in humanitarian assistance in Syria had long been argued to be both unprecedented and legally unnecessary under international law.⁶⁴ The earthquake has now demonstrated the need for UN agencies to explore parallel aid delivery mechanisms that provide fewer opportunities for political manipulation from the GoS and its allies.

Problematic cross-line aid advocacy. Soon after the first earthquakes struck, the GoS, Russia, and UN agencies advocated for parties to cooperate for increased cross-line assistance into NWS in the absence of additional border crossings.⁶⁵ World Food Programme (WFP) Director David Beasley even went so far as to attribute responsibility for the lack of aid reaching NWS to the SIG and SSG's rejection of cross-line assistance, claiming they refused to allow access.⁶⁶ While both authorities did refuse shipments from elsewhere in Syria, these statements ignore the fact that cross-line assistance is largely insignificant for humanitarian operations in NWS. It comprises less than 1% of all NWS aid,⁶⁷ only has the capacity to reach thousands but not millions of vulnerable people,⁶⁸ and is not implemented by local partners on the ground.⁶⁹ Crucial non-physical assistance such as salaries and MHPSS programming is also unable to be delivered cross-line via Damascus. This modality does, however, significantly benefit the regime, offering greater control over a crucial lifeline for communities in opposition-held areas that Assad has long bombarded and besieged from humanitarian access. There is little confidence that the GoS would follow through with promises to facilitate cross-line aid to these areas and Syrian officials have explicitly caveated that this must not reach "terrorist armed groups,"⁷⁰ a classification they designate to HTS and other opposition forces. Due to the known limitations to the regime's record of humanitarianism and lack of effective oversight to ensure aid is delivered to intended recipients, increases to cross-line assistance while refusing to open further border crossings can therefore be reasonably interpreted as political posturing in the interest of Damascus, even if unintended.

Any push towards an increased cross-line modality must also take into account widespread accusations and reports of systemic diversion and theft of aid by the GoS. Following the earthquake, there has been prevalent anecdotal evidence of the GoS redirecting aid to loyal communities, with corruption, favoritism, and discrimination reportedly determining the distribution of temporary housing supplies by Aleppo city council.⁷¹ There has also been evidence of the resale of UN-provided earthquake relief items and fuel on the Syrian market in GoS areas.⁷² This provides an additional financial boost for the regime, as some sources report it already taking 51 cents of every dollar of funding from transfers made by UN agencies to implementing partners due to the distorted exchange rate.⁷³

This siphoning of aid has been corroborated by previous research on UN procurement contracts, some of which shows that 47% of procurement funding via Damascus goes to risky or highly risky suppliers, and 23% goes to companies owned by individuals sanctioned by the US, EU or UK.⁷⁴ This would counteract any financial pressure on the regime from sanctions implemented by these major international donors at a time where GoS rehabilitation of its collapsing economy is vital to its ability to control territory.

Dynamics between Syrian authorities impact aid. There has additionally been evidence of the GoS extorting cross-line assistance sent to NWS from other actors in Syria. According to our field sources, one medical and winterization convoy sent by SANES to Tal Rifaat was stopped at the al-Tayha cross-line crossing for several days pending GoS approval after the regime demanded it hand over fuel in order to proceed. Moreover, the leader of the Idlib's HTS explicitly rejected one UN shipment sent through GoS-controlled areas on February 12,⁷⁵ under the principle that Assad could not be trusted to deliver aid and that accepting assistance from the regime would be a significant symbolic concession that HTS are unwilling to make.⁷⁶ The rejection, however, benefitted the image of both parties. Whereas it provided Assad an instrumental opportunity to demonstrate humanitarian willingness, al-Golani was able to promote his revolutionary credentials through non-cooperation with the regime, adding to the boost in reputation he has enjoyed since the earthquake. Within NWS, al-Golani facilitated the entry and protection of foreign rescue teams and UN delegations, held meetings with the White Helmets and other responders, and allocated military construction machinery to a newly-formed emergency response committee. His encouragement of international media teams to cover the crisis in NWS and interview him supported his pleas to the international community to provide relief, augmenting his image of a credible governing actor in the Syrian context.

As noted in iMMAP's recent [Spot Report](#), the Turkish-backed SIG faced pressure against receiving assistance from the Kurdish authority in NES. SIG's President Abdulrahman Mustafa noted that an increased reliance on cross-line aid could be understood as "pressure to force them to accept receiving it from the areas controlled by SDF militia, which cannot be accepted."⁷⁷ However, a few days later and following increased public dissatisfaction with a perceived absence of SIG leadership in the affected districts, the SIG issued a statement welcoming a grassroots "Here Is Syria" assistance campaign organized by tribes and community leaders from Manbij, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor. The Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in North and East Syria, which includes more than 180 local organizations, collected aid items and donations across mosques, schools, and tribal councils, which were transported by volunteers into NWS. To avoid political objections from the SIG, SANES's role was limited to facilitating the convoy's passage through Um al-Juloud and Awn al-Dadat crossings and providing fuel to transport volunteers.

I Developments in NES

Earthquake impact on infrastructure in NES. Since the earthquake, there have been notable irregularities in water supply routes into NES following unexpected action by Turkey to allow water flow into the al-Khabour river. After years of politicized interruption, water reportedly began to flow into al-Khabour on February 11 as Turkish authorities were forced to release water from dams that had been damaged in the earthquake.⁷⁸ As once one of the main water sources for the city of Hasakah, farmers across NES have keenly welcomed the current flow rate 15 cubic meters per second.⁷⁹ The revived river will service around 150 hectares of fertile farming land between its source in Ras al-Ain to its meeting point with the Euphrates at al-Busayrah, relieving a population suffering from acute drought, stifled agriculture, and water shortages amidst a cholera pandemic.

However, the co-chair of SANES' energy office has announced that the Tishreen dam in Aleppo will be out of service for one week due to severely low water levels.⁸⁰ The dam will not produce electricity, but drinking and irrigation water will be unaffected. Although the low water levels have been attributed to Turkey withholding water from its Euphrates River source, field reports indicate that post-earthquake, SANES used all water stored in dams out of fear that Turkey would release water into the river and thus damage downstream dams due to high water pressure. It is therefore assumed

that SANES suspended the Tishreen dam's operation to recollect this lost water.⁸¹ Suspension of the dam's operations longer than the specified period will exacerbate already low water levels in the Euphrates, forcing the surrounding population to rely on unsafe water resources and risking the spread of water-borne diseases.

Anti-ISIS operations. ISIS has conducted a number of operations in Syria since the earthquake. Most significantly, on February 11, ISIS fighters reportedly kidnapped about 75 truffle hunters outside the town of Palmyra, where at least 16 have been executed, including a woman and security officers. An additional attack on February 17, reportedly targeted truffle hunters near to Sukhna, where at least 61 civilians and seven soldiers were killed. This is the deadliest ISIS attack since January last year, when ISIS gunmen stormed a prison in Hasakah.⁸²

However, anti-ISIS operations by SDF and international coalition forces also continued in NES, suggesting a continued security focus by the US. On February 10, a partnered raid resulted in the killing of ISIS official Ibrahim al-Qahatni, who was associated with planning ISIS detention center attacks.⁸³ The SDF also announced on February 16 two security operations against ISIS cells in eastern Deir ez-Zor. The first targeted Mohannad Al-Sari Al-Fadgham, who was reportedly involved in the assassinations of SDF forces.⁸⁴ The second operation comprised a helicopter raid which targeted and killed ISIS leader Hamza al-Homsi, wounding four Coalition servicemembers and one working dog.⁸⁵ Elsewhere, Turkish authorities announced the arrest of a senior ISIS figure in Istanbul. Named "Abu Huzaifah," Istanbul police claim the suspect held multiple senior positions within ISIS, including as a "judge" in Raqqa, Manbij, and Tell Abyad.⁸⁶

Prior to the earthquake, on February 2, the SDF announced the completion of a large-scale security operation, "Retaliation for Raqqa Martyrs," which targeted potential ISIS cells and hideouts in Raqqa, Tabqa, Sarren and respective surrounding areas. The operation was launched upon the request of notables and tribal leaders in response to an ISIS attack on an Asayish headquarters and a prison holding ISIS detainees in the al-Dariyah neighborhood in Raqqa in December. The SDF arrested 127 wanted ISIS suspected affiliates during the operation, in addition to dismantling 4-terrorist cells associated with the headquarters attack and the discovery of old tunnels used by ISIS in Raqqa.⁸⁷

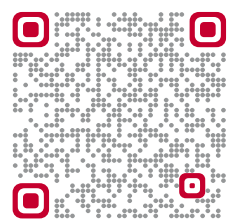
CONCLUSION

The fatal consequences of the disparity in the accessibility of aid between NWS, Turkey, and GoS-controlled areas during the earthquakes has illuminated deep flaws in the international humanitarian logic for Syria. The international community has primarily looked to deal with the Syrian conflict and Assad regime through a lens of humanitarian aid. While the purpose of humanitarian assistance is to relieve suffering of individuals, longstanding political positions based upon previous calculations and compromises have superseded humanitarian imperatives in international decision-making during the earthquake crisis. The clear politicization of both cross-border and cross-line aid mechanisms during the earthquakes by the GoS, its allies, Turkey, and different opposition administrations has shown how the current status quo in Syria is untenable as a strategy to manage the resultant humanitarian crisis from both the conflict and this natural disaster. As neighboring and regional countries still deal with the impact of the crisis in the form of refugee flows and a proliferating drugs trade, a re-evaluation of Syrian humanitarian strategy is essential.

However, the number of countries ready and willing to accelerate normalization with the Assad regime in the aftermath of the earthquake demonstrates a diplomatic momentum that may drive key regional stakeholders to accept further compromises in order to move on from the intractable Syrian conflict. The earthquake provides a conveniently acceptable opportunity and safety in numbers for countries to normalize with the GoS on the global stage, particularly when fierce opponents such as the US are waiving sanctions and delivering humanitarian assistance. Assad is thereby using the earthquake as part of his strategy to rehabilitate his international position. He has capitalized on the increased media exposure of regime officials to dominate aid modalities as an expression of total territorial sovereignty over Syria and has framed sanctions as counterproductive to humanitarian interference by international actors. His recent diplomacy demonstrates the continued relevance of GoS soft power on the international stage and has underscored the length of the journey it would now take for any substantial power transition.

The earthquake must, therefore, act as inflection point in international actors' approach to humanitarian aid in Syria, with increased efforts to derive a consistent strategy incorporating effective sanctions, diligent oversight, and dynamic aid modalities. Next month, the EU Commission will convene a Donors Conference on March 16 to mobilize funds from the international community in support for the people affected by the earthquake. In consideration of the likely continuation of the GoS to push for increased reliance on cross-line assistance, solid guardrails will need to be established to prevent siphoning from the millions of dollars set to be funneled into a disaster zone. Syria is the biggest recipient of UN-funded aid programs;⁸⁸ but new conversations around the allocation of funds towards necessary earthquake and inevitably post-conflict reconstruction to achieve humanitarian goals will open new fronts for political manipulation by the GoS and its allies. Although the long-term stance of the US, EU, and UK is that there will be no reconstruction efforts until there is movement towards a just political transition, it is difficult to see how they will persist with temporary shelter solutions in the face of such devastation.

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