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Syria

A new crisis on top of a never-ending tragedy

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The 6 February 2023 earthquake in Syria killed at least 6,200 people and injured nearly 15,000, mostly in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime. It mainly affected the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia (and to a lesser extent Hama).

At least 8.8 million people were affected by the earthquake. The UN appealed for \$397 million to provide emergency assistance to around 5 million Syrians over a three-month period.

More than 30 states had delivered humanitarian aid to regime-controlled areas, with an estimated total volume of several thousand tons as of 25 February. In comparison, international humanitarian assistance to north-western Syria, in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime, was very limited and slow, even though these were the most affected areas. The first UN aid convoy only entered on 9 February, the fourth day after the earthquakes, through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. By 25 February, the total number of UN trucks had reached only 385, well below the average number of trucks entering the northwest before the earthquake, estimated at around 600 per month in 2022.

Controlling the organisation and distribution of humanitarian aid

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Syrian regime attempted to reassert the centrality of its power by trying to control, or at least influence, the organization and distribution of humanitarian aid throughout the country. In north-western Syria, outside the control of the Syrian regime, this policy was reflected in Damascus's belated approval, more than a week after the earthquake, of the reopening of two border crossings controlled by the Turkish-backed Syrian interim government (Bab al-Salameh and al-Rai), through which the UN is allowed to deliver cross-border aid for three months.

The Damascus authorities also blocked an aid convoy of 100 trucks carrying fuel and a medical team from the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES) to the Syrian Democratic Forces-held areas of Aleppo (Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh) for several days. The Syrian regime only accepted its delivery after taking half of the aid portion. In regime-controlled areas, the Damascus authorities have sought to control the management of humanitarian aid through government institutions and regime networks, preventing any popular and independent initiative at the local level.

Breaking out of political isolation

The Syrian regime also tried to work against its political isolation at the regional and international level. Syrian officials and their allies launched a new campaign calling for the lifting of Western sanctions, arguing that they had severely hampered emergency response and humanitarian relief operations. Most importantly, Damascus is instrumentalizing this new tragedy in a continued attempt to advance the process of normalization with regional and international actors through calls for enhanced political and economic relations.

Once again, the United Arab Emirates is the main actor in pursuing these efforts, in a continued attempt to harmonize relations between Arab states and Syria. This is also part of a broader policy to reinforce a form of authoritarian

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stability in the region, which they share with other influential countries such as Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia, although differences exist on the means to achieve such a goal. However, the success of the normalisations of the Syrian regime is still limited, with only a few states in the region having consolidated their relations with Damascus and generally limited to collaboration in the humanitarian field.

While the priority today is to maximize the emergency humanitarian response for the affected populations in Syria, particularly in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime, these areas lack international support. These areas lack extensive international support, infrastructure and equipment. Practical solutions must be found to frame and organize a potential reconstruction process based on the interests of the local populations, not on strengthening the Syrian regime and achieving its objectives. Similarly, there is still a need to rebuild democratic and progressive networks that seek to unite and benefit the Syrian working classes at home as well as the millions of refugees.

3 March 2023

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Solidarités](#).

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