



## Update Syria: the impact of earthquakes in a conflict zone

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### *Summary report*

Since 2011, just over 12 years, Syria has been battered by conflict. Peaceful protests and a revolution turned into violent conflict and civil war, displacing about 13 million people and leaving 70% of the Syrian population in need of humanitarian assistance. On February 6th, several large-scale earthquakes hit southern Turkey and Northwest Syria, and to a lesser extent rest of Syria. These earthquakes had a particularly severe impact on the 4.5 million people living in northwest Syria, 4.1 million of whom were already dependent on humanitarian assistance due to economic hardship, a cholera outbreak and harsh winter conditions. In other words, these earthquakes caused a very acute crisis on top of an already very severe protracted humanitarian crisis in northern Syria.

To better comprehend the complex context of working in conflict-torn Syria, KUNO organised an online session on the situation in Syria with humanitarian professionals who have just visited different parts of Syria.

#### **Speakers:**

- **Ester van den Berg**, program officer Middle East, and **Robbert van den Berg**, Head of Emergency Programme Turkey/Syria - Stichting Vluchteling – recently visited Idlib, Jinderis and Afrin.
- **Dirk-Jan Jalvingh**, Policy Advisor Conflict and Humanitarian Response Oxfam Novib – recently visited Aleppo.
- **Mohammad Kanfash**, researcher at Utrecht University's School of Law and Centre for Conflict Studies, Founder of Damaan Humanitarian Organisation.
- **Kees-Jan Hooglander**, Acting Country Director ZOA Syria – based in Syria

#### **Ester van den Berg and Robbert van den Berg, Stichting Vluchteling (SV)**

Under the umbrella of one of Stichting Vluchteling's partner organisations, Ester and Robbert visited Northwest Syria in March. Prior to the revolution, these areas were mainly focused on agricultural activities. Following the commencement of the revolution, the majority of internally displaced people (IDP) moved to these areas, resulting in 75% of the population being an IDP today. Of the 4.5 million people living in this region, currently 90% is in need of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian access to these areas has always been complicated, since aid relied on a few border crossings, and more recently only one border crossing Bab al-Hawa. Due to the earthquakes this border crossing was temporarily closed making it impossible for large equipment to enter these areas. Currently two additional border crossings were reopened for post-earthquake aid.

On the first day of their visit, Ester and Robert travelled to Jinderis, a city in the Turkish-controlled territory of northwest Syria. To their dismay, this city was almost completely destroyed by the earthquakes and it seemed that very few aid organisations were present. A local council member of the city confirmed there were no international aid organisations in the area (apart from People In Need and the White Helmets), and the people felt forgotten and abandoned by the international community. This is also the most noticeable contrast with Turkey, where there is a lot of activity regarding clearing rubble, repairing roads and providing shelter and basic needs to victims, whilst Turkey has more

resources and greater access to international supports. On the second day, they visited the Dana'a camps, which consist of kilometres of tents in the Idlib governorate area. While the earthquake did not significantly damage these camps, the living conditions are far from ideal. People already live in tents for years, have been displaced multiple times, are very dependent on the little aid which comes in, and there is limited access to education or health care.

### **Dirk-Jan Jalvingh, Oxfam Novib**

The purpose of Dirk-Jan's visit to Aleppo with Oxfam's director Michael Servaes, was to gain a better understanding of the complex situation and how to provide aid in this situation. He saw that the need for rehabilitation and reconstruction is immense. Many buildings had already been damaged by the conflict, thus the earthquake was the last push that made these buildings totally unlivable. Besides, there is widespread fear of aftershocks, which keeps people from returning to their homes, if at all possible.

One dilemma for the earthquake response that Dirk-Jan raised is the difficulty in distinguishing between damage caused by the conflict and damage caused by the earthquakes. In Syria, the international community only allows for the provision of humanitarian aid and not to work on rehabilitation or reconstruction. Whilst after the earthquake, people would like to rebuild their houses, instead of receiving a tent to live in. And therefore reconstruction efforts would actually better support the Syrian communities to rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, many people currently stay in collective shelters, which are often accommodated in schools. There is a lot of uncertainty on how long they can stay there and where they should go next. A last challenge from an ethical perspective, concerning communications towards the Dutch audience: it is complicated to strike a balance between the psychological needs of those affected by the earthquakes and asking those people to share their stories with the Dutch audience/donor. Making people relive their trauma and causing further harm should be avoided at all costs.

### **Mohammad Kanfash, University of Utrecht & Damaan**

Mohammad expressed his appreciation for the very much needed support which Syria is receiving following the earthquakes. However, currently the Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria 2023 is only covered for 6 percent: this is alarming.

Another issue Mohammad stressed are geopolitical developments that require attention, also from the humanitarian community. First of all, the Syrian government of Assad is welcomed back in regions that had grown rather critical of the government. Furthermore, after the earthquake Syria and Turkey the dialogue between the Turkish and Syrian governments intensified. Moreover, the cross border resolution that keeps the Bab al-Hawa border crossing open for the delivery of aid into North-west Syria will expire July 2023, as well as the end of the three-month period of the two extra border crossings that were opened after the earthquakes, is approaching fast.

The Turkish elections are coming up in May 2023. The potential change of government that might follow can have a big impact on the humanitarian situation. Many of the current contingency plans for Syria are based on the approach Erdogan's government had pursued. Furthermore, a new administration in Turkey might decide to shift towards the West, which would have a significant effect on the cross border resolution and the humanitarian aid that will be let into Syria, given the geopolitical relations between the West and Russia and Syria.

Finally, another important development is the temporary relaxation of EU sanctions against Syria after the earthquakes. This change in sanctions is a sign / indirect admission that they do impact humanitarian aid, even though said otherwise before. Mohammad stressed that the humanitarian community should discuss how to capitalise on these geopolitical developments and what role

advocacy should have e.g. in the new relaxation of the sanctions and how to capitalize on the UNSC resolution 2664 and EU's adaptation of this resolutions into its existing regulations / acts. In the end it is about rethinking the current strategy to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, also considering the geopolitical developments.

### **Kees-Jan Hooglander, ZOA**

Kees-Jan Hooglander, currently in Aleppo, also recognises what Dirk-Jan saw: it is not at all black and white what damage has been done by the earthquake and what by the conflict; it differs house per house. It took ZOA almost 5 years to get registered in Syria, but it is now active in the government-controlled areas of Syria. While ZOA has a good cooperation with the government, working in these areas is not easy. If you want to work there you either have to work through SARC or The Syria Trust for Development. At a later stage it is possible to discuss with a ministry the importance of more direct contact with beneficiaries.

He also highlighted a few key challenges, one of which being the many sanctions and delays. To be able to provide cash support, a lot of approvals are needed which causes many delays. Therefore, the DRA response to the earthquakes in Syria still only consists of in-kind distributions, while they wait for the approvals to the cash support. Another challenge he identified is the change in the Syrian exchange rate. This results in a huge impact on the economy and the black market, driving up the prices of food and fuel. Looking forward, the recovery will be difficult due to the instability regarding funding and the collaboration with the government.

### **Priorities for April and May 2023**

At the end of the update on North Syria, the speakers were asked about their priorities for the coming weeks. Mohammad expressed that in order to provide meaningful help in a longer term period, issues such as reconstruction and rehabilitation should also be high on the agenda. Dirk-Jan is currently very much concerned with the outbreak of cholera and making sure Syria stays on the international agenda, also concerning parts of the country which are not affected by the earthquake. For Ester the two most important things for the coming weeks are to develop a longer term approach to the major humanitarian crisis in Syria and to prioritise advocacy to keep Syria's humanitarian situation on the international agenda. Furthermore, Robbert's priorities will be to establish Stichting Vluchteling's presence in Turkey, develop a two-year strategy and implementation plan and identify new local partners. Finally, Kees-Jan hopes to be able to move forward quickly with cash distributions and also look at a longer term approach to the earthquake response in Syria.