THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

SYRIA AFTER THE EARTHQUAKES

Washington, D.C.

Monday, March 6, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

SUZANNE MALONEY
Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution

PANEL DISCUSSION:

REVA DHINGRA (Moderator)
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution

STEVEN HEYDEMANN
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution

ROBERT FORD
Senior Fellow, Middle East Institute; Former Ambassador to Syria, U.S. Department of State

KARAM SHAAR
Nonresident Scholar, Middle East Institute

AMANY QADDOUR
Executive Director, Syria Relief & Development

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Suzanne Maloney: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of foreign policy here at the Brookings Institution. On behalf of Brookings foreign policy and our Center for Middle East Policy, I'm delighted to welcome you all to this event to discuss the humanitarian response and the future of Syria policy one month after the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. As you all surely know, the first of two earthquakes struck the Turkish-Syrian border in the early hours of February 6th. In the days that followed, rescuers scrambled to reach those trapped under the rubble. The death toll from the earthquakes has surpassed 50,000 lives, approximately 44,000 in Turkey and 6000 in Syria. The region continues to experience aftershocks, causing additional deaths, injuries and damage to infrastructure.

In Syria, the earthquakes compounded the devastation from more than a decade of civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced more than 13 million Syrians. It took days for international support to reach rebel held areas. In northwest Syria, delayed by political barriers that resulted in the loss of lives and heavy criticism of the United Nations. Now, even as relief efforts continue, the Syrian government is shelling earthquake hit rebel areas. In Syrian regime held areas, dozens of countries have sent humanitarian aid, both directly to the Assad government and through the U.N. and local organizations. Arab states have edged closer to normalization with the Assad regime, while debates continue on the effects of the U.S. led sanctions on relief efforts and reconstruction.

The earthquakes have highlighted the challenges of the current U.S. and global approach to Syria. Can the U.S. and the international community balance policymaking that pursues accountability for more than a decade of human rights violations and war crimes, even while we help populations to rebuild? As the Biden administration and the international community consider how best to support the Syrian people, I'm so pleased to present this distinguished panel here today who will offer their insights to inform the discussions based on decades of experience working on Syria. Let me provide just a few brief introductions before turning this over to the panel.

We're first joined by former Ambassador Robert Ford, who is now a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute. He served as U.S. ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014, proposing and implementing policy and developing common strategies with European and Middle Eastern allies to try to resolve the Syria conflict. Ambassador Ford had a distinguished career in the State Department, including service as deputy U.S. ambassador to Iraq from 2008 to 2010 and U.S. ambassador to

Algeria from 2006 to 2008. We are joined as well by Amany Qaddour, executive director of Syria Relief and Development, a nonprofit humanitarian organization operating on the ground in Syria since 2011. Amany is also an associate faculty member at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a visiting scholar at Brown University.

We're also joined by Dr. Steven Heydemann, a Brookings foreign policy nonresident senior fellow and chair of Middle East studies at Smith College. From 2015, from 2011 to 2015, Dr. Heydemann directed the U.S. Institute of Peace Syria related activities. He consults widely with U.S. and European governments on Syria policy and on the status of the Syrian conflict. We're also joined by Dr. Karam Shaar, a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute and a political economist. He previously served as research director of the Operations and Policy Center overseeing Syrian policy research, and he's commented extensively on Syrian political economy and sanctions policy.

Our conversation today will be moderated by Dr. Reva Dhingra, the Brookings foreign policy postdoctoral fellow who is affiliated with our Center for Middle East Policy. Reva has written extensively on humanitarian aid and policies on Syrian refugees and internally displaced, displaced persons. She previously worked on the Syrian Regional Response with the International Rescue Committee from 2015 to 2017. Finally, before we begin, this panel discussion is on the record. Please feel free to send your questions to events at Brookings dot edu and using the hashtag Syria event on Twitter. Thank you all. And the floor is now yours, Reva.

Reva Dhingra: Thank you so much, Suzanne, for those introductions. I want to begin this event by first acknowledging the devastating human toll of the earthquakes in both Turkey and Syria and share my condolences for the lives lost during this tragedy. I'd first like to begin our discussion by turning to Amany Qaddour, who is currently based in Turkey, overseeing SRD's operations in response to the earthquakes. Ms. Qaddour, thank you so much for joining us. Can you tell us a little bit about the current humanitarian situation in terms of both needs and access within northwestern Syria a month after the earthquakes? And in particular, how do you think the war has shaped how the earthquakes have affected communities?

Amany Qaddour: Yeah. Thank you, Reva, for having me. And to Brookings, obviously, for, for hosting this event alongside co-panelists. I also want to start sort of centering the conversation around the victims and the survivors of the earthquake and condolences, obviously, to those who have lost their lives, those who are still missing, including some of our staff, and obviously

commending the tremendous search and rescue efforts, search, rescue actually and recovery at this point for those who have not made it out alive, unfortunately.

Maybe I'll start by answering the second part of your question first, which is essentially how we got here. And I know obviously many from the audience today are probably familiar with the nuances of northwest Syria and the Syria crisis at large. But I really want to frame this in light of the earthquake. You know, obviously a population that's endured 12 years of, of conflict and crisis. And in the immediate term following the earthquake, obviously, we saw as, as Suzanne mentioned, is, you know, this part of the population essentially trapped, if not abandoned without international assistance coming in for several days. And we certainly saw other parts of the country receiving international aid in all forms, including when it came to search and rescue efforts.

In the northwest, when we look at those first few days of this black haze of the earthquake, we saw first responders on the ground. We saw local Syrian organizations were the ones that mobilized, working around the clock to save lives first and foremost in that immediate acute phase of this emergency. And, of course, having to prioritize beyond just saving lives as food, emergency, shelter and clean water, obviously. But then from a broader standpoint, we see this compounded vulnerability of the population that has become, and this is where I really want to emphasize sort of three distinct areas that really emphasize how complex the needs are right now, both in the immediate term and if we're looking, let's say, at the next six months or the year, what this is going to look like.

The first is obviously the existing housing crisis, even before the earthquake, where in this particular pocket of the population, you had over 2.7 million people displaced from other parts of the country and this very small geographic region of the northwest, particularly with over 90% of the population right now residing below the poverty line, you know, over a million of, people from this area were in camps. And the rest, about 1.5 million, were living in precarious housing situations. So unfinished, damaged buildings that really only exacerbated their vulnerability once the earthquake hit. And from these displacement camps that I mentioned, you know, you had over 51%, 50 or so percent of these camps lacking any type of waste management, any access to clean water. And obviously, for me, as a public health practitioner, I'll get to why that's such a critical piece in a bit.

But then we're also looking at this response in terms of short-term solutions over and over again. Now, you know, this has really brought to light so many gaps in terms of sustainability, excuse me, in terms of dignified shelter for some of these vulnerable communities in this region. And as we

speak today, there are people whose homes or tents have actually flown away because there's a major sand or dust storm in the region that's hit the region as of today and through tomorrow.

And then the second aspect is weakened infrastructure. Obviously, I mentioned housing, but then in terms of hospitals, health care, schools, universities, water and sanitation networks, you know, we were dealing with an already stretched health care system before this. For those of you who have followed Syria closely, it's no secret where there were massive aerial bombardments and campaigns, campaigns against civilian infrastructure, particularly hospitals and clinics, you had, you know, due to damages and continued attacks on schools, you have millions of children out of school, essentially a generation that continues to be displaced. The earthquake has been no exception to that. And of course, in other forms of infrastructure, obviously damaged roads, basic access to health care facilities and other forms of public infrastructure.

And as I referenced before, certainly sort of a series of public health crises, including the COVID pandemic and right before the earthquake, actually a massive cholera epidemic that continues to be a concern today. We now have over 50 health facilities damaged in the northwest that need to be rehabilitated at this point in time to simply meet the growing needs of the population that have either been injured or affected by, by the earthquake. And then there are other health care needs that simply don't stop because there, there was an earthquake, including many women who went into labor to a certain degree because of the shock of the earthquake that obviously need, needed to see a health care provider and give birth safely. Many, many didn't make it out alive, unfortunately. So we're looking at how these are all interrelated and obviously some of these sort of long term consequences when these health care needs are neglected.

And then the third point I want to mention are the area that really needs emphasis is sort of this, you know, often an invisible aspect is the protection crisis. Beyond just safe housing and physical infrastructure, we're talking about protection where many people are in a vulnerable situation right now, particularly for groups like women, adolescents, girls, children. You know, our teams were just in Afrin, where you had over 40 families residing in one collective center with one bathroom. And we can very quickly see how some of these protection risks become amplified in some of these crowded housing situations. We certainly saw this before in displacement camps, and we're certainly seeing it now with collective shelters.

And in addition to sort of protection risks for the population, as well as is our aid workers, which has always been a very critical point. Syria before the earthquake was one of the most dangerous places to be for an aid worker. This has been no exception. Suzanne mentioned even attacks in light of the earthquake. And this has been something, you know, often termed duty of care, which has been very important for us to emphasize. You know, when our own humanitarian aid workers our frontline responders themselves are equally affected, it's critical that we also are able to provide them with the protection that they need, you know, essentially take care, taking care of them so that they can take care of others.

And then just lastly, closely tied to these sort of three major areas, I really want to emphasize the need to keep in mind the existing vulnerabilities and prioritize those as well. Oftentimes, you know, we now have this sort of one-dimensional focus just simply on earthquake needs. We're seeing donors, very generous donors, I will say, encouraging, you know, humanitarian agencies to re-channel funds or repurpose funds simply for earthquake response. But the complexity that I've mentioned simply means that these needs aren't mutually exclusive. We still need to address some of the deep-rooted vulnerabilities that existed before so that people don't slide further into vulnerability.

And then just lastly, I know my co-panelists I'm sure will touch on this is really the need to prioritize humanitarian aid and not weaponize it, because this is something we've seen in the past time and time again, particularly for communities of the Northwest, but certainly other parts of the country. I'm going to stop there, and I'll hand it back to you. And of course, I'm happy to take any questions during Q&A. Thank you. Over.

Reva Dhingra: Yeah, thank you, Ms. Qaddour. And I just wanted to follow up for you and for our other panelists on this question of humanitarian access. So we saw a lot on humanitarian access and challenges to humanitarian access in the first few days. Has that changed at all? Are we seeing the situation, you know, improve? There were additional crossings open. So how has that situation evolved one month after the earthquakes?

Amany Qaddour: I mean, we're certainly seeing more humanitarian assistance coming into the country. But unfortunately, you know, that came at a price. The first, those first several days where people were cut off from the international community certainly meant many lives lost, unfortunately, it is a disappointment. But I also know and I'm sure other panelists will touch on this as well, those crossing points certainly could have been opened much sooner. And this is, again, what I

mentioned related to sort of weaponizing or politicizing aid. Certainly, this has been no exception with the, with the response to the earthquake.

Reva Dhingra: So maybe on that note then I'll turn to Ambassador Ford to share a bit on the policy perspective on humanitarian aid access as well as the US's role. So, Ambassador Ford, I wanted to ask you, the U.S. has provided $185 million in humanitarian assistance for the earthquake response in Turkey and Syria so far and has consistently been one of the leading donors for the humanitarian response throughout the war. But from a policy perspective, the past few years have been marked by a relatively disengaged and deprioritized approach to Syria. What do you see as the direction of U.S. policy on Syria post-earthquakes in terms of questions of aid access? What is the U.S. doing now? And do you see this moment leading to a shift in policy towards either rebel groups in northwestern Syria or towards the Syrian government?

Robert Ford: Thank you, Reva. And many thanks to you and to Suzanne and all your colleagues at Brookings for organizing this, because the scale of the tragedy is unimaginable. And it's going to be with us not just for a few weeks, but it's going to be with us for years. And so I hope in this panel we can talk a bit about where do we go in the next months and longer term. So in answer to your question about current U.S. policy, yes, it is somewhat stand backish with respect to Syria. It is not on the top priority list the way it was ten years ago.

The Biden administration really has five principal objectives in Syria. I'll just run through them very quickly for context. The first is— and it's always at the top of the American government's list— the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Syria. And we have 900 troops in eastern Syria for that. Related to that, the Biden administration always voices support for ceasefires. That means no Syrian government shelling bombing of northwest Syria, and it also means no Turkish threats against the Syrian Democratic forces, the American partners on the ground in eastern Syria in the fight against ISIS.

The third objective is accountability. And people may have just noticed that the Biden administration came out and named a Syrian government officer, put him on sanctions because of his involvement in a massacre in the Tadamon districts of greater Damascus. So accountability is the third objective. The fourth objective is some kind of an eventual political resolution to the Syrian crisis, along the lines of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. And the United States always

voices support for the U.N. efforts under Special Representative Geir Pedersen. And it isn't making much progress at all. But that doesn't stop the United States government for voicing support for it.

And then finally, there is the issue of access for humanitarian assistance. That's the fifth broad objective. At this point, the United States has given over $16 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2012. It is the largest single nation donor, the European Union has given more as a collective, but the Americans are still the number one single country. The American support is for both cross-border aid coming from Turkey and also now for crossline aid crossing from Syrian government-controlled territory into opposition held territories in northwest Syria. But American government has always been very clear that it views cross border as essential. The United States Agency for International Development bases a lot of its activities on cross-border aid coming down from Turkey.

So let me just take a minute and a half and look forward. After the earthquake, I do not expect, do not expect a big change in American policy on Syria. First of all, it's going to continue its effort to fight ISIS in eastern Syria. We just had the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley visiting. The United States government will not change its rejection of normalization with the Syrian government. In fact, they reiterated that stance during the visit of the Egyptian foreign minister to Damascus last week. The Americans do not have any kind of formal relations with the organization to liberate sham, Greater Syria, HTS is its acronym in English. They control about half of Idlib, the part that the Turks don't control directly, and it's on the American terrorism list. And I don't think the Americans are going to take it off terrorism list any time soon. I think politically that's difficult in Washington.

And I have to say also, HTS did not itself help its cause when it reportedly blocked some small cross line aid that was to come up from Syrian, from controlled territories a couple of weeks ago. As I think about looking forward, I think there are two big questions for policy. First, what are they going to do about sanctions and the general licenses that they issued to expedite humanitarian assistance? And what does that mean for broader sanctions policy? I think we should discuss that.

And second, I think there is this question of cross-border aid and whether international humanitarian law provisions should prevail or provisions in international law regarding state sovereignty and respect for a state to decide whether or not cross-border aid can come even into a stricken area where the government has no control to begin with. And I think those are two policy questions that should come out of this earthquake tragedy. Thanks very much, Reva.

Reva Dhingra: Yeah. And I think these two areas that you touched on for the future of policy are really good starting points for turning to Dr. Karam Shaar, who is an expert on sanctions policies. And I'm, and I'm curious what you make of these recent declarations or these recent moves by the U.S. administration to sort of clarify its sanctions policies and to the broader debate on sanctions policies by the West led by the Biden administration in hindering the response. I wonder if you could comment on how you saw that both shaping the early response and how you'll see that shaping the reconstruction efforts.

Karam Shaar: First, I want to thank you for organizing this event, Reva. I want to first just make it clear to everyone that sanctions are not easy to assess. We don't have causal connections to establish using data, so we're all trying our best when, when we're assessing the impacts of, of sanctions. Now, we also all know that sanctions are extremely polarizing, so everyone has such strong views on them. And these views tend to be quite difficult to change as well. Now, I think we need to first just review what sanctions are about before answering your questions.

So the goal of, of sanctions, sanctions in Syria were imposed initially, well, they've existed from the seventies but didn't really become serious until the uprising in 2011. Initially, when they were imposed in 2011, they were actually aimed at behavioral change. They wanted to push the Assad regime into negotiating and agreeing to a political settlement. As time went by and no concessions were, were given, the nature of those sanctions or the goal from them changed completely. They became more about signaling to other governments that, no, you can't kill your people with, with impunity. And they became more punitive in nature.

Now, as time also went by, they became just a passive tool for dealing with, with Syria. Now that Syria is deprioritized and the view in most Western circles is it's a conflict that you better contain than resolve, it's too costly to resolve, just contain it, it's not a priority. So you keep those sanctions in there so that if someone asks, you tell them you're still interested, but in reality, they are just a very cheap policy tool that you can impose at virtually no cost.

Now, the debate around sanctions has been, has long been siloed between different circles. For instance, in academia, most academics believe that sanctions have a strong negative impact on the humanitarian response. In policy circles, we're seeing now a new kind of polarization. You have those who are opposed to the Assad regime who argue that sanctions have virtually no impact on the lives of civilians or the humanitarian response. And you have the humanitarians who say, look, there's

no harm in disagreeing with the Assad regime and believing that it's a criminal regime and yet not accepting sanctions as a good policy tool.

And I think the truth actually lies somewhere in between. I think sanctions have caused limited harm in Syria, however, much of the harm has been caused by the Assad regime, its thuggery, the fact that its, actually steals that aid plays a far more significant role in aid diversion, plays a far greater role in preventing the provision of aid to those who deserve it relative to sanctions. Now, I think sanctions need to be reformed, and there's a lot to be said there.

But now I can answer your, your question on general licenses, and I'm sorry for the long introduction, but we need to set the scene for sanctions. I think I'm in favor of the latest general license issued by OFAC, not only because it does improve the humanitarian response, albeit to a very limited extent, just because sanctions were not the main impediment to the humanitarian response to begin with. But I support those exemptions because they're also important from a communication point of view, from a signaling point of view.

The Assad regime from day one after the earthquake before even declaring an emergency, was saying lift sanctions, lift sanctions, all sanctions now. Giving that general license actually helps deprive the Assad regime from a key talking point, which is sanctions are killing us. No, we will ease those sanctions and show us how you can respond to the crisis. Again, much of the aid is being stolen by the, by the Assad regime. And sanctions will improve the humanitarian response, albeit to a very limited extent.

Reva Dhingra: So I want to, I want to follow up directly on that, to ask about not just the humanitarian response, but the reconstruction aspect of it. So Ms. Qaddour commented on our use of short term approaches and sort of humanitarian approaches when people are in tents that are blowing away from sandstorms and it might not be restricting the humanitarian component of their response, But I wonder if you, Dr. Shaar, or Ambassador Ford or anyone else who would like to could comment on how it's factoring in to the reconstruction aspect.

Karam Shaar: The sanctions do have a direct impact on, on reconstruction. In fact, under the Caesar Act, reconstruction is signal, singled out clearly as an area that no investor can enter without a political settlement first. So are sanctions preventing reconstruction? I would say definitely, yes. Should they be lifted, then the answer depends. I think we need to push for a political settlement in Syria and use those sanctions on reconstruction as leverage against the Assad regime to bring it

closer to the negotiating, negotiating table. But if those sanctions are just meant to be in place and refuse to engage with the Syrian conflict or push for a political, political settlement, then we need to reconsider, reconsider them.

If you allow me just in one minute, what I meant by sanctions reform earlier does include reconstruction. So we have those sectoral sanctions at the moment that affect everyone in the country, including the Assad regime, which I think should be lifted in exchange for concessions. On the other hand, you have targeted sanctions, smart sanctions that can hurt the regime a lot more, which are not being used. So under the Caesar Act, secondary sanctions could be used. So you're sanctioned not only for committing sanctionable behavior, but for helping someone else committing sanctionable behavior. Those could be used. And if they're used today, say, in, in the UAE or Lebanon, that would definitely hurt the regime. They're not being used at all. So, again, we go back to the same point, which is Syria is not viewed as a priority for policymakers in Western countries.

Reva Dhingra: Ambassador Ford, do you have anything to add? Oh, you're muted.

Robert Ford: Sorry. I'm, I think Karam has it exactly right. The administration shows no signs of changing its attitude against, uh, facilitating reconstruction in Syria. They could perhaps stretch the boundaries of what is called stabilization, which is acceptable, certainly in northeastern Syria, and maybe could extend that to northwestern Syria. Where stabilization ends and reconstruction begins is a bit ambiguous, it's in the eye of the beholder, I would say. And so I think that is a serious discussion that people could engage with the United States government officials about.

Reva Dhingra: And I want to, I want to turn on this question of, you know, leveraging sanctions for political concessions to the fact that the Assad regime seems to not have had to make a lot of concessions in this period. So I want to turn to Dr. Steven Heydemann, who's also a fellow at the Brookings Institution, to ask this question of normalization, which I think a lot of our viewers have submitted questions on, and this fact that the Assad regime has very aggressively used this moment to engage in earthquake diplomacy, specifically with Arab states and has not really seemed like it has had to, you know, approach a political settlement to be able to access these normalization efforts. So do you see this moment as furthering the Assad government's campaign of normalization, or will it remain closer to the status quo? And are these sort of surface level efforts?

Steven Heydemann: Thank you, Reva. And thanks to the Center for Middle East Policy for bringing us all together to talk about this topic. I think, I think the picture is a bit mixed. There's no

question that the earthquake has led a number of governments and international organizations to engage much more visibly with the Assad regime than might have been the case before the earthquake. We've seen an increase in diplomatic delegations in Damascus, and as others have mentioned, we've seen the temporary lifting of selective aspects of sanctions by the United States, more recently by the, by the Swiss government.

And while I think these, these, these lifting of sanctions would be a positive step if they reduced obstacles that now make it very hard for Syrians to send money to their families inside the country, for example. But we also have to recognize that they may not have this effect, but they may open the door to further abuses of aid by the regime already well documented, including in a story yesterday in The New York Times. And I think these temporary lifting of sanctions is a troubling precedent as well. And we can get into that in the, in the discussion.

In addition, we've seen what I would describe as very troubling levels of deference on the part of U.N. agencies to the Assad regime and its humanitarian operations that, as we've heard, had significant costs for Syrians in the northwest of the country. I think this is an aspect of normalization that we shouldn't overlook. And we see elements of this, I think, in the invitation by the European Union to the head of the Syrian Red Crescent, who is a casino operator in Damascus and a close crony of the Assad regime, to participate in the EU donor conference, that's going to kick off in a few days. So I don't think there's much doubt that the regime's normalization campaign has made some headway. And, and frankly, I think we'd be naive if we didn't recognize that this is likely to continue in some form, even if in a slow and incremental way.

But I think we have to be cautious in assessing just how much progress the regime has, has made. I think we have to be cautious in assuming that this post-earthquake, you know, surge in diplomatic activity is going to be lasting and about whether it's going to have significant effects overall. For one thing, almost all of the diplomatic delegations we've seen have been from countries that began normalization some time ago or had taken some steps in that direction, like the visit of the foreign minister from Egypt. We've seen very few indications, at least, up to, up to this point that earthquake diplomacy is producing any kind of durable backsliding in the commitment to isolate and sanction the Assad regime and certainly not to deepen economic ties in a substantial way. [inaudible] for example, recently very publicly rejected steps toward normalization.

And in terms of Saudi Arabia, which I think sees itself as a diplomatic bellwether in the region, despite many rumors about a possible high-level visit to Damascus, this has not yet materialized. And as others have indicated, the US did lift some sanctions, but in a temporary and selective way, there was this recent sanctioning of a perpetrator of the Tadamon massacre, and we had this quite extraordinary vote in the US House of Representatives recently, which was near unanimous in rejecting normalization of the Assad regime. Given the level of polarization in Congress, the, the idea that we could get over 400 members of the House to vote in support of a resolution is quite, quite astonishing. So I think, broadly speaking, commitments to the isolation of the Assad regime remain pretty strong.

And I just want to make one last, last point, which has to do with the war in Ukraine, with the deepening Russian Iranian ties this has produced, with growing tension between the West and China, as China seems to align itself more closely with Russia, the war has really quite fundamentally undermined Russia's role as an advocate of normalization, even if its track record in that regard was limited. This has, this has been completely gutted, I think, and I expect that to continue well beyond the horizons of this immediate moment of the crisis, it, the growing security cooperation between Iran and Russia I think factors into this, and China's standing as a potential international interlocutor has also been weakened.

So I'll just close by pointing out that I think there may be less to earthquake diplomacy than, than meets the eye. For that to remain the case, though, I think it's going to be necessary for the US in particular, but also the EU to continue to maintain the same very strong anti-normalization positions that we've seen from, from both so far.

Reva Dhingra: Thank you. Thank you for that. And I did want to get to this question of Russia and China and Iran, specifically within Syria and in the earthquake response. But before that, I did want to turn back to Ms. Qaddour on this question of aid diversion, which people have raised as the chief barrier to, to the humanitarian response. And, you know, one that we've discussed in, you know, as primarily taken by the government. From an operational perspective, how has this affected, you know, these challenges? I was wondering if you could comment on how these challenges have affected your operations within the earthquake response.

Amany Qaddour: Yeah. Thanks, Reva. I mean, I wouldn't just say with the earthquake response, I would say prior to that, but there's a deep irony in terms of sort of organizations that

operate in northwest Syria and sort of the hurdles that come with measures to ensure there isn't aid diversion when we're talking about the larger picture and obviously hearing colleagues talk about sort of the government of Syria and the broader notion of of aid diversion. But certainly for us and many organizations that have operated in the Northwest for many years now, I mean, this has been one of the most, I would say, debilitating aspects of our work just in terms of anti-terrorism compliance, sort of aid diversion measures.

The amount of, I would say, sort of monitoring and safeguards that are in place for organizations that are operating for the Northwest simply because of that risk and the many groups that Ambassador, the ambassador mentioned, obviously, that are present in northwest Syria, there still is, again, like this irony that the amount of hindrances and bureaucratic impediments for humanitarian organizations to be able to deliver services when we're operating in there, in this broader context of Syria. So I'm happy to elaborate a bit more.

But for us, certainly, you know, these, these bureaucratic impediments affect everything from the way we move cash, the way we're able to, to pay our aid workers, related to vetting and screening and oftentimes very, very lengthy, even due diligence processes, even in the past where, you know, and currently now even with, with beneficiaries and victims themselves in terms of the, the level of screening that has been required simply to provide them with aid. So certainly it has been a major bureaucratic hurdle for us.

Reva Dhingra: Yeah, and I know a lot of that does come from the U.S. government side in terms of, you know, donor requirements. And we've talked about sanctions, but also policies towards HTS and other armed groups within northern Syria. And, and the sense I'm getting from, from you all is a sort of picture of sort of status quo of, you know, the fact that we don't really see U.S. policy changing and that post, post-earthquake diplomacy might be overstated in the moment.

So, you know, given, would you say that this is an accurate characterization of where you see Syria policy moving after this and, you know, given the sort of consequences that we saw within the humanitarian response, the very tangible consequences it's had on getting aid to populations, on reconstruction, do you see ways of, you know, moving at the margins on this policy approach? And that's an open question for whoever would like to jump in.

Robert Ford: Let me, let me offer two thoughts real quick, Reva. Number one, the United States government has always supported cross border assistance from Turkey into northern Syria.

However, and I underline this, that American support was always predicated on one of two things, either a Security Council resolution that allowed it, that, that gave a sort of an international legal cover to it— the problem there, of course, is the Russian and Chinese vetoes— and then second, support for the three border crossings, but again, insisting first that the Syrian government or the Security Council resolution authorize it.

Going forward, I think the need for three border crossings is more visible than ever, especially after the earthquake, there will be a bigger need for humanitarian assistance going into northwestern Syria. I hope that the administration begins to look for other legal arguments that can supersede this insistence on having a Security Council resolution or approval from the Syrian government. There is quite a debate in international legal circles already, and I think the United States government could be much more forward leaning about keeping those cross-border crossings open.

Reva Dhingra: Dr. Shaar, you can go ahead and—.

Karam Shaar: Yeah, just very quickly, I mean, while I do agree, it looks like nothing is, is going to change in Syria politically. Well, meaningful change. I just want to say that this is also an opportunity for us to push for gradual change. And gradual change has many advantages. So, for example, if the current political deadlock continues, wouldn't now be the ideal time to push for sustainable development and reconstruction in, in areas outside of regime control? We know that the main obstacle to peace in Syria at the moment is the Assad regime refusing to budge, refusing to give any political concessions.

So in the meantime, why don't we try to push for sustainable development in areas outside regime control? Why don't we deal with the elephant in the room in northwest Syria? [inaudible] We can't afford to ignore that question. They're becoming more and more powerful by the hour, and we're not going to be able to sidestep them going forward. So I think these are also questions that we have to contend with going forward.

Reva Dhingra: Okay. So on that note, I'd like to turn to the number of questions that we've gotten from the audience for our panelists. And just as a reminder, if you have questions, you can submit them to events at Brookings dot edu or using the hashtag on Twitter Syria event, so hashtag Syria event. So our first question that I wanted to ask our panelists from, from one of our audience members is on this question of normalization. So we've seen a lot of outreach, successful outreach between Syria and Arab states since the earthquake. Are we seeing signs of any European countries

moving towards that point? So you mentioned. Dr. Heydemann, the Switzerland and UN agencies. But I wonder if you could talk a little bit about European countries or the EU writ large.

Steven Heydemann: Well, there was also a fairly high profile visit from an Italian official in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, although Italy had previously had some contact with the Assad regime. So it wasn't a complete departure from past practice. And we've also seen, I think, an interest in the way the EU has overseen the donors conference coming up in Brussels to try to find a way to thread this very difficult needle between engaging with the Assad regime strictly on the basis of humanitarian response to the earthquake, while without providing the basis for the regime to claim that a process of normalization has either moved forward or has reached a point where it is likely to continue into domains beyond those related to the earthquake. So very difficult balancing act to maintain.

And I think it's [inaudible] for so much of the criticism that the EU has confronted following that invitation to a senior official of a purported NGO who is really an official of the regime. So we have not yet seen that kind of, of movement within the EU. There have for years been countries within the EU that were more open to the idea of ties to the Assad regime, including Greece, including Hungary. But so far, so far those differences have been contained and have not yet produced a shift in policy on the part of the EU.

Reva Dhingra: Mm hmm. And that also brings me to another question that I wanted to ask as follow up and one of our audience members asked about, which is on Turkey. So specifically on Turkey-Syria relations, there was a huge push for normalization prior to the earthquakes that was sort of being met with some stonewalling from the Assad regime. Ambassador Ford, I know you've written recently about Turkey-Syria relations. So Turkey itself was hit quite hardly by the earthquake. How do you see these affecting the normalization prospects for Turkey and Syria?

Robert Ford: I think the question is really one of domestic Turkish politics. If Erdogan pays a price politically for both the inept parts of the Turkish government response to the earthquake, as well as building management, building sector management policies prior to the earthquake, if Erdogan pays a political price for that, and if the, the Turkish opposition is able to capitalize on it, I could imagine that the normalization might proceed. The Turkish opposition in general is in favor of some kind of rapprochement with Damascus more than Erdogan himself is.

But the Turkish opposition itself is, is not exceptionally unified. There have been splits in it, and today, attempts to heal some of the splits. And I saw a clever description of the Turkish opposition today on Twitter. There are known knowns, there are known unknowns, there are unknown unknowns. And then there is the Turkish opposition.

Reva Dhingra: Would you like to add to that? I'm sorry. I was on mute. Now you're on mute.

Steven Heydemann: Thanks very much. I heard just before beginning this panel that the opposition has, in fact, reconciled, that they are now moving forward with a unified opposition coalition. Current polling in Turkey suggests that there is a possibility that the opposition could prevail. But, but as Robert said, that is, that might perhaps increase the likelihood of Turkish Syrian normalization rather than push it into the, into the background. It does seem to me, however, though, that given the earthquake, the saber-rattling that, that everybody engaged in earlier this year around a pending offensive in northeast Syria has been taken off the table. And to that extent, if that was one of the principal, principal incentives driving the normalization conversation led by by Russia, it seems to me we're probably unlikely to see a resumption of that before the May elections certainly.

Reva Dhingra: Mm hmm. And, and I know, so I will take moderator privilege on this and ask about the question of refugees and as a highly salient issue in the push by Turkey for normalization, particularly among the opposition. And Ms. Qaddour, I also wanted to ask you, you mentioned that many much of the population has been displaced a number of times already, and we have refugees from Turkey actually returning to northern Syria and northwestern Syria to rebel controlled and regime-controlled areas.

So I first wanted to ask, how do you see the issue of refugees factoring into these normalization pushes? Is it at all salient in the discourse that is happening right now? And second, in terms of these returnees and in terms of displaced populations within northern Syria, are we seeing any additional needs as the number grows over the next few months?

Amany Qaddour: Yeah, that was a lot of questions in one. So I'll just take it piece by piece. I mean, I, yeah, I mean, the situation is, it's very complicated here in Turkey because certainly before the earthquake, there was sort of, this normalization narrative did start to impact the, you know, the notion of, of return, safe returns in particular. And certainly some campaigns that were, you know, sort of advocating for many people to return, even though we knew there was this dire economic crisis in the country, very limited livelihood opportunities and certainly very unsafe conditions in different parts

of the country. So we were already sort of combating this normalization narrative around safe returns that were in fact, you know, not voluntary, not dignified, and certainly sort of a black hole once people did return to the country.

It is complex also now in Turkey, just leading up to the elections also in terms of a lot of anti-refugee sentiment. This was happening before the earthquake. And certainly, you know, our hearts are obviously with the Turkish people, but we can't deny the fact that many Syrian refugees obviously don't feel safe in the country right now. And we need to sort of also recognize for humanitarian organizations operating in Turkey on northwest Syria and also those responding in Turkey right now is not balance, you know, not robbing Paul to pay Peter is just understanding that the needs are tremendous both inside of Syria and for not only the Turkish population, but for the refugee population that's in the country right now.

So I don't know if I answered the question, but certainly this is something a lot of humanitarian organizations are grappling with right now is certainly to address those needs. And certainly the state of at least northwest Syria is in no way prime for refugees to be returning right now, especially in light of the earthquake.

Reva Dhingra: Yeah, so from both an economic and security and a simple lack of housing, as you mentioned. And that brings me to a question from one of our audience members on the economy. And, you know, where, we have the economy in Turkey that's been very severely impacted by the earthquakes. And there are indications that within Syria already economically and socially isolated, that the earthquakes will have additional impacts on already struggling economies. So I wonder if our panelists, Dr. Shaar, if you'd like to answer this question of where the Syrian economy is going from here.

Karam Shaar: Well, I mean, it doesn't look promising at all. I would say the living conditions of Syrians have never been this bad since World War One. And with what we're looking at at this stage in terms of the humanitarian response, I'm not that optimistic because it looks like we will have same or the same as old response. So more support for shelter, for health and less support for sustainable development and rebuilding damaged buildings. So unfortunately, the outlook is bleak, and this should be a reminder to all those involved to push for a political settlement. That's the only way for the economy to be put back on, on track.

Reva Dhingra: So you do you think that. Oh, sorry, Ms. Qaddour, go ahead.

Amany Qaddour: No, please follow up. But I was just going to add one thing because you know what Karam said, you know, really, we this was something we were grappling with also before the earthquake, as you know, dealing with early recovery, sort of separate than the narrative of reconstruction, certainly in northwest Syria. Obviously, some of these push pull factors is getting people actually to come back means there needs to be, you know, public infrastructure needs to be up and running. This was something we certainly advocated for in the health sector, at least with health system strengthening, certainly with water and sanitation networks. So it certainly seems just outrageous to expect people to come back when there aren't certain investments in infrastructure itself. And some of those early recovery initiatives that Karam sort of touched on.

Reva Dhingra: That can potentially be gotten to by, you know, this sort of stabilization, ambiguous stabilization and reconstruction category for humanitarian assistance. But it doesn't seem like there is necessarily a concerted effort on that front beyond the short-term approaches. I wonder if, Dr. Heydemann, if you'd like to comment on that.

Steven Heydemann: I just wanted to say I think we have to recognize that these categories of stabilization and reconstruction are politically, themselves, politically constructed. They're designed to establish boundaries that don't exist on the ground at all. And everyone involved in the enterprise of stabilization understands that. And that implies that we need to be very, very cautious about imagining stabilization as a category that should be exploited as an additional way to feed resources into regime-held areas of the country. Because what we've seen so far is that they are either abused corruptly, they are diverted, they are focused in areas where regime loyalists are resident and where damage may not be as severe as in areas that were the target of regime violence. And so there are all kinds of unintended ill effects that result when we imagine that we can use these categories as opportunities to improve the lives of ordinary Syrians, Syrians. Unfortunately, that happens all too well.

Reva Dhingra: Go ahead.

Amany Qaddour: Yeah, I just want to clarify also, I wasn't, you know, when I touched on these points, it was not related to stabilization, actually. It was just from the humanitarian itself. You know, oftentimes we think of humanitarian development and stabilization as sort of these three distinct, you know, siloed areas. On the humanitarian side, this is something we pushed for even prior to the earthquake, there was an early recovery cluster that was activated simply because 12 years

after the conflict, this protracted crisis, we cannot simply be thinking about short term, immediate humanitarian interventions. People simply need to have dignified living, dignified housing conditions. And so when I speak of early recovery, I certainly refer to that as sort of integrated within humanitarian response and thinking more long term, even though humanitarian is often thinking 6 to 12 months, we're certainly past that point.

Reva Dhingra: Mm hmm. Yeah. And I think that would be a good note for, for us to sort of conclude on, which is where do we go from here? So given the, the political impasses that, that you all have outlined and, you know, specific policy solutions also coming forward in terms of the more, use of more targeted sanctions, that sort of ambiguous category. But given how deadly existing policy turned out to be for many people living in northern Syria, the fact that, you know, access to safe housing directly contributed to the loss of life when an earthquake hit and the probability that, you know, earthquakes will continue to hit in the future, cholera epidemics will continue to hit in the future. I wonder if you could share some, some sort of tangible policy recommendations on where do we go from here in this limited operating space?

Steven Heydemann: I can make one as a, as a start, and it would be very quick. I think it's crucial to establish some form of safe harbor that would reduce over compliance by banks with the transfer of private funds from Syrian individuals outside of Syria to their family members inside of Syria. We hear one horror story after another about refugees, asylees, ex-pats trying desperately to get money to family members, bumping into banks that will not support those transfers over fear of sanctions compliance. What if there were a way for the Treasury Department to reassure institutions involved in money transfers that these kinds of private flows should happen without those obstacles, I think it will be a major step forward.

Reva Dhingra: Go ahead.

Karam Shaar: I'm assuming you're talking to me.

Reva Dhingra: Yeah, sorry, you have your hand—.

Karam Shaar: Yeah. So, I mean, I believe the two lowest hanging fruit at the moment are, first, limiting aid diversion by publishing more and exposing more of these abuses to make sure aid arrives, aid reaches the intended recipient, recipients. And the second is sanctions reform.

Reva Dhingra: Ambassador Ford, go ahead.

Robert Ford: My recommendation would be for the Biden administration to take up first with European donors, also the Japanese to establish a consensus among that donor group first about the prioritization of the international humanitarian law and using that prioritization to keep a broader number, bigger number of cross-border access points open after the three-month period expires. And they need to raise that with the United Nations directly, with the secretary general, with the director and the leadership team at UNOCHA. And if in the end, the U.N. is uncomfortable, doesn't want to go forward, then the U.S. Agency for International Development should take the lead in standing up a separate coordination mechanism and explain to the Russians very directly that we will go forward even without the United Nations Security Council resolution. I think we really have waited long enough on that.

Reva Dhingra: Ms. Qaddour, we'll conclude with you if you have any final words of advice for the humanitarian—.

Amany Qaddour: Yeah, I mean, ditto to all of the above. And I touched on this a bit earlier. I mean, this is sort of the textbook definition of a complex crisis. We have to change the blueprint of how we're responding to this, you know, these protracted conflicts and, you know, hit them by a natural disaster, really understanding, investing more in public infrastructure that's been affected over the years. And certainly that's just coming from a humanitarian and a public health practitioner.

Reva Dhingra: Well, we're at time. I want to thank you all for joining us today to both our audience and our panelists. This was a very rich discussion with clear policy implications, and the recording will be available online. So thank you all so much for joining and we'll talk to you soon.