



A'zaz, 20 March 2023

A large number of Syrian civil society and advocacy organisations gathered on the 17th of March 2023 to assess the current humanitarian and political situation of the Syrians in South Turkey, northwest (NW) Syria and the entire country, following the devastating earthquake. They sought to amplify the voice of Syrians affected by the earthquake, their needs, fears and aspirations ahead of the International Donors Conference on the 20th of March.

The organizations expressed the deep frustration and anger of the Syrian people towards the UN's politicisation of aid in particular in the aftermath of the catastrophe and provided ample examples of concrete structural, procedural and behavioural failures and misconduct which contributed to the death of countless Syrians who could have been saved if the emergency aid reached them in time. The Syrian organizations found inexplicable how it took the UN six days after the earthquake to deliver any type of aid to the affected areas in NW Syria, and how even this modest aid stopped since the 3rd of March.

Syrians vehemently reject the politicization of humanitarian aid that the UN and its agencies have been practicing over a long period of time, politicization which got exacerbated after the earthquake. The blatant example of such repugnant policy was the delay of aid to NW Syria until after the UN received permission from the head of the Syrian regime to do so, a flippant act since the Syrian regime does not control NW Syria nor has the legitimacy to decide when or what urgent humanitarian aid can go to these areas. This policy continues, with the UN and other key actors flooding the Syrian regime with aid, despite clear evidence of weaponization of aid by the regime before the earthquake and the abundance of testimonies from regime-controlled areas (after the earthquake) about the aid being sold on the market or given to the military and militias affiliated with the Assad regime and its allies. How could the lifeline of international aid for our people be trusted and be confined to a regime who used siege, famine, and massive killing as a tool against his own people?

The main threat that faces Syrians in the short term is the full normalization of the Syrian regime under the flawed notion of solidarity with the Syrian people because of the false equivalence in which the Syrian regime equates the Syrian state/government which in turn equates Syria and its people. A clear distinction must be made between the Syrian people and the Syrian regime who has been weaponizing humanitarian aid against its own people, committing war crimes against them for more than a decade, including the use of chemical weapons, and displaced more than half of the population. This is a regime that openly refers to Syrian civilians affected by the earthquake in the NW as "terrorists" who don't deserve aid, and is the regime who bombed Syrian civilians while they were still under the rubble during the first days after the earthquake.

The second, even more dangerous threat, is that of the forced return of displaced Syrians who lost their shelter and livelihood in Turkey and NW Syria. The situation of the Syrian refugees affected by the earthquake in Turkey is dire. They are under great pressure, often subjected to discrimination, made worse by the pressure facing the Turkish government to deal with the impact of the earthquake on its own population. This in turn increases the vulnerability of vulnerable groups among refugees, women, children and people with special needs, which gives room for exploitation and places pressure on them to return to Syria despite it not being safe.

We reiterate that the devastating earthquake should not lead to the further dehumanisation or humiliation of Syrians by the UN or any other party and should not be allowed to develop into a political cataclysm that will further doom and condemn the Syrian people to a new dark era and cause further instability in the region and beyond.



“#Save_Syrians_Not_Assad”

"#أنقذوا_السوريين_لا_الأسد"

At the meeting on 17 March, the following demands were made by various Syrian organizations to be conveyed to the International Donors Conference:

- Demand for an independent international inquiry into the unacceptable failure of the UN and its agencies in delivering any aid to earthquake victims in NW Syria in the first 150 hours after the catastrophe.
- Request the main donors along with the UN to put an emergency response plan for the next 12 months to address the damage caused by earthquake in NW Syria, which houses millions of displaced Syrians. The existential humanitarian and livelihood needs of the Syrians cannot wait till June for the regular Syria Conference, they have to be addressed now.
- Call on the donors to improve assessment mechanisms for the immediate humanitarian needs, but also for the longer term, sustainable aid which will address various impacts of the earthquake in NW Syria on other different sectors such as services infrastructure, education, healthcare and housing. The donors should have immediate and direct engagement with the Syrian organizations on the ground to develop an effective assessment procedure and the consequent short and long-term aid delivery.
- Demand humanitarian air bridge from NW Syria to European countries in order to transport injured civilians that require urgent and complex surgical interventions as well as treatments not available in NW Syria. This humanitarian air bridge is independent from any UNSC resolution and relies on donors' will and decision.
- Call on the key states to end the Russian political blackmail in the UN Security Council regarding “cross-border aid” in NW Syria and ensure that the UN starts sustainably delivering humanitarian aid through all available border crossings using the existing basis in international law for such action, this can be achieved through alternative aid delivery mechanisms to be put in place by the US, UK, EU and Turkiye in order to completely depoliticize aid and make it independent of the regime's network of corruption and political exploitation.
- Provide support for Syrian for capacity building in order to build a new administrative body in NW Syria capable of establishing good governance and manage the current crisis and transition towards the recovery phase.
- Reject any plans for the forced return of shelter-less displaced Syrians in Turkiye and NW of Syria to regime-controlled areas or any other destinations under any false pretexts or unilateral initiatives by the UN such as “Area Based Returns” or “Pilot Projects” or even “step for step”. Instead, the focus should be on securing swift support and assistance to them in their current locations. We call on the donors to develop effective aid mechanism for Turkiye which will alleviate the pressures on the Syrian refugees in the affected areas and protect refugees from the added vulnerability and forced based on previous international precedents such as Haiti and the tsunami disaster
- Reassure that the safe environment as defined by Syrians is the only pragmatic and realistic solution to the situation in Syria, a solution that will allow for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians and will stop any further waves of refugees and will usher a new era in Syria's history. The safe environment should be the cornerstone of any future political solution and should not be replaced by ad-hoc improvised



ill-conceived political adventurisms such as the “steps for steps” or any other approaches which seek to appease the Syrian regime and its Russian allies.

- Reiterate that the targeted sanctions imposed on the Assad regime for the horrific crimes it committed against Syrians and not the Syrian people, whether The Caesar Act or the EU sanctions, are one of the main bulwarks against political and economic normalization with the regime, but at the same time they do not impact the delivery of the humanitarian aid or the earthquake assistance. These sanctions should be coupled with mechanisms to deliver aid directly to Syrians and impose more scrutiny, accountability and control on the UN agencies operations and performance.
- Demand a stop to any normalisation with the regime at humanitarian or political level under any false pretext. The most dangerous catastrophe that could inflict additional damage to the Syrians is the normalization and revival of the Syrian regime which has turned Syria into a narco-state and continues to commit countless crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.