

The catastrophic earthquakes that have devastated Turkey and Syria last month have brought Syria back to the headlines and to the attention of policy makers, which have been dominated by the war in Ukraine. But this does not mean any progress towards the end of the civil war. About 6,000 people were reportedly killed and more than 12,000 injured in earthquake areas across Syria. At least 8.8 million people have been affected. Most of these people are expected to need at least one form of humanitarian assistance. This disaster comes after nearly 12 years of conflict in the country with more than 15 million people assessed by OCHA to require humanitarian assistance in 2023. To date, the Syria earthquake Flash Appeal received \$171 million or 43 percent of the US\$397.6 million funding requirement, according to the UN. The earthquake crisis has further stretched the health system which has been significantly affected with at least 55 health facilities in northwest Syria reportedly partially or fully damaged. This comes when Syrian communities are simultaneously hit with an on-going cholera outbreak. As of 24 February, more than 50,000 suspected cholera cases, and 21 associated deaths have been reported in northwest Syria, the majority in Harim and Idlib. Forty four percent of suspected cases are children aged four years old or younger. Assistance delivery took a long time and the regime demonstrated once again the poor quality of its governance system. Moreover, civil society organizations (which were for a long time the only players to deliver needed assistance) have accused the regime of stealing 90% of the aid provided by governments and international institutions. Damascus is also accused to continue to manufacture and sell Captagon drugs.

Meanwhile, despite of the efforts by the UNSE and his team (including visits to Damascus), no significant progress in the political process under UNSC 2254, since the briefing to the UNSC last December. Russia is playing a role of troublemaker and its request to move the meetings of the Constitutional Committee away from Geneva is delaying planning and organization. The political process is more than the constitutional committee. The civil society group and the Women Advisory Board are essential components of the inter-Syrian exchanges. Both are very constructive. And on top of these, confidence-building moves as well as “steps for steps” approach are indispensable to restore trust among the parties. The status quo is the worst possible option. Without movement in these areas there is no way to convince refugees that it is safe to return, including Syrian business people who have settled in neighboring countries, some of which do not welcome them anymore.

Violence could return, even if the situation on the ground has been calmer besides the usual attacks by the Israeli air force against Iranian assets in Syria. Some sources mention signs of revival of IS.

In the meantime, several Arab countries are showing an inclination, if not more, to normalize relations with Damascus, to compensate for the Arab absence in the field currently occupied only by non-Arab players. For some it is also probably to be in good position when reconstruction will start. Egypt's foreign minister met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in the first visits to Syria and Turkey by a top Egyptian diplomat in a decade. Senior Arab lawmakers were in Syria early March for talks with President Bashar Assad on bringing his country back into the fold of the Arab world. The visit followed a mini summit in Baghdad that affirmed the Arab League's intentions of having Syria return to the organization despite the country's devastating civil war. Syria was suspended from the Arab League in 2011 after Assad's government cracked down brutally on mass protests against his rule.

Lawmakers from nine Arab countries, as well as Palestinian representatives, made up the delegation — reflecting a continuation in the thawing of relations with Assad, who for over a decade has been isolated from most of the region.

Assad visited the UAE March 19 and was received with great visibility. The UAE have been working hard to restore Syrian membership of the Arab League. The visit was also an opportunity to discuss the resumption of aid and economic relations. The kingdom has already re-opened its embassy in Damascus.

The Europeans have remained united around the principles for dealing with Syria (sanctions, normalization, reconstruction, early recovery, etc.) and been on the forefront of assistance to the country, notably through the successive Brussels Conferences and the donor's meeting for the earthquakes' victims. The question remains whether Europe will be willing and able to play a more comprehensive role in bringing an end to the civil war.

Egmont invites you to participate in an informal discussion reflecting on the way forward and for a possible stronger EU role in improving the prospects of ending the conflict.

Among possible topics of discussion:

- The potential of a long-lasting failed state and its impact on the region and on Europe
- Reaching out to the Arab states for a common approach
- Will the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran accelerate the normalization process between Syria and the Arabs?
- How to deal with Russia and Iran?
- Dialogue with Turkey
- Role of China and other world powers
- Transatlantic dialogue
- Test the option of a stronger international presence in Syria to monitor assistance delivery and implementation of CBM's.