

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

The Earthquake: Catalyst for Dynamic Change in Syria

Richard Pecinka, LTC, CZE AF (CSAG/CCJ5)
Rene Berendsen, LTC, NLD Army (CSAG/CCJ5)
Hubert Mroz, CDR, POL Navy (CSAG/CCJ5)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject: The Earthquake: Catalyst for dynamic change in Syria.**
2. **Purpose:** This paper presents CSAG's summary analysis of the geopolitical and military evolution of the main actors in Syria following the February 2023 earthquake.
3. **Facts:** In the early morning of 6 February 2023, an earthquake struck southern and central Türkiye and the northwestern part of Syria. As of 15 February, more than 40,000 deaths had been reported. According to the WHO about 23 million people, including 1.4 million children, are likely to be affected by this disaster. Furthermore, cross border restrictions and imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime significantly reduced the will and the capability of the international community to provide humanitarian assistance. The affected area is the most complex of Syrian territories because of the presence of many regional and international actors. Despite the situation, some countries reacted at the very early stages of the disaster response.
4. **Assessment of the geopolitical and military consequences for the main actors:**
 - a. **Türkiye**
 1. The large-scale Turkish operation / incursion into Syria against terrorist groups, already postponed for external political reasons, is likely to be further delayed. The Turkish government should for the coming months focus on domestic challenges (reconstruction, electoral campaign, among others).
 2. The May 2023 elections might be postponed (no longer than a year, according to the Turkish constitution). The rescheduling of the elections is important in terms of a possible Erdogan-Assad meeting, as Assad wants to meet Erdogan only as a newly re-elected president.
 3. As a collateral effect of the earthquake in Syria and in Türkiye, the diplomatic role of mediator between Western countries (including those belonging to NATO) and Russia that Türkiye has played until now could be weakened.
 - b. **Russia**
 1. 10 days after the earthquake, Russia seems to be taking the greatest advantage of the situation in many areas.

2. At the level of the international community, Russia quickly launched a messaging campaign (a few hours after the earthquake) and communicated the provision of 300 of its soldiers already deployed in Syria as well as the dispatch of research teams and the supply of basic aid by air for the benefit of the local population.
 3. Russia offered the international community to be able to use its airports in Syria (Aleppo and Latakia, localized in the territory controlled by Bashar Al-Assad).
 4. Russia seized the opportunity to present itself as a “force for good” and not a “force for evil” as portrayed in the war in Ukraine.
- c. **Iran**
1. Within 24 hours of the earthquake, Iran sent a plane with emergency aid to Damascus. This caused some anger and criticism amongst Iranians who referred to the slow and insufficient response to those affected by the 18 January earthquake in the Iranian province of West Azerbaijan.
 2. Iran conducted some anti-US messaging accusing them of a slow response but the media coverage has not amplified this.
 3. In support of Iranian initiatives, Hezbollah issued a statement calling on countries and organizations to “use all available resources to reduce the pain and suffering of these two earthquake-stricken countries.” Lebanese government offered to use the Beirut port as a hub for humanitarian supplies. A significant part of the port is under control of Hezbollah.
 4. Iran could also take advantage of the situation in Syria and, under the cover of humanitarian aid, could facilitate shipment of weapons and equipment to its proxies with less scrutiny.
- d. **China**
1. Soon after the disaster, China sent humanitarian aid. The Chinese government stated that China is not breaking any national law providing humanitarian assistance, despite US sanctions.
 2. While maintaining the Chinese modus operandi to not fully engage in unstable countries, China may however still be planting some seeds for reaping reconstruction dividends in the long-term perspective by building their relationship with Bashar Al Assad.
 3. The fact that the US will not lift sanctions is amplified by Chinese messaging and may damage the US image.
- e. **Syria/Bashar Al Assad**
1. He took no significant actions since the earthquake happened and refused some of international aid in the first several days. Even though it was condemned by the international community.
 2. The refusal of aid may be because most parts of the affected region are not under his control. This could create an opportunity for Assad to launch operations to retake some territorial parts of the affected area.
 3. He could also control incoming humanitarian aid that is entering Syria through his controlled ports of entry (Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia).
 4. The disaster creates the opportunity for some countries to re-recognize and then normalize their relationship with the Syrian government.
- f. **ISIS**
1. The disaster could create opportunities to recruit more members out of the affected area.

2. The situation may open greater freedom of maneuver for ISIS as attention is drawn away from their operations.

g. SDF

1. If the situation allows, they could play a role in securing aid corridors from Iraq.

h. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)

1. The situation might promote their facilitating role in the northwestern part of Syria, since HTS already facilitated the free crossing of other border passes into the area.

i. US

1. The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control issued General License (GL) 23, which authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to earthquake relief that would be otherwise prohibited. GL 23 provides the broad authorization necessary to support immediate disaster relief efforts in Syria. However, US will not lift the sanctions on Syria since humanitarian assistance is not targeted.
2. Russia, China and Iran will all continue to message that the US has not acted quickly enough and have hampered other humanitarian efforts in Syria.

5. Conclusion:

1. The Coalition forces could be endangered by malign activities which take place under the cover of aid and reconstruction.
2. The earthquake is creating an opportunity for reconstruction of Syria by regional actors in long term perspective.
3. The disaster creates the opportunity for some countries to re-recognize and then normalize their relationship with the Syrian government. Some of these countries are members of the Defeat ISIS coalition.
4. CENTCOM initiatives are restricted in the affected area because of US sanctions and available resources. Therefore, the only option for CENTCOM is to promote and support regional partners efforts (who are already providing assistance).
5. Regional actors could play a significant role in the long-term in rebuilding the devastated infrastructure. This can be used to challenge Chinese, Russian, and Iranian efforts in Syria.