



# SPOTLIGHT

SYRIA

March 2023

## Shattered ground and shattered politics

**A devastating earthquake of 7.8 magnitude struck northern Syria on February 6<sup>th</sup>. While thousands have lost their lives, political opportunism reigned supreme.**

*Michael Bauer and Anne Bauer*

The repercussions of the earthquake that hit Syria and Türkiye one and a half months ago are far from over. While the worst seismic aftershocks have subsided, the humanitarian as well as political ramifications are ongoing and manifold. Foreign states have rushed to send aid, however the complex Syrian environment with its war-torn political structures and restricted territorial access has proven detrimental to the humanitarian response. In addition, the Assad regime has used the disaster to make political gains, most notably by moving closer towards the Arab fold from which it has been expelled more than a decade ago.

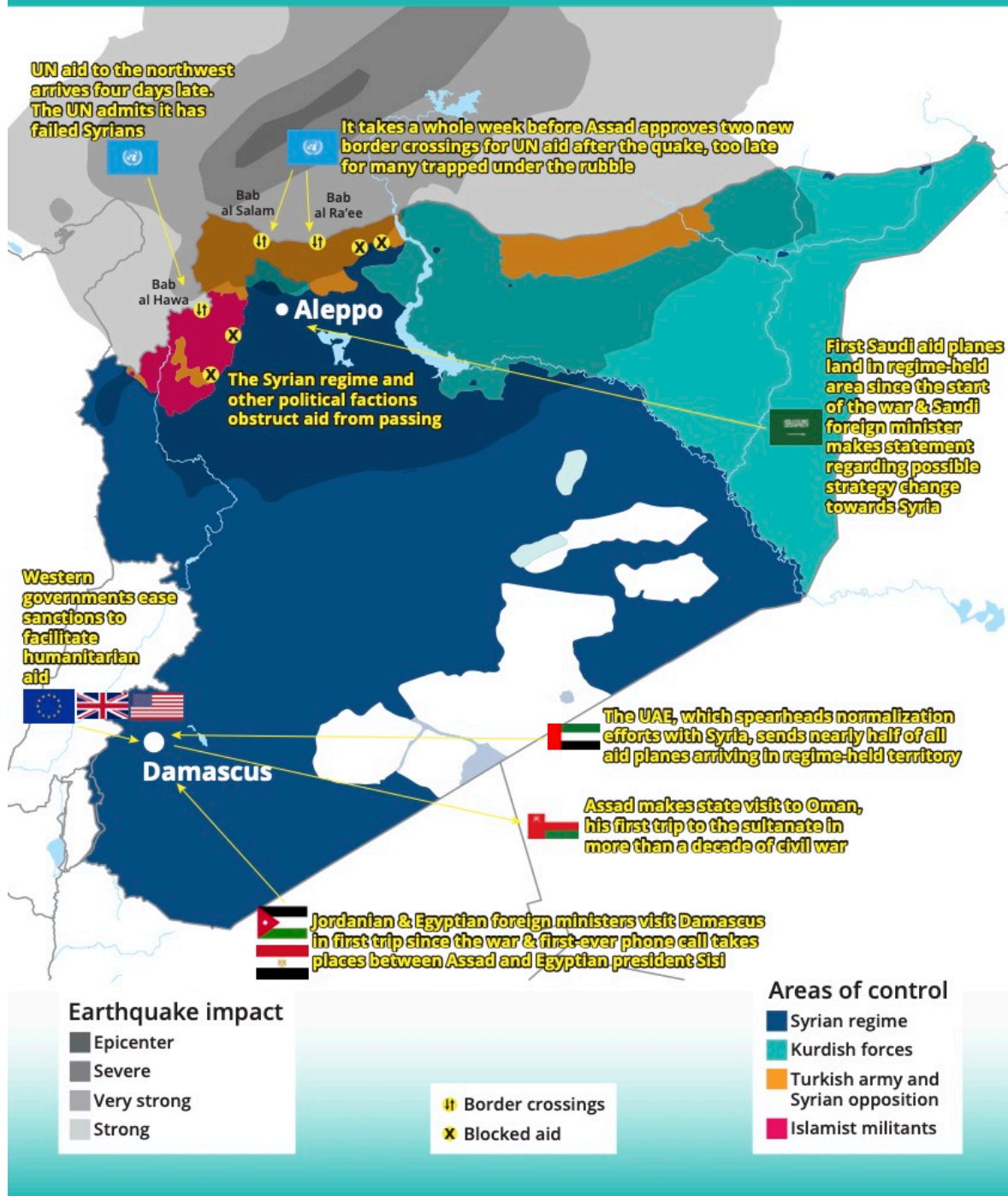
### Fragmented Syrian politics and hampered aid delivery

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, two powerful twin quakes of 7.8 and 7.6 magnitude struck southern Türkiye and northern Syria, killing more than 51,000 people and injuring and displacing hundreds of thousands in both countries. While the earthquake's epicenter was located in south-central Türkiye, where the death toll and devastation subsequently were highest, large-scale destruction was also caused in the Syrian provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia. Around 6,000 people died and more than 105,000 households were displaced, while millions are left in dire need of humanitarian assistance across Syria.<sup>1</sup> Grasping the extent of the destruction across the country, governments and international organizations all over the globe have sent aid to Syria, yet the complex Syrian environment once again brought to the surface the longstanding political fault lines and political opportunism that proved in many cases obstructive to the humanitarian cause. While the regime in Damascus holds sway over most of the country's territory, especially Syria's northern provinces are under split control of different, often warring opposition factions and their foreign backers. The northwest is divided between territory de facto controlled by Türkiye and allied Syrian opposition groups as well as the Islamist rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) that is listed as terrorist organization by the UN, U.S. and others. Syria's northeast is largely controlled by U.S.-backed Kurdish-led groups. The split realm of influence along regime-opposition as well as intra-opposition lines, has significantly complicated emergency relief and aid delivery in northern Syria. This is despite the fact that the earthquake could not have hit a more vulnerable population, particularly when it comes to the opposition-held northwest. More than 4.5 million civilians – nearly 3 million of them internally displaced – live in an area of less than 4% of the Syrian territory. Even before the earthquake, large parts of infrastructure lay destroyed and 90% of the population had been dependent on humanitarian aid, all the while recurring clashes between opposition and government forces in and around rebel-held territory as well as airstrikes and bombardment continued.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See UN OCHA, [Syrian Arab Republic: Earthquakes - Syria Situational Updates](#), March 1, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See UN OCHA, [North-West Syria Situational Report](#), March 15 2023.

# NOVEL POLITICAL EVENTS IN SYRIA AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE



Disclaimer: This map does not aim to be comprehensive. It rather aims to give an overview of selected novel events in Syria since the earthquake which are discussed further in the report. For more detailed information, please refer to the text.

Against this backdrop, in the wake of the earthquake, the UN called for an immediate ceasefire, yet, according to local sources, clashes and shelling of Syria's quake-hit northwest by the regime forces resumed days after the natural disaster.<sup>3</sup> The far-reaching distrust and animosity between all sides was moreover illustrated when the Islamist rebel organization HTS was reported to have blocked a UN aid convoy from Damascus. In addition, some 100 trucks carrying basic aid from the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES), which governs Syria's Kurdish-majority northeast, was first denied entry by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) on its way to Afrin, and was then held up by the Syrian regime when the aid was re-routed to a Kurdish-majority area in Aleppo.<sup>4</sup> When the regime was reportedly demanding the hand-over of the cargo, this was refused out of concern that it would confiscate the load. As a result, the rest ended up parked at an undisclosed location until the Syrian government would drop its demands.<sup>5</sup> This example is indicative of how political motives frequently prevail over the humanitarian imperative in Syria. "All of the players, be it the regime or the factional powers - are taking advantage. They have their own political motives, so by rejecting aid they want to avoid to be perceived as serving the others' political agenda," explains Bassel Kaghadou, independent Syrian expert on aid effectiveness and peace building consultant.<sup>6</sup>

Conflicting political agendas furthermore overshadow the humanitarian response when it comes to the issue of cross-border versus cross-line aid. Since 2020, UN-authorized humanitarian aid from Türkiye into rebel-held northwest Syria has been delivered through only one border crossing, Bab al-Hawa, after Russia and China used their UN Security Council veto power to stop the renewal of other crossing points. Instead, Assad and his allies demanded all aid to be re-routed through a cross-line mechanism, i.e. delivered from government-held into rebel-held areas. This familiar mantra was reiterated by the regime in the aftermath of the earthquake. Humanitarian groups, on the other hand, made it clear that the opening of additional cross-border points from Türkiye was imperative given the large scale of destruction in northwest Syria. This was especially reinforced by the fact that while international aid quickly poured into Türkiye, it took four days before a single UN convoy with emergency relief aid crossed into Idlib province, later prompting the UN's humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths to admit in a tweet, which since then has been shared widely: "We have so far failed the people of north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived."<sup>7</sup>

Following a meeting between Griffiths and Assad, one week after the earthquake the latter eventually approved the opening of two additional crossings, Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Raee, for an initial period of three months. However, since then a discussion has been enflamed regarding whether the UN could have applied a broader interpretation of international law when it comes to the cross-border mechanism. While the UN disputes that it could have acted differently, some legal experts and human rights lawyers claim that it did not have to wait for permission from the Syrian regime or the Security Council to deliver aid to affected areas in northwest Syria. It remains to be seen if and how this discussion will contribute to improving current aid mechanisms into Syria. What is clear however, as Natasha Hall, Middle East Program senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, notes: "The areas in the northwest require a mechanism for life-saving humanitarian aid that is more reliable than waiting for the approval of warring parties that have consistently cut off these areas throughout the conflict and that will remain particularly problematic for the foreseeable future."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See UN Human Rights, [Twitter Post](#), February 10, 2023 & National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, [Syrian Interim Government Report: Assad Regime Continues Attacks on Northwestern Syria Despite Earthquake](#), March 6, 2023 &

Perry and Richardson, Reuters, [Syrian government forces, rebels clash in quake-hit region-report](#), February 17, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See Human Rights Watch, [Northwest Syria: Aid Delays Deadly for Quake Survivors](#), February 15, 2023

<sup>5</sup> See Zaman, Al-Monitor, [Did US pressure force Turkey to let Syrian-Kurdish earthquake aid into rebel-held northwest?](#), February 13, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Bassel Kaghadou, Syrian expert peace building, February 27, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Griffiths, [Twitter Post](#), February 12, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Natasha Hall, Senior Fellow at CSIS, March 8, 2023.

In regards to Assad's decision to eventually open additional crossing points - though much too late for many that were trapped under the rubble and thus paid with their lives - the underlying motives behind the apparent goodwill gesture are the subject of speculations. Some talk about a potential closed-door-deal at the behest of the UAE;<sup>9</sup> others suspect that Assad aimed to improve his diplomatic standing by escaping criticism at the time and capitalize further on the gained leverage.<sup>10</sup> "What Assad was doing is putting himself back in the driver's seat when it comes to authorizing the UN's access to the country. Now Assad is the one who decided to approve the use of these cross-borders, which gives him renewed legitimacy and a stronger diplomatic position,"<sup>11</sup> says Dr. Karam Shaar, political economist and non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute. And Bassel Kaghadou mentions: "The earthquake has highlighted that either way it is a huge challenge for the international community how to deal with these types of actors. The regime you cannot trust, the de-facto authorities you cannot trust, so neither cross-border nor cross-line you have a trustworthy party to work with."<sup>12</sup>

### **"Earthquake diplomacy" under the humanitarian pretext**

While being a political pariah for more than a decade, the earthquake has provided Assad with an opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties and open up political channels, especially so with Arab states. For example, Assad went on an official state visit to Oman, the first trip to the sultanate since the start of the civil war, while Jordan's and Egypt's foreign ministers paid a visit to Damascus and a phone call took place between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Bashar Al-Assad, the first-ever official exchange between the two leaders.<sup>13</sup> "The Assad regime managed to play the situation to its favor on multiple fronts, but most importantly in terms of diplomatic recognition, which came with the aid that was sent bilaterally and the increased and improved communication with the UN," notes Karam Shaar.<sup>14</sup> These diplomatic advancements come at a convenient time for Assad, amongst others due to the fact that its long-term main benefactors, Iran and Russia, are caught up in domestic upheaval and a full-fledged war respectively. While Tehran was quick to send aid planes to regime-held territory, war-entangled Moscow did not send any additional resources to Damascus but claimed that 300 of its troops already stationed in Syria helped to respond to the emergency.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the flow and direction of foreign aid into regime versus rebel-held territory as well as accompanying diplomatic gestures and statements are largely indicative of the stance donor countries take towards Assad. To name a few significant examples, nearly half of all aid planes that landed on regime-held airports after the earthquake came from the UAE, which has spearheaded efforts of regional normalization with Syria throughout the past few years.<sup>16</sup> Weeks after the earthquake, Assad was then invited to Abu Dhabi, where the call for Syria's return to the Arab League as well as extensive humanitarian and economic aid was reiterated.<sup>17</sup> Also Jordan, which sent several planes and aid convoys to Damascus, was seen to reengage with Assad in 2021, albeit with limited success. Moreover, one might say that Assad's trip to Oman, which also sent aid to Damascus, did not come as a huge surprise either; the sultanate was the only state of the Gulf Cooperation Council to maintain diplomatic relations with Damascus throughout the Syrian war and Muscat has since then supported Syria's return to the Arab League. On the other hand, well-known backers of the Syrian opposition such as Kuwait and Qatar, the latter of which has reaffirmed its steadfast position against normalization after the earthquake, provided assistance only to opposition-held areas.<sup>18</sup> Egypt and Saudi Arabia took a middle way by supplying both

<sup>9</sup> See Syria Today in 'The Syrian Observer', [Assad Wants to Escape Isolation After Earthquake](#) February 16, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> See Bassam et al. , Reuters, [Exclusive: Assad approved Syria quake aid with a UAE nudge, sources say](#), February 23, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Dr. Karam Shaar, Non-Resident Scholar at MEI, March 4, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Bassel Kaghadou, Syrian expert on peace building, February 27, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> See Aljazeera, [Jordan's foreign minister visits Syria in first trip since war](#), February 15, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Dr. Karam Shaar, Non-Resident Scholar at MEI, March 4, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> See Reuters, [Russia says more than 300 troops helping Syria recover from earthquake](#), February 14, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> See Aljazeera, [Syria's Assad thanks 'Arab brothers' as quakes stir aid diplomacy](#), February 17, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> See Aljazeera, [Syria's Assad in UAE for second post-quake Gulf visit](#), March 19, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> See Cahn and Yavorsky, The Washington Institute, [Disaster Dynamics: Assessing Middle East Response to the Turkey-Syria Earthquake and Other Destructive Events](#), March 3, 2023.



sides. While the largest part of Saudi aid went to opposition-held areas, perhaps the most novel development included aid planes from the kingdom that landed in regime-held territory and a statement of the Saudi foreign minister who hinted towards a possible diplomatic strategy change towards Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, it is doubtful, as of now, that Assad's "earthquake diplomacy" will bring about a wider diplomatic breakthrough. According to Jihad Yazigi, Syrian analyst and editor-in-chief of *The Syria Report* "it looks like each of those Arab countries has slightly upped the level of engagement, but many of them could have done a lot more if they were pushing towards full normalization."<sup>20</sup> And Karam Shaar notes: "This is not the first time we've seen a push towards normalization but so far nothing really has happened because the brakes were being pushed by the U.S. above all. I think this time is not different. If something was to happen, the signs should have been stronger right after the earthquake."<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite the fact that there has not been a 180-degree turn-around by any state on their position towards the Syrian regime, Natasha Hall states that the developments give a reason for concern: "The sheer fact that relations are now more public and obvious is actually novel in and of itself. Because this is a regime that has been isolated aside from its main benefactors and now it is publicly coming back into the fold. For a regime that has committed mass atrocities of the likes that we have not seen in our generation over the course of 12 years that's very significant."<sup>22</sup>

### **Walking the tight rope between sanctions and humanitarian aid**

After the 2011 uprising, the U.S., EU and several other states sanctioned the Assad regime on an unprecedented scale for gross human rights violations against its own population. In the aftermath of the earthquake, just as many times before, Assad seized the opportunity to demand the unconditional lifting of sanctions against Syria, which it claimed "are the major obstacle in response to earthquake repercussions".<sup>23</sup> In that sense, the earthquake struck right at the core of the prolonged debate regarding the impact of sanctions on the Syrian population and humanitarian sector. On the one hand, it should be stressed that humanitarian aid has been exempted from sanctions already before the earthquake, and that thus sanctions per se are not an obstacle to humanitarian relief efforts. On the other hand, however, over-compliant behavior of banks and insurances at times have impacted the work of NGOs.<sup>24</sup>

To forestall such problems at a time when swift emergency relief is crucial, the U.S., EU, UK and also Switzerland announced a six-months amendment to their sanction policies in relation to earthquake relief efforts. While the change has often been cited as "sanctions exemption", it is more accurately described as a further alleviation of the humanitarian exemption policy that had already been in place. In essence, it means that for the next six months institutions can send aid without having to obtain prior approval for sanction exemptions.<sup>25</sup> While the policy amendment may therefore help to facilitate and speed up aid delivery, it is doubtful that the positive impact will be of large scale, one reason being that the biggest aid institution, such as all UN agencies, did never have to abide by unilateral sanctions in the first place. Karam Shaar furthermore points out that "the impact will be limited because the main impediment to the humanitarian response was the thuggery of the regime – it wasn't sanctions." He continues: "Easing those sanctions is a good PR step. It is basically telling the regime and its backers: look, you're blaming sanctions, right? Here you go, this is a freeze on sanctions, let's see how that's going to make the response to the humanitarian disaster better."<sup>26</sup> And Jihad Yazigi notes: "The temporary waiver

<sup>19</sup> See Gulf News, [Saudi foreign minister: Syria could return to Arab League, but not yet](#), March 8, 2023. By the time of completion of this report, following the landmark agreement to restore Saudi-Iranian ties, news regarding the re-opening of the Saudi embassy in Damascus emerged.

<sup>20</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Jihad Yazigi, Editor-in-Chief of The Syria Report, February 22, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Dr. Karam Shaar, Non-Resident Scholar at MEI, March 4, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Natasha Hall, Senior Fellow at CSIS, March 8, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> See Syrian Arab News Agency, [Western sanctions on Syria are the major obstacle in response to earthquake repercussions](#), February 7, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> See The Syria Report, [Amid Disinformation Campaign, Western Sanctions Accused of Impeding Aid](#), February 14, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> See Marsi, Aljazeera, [US exempts Syrian earthquake aid from sanctions](#), February 10, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Dr. Karam Shaar, Non-Resident Scholar at MEI, March 4, 2023.

of the Americans and Europeans rids the regime of someone to blame,” says Jihad Yazigi.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the Syrian regime has a proven track record of employing numerous tactics of siphoning and weaponizing aid such as manipulating the exchange rate for aid transfers, distributing aid exclusively to loyalist areas or channeling in members of its own inner circles to work in international aid agencies and organizations. This became once again apparent after the earthquake rekindled the debate about the ways by which the UN and other humanitarian organizations are coerced into compromises to benefit the Syrian leader and his cronies, as well as raising criticism regarding the UN’s tangled relations with the regime after exposing that a daughter of Syria’s sanctioned spy chief was hired to work in one of the UN’s Damascus-based offices.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the existing complications, the earthquake has created new difficulties to the enduring dilemma of sanctions and humanitarian responsibilities. The United Nations has estimated the earthquake recovery costs in Syria at \$14.8 billion.<sup>29</sup> At an EU-led donors’ conference in Brussels, a total of €7 billion in quake-aid were pledged for Syria and Turkey. In the case of Syria, it was reiterated, however, that aid will go exclusively towards humanitarian assistance and so-called early recovery measures (which are exempted from sanctions) and not towards full-fledged reconstruction.<sup>30</sup> In the upcoming months, if not years, monitoring where and how earthquake aid will be spent will hence pose a considerable challenge; in specific the differentiation between the devastation that has been caused by the earthquake versus the war. Amidst the chaotic situation after the disaster, well-founded fears exists that the Syrian regime would exploit the situation by repurposing funds for its ongoing urban reconstruction plans, for example by demolishing buildings in areas that were not affected by the earthquake.<sup>31</sup> It will remain up to the donor countries, international institutions and implementing aid agencies to find appropriate solutions for control mechanisms as well as ‘smart sanctions’ to minimize the further politization and weaponization of aid.

## Conclusion

The political developments that took place since the devastating earthquake hit northern Syria one and a half months ago serve as a sad example par excellence how political motives prevail over humanitarian ones. On multiple occasions, the obstruction and theft of life-saving aid by the Assad regime as well as various Syrian warring factions has put the spotlight on the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict and highlighted the lack of trust and unwillingness to compromise political interests even in the face of an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. In this context, the Syrian regime has certainly profited the most by instrumentalizing the disaster for self-serving political gains. Moreover, those Arab states on a course towards normalizing ties with Damascus have been provided with a humanitarian pretext to advance their efforts. Against this background, also the flow and direction of aid as well as respective diplomatic gestures appear to be indicative of the various degrees of states’ benevolence - or lack thereof - towards the Syrian regime. While thus far no Arab government has changed its fundamental stance, the humanitarian emergency has served as a fig leaf that allows leaders to talk with unprecedented ease about rapprochement and normalization. The fact that more and more states seem increasingly comfortable with this reality – may it be out of self-serving political motives, a fatigue with the prolonged conflict or the growing notion that Assad is here to stay - may indeed have consequences for any future negotiations with Damascus and gives less and less leeway to those states that would like to elicit concessions on crucial issues, let alone hold the regime accountable for committed war crimes and gross violations of human rights.

<sup>27</sup> The interview was conducted by KAS with Jihad Yazigi, Editor-in-Chief of The Syria Report, February 22, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See Financial Times, [Spy chief's daughter highlights UN's tangled relations with Syrian regime](#), March 8, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> See United Nations Syrian Arab Republic, [International Donors' Conference "Together for the people in Türkiye and Syria"](#), The UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, MR. El-Mostafa BENLAMILIH, March 20, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> See European Commission, [Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the International Donors' Conference 'Together for the people in Türkiye and Syria'](#), March 20, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> See al-Issa and Mourad, Enab Baladi, [Does the Syrian earthquake cover Assad's "urban" plans?](#), March 7, 2023.

For Assad, the earthquake has furthermore presented an opportunity to point fingers at Western governments, blaming their insistence on cross-border aid and adherence to sanctions for the impeded humanitarian response after the earthquake. While such well-known and often-employed mantras are used to distract from the regime's own inability and unwillingness to respond appropriately to humanitarian emergencies, the U.S., EU and others have reacted by further alleviating sanctions on humanitarian aid - perhaps more so to escape the political blame game than out of a firm belief that such amendments could stem the tide of misconduct and political opportunism on the side of the regime and other parties. Assad on his part has conceded to open additional border crossing points for aid into rebel-held territories but it remains to be seen whether such gestures will endure for the good of the Syrian population or whether they are part of the wider political power game in which the distribution, direction and access to humanitarian aid is weaponized. If anything, a natural disaster such as the one seen, which does not stop at man-made borders and does not spare one group over another according to their political, religious or ethnic affiliation, should have above all prompted the Syrian regime, as the main power holder, to adopt a behavioral change, show goodwill and make concessions for the greater humanitarian cause. Instead, the earthquake has served as a brute reminder that illustrates once more the protracted nature of the Syrian crisis, while, as of now, doing little to shake the bigger political establishment that perpetuates it.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

Michael Bauer  
Head of Office Lebanon  
European and International Cooperation  
[Michael.bauer@kas.de](mailto:Michael.bauer@kas.de)  
[www.kas.de/en/web/libanon](http://www.kas.de/en/web/libanon)



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