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The Syrian Earthquake of 2023: Navigating Diplomacy and Sanctions

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MEHAK KULAAR

India

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Members of the Examining Committee:

Dorothea Hilhorst

Rodrigo Mena

The Hague, The Netherlands

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Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

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While I struggle to understand this section of the paper. It is right to say that I do not know if this is how it should be written or if there is just one way to write it. This master is one of the most beautiful chapters of my life. My major GDP, the courses I took, the experiences and stories will always stay close to you. When I came here first, a friend from the old batch told me that ISS is not just an institute, it is an experience. I now understand what she meant. In this time, I did not just get an opportunity to learn about governance, humanitarian action, and other social science courses but I also got a chance to learn so much about myself.

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List of Acronyms

NWS- North-West Syria

GOS- Government Controlled Syria

UNSC- United Nations Security Council

OCHA- United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs

INGO- International Non-Government Organization

NGO- Non-Government Organization

HA- Humanitarian Arena

ES- Economic Sanctions

SCPR- Syrian Center for Policy Research

GL- General License

US- United States of America

UK- United Kingdom

EU- European Union

R2P- Responsibility to Protect

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The Syrian Earthquake of 2023: Navigating Diplomacy and Sanctions

In the early hours of February 6th 2023, an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude struck southern Turkey and north-western parts of Syria, that rocked both countries to their core. Following this, the international community, including international organisations, and other humanitarian actors, stepped in to play a vital role in providing aid and relief to the people on the ground and the countries in general. While both countries dealt with the loss of lives, displacement of people and severe destruction of infrastructure, they both had a different set of problems to deal with as well. On one hand, Turkey got rapid help and aid from humanitarian actors and was given diplomatic support, for example- “Israel, which is was the second-largest humanitarian aid donor after Azerbaijan right after the earthquake, sent a search and rescue team and 450 medical specialists to Turkey” (Yanarocak and Çubukçuoğlu, 2023). The fact that it is a politically and economically stable country also helped the situation to some degree. However, on the other side of the border, it was a different situation. Syria, which was already dealing with a civil war that is now in its 13th year and with a crippling economy that is under heavy economic sanctions, found itself crushed under yet another severe crisis.

While the country and humanitarian actors are dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake along with the severity of the ongoing war, the shifting sands on the international political level are also being observed. The Syrian government which had been completely isolated both diplomatic and economically got itself a window of change and opportunity to engage with other international actors to help better the bilateral ties through the engagement of what is now called “earthquake diplomacy”.

Like any other disaster, this one also did not pick sides and spare any person on the ground, regardless of whether they were Syrians or not. With a country that is already broken politically and dealing with an economic crisis along with outbreaks of diseases, one can only try to understand the level of helplessness and vulnerability this earthquake has brought to the forefront. This thesis aims to examine the humanitarian response to the Syria earthquake of 2023, with a particular focus on the role of diplomacy and economic sanctions.

Chapter -1 Introduction

The catastrophic Earthquake of 7.8 magnitude that struck the southern part of Turkey and north-western parts of Syria, shook not just the two countries to their core but also brought about a wave of changes in the international and the humanitarian arena. In response, the international community, including international organizations and other humanitarian actors, intervened to play a crucial role in delivering help and relief to the local population as well as the countries as a whole. Both nations had to deal with a separate set of issues in addition to the loss of life, population displacement, and catastrophic infrastructure destruction. Only after the earthquake did a window of opportunity open up for the Syrian government to participate in what is now known as "earthquake diplomacy" and improve bilateral relations by working with other international actors.

This calamity, like all others, spared no one on the ground, whether they were Syrian or not, and did not take sides. One can only try to comprehend the degree of helplessness and vulnerability this earthquake has brought to light in a nation that is already politically fractured, suffering with an economic crisis and disease outbreaks. For past 13 years, the innocent Syrian lives that have been surrounded by destruction and displacement, see humanitarian assistance as their only ray of hope and help. Humanitarian Operations have been on-going ever since the civil war of 2011 that soon tore the country apart into different parts- the government-controlled part and the opposition-controlled part. Humanitarian operations that have been going on for more than a decade now has left no stone turned to reach the people in need of their help and has continuously provided aid and assistance on ground. However, the earthquake of 2023 affected all as one and has left humanitarian actors with a new set of issues to deal on both international as well as local level.

In this study, the aim is to analyse the challenges humanitarian actors face in the humanitarian arena particularly in the wake of a disaster of this level. With the international political actors shifting stances and creating situation on the ground, humanitarian workers are set to strategize and maneuver these changes on the ground to keep their operation going. While theories suggest that humanitarianism is kept away from politics, be it regional or international, the reality of it seems to be far more different from that. According to Slim (1997) definition on which humanitarian action was established the whole concept rests on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. However, the theoretical concept does find itself in a different and ever- changing situation when applied on ground. Humanitarian action is established to help humanity wherever and whenever required. It is with this core understanding that its

presence in places that are embroiled in disaster and destruction is most vital. One major branch that connects humanitarian action to the on-ground situation amongst many is humanitarian diplomacy. “Humanitarian diplomacy is generally defined as persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act at all times and in all circumstances in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles.” (Rousseau and Pende, 2019). Diplomacy for humanitarian actors range from engaging with international actors that have a major say in the geopolitical arenas (like governments of countries) to negotiating a way across checkpoints that can help them gain access to the vulnerable population.

1.1 Research Problem Explanation

While on paper humanitarian action is exempted from all international politics and tussles, the reality is far from this. Humanitarian actors have time and again found themselves stuck in between the lines that have been drawn between the Syrian government and the opposition, making it hard for them to stay neutral and politically unbiased. Not only is the tussle on a national level but decisions taken on economic sanctions, countless laws and diplomatic strategies in the international arena, have also caused roadblocks for the humanitarian organisations on the ground. The problem that caused obstructions for the humanitarian arena precedes the earthquake and dwells deep into what has been going on for the last 13 years. After the civil war started in 2011, Syria got divided internally as well with the Government of Syria controlling around 70% of the Country and the remaining 30% that is northwest (NWS), northeast (NES) and parts of south east of Syria is controlled by several opposition groups (Yacoubian, 2023).

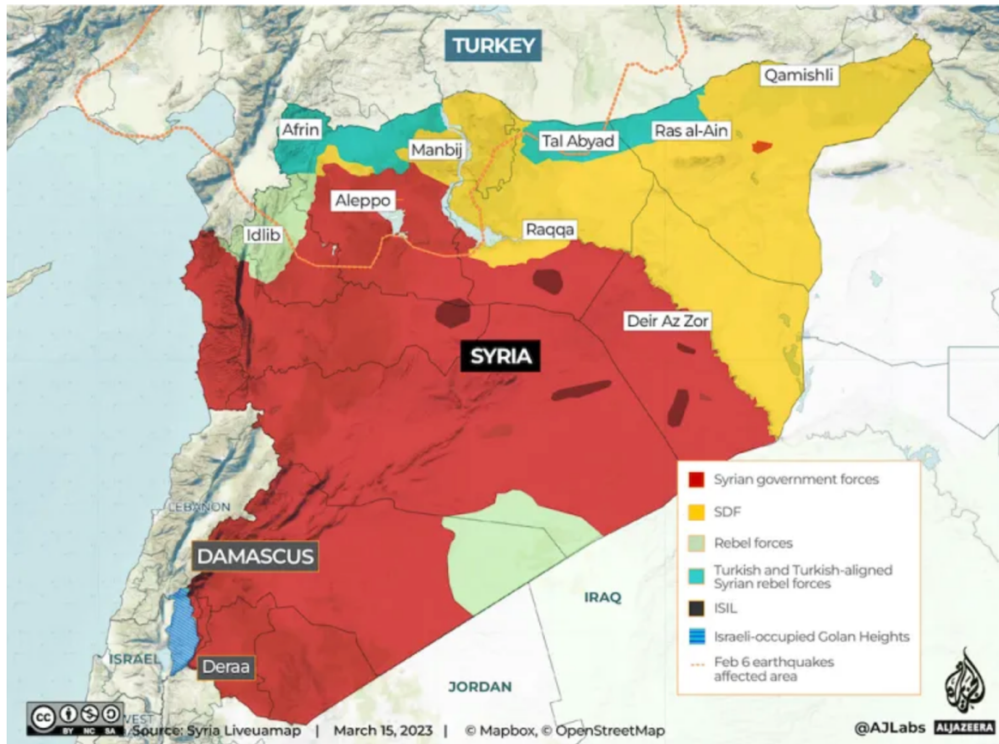


Image-1 Source- Borrowed from Al- Jazeera

Having the government and opposition-controlled areas, as it is makes it difficult to understand the level obstructions such divisions can cause. Despite that humanitarian operation that has been going on in Syria, has been navigating these divides since day one. This research aims to observe the humanitarian response in the government-controlled and northwest of Syria.

There was a big difference in the level of international support that Turkiye got as compared to Syria. Turkey having better ties with international actors was given rapid help whereas Syria a war struck country with economic sanctions on it, felt otherwise (Agarwal, 2023). Not only was there a difference of action between international borders but there was also a difference in response within Syria’s control lines. With the government control major part of the country, the north west is controlled by actors like Turkiye and the opposition group named Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Holtz, 2023).

The economic sanctions that are in place with the purpose of impacting the perpetrators of conflict and injustice, have time and again caused obstructions for humanitarian actors. As an example, when the earthquake struck, much of the aid transfers were made possible due to the temporary lifting of economic sanctions. “In the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes, as UN agencies and aid groups struggled to quickly and effectively scale up their emergency response, the US, EU, and UK issued humanitarian exemptions for six months to facilitate earthquake response despite claims by US and EU officials and sanctions advocates that their sanctions frameworks do not actually hinder humanitarian operations” (Relief Web, 2023a)

Economic sanctions in practice have proven to be problematic for humanitarian operation. Human Rights Watch has stated that “sanctions that have been imposed against the Syrian government as a response for its unspeakable violence against its own citizens, but it should be ensured that these sanctions do not have a negative impact on the rights of Syrians, including by impeding critical humanitarian aid”. (Relief Web, 2023b) The factors that make economic sanctions create roadblocks for humanitarian operators, should be brought to light as it is these discrepancies that are keeping humanitarian action from staying true to the principles that govern their operation.

On the other hand, international diplomacy as seen recently has softened its stand on the matter of Syria after the earthquake. What has been dubbed as “earthquake diplomacy” wherein the once isolated government of Syria saw a rapid re-establishment of contact with its Arab neighbours has also raised questions about how this will affect humanitarian operation on ground. While official level diplomacy is ever shifting and always manoeuvres its ways around the international political dynamic that we witness on a global platform. How do humanitarian operators on the ground navigate this to help serve their purpose is a vital matter to looking into.

1.2 Research relevance to Social Science

The level of complexity that this earthquake has added to the already war-torn Syria is a significant. However, the elements like diplomatic negotiations and the existence of economic sanctions have been much talked about during the period succeeding the earthquake. While the political debate is not new to Syria, the effects of this event on the humanitarian arena are significant. For this reason, to bring forward the challenges that these elements cause to the humanitarian operations and how humanitarian operators navigate these challenges is significant and need attention. For it humanitarian action that has been working tirelessly in the field (in this case Syria), to keep serving their purpose for the sake of countless Syrian lives.

1.3 Context and background to the research

The earthquake that struck Syria in 2023 resulted in major destruction and fatalities. The earthquake exacerbated a number of issues that the country was already facing, such as armed conflict, displacement, and economic instability. In a significant way because of the humanitarian response, those affected by the earthquake were able to get swift help and support. However, a number of challenges were encountered, including economic sanctions against Syria and political disputes with neighbouring countries. These problems limited both the ability of the international community to provide meaningful support and the ability to deliver humanitarian aid.

With a civil war that has been going on for 13 years, the country that lies in the middle east has faced death, destruction, disease outbreaks and an ever-inflating economy. To this, the country with an already demarcated international border, has another diversion internally. A division of power and control, wherein the southern part is controlled by the Syrian Government led by President Bashar al-Assad and the north- western and north- eastern parts controlled by opposition groups. In this research, the focus will be on particularly the government-controlled Syria and the “Northwest Syria (NWS) region controlled by opposition groups and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham HTS” (Saad, 2020).

These lines both internal and external of Syria proved to be extremely problematic when the earthquake hit and it became a challenge for humanitarian actors and aid to reach the people that were stranded in a disaster- stricken region that was at the time set in the bone biting winter early February. While the roads and air space were blocked off by citing damaged infrastructure as a reason, it took almost a week for humanitarian workers to reach the people in the northern part of Syria. It was reported that “Syrian President Bashar al- Assad issued a three-month authorization for UN aid deliveries to pass through two more border crossings to the besieged northwest from Turkey, but the decision came more than a week after the February 6 earthquakes.” (Relief Web, 2023c) Diplomatic tensions and economic sanctions can affect the ability of aid organizations to access affected populations and deliver assistance effectively.

1.3.2 Diplomatic Talks

After the civil war that divided the country into two parts, many international actors like countries and international organizations, condemned the Syria regime’s unjust behaviour and blamed President Bashar al-Assad for turning against his own country and people. This was followed by several countries cutting off any form of communication or diplomatic ties with the government of Syria. Syrian Government having been forced into isolation turned to seek help from Russia, which become its strongest ally, along with China, Iran.

Russia and China have strongly supported Syrian government in terms of blocking any form of intervention that has been suggest in the UNSC, that would lead to a regime change. (R. Foot, 2020) These countries having quoted examples of Iraq and Libya, have time and again stressed that western “intervention” will not just topple the government but create an even bigger crisis that might spill over to the rest of the middle east. Russia and China have also time and again stressed on the fact that sovereignty of a country should not be compromised and have backed Syria over unauthorized western presence on Syrian soil. (Calamur, 2013) While Russia has been an ally to the Syrian president, it is seen as the root of all problems by the

Syrians themselves. In July 2023, less than a month from the deadline of the cross-border humanitarian aid delivery was to end, Russia vetoed the vital resolution in the UNSC that was supposed to extend the period to aid delivery to the north-western part of Syria for 9 months. The fact that several international actors like Syrian government allies, opposing parties and regional powers are heavily involved in the matter that concerns not just the Earthquake but also the ongoing conflict in Syria. It is safe to say that analysing their position in this context will help understand the roadblocks that are being faced by humanitarian operators.

A Syrian was reported saying “Not only did Russia displace us from our land through the military operation it conducted alongside the Syrian Government and the Iranian militias five years ago in our region, but today it continues its atrocities through its power in the Security Council by halting the decision to allow humanitarian aid into our area” (Al- Jazeera, 2023). It further explained that “The mechanism established by the UN in 2014 aimed to deliver humanitarian aid to people living in opposition- controlled areas in northwest Syria without obtaining approval from the Syrian government.” The government of Syria along with its allies saw this as a clear violation of its domain of power and sovereignty of Syria.

Following the country’s internal division, the issue of humanitarian operation and movement is not only ‘cross-border’ but also ‘cross-line’. Accessibility from the government-controlled Syria (GOS) to opposition-controlled Syria, which in this paper, particularly refers to the North West Syria (NWS) has been an issue for a long time now. In lieu of this, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2585 that was renewed in 2021 mentioned this mechanism to involve a cross-line humanitarian response from the governmental areas while maintaining cross-border humanitarian operations through one border crossing, Bab Al Hawa, from Turkey”. (Al-Abdulla et al., 2023) However, this mechanism so far has proven to be inefficient as the cross-line access is still an issue.

1.3.3 Economic Sanctions

Economic Sanctions were put on the Syrian government following the civil war that broke out in 2011. After the Syrian government was seen violently trying to suppress their own people several countries and international organisations moved to impose sanctions on them. This move was an attempt to stop the Syrian government from using arms and violence against Syrians and help create space for political reconciliation. In April 2011, when the crisis started to unfold, the Obama Administration went on to impose severe sanctions against the Syrian government and third parties’ personnel who had direct links with the crisis, that untimely led to an embargo against the Syrian oil sector (United States Department of State, 2020). The US was followed by the European

Union which also adopted an embargo against the Syrian government, it additionally noted the engagement of the Syrian government and Russia. Along with this, the member states of the Arab League (Lebanon and Yemen opposed) also imposed sanctions against the Syrian regime and moved to completely isolate them by cutting off all ties until recently. (Debre, 2020).

While the aim of these sanctions is to directly impact the government and its position, the spill over is causing blockades for the rights of Syrian and humanitarian operation to a great extent. While on paper, humanitarian operation is exempted from economic actions and should not be affected by it, the reality of the matter tells another story. Humanitarian actors are constantly met with difficulty when it comes to monetary support and movement. While economic sanctions are meant for the government, they also are targeted towards certain banks within Syria that are included in the sanction, this way it makes it extremely difficult for humanitarian actors to transfer money into the country. Foreign international banks tend to not let humanitarian organisations to open bank accounts or do any transfers as they tend to stir clear of coming in the way of the government's watch that overlook sanctioned regions. Banks see humanitarian operation as less profit, more risk hence they keep their distance from domains that are under economic sanctions. (Debarre A.S. 2022)

Along with this, economic sanctions often intertwine with counter terrorism policies. These policies target those organisations and people that are deemed as 'terrorist'. ECs and IHL both share the common interest in combating illegal violence and terrorism at large in order to safeguard the rights and lives of the people that are not at fault and to maintain peace in the world. While one deals with the legal aspect and the other with economics, they both together create road-blocks for humanitarian action in terms of engagement and relief operations. While economic sanctions exempt humanitarian action, it is the CT laws and policies that directly contradict their freedom of movement and operation on the ground.

1.4 Research Objective and Question

The objective of this research is to help understand the blockades that humanitarian action faces in the wake of yet another disaster in the case of Syria, from the perspective of diplomacy and economic sanctions.

Whether its economic sanctions or diplomacy on both official and humanitarian level, there are several factors that are said to not come in the way of humanitarian action. However, the dynamics of these factors tend to be so intertwined that a much deeper analysis on how and where these aspects connect is required. For a set of jumbled cords to be unjumbled and straightened out, one must find the ends of a few strands of these cords and start the untwining to create more space

for improvement and betterment. That is what this research aims to do. Just like the jumbled cords, to understand how economic sanctions along with the shifting sands of official diplomacy have a direct impact on the humanitarian arena. That humanitarian operators on the ground further navigate on a daily basis to continue serving humanity and stay true to the principles of humanitarianism. In order, to make room for improvement in terms of giving way for humanitarian work to truly make a difference in the lives of the affected population of Syria.

1.4.2 Main Question

How do humanitarian actors adapt to the multifaceted challenges posed by the earthquake in the case of a conflict torn Syria?

1.4.3 Sub Questions

- What is the impact of track I diplomacy on the reach of humanitarian action after the earthquake of 2023?
- How did the earthquake change the diplomatic arena?
- How do economic sanctions challenge the humanitarian operations in Syria?
- How do humanitarian organisations act on the policies laid by track I actors?

1.5 Justification for this study

I am interested in understanding how humanitarian actors navigated several roadblocks in terms of aid delivery and accessibility that intensified in the wake of the earthquake. The aftermath of the earthquake brought several actors to question how the humanitarian operations that are supposed to be exempted from the effects of international politics and economic sanctions, are still facing issues on the ground. While these issues are not new to humanitarian organisations on the ground, it is important to understand how they remain steadfast in their commitment to the very essence of humanitarianism. In terms of accessibility and survival in a war zone, it is the constant strategizing and handling of humanitarian actors on the ground that should be brought to light to understand how they are finding ways around the constant shifting sands of track I diplomacy that is happening on the say of international actors.

With humanitarian operation going on in Syria, the international arena is making decisions that is ruling the future of humanitarian operation in Syria and the fate of Syrians. This can also draw its links to the way the Syrian government has been interacting with the other international actors since the earthquake and how that affects the humanitarian arena. These gap between the humanitarian arena and international arena needs to be analysed and bridged in order to make humanitarian action and accessibility more far reaching and effective.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Based on the questionnaire that was used to conduct interviews, I further designed the theoretical framework that connects the impact of economic sanctions and diplomacy to the humanitarian response through concepts that cover and overlap with Track I Diplomacy, Disaster Diplomacy and Integrated Diplomacy. Through these concepts, I aim to analyse the humanitarian response to the Earth-quake.

The theoretical framework is designed to understand how the humanitarian operators worked their way around the impact of economic sanctions and official diplomacy along with the political elements it entailed in the wake of the earthquake that was conducted on the ground from February till August 2023. The concepts that have been used, have been borrowed from the United Nations Peacebuilding framework that will particularly cover Track I Diplomacy, Track II Diplomacy and Multi-Track Diplomacy. The concept of Disaster Diplomacy and overlap with Disaster Diplomacy. Through the engagement with these concepts, I aim to analyse the impact of official diplomacy and economic sanctions on the humanitarian response done towards the earthquake of 2023.

1.7 Chapter Outline

The first chapter covers the background of the research followed by the problem and justification of what this research aims to bring to the table. This is followed by the research questions and sub-questions that this research will try to answer. The second chapter covers the literature review wherein the research gaps and concepts along with theories that will apply to this research will be discussed. The third chapter talks about the methodology that was used during the fieldwork to obtain data for this paper. The fourth chapter discusses the analysis of the data gathered during the fieldwork and aims to answer the main question and the sub questions. Finally, the fifth chapter, wraps up the discussions that surround the findings and recommendations on what can be done in the future.

Chapter-2 Literature Review

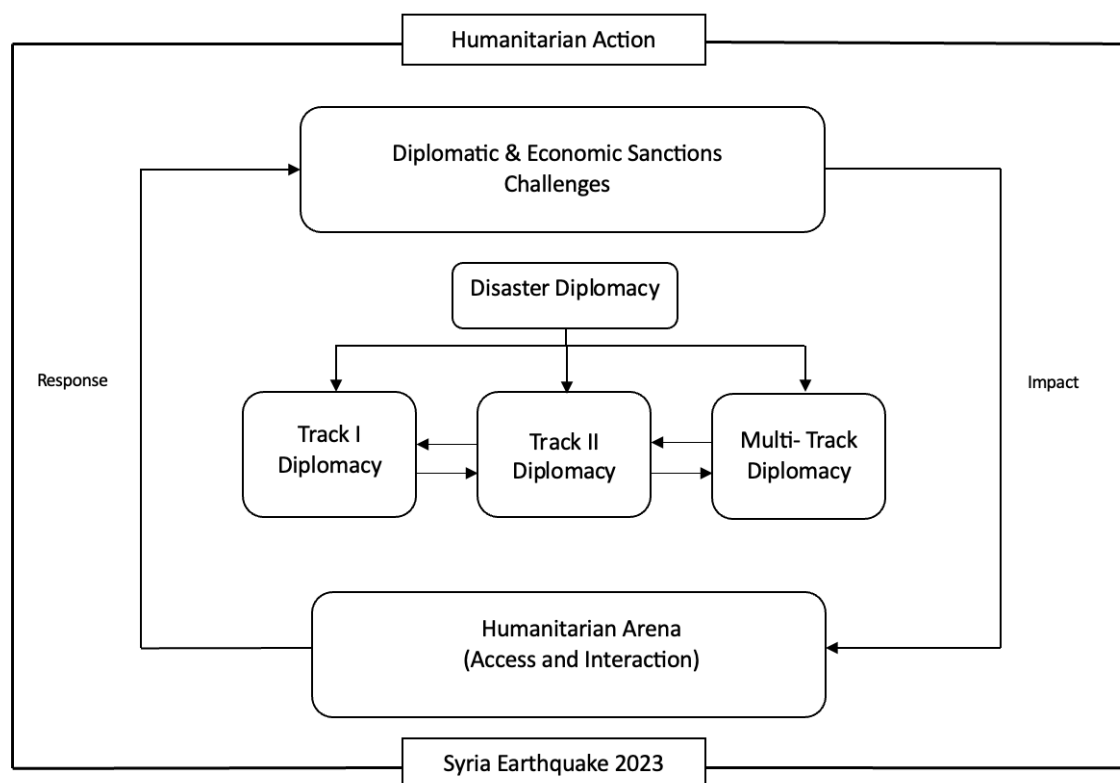


Figure 1 (Framework)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the concepts and theories that guide the process of analysing the humanitarian response to the earthquake of 2023. A study conducted by Malhouni and Mabrouki, (2023) highlighted the challenges of logistics in conflict zones in the case of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic. While in this research the authors highlighted the risks and key obstacles that humanitarian operators face when it comes to humanitarian logistics. To further understand the key challenges, my own research focuses on accessibility on the ground that is impacted by diplomatic manoeuvring and economic sanctions implementation, through the concepts of Track I, Track II and Multi-Track Diplomacy. Borrowed from the peacebuilding framework. The framework also includes disaster diplomacy as an overlaying concept within all the three interwoven concepts mentioned above. While the peacebuilding framework as the name suggests talks about peacebuilding, this research focuses on the tracks diplomatic understanding and impact along with economic sanctions on humanitarian action.

Track I diplomacy, Track II diplomacy, and Multi-Track diplomacy are the three interconnected notions that serve as the theoretical foundation for this study. These ideas serve as the prisms through which I seek to investigate the complex interplay between diplomatic initiatives, economic

sanctions, and their direct influence on humanitarian assistance in the wake of the earthquake of 2023 in the case of Syria.

2.1.1 Disaster Diplomacy

There is a saying that says that disaster doesn't wait or knock before striking. Disasters as phenomena are often seen as unpredictable, "disasters are not 'natural', neither in the sense of being from nature nor in the sense of being normal and acceptable" (Kelman et al., 2016). Disasters are made by the actions of people who can create factors that may or may not lead to one. This can be seen in the case of Syria, nothing that has happened in the last 12 years or what happened in February 2023 has been natural. The civil war was not natural and nor was the impact of the earthquake that took the lives of more than 8000 Syrians. The elements that led to the level of destruction a "natural event" caused dial back to the international political disagreements between state actors and the internal power struggle. "Acknowledging disasters as endogenous processes, intertwined with conflict, draws our attention to characteristics such as poor governance, ethnic fractionalization, and economic deprivation that can make a group vulnerable to both disasters and conflict" (Reinhardt and Lutmar, 2022). While disasters or natural events are bound to happen, the effects of it are human made, the same can be said about how a disaster in a conflict zone shapes the aftermath of a said event. As Explained by Kelman (2011) "disaster-related activities often influence peace processes in the short-term—over weeks and months—provided that a non-disaster-related basis already existed for the reconciliation". In a conflict zone, wherein many actors are involved, a disaster can draw attention to the humanitarian crisis's that unfolds in the wake of another event that requires the humanitarian arena to step in and mobilise resource to tackle the situation at hand. "However, recognizing the participation of various actors, their interconnections, and the larger dynamics of conflict transformation that have an impact on the delivery of humanitarian aid in a contentious environment" (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010b). One such element can be diplomatically strategizing around the disaster and the diplomatic actors manoeuvring that can create dialogue or challenges on the ground and in the humanitarian arena. While United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is the organization that arches over several humanitarian operations in Syria, it is also a factor to consider that United Nations Security Council is a major player in the resolution and policy decision making. As it was the UNSC resolution making that wholistically decides on how humanitarian response should be provided on ground to Syria. In order to connect the diplomatic decision making in terms of humanitarian response to the earthquake that the concept of disaster diplomacy is required to be adopted in this thesis. As it helps understand the multiple diplomatic factors that originate in the

event of a disaster and affects the humanitarian arena directly in Syria especially after the earthquake.

2.1.2 Formal Diplomacy Effect on Humanitarian Operation

Mapendere (2006) describes Track I Diplomacy which is also called Formal diplomacy as, “the primary peace- making tool of a state’s foreign policy. It is carried out by diplomats, high-ranking government officials, and heads of states and is aimed at influencing the structures of political power.” At its core, the concept connects governments in the international forum to deal with issues that affect countries at large. In the case of humanitarianism, the concept of track I diplomacy shows its prevalence in terms of how countries discuss international and regional issues like border governance, armed conflicts or even disaster management. With the existence of several international organisations that have been established as a platform to discuss these issues, the main international organisations that draws attention in the context of this paper in particular is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As Explained by Wenaweser & Alavi (2020) “the UNSC’s decision making directly decides on the appropriate measures to restore international peace and security, further preventing or ending such crimes and the human suffering that they entail”. Decisions that are taken on whether a peaceful resolution can be reached between countries affects the lives of the population that make up the country at large. When these international forums decide the fate of millions or billions of lives at a given point, they also decide the fates of those humanitarian operations that are running on the ground for humanity.

However, when it comes to complying with humanitarian accessibility and humanitarian laws, the decisions making of the same can create a point of contention between countries involved. As it is in the case of economic sanctions, the decisions made by track I diplomats to impose sanctions on the behest of the foreign policy that they are employed to protect and defend, can divide participants of the forum that they interact in. “the relationship between the pain brought by the sender and the resolve of the target is the key to achieving the expected result.” (Nephew 2017). Sanctions over the years have evolved in terms of being targeted, but the truth on the ground suggest otherwise. Although on the international level, the implementation of resolution 2664, that states “the provision, processing or payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources or the provision of goods and services necessary to ensure the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance or to support other activities that support basic human needs are permitted and are not a violation of the asset freezes imposed by that organ or its sanctions committees.” (UN Press 2022a). On ground the situation seems far from it. A technique favoured by Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris called ‘carpet bombing’ explains that just like “carpet bombing unknowingly kills innocent

civilians be it the young or old, economic sanctions also inevitably impose privatisation, disease and hunger on the poorer strata of society” (Research Handbook on Economic Sanctions, 2021). Economic sanctions that are put in place by international actors are to a great extent affecting humanitarian arena, and it is this gap that needs to be looked into, in order to bridge the hollow space that is keeping humanitarian operations from fully engaging on ground.

When international diplomacy is debating international issues through track I diplomacy means, i.e foreign policies, they take decisions on matters that concern accessibility, import/exports and many other factors that are integral to the humanitarian arena. This study aims to see how humanitarian operators act on and around these Track I decisions, to continue doing their job of serving humanity.

Having the international debate be analysed through the lens of track I diplomacy gives way to include the political debate that has a direct effect on the humanitarian arena in terms of operation, accessibility and procurement.

2.1.3 Study on Track II Diplomacy:

Track II diplomacy as defined by Montville (1991) is the “unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict”. Track II diplomacy was coined as concept to help bridge the gaps that track I diplomacy is not able to deal with, as it is constricted by foreign policies. Track II diplomacy is when non state actors like researchers, NGOs and even private sector interact with one another on matters that are deemed as issues that transcend international borders. While the concept stretches itself across countless sectors, in this paper its significance can be seen as one particular branch that has gained significant importance on its own: Humanitarian Diplomacy. This research aims to understand how humanitarian diplomacy works through negotiations that directly affect matters relating to accessibility on the ground.

“The second track of diplomacy is a humanitarian diplomacy tool for creating confidence aimed at resolving a certain international conflict or reducing tension through informal negotiations.” (Simons and Velikaya, 2023) Humanitarian actors be it operators or researchers have knowledge and information about how negotiation on a daily basis is conducted to navigate track I diplomatic decision making on the aspects of accessibility and economic sanctions. “Humanitarian organizations, activists, international agencies, policymakers, and scholars alike have questioned the rationale and the ethical quandaries behind economic sanctions.” The humanitarian arena while stated in theory that it is exempted from the impact of economic sanctions, is indeed under

pressure of the sanctions. As it is not a body that operates in isolation from the rest of the society, humanitarian action comes under pressure when it is the only means to survival for innocent lives that are caught in the crossfires of a conflict zone. Many critics of economic sanctions have emphasized on the fact that “despite being a targeted and passive form of foreign policy, economic sanctions still have a direct impact on innocent bystanders” (Gonzalez, 2022). In this study the impact of economic sanctions on humanitarian arena will be studied.

Economic sanctions as it is, has a drastic impact on the economic situation of a country. However, in the event of a major disaster in a conflict zone that is under international scrutiny and economic sanctions, the conversation brings about many issues that humanitarian operator must deal with every day. This research draws upon how track II diplomacy in this case humanitarian diplomacy navigates several issues on the ground to keep their operation going.

2.1.4 Multi- Track Diplomacy- Interplay between track I diplomacy and Humanitarian Diplomacy

“Multitrack approaches can be understood as a way of considering different peacebuilding initiatives taking place at different levels of society, with the intention of leveraging the positive impact of linkages between initiatives, while preventing or mitigating negative impact.” (Relief Web, 2020) Non- state actors like NGOs and international organizations. “Multi-Track Diplomacy is a diplomacy concept that describes the process of world peace in the international system through a combination of government channel diplomacy, group channel diplomacy, and individual channel diplomacy.” (Firdaus, 2020) While multi track diplomacy talks about peacebuilding as the focus point at large, in this research I aim to use the concept of multi-track diplomacy to help understand the synergy between official diplomacy and other levels of diplomacy that particularly pertains to humanitarian diplomacy. To emphasis, “Multitrack approaches can be understood as a way of considering different peacebuilding initiatives taking place at different levels of society, with the intention of leveraging the positive impact of linkages between initiatives, while preventing or mitigating negative impact.” (Federer et al. 2019)

This thesis aims to understand the impact of track I diplomacy and economic sanctions on the humanitarian arena in a conflict zone that was struck by a disaster. Further, to understand how humanitarian diplomacy adapts to the shifting sands of track I diplomacy that directly impacts the standing of economic sanctions on the ground and the very negotiation of accessibility. Economic sanctions in particular is a lens that help understand the intertwining of track I diplomacy in the humanitarian arena and humanitarian diplomacy (track II) constant navigation of the international level decision making. “For humanitarian operations, it is important to note that sanctions are not

only triggered by financial transactions, but can also come into play with the provision of services or the delivery of goods, even if no payments are involved.” (Walker, 2021)

This research tries to answer the research question at hand, not just by one level of diplomacy but from the perspective of on ground realities in the humanitarian arena, research focusing on humanitarian arena and so on. In times of crisis, such as earthquakes, while humanitarian operators are frequently in the frontline of humanitarian response initiatives. The existence of track I diplomacy decisions in the humanitarian arena and the negotiations around these decisions on the part of humanitarian operators, identifies the fact that humanitarian arena is not away from the atrocities of a conflict zone.

The intricate relation between official diplomacy and humanitarian response comes to use in order to understand how the actions and decisions of one affects the other in times of crisis. Thus, multi-track diplomacy is a thorough framework for examining the interplay between political moves, economic sanctions, and humanitarian initiatives in the wake of a disaster like an earthquake.

2.1.5 Instrumentalization of a Disaster

When it comes to a disaster that hits a place that is already strained with a conflict, the toll of distress and damage adds up drastically. However, when the disaster is seen as an opportunity or tool to further one’s own agenda in the political arena, the pressure builds up in the humanitarian arena as well. Humanitarian arena is often perceived as a sector of the conflict resolution, isolated from the rest of the society. As of 2022 “Adopting resolution 2664 (2022) ... the 15-member organ decided that the provision, processing or payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources or the provision of goods and services necessary to ensure the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance or to support other activities that support basic human needs are permitted and are not a violation of the asset freezes imposed by that organ or its sanctions committees.” (UN Press, 2022b). However, even with the resolution 2664 in place, the humanitarian arena exists in the same politized domain of existence as the rest of the world. This is a gap that shows itself very prominently in the wake of a disaster, be it conflict created or a natural phenomenon that occurs in its own time.

In this thesis, to understand how a disaster can be an instrument to further a cause or political agenda is an aim that does not just help one understand how diplomacy plays a major role in the humanitarian arena. But also highlight how politics on an international or regional level can shape the aftermath of a disaster.

2.2 Conclusion

To conclude, this theoretical framework offers a methodical way to layout the complex relationships between diplomacy, financial sanctions, and humanitarian assistance in the case of the Syrian earthquake in 2023. This will help lead to a deeper understanding of how humanitarian actors interact with these dynamics to deliver vital aid to those affected by the earthquake against the back- drop of a protracted Syrian crisis. It also enables a thorough analysis of the before and after scenarios, the role of disaster diplomacy, and the points of convergence between international and humanitarian diplomacy, that directly affects the humanitarian arena.

Chapter -3 Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain my methods of collecting and analysing data for the research through interviews and news analysis. This research draws on seven in depth interviews and analysis of the going on news generation over the period of several months to understand how humanitarian operators on the ground constantly negotiate their way through several challenges. Also, it will further help understand how the intertwining of track I diplomacy and economic sanctions directly affect their operation on the ground.

To understand this further, I wish to draw upon the reason behind why I chose to research the earthquake aftermath in Syria. Syria as a country has been going through a war, inflation, disease outbreak and many other severe challenges, that made the earthquake the very last thing that they required. However, a disaster never comes knocking. However, this 12-year war has had an impact on my academic journey since before I started writing this research paper and way before the earthquake itself. Furthermore, even the humanitarian operators that are living through the catastrophe and working tirelessly to make a difference are constantly left to fend for themselves in the face of an armed conflict. The research aims to draw upon these challenges. In the case of Syria, the problem needs as much attention it can get, in order to find an end to the conflict and its implications on the ground. This research merely draws upon one aspect of a complex web of issues that make up the Syrian conflict as we know.

3.2 Research Methodology

I used two research methodologies for this research which are explained as below. For the collection of research data, the usage of various reports, writings published by humanitarian researchers was done.

3.2.1 Primary Data- Qualitative Interviews

I conducted in depth interviews for the collection of data from three different sectors that are directly linked to the humanitarian arena. Six in depth interviews were conducted with humanitarian actors who from their own respective area of focus studied the earthquake and post-earthquake humanitarian response on the ground in GOS and NWS areas. The groups that I collected my data from were- three humanitarian operators, three humanitarian researchers and one track I diplomat assigned to the humanitarian aid desk of the said ministry of foreign affairs.

The interviews were conducted in a semi structured manner wherein a questionnaire was prepared in advance to be used during the interviews. As I wished to explore how a disaster of this magnitude that affected two parts of Syria, the sensitivity of the subject at hand was kept in mind.

In doing so, the interviews that were conducted were made as flexible as possible and while they were conducted online via video calls, the comfort and willingness of the interviewees to answer or avoid answering said questions was well respected. The majority of the interviews were discussion based wherein (open-ended interview), the interviewees indulged in a general discussion of what they knew and understood of the topic and sub topics at hand. Each interview lasted an hour.

The way through which I got in touch with the said interviewees was through snowballing method (Geddes et. Al, 2017) wherein the first humanitarian actor put me contact, so on and so forth. The duration of the interviews was from 60 to 70 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with the due consent of the interviewees.

3.2.2 Secondary Data- News Analysis

This study observed the news reporting that were being conducted, especially in the aftermath of the earthquake. While there are various media outlets that report on events that entail disaster of this level. The data collection from News did include some aspects of Event Phase Oriented News Summarization (Norambuena, et. Al, 2023). Through the use of EPONS, I aimed to extraction data from media outlets and several blogs that proved to be reliable. While there is a quantitative aspect to EPONS, in this research I used the qualitative aspect in terms to segregating news that was being reported by media outlets that are internationally recognized as unbiased and fair. In the case of blogs that I use, I have checked their source of information and references, to make sure that the information is verified.

3.3 Limitations and Obstacles

The challenges that I faced during my fieldwork were more or less anticipated however, there were some that were unexpected. While reaching out to humanitarian operators on the ground who I wished to interview, many were hesitant to sit down for an interview. The data collection period was in the months of August and September, a few who replied to my request stated that with the economic sanctions back on track, everything was closing up again. Hence, many humanitarian operators were busy with the operations on the ground. Owing to this the number of humanitarian actors I could interview were seven in total.

Another challenge that was prevalent was that all the interviews were conducted online via zoom or google teams. The fact that I could not be there in person to conduct these interviews came in the way of establishing a sense of trust with few humanitarian actors. While five humanitarian actors were comfortable in having a free conversation with me, two seemed to have been on guard and alert with what they wished to share with me. I also noticed that the four humanitarian actors

that I interviewed, two operating in the NWS area while the other two were GOS based. This helped me draw a parallel between the operations of the two regions. However, it is noteworthy that the GOS based humanitarian operators were less comfortable in engaging in a conversation as compared to the two NWS based humanitarian operators. Another observation that was made was that the position that every humanitarian actor had within their respective organization directly affected their level of openness to discuss the intricate details with me. Their respective level of seniority and responsibility affected their level of trust during the interviews.

3.4 Ethical Choices and Positionality

For this study, owing to the sensitivity of the topic at hand and the area in which this research is focused was something that took utmost importance when the research was being conducted. Having studied the conflict previously during my bachelors, I always understood the situation in Syria from afar, as a student from India who had no ties to Syria, or even the Middle East, always made me feel like an outsider who could not even begin to understand the severity of the situation there. However, when the earthquake struck in February 2023, something drew me closer to Syria. As I was already half way through my Masters, having studied humanitarian action as a course, the disaster that inflicted pain on the already grief-stricken people of Syria, somehow felt personal and emotionally draining. The idea behind choosing to focus on the case of Syria post disaster, made me as a student who is currently residing in the Netherlands felt obligated to use the knowledge that I had an opportunity to gain during my masters to be put to good use and towards the betterment of the innocent Syrians.

Before I started out my data collection, the ideas that I had regarding the aftermath of the earthquake of 2023 included factors like framing one side as the villain while the other side as those who were trying to help diplomatically and in the middle of it was the humanitarian arena that was away from the effects of these policy advocacies. As suggested by many international actors that humanitarian action is exempted from economic sanctions and is to remain neutral in political situations to uphold the humanitarian principles. The reality of the subject at hand is that, humanitarian arena does not exist in a vacuum, it very much exists in the politicized world of today. Wherein resilience is tested on one's own ability to see the bigger picture in order to give meaning to the actions and operation that is being enacted on the ground on a daily basis.

This research has been conducted to highlight the undying resilience of all the humanitarian actors involved and further their work of helping those who are stuck in the middle of a conflict. However, their own lives and right to privacy have been well respected. As before the interviews were conducted each and every humanitarian actor was sent a one-page write-up that mentioned

the scope and aim of this research. They were also sent an informed consent form that was well within the university guidelines. During the interviews, every interviewee was asked if they were comfortable enough to allow me to record the interviews. It was also made clear that their personal information will be dealt with utmost care and respect and the data collected will be completely anonymized. Also, as a researcher, I made sure that none of the interviewees felt disrespected or unsafe and also repeatedly informed them that their level of comfort and privacy was going to be upheld over everything else.

Chapter -4: Findings and Analysis

When the earthquake struck in February a chain of events followed that brings to light the level of change and shift a disaster can bring with it. The first response in the aftermath was about rescuing civilians who were stuck under the rubble of the damaged buildings. Owing to the ongoing conflict and different powers in controls, the humanitarian aid and accessibility was heavily compromised. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the political power play and diplomatic interactions between international actors (including the government of Syria) brought about what is understood as “earthquake diplomacy”. Earthquake diplomacy on the Syrian government’s part created space for it to push its agenda of deisolating itself and pointing fingers at many international actors that have imposed economic sanctions on Syria. The government of Syria stating that obstructions to humanitarian operations was caused by the long existing economic sanctions, brought to light the question on whether or not the humanitarian arena is affected by it.

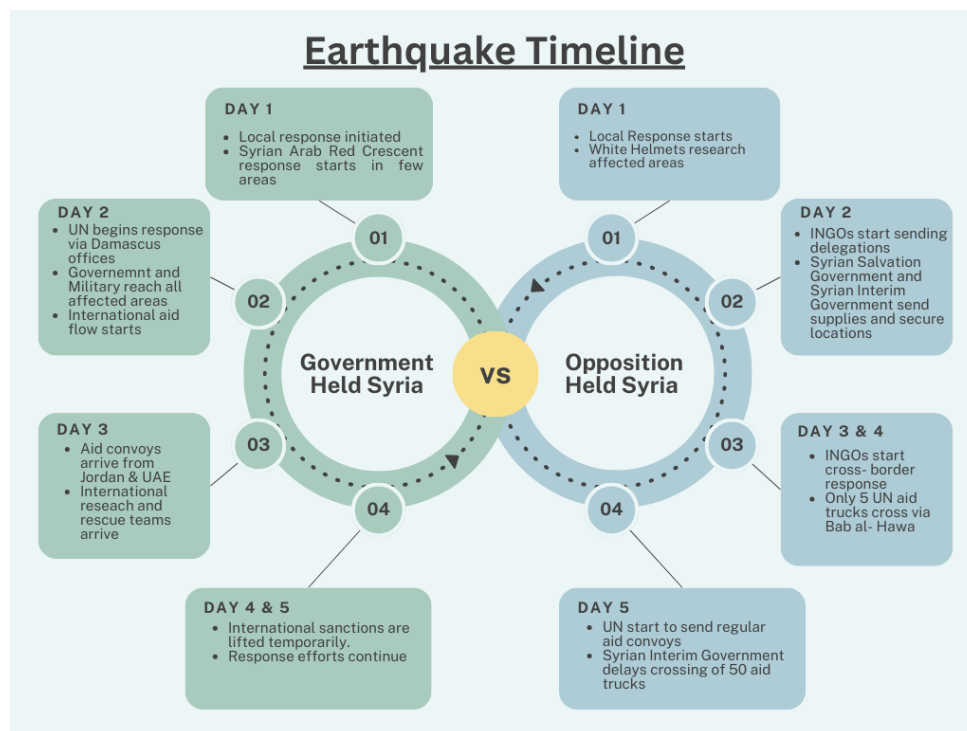


Table 1- Adapted from Ekzayez, A., 2023. “Key Considerations: Humanitarian Response to the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake in Syria.”

Following this, how international and regional actors have played a role in handling the aftermath of this disaster has had effects that were visible in the humanitarian handling of the matter at hand. While, the operations on the ground were already on going, right after the earthquake, humanitarian operators that I had a chance to interview stated that “*on-going operations were halted and all resources were to focus on the response to the earthquake*” (humanitarian operators A, B & C). Despite, the pre-existing challenges and the add on of what the earthquake brought, the humanitarian arena significantly navigated the shifting sands of international politics and were resilient in working

tirelessly to respond to better to the earthquake up until the UNSC resolution to extend the post-earthquake accessibility was vetoed in July.

Based on the data collected till August 2023, the key findings were classified into three main categories, which are listed are sections in this chapter. The five themes are, (1) Challenges to Humanitarian Response, wherein the interplay between international and local response to government controlled and northwest Syria was observed. (2) the Impact of Economic Sanctions, that highlights the effect economic sanctions have had on accessibility and operation of Humanitarian operation. (3) Multitrack Diplomacy, explains the interaction between track I and humanitarian diplomacy. (4) Instrumentalization of Aid, draws upon the ways through which humanitarian aid was used as a tool in a highly politicised way.

4.2 Challenges to Humanitarian Response

In a conflict zone, wherein governments are at odds with each other, the humanitarian arena feels direct effects on international decision making at international organizations like the effects of economic sanctions. This was majorly visible during the aid accessibility that was delayed to the North West during the earthquake (Relief Web, 2023a). It was reported that the Syrian government was obstructing aid delivery to the north west as the “aid was required elsewhere” i.e., Government controlled areas. (Humanitarian Actor-A).

Owing to the IHL’s law on accessibility, many organizations that work in the north west of Syria are deemed as “terrorist groups” by the Syrian government. One such example is Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) organization that works in the north west opposition held area of Syria (MSF, 2023).

4.2.1 International vs Local Response

The response in GOS and NWS was very different from one another. The following segments give a detailed understanding of the response in both the areas and how humanitarian actors strategies around the uncertain terrain of Syrian regionality.

In the wake of the catastrophic earthquake, the humanitarian arena that operates in the country was severely affected itself, with damaged infrastructure and conflict lines, yet the humanitarian operators on the ground powered through the challenges that they were being presented with. It was reported that immediately after the earthquake NGOs on the ground started their response without wasting any time. MSF (2023) reported that their immediate reflex was to support hospitals and health centres that were based Idlib and Aleppo provinces, and provided them with emergency, trauma and surgical kits and medical supplies to help them with the initial influx. Side

by side humanitarian operators based in NWS mentioned that while borders were closed off and internal line of control too was in active, they immediately started using their stocks of supplies that was stored in different parts of the affected areas. Despite the rapid consolidation of resources and man power, the response was severely affected due to the political situation on the ground.

“This makes the impact of humanitarian operations in GOS and NWS differ due to the access restrictions and levels of international assistance. In GOS due to the conflict, the restriction to access some areas is an issue, while in NWS, the lack of formal recognition of authority, makes accessibility and aid delivery restricted as well” (Ekzayez, A., 2023).

4.2.2 Response to Government Controlled Syria

Right after the earthquake, with the damage to the roads and routes around the areas affected was first cleared out by the government in order to help assistance reach these areas. The key organizations that were involved in the early response along with the Syrian government agencies were the Syrian Arab Red cross, International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations and many others. The aid that was delivered to Damascus by the UN and many other states was sent for “disaster struck Syrians” however, this aid was being made to go through the government of Syria and so was the control of accessibility for humanitarian assistance” (Daher, 2023). When I inquired about how the internal communication between organization offices based in different parts of Syria was like, humanitarian operator C stated that they were completely focused on the operation that was based in GOS areas, moreover she emphasized that she did not know much about other offices of her organization that are based elsewhere in Syria-

“I do not know what happened in the North, we are based in Damascus thus I do not know what the office (same organization) in the Northwest did at the time” (Humanitarian Operator- C)

It was also reported that the government of Syria pressured the sanctioning countries to lift the sanctions as it was obstructing humanitarian operations on the ground. “However even after the temporary relaxation of the economic sanctions, the Syrian government had not prioritised emergency and response to the earthquake” (Ekzayez, 2023). When I asked the Damascus based humanitarian operators about the level of difference that the economic sanctions made, one stated-

“the discussion on the economic sanctions only started off when the international media highlighted and reported on the severity of the situation and the urgency to act” – (Humanitarian Operator- C)

While still recovering from the aftershocks of the earthquakes, many international non-government organizations also made donations to Damascus based humanitarian organizations, to help from a far before reaching Syria themselves.

4.2.3 Response to Opposition Held Area (North West Syria)

While GOS got rapid response in the aftermath of the earthquake, the same cannot be said in the case of NWS. The earthquake was followed by immediate response from opposition authorities that have control over NWS areas, along with international organizations like MSF, White Helmets etc that are based in these areas. While the emergency responders were from INGOs and local organizations, the lack of equipment and funding caused a huge roadblock to the rescue operations in the first few days.

“humanitarian corridors were closed off and in the northwest, aid supply is easier to be received via the international corridors via Türkiye than from the government controlled regions”- Humanitarian Operator A

Due to political disagreements and infrastructure damage the cross-border accessibility was blocked via Türkiye (Skyle, 2023). As the world watched in horror from afar, humanitarian workers all agreed that while the negotiations were on going at the official diplomatic level, they tied up with local actors to first bring as many people to safety as possible. Given the severe winter and the pre-existing issue of the cholera outbreak, humanitarian operators on the ground first provided emergency kits (including basic hygiene items like sanitary pads, shampoos etc and blankets) to the people.

“owing to the on-going conflict, we always have emergency kits stocked in different areas, so when people were rushed to safety, our first task was to make sure that the people had basic items with them” – Humanitarian operator B

While safety is a big issue in Syria right now, humanitarian worker A explained that they chose to set up their medical facility away from the major populated areas as it is the more populated areas that are targeted for major attacks. This claim was confirmed by the international media when it was reported that the affected areas in the north west have been bombed by the Government of Syria around 132 times (till April) in the aftermath of the earthquake. (Relief Web, 2023e)

Hence, the policies that official diplomacy puts on an international level, wherein laws of the international humanitarian law and economic sanctions of the West in this case are not on just states but on people on the ground. Whether it is the innocent civilians of Syria who have been subjected to much atrocities of international actors or the INGOs that are operating to help them, none of the said actors are tucked away from the effects of international policies or politics.

4.3 Impact of Economic Sanctions

After the earthquake the Syrian government also adopted what was called as “Earthquake Diplomacy” wherein it used its own position of being the government to a disaster hit country, to

push its own agenda to gain other countries support and have the economic sanctions relaxed for humanitarian aid. Although the conversation between Damascus and other countries had started to pick up since 2022, the earthquake surely paced up the process of deisolating the Syrian government (Brookings, 2022). This acceleration was due to the earthquake, and gave the Syrian Government a voice to state that it was the economic sanctions that was causing an obstruction to search and rescue operations along with humanitarian operations (Chehayeb, 2023).

Sanctions that are put on Syria are seen as an element that does not affect the humanitarian arena, the humanitarian operators who indulge in negotiation not just with the Syrian authorities, whether the government itself or the opposition groups that controls the north western parts, state otherwise. The humanitarian operators that I interviewed all agreed that whether it is the GOS or NWS areas, economic sanctions cause a roadblock for them. Humanitarian operator based in GOS area clearly stated,

“we as a humanitarian NGO are not sanctioned but our suppliers often face the fear of contradicting with the guidelines of ESs that affects our supply chain”. – Humanitarian Operator- B

Right after the earthquake the United States (US) along with United Kingdom (UK), European Union (EU) and Switzerland adopted economic sanctions. The US also implemented General License 23 for a period of 6 months, which states that “all transactions with the GOS that are directly related to the relief work concerning the earthquake that was otherwise prohibited are authorized, except for a few types of transactions” (Moret, 2023, p-10).

While the political tug of war between many said actors, humanitarian actors were also trying to get access through government channels via visas and entry clearances in order to help with the operation on the ground. Humanitarian workers B & C also mentioned that while they were waiting for travel clearance and visas, their respective organizations made donations to other humanitarian NGOs that were operating in the government-controlled Syria. This was a way to not only provide a helping hand to other organizations but to also show the government of Syria that the said organizations meant to solely help the country in distress and were still committed to not choosing sides.

One particular aspect that all the three humanitarian operators agreed on was, that economic sanctions severely halt the operations on the ground. As seen in the case of the opposition held northwest, even though the manpower was available for search and rescue, the lack of equipment and accessibility to bring this equipment in, did result in loss of countless lives. The economic sanctions exemptions were stated as useful but significantly delayed as the severity of the situation

required rapid response, as the “immediate window of 72- hours is the most critical to save lives” (Moret, 2023, p-3).

In terms of economic sanctions humanitarian operator- A highlighted stated that while humanitarian arena is exempted from economic sanctions, the resources that are procured by local businesses are not given this immunity.

“There is no list of suppliers that are given protection from the sanctions, our local suppliers have to really tip toe around the guidelines... even if they are based in regions that have sanctioned entities, they have a risk of being scrutinised” – Humanitarian Operator- A

In fact, these businesses being specific to Syria are constantly under the fear being sanctioned themselves. As per the report from Carter Center (2023), “the implementation of the GL 23 does not really help in this case. In the GOS area the GL 23 does not allow transactions that concern entities whose owners of 50% or more lies in the hands of the Syrian government”. This caused a level of confusion amongst the NGOs that are based in GOS as the report quoted a humanitarian operator stating that “the GL23 allowed us to engage with the authorities in GOS but left out SDNs”. The SDNs “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List”, is a list in the economic sanctions that covers individuals who are not operating the GOS but are still under sanctions in the North West or North East of Syria (Office of Foreign Assets Controls, no date). This confusion also caused problems for humanitarian organizations working in the NWS that is controlled by the Hayat Tahrir Al- Sham (HTS). The SDN list also includes personnel’s that are under the strict scrutiny of counterterrorism measures, hence GL23 does not permit transactions that involve the SDN list (Moret, 2023, p-12). This is why the key challenge faced by the NWS to procure earthquake relief equipment after the earthquake.

Humanitarian B reiterated that stating that these economic sanctions are to some extent *“copy & pasted and what worked in one region does not necessarily work in another”*. This was further assured by the lack of guidelines of the GL23. Humanitarian operator C also stated that “if they saw the need to create new licenses then it is clear then why are the economic sanctions not being revised?”

As it was evident in both the GOS and NWS areas, the resilience of the humanitarian operators who were themselves struck by the earthquake, worked tirelessly to continue their operation on the ground. Despite the fact that humanitarian principles uphold the importance of political unbiasedness and impartiality, the humanitarian operators on the ground are constantly met with hurdles that makes them indulge in negotiations for accessibility and aid deliveries. The negotiations, whether it is with government authorities or it is at checkpoints, makes what we understand as “humanitarian diplomacy”.

4.4 Multi Track Diplomacy- Interaction & Navigation

When it comes to International Politics, the concept of Track I diplomacy is put in place to understand the true essence of official diplomacy wherein countries represented by government officials sit in on discussions that deal with global issues (Mapendere, 2002). For it is the international negotiations and constant back and forth, that has been playing a key role in matters of accessibility and impact of economic sanctions that have a direct effect on the humanitarian arena

Right after the Earthquake in February, the international arena witnessed rapid moves that were done to clear the way and better help the humanitarian operations on the ground, with the relaxation of US sanctions (10th February) and European Union's restrictive measures (23rd February), along with the opening of two border crossings from Turkiye (Agha, 2023). The ground operations in the humanitarian arena were being made to get more access to the aid. However, with damaged infrastructure like roads and political instability, accessibility was a challenge both at border crossings (from Turkiye) and line crossings (line of control between the Syrian government and oppositions-controlled areas). Owing to the political conflict within Syria, aid delivery and accessibility is more restricted in the internal crossline dynamics (Agha, 2023). While international negotiations were on going, many countries in Europe were directly in contact with their aid funded organizations.

“They highlighted that the international response to the earthquake surrounded plans to focus on acute assistance in the initial months. The restoration of vital facilities was to restore medical services, water and educational services along with psychological care” (Ministry of General Affairs, 2023).

Given the severity of the ongoing conflict and the humanitarian crisis pertaining to the earthquake, many organizations that are funded by several European countries, have been getting unearmarked and predictable financial support that greatly helped operations on ground to start their rescue operations rapidly (Humanitarian Diplomat, 2023).

While donor countries have been supporting the humanitarian organizations on the ground with unearmarked funding, it has been stated by the humanitarian diplomat (2023) that they get operation reports regularly. However, after the earthquake he stated that the said country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' humanitarian desk was in constant contact with the humanitarian operators on the ground trying to identify any nuisance and take the right steps wherever necessary. The European country's Ministry also stated in its report that while the European Union's economic sanctions exempt humanitarian action, humanitarian operators have reported that-

“They face issues with overcompliance by suppliers of aid supplies, who often are reluctant to export to Syria” (Ministry of General Affairs, 2023a).

4.5 Instrumentalization of Aid

It was reported that the Syrian President took a week to open the 2 additional humanitarian corridors (Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra’ee) from Turkey, at the behest of UAE. (Hilani, 2023). The Syrian government’s strategy to incentivise the earthquake in order to deisolate itself after a period of 12 years, was seen as a move that gained momentum due to a catastrophic disaster. The diplomatic talks were already picking up since before the earthquake, with countries like Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, and Algeria re-establishing relations with the Syrian government.

Humanitarian actors were at the forefront of dealing with these negotiations, the humanitarian researchers were the one analyzing the situation from a distance and having enough literature on the Syrian crisis, gives them a plethora of research and knowledge about how the earthquake has played a role in creating branches of theories that come out of the international negotiations that were triggered by what can be dubbed as “Earthquake Diplomacy”. Several researchers were closely watching the ways through which this catastrophic disaster was instrumentalized by Syrian Government and its allies in order to further their agenda on the so-called issue of breach of sovereignty of the land borders of Syria that as per legal terms should be under the control of the government of Syria. Through this the connection between the Allies of the Syrian Government and their involvement in the humanitarian aid flow is greatly highlighted. It also influences the coordination between Syria Government and their decisions over allowing humanitarian operation in the government-controlled parts of Syria.

On the other hand, the earthquake in some way was a wake-up call for international state actors and international organizations like the UN on how complex this situation was and the limited power they had to do something about it. Both the Humanitarian Researchers that I interviewed agreed that owing to the 12 years on going war, the situation keeps getting worse and difficult to solve. Humanitarian researcher- A stated:

“the severity of the situation was a given. We knew that this is going to be complicated. But there also a sense of realisation and an understanding of the humanitarian costs of this war cause what we have observed is that the problem keeps getting postponed. That is making people suffers further”

Not only are economic sanctions a roadblock to aid deliveries but has also been used in the Syrian diplomatic strategy to politicise humanitarian aid and delivery. When it comes to accessibility, according to the International Humanitarian Law, unconditional right to access is not provided, in

fact the host country's government¹ has to grant access to INGOs that are solely there to help human lives (Marin and Bin Ali, 2021).

When it comes to the operations of humanitarian organisations, principles and international law suggest that the humanitarian arena is to stay neutral i.e not choose sides and simply serve humanity. On the other side of it, international actors like the countries involved are to keep their objections and policies separate and far from the humanitarian arena. This international humanitarian law is in place to differ between international politics and the humanitarian arena (European External Action Service, 2021). However, it is important to note that the humanitarian arena does not function in a vacuum, it exists within the same politicized sphere of existence that the rest of the sectors survive in. International policies and ever shifting sands of the political world are always finding cracks in the floor that divides the political sphere from the humanitarian arena to seep in. With this earthquake, there were many cracks that resurfaced in the humanitarian arena that did not just cause roadblocks on the ground, but brought out the political strategies of national and international actors to cause major obstructions.

Whether it is one side, causing obstructions or it is the other side making matters worse in terms of not extending the lifting of economic sanctions, the effects ultimately boil down to the impact on civilian lives and the humanitarian operations on the ground.

To start with, it was reported that Russia vetoed the resolution that called for an extension for the cross-border movement through Bab al Hawa and al- Rai in July. (Relief Web, 2023b)

“We condemn the veto by Russia today on the Syria cross-border resolution. This resolution is a critical lifeline for millions of Syrians, with no viable alternative to meet the growing humanitarian needs in northwest Syria. It defies reason and principle, that Security Council members would vote to not maintain all avenues of aid access for vulnerable Syrians at this time.” (Relief Web, 2023b)

However, what did not attain much attention was that the West did not extend the economic sanctions relief period either. It was explained that

“a 9-month extension of the economic sanctions was vetoed by the US, United Kingdom and France” (Humanitarian Actor C).

Followed by-

“While Russia cut off our way into the northwest, the West cut off our financial flow. Everything is closing up again and the west is equally to blame”. (Humanitarian Actor C)

¹ While the Syrian government is under scrutiny, it is still the state that hold the right to sovereignty

Owing to the ever-going tug of war between the West and the Syrian Government with its allies (Russia, China and Iran), the impact that it created on the humanitarian arena were significant during the aftermath of the earthquake.

4.5.1 Politicised and Compromised Accessibility

When it comes to accessibility, the pre-earthquake conflict destruction and post-earthquake infrastructure damage, caused a huge problem for accessibility and equipment movement into the northwest. While buildings crumbled and had people stuck inside, the government-controlled area got rapid help from international actors and national first responders, the opposition-controlled northwest was stranded in more than one way. The initial few days after the earthquake, main task at hand was search and rescue (United Nations, 2023). In the government held Syria, the permission to access areas affected, the Syria authorities had to sign off, Humanitarian operator B explained, and followed by stating that –

“If the communities residing in these areas are within government-controlled Syria, then it is not just the government that has to sign off, it also has to be granted by the local level authorities, in Aleppo, for example” – (Humanitarian Operator B)

In NWS area, it is the “Salvation government” (opposition group) that could grant access to affected areas. However, in the initial days the north west was completely stranded and made to fend for itself. Since the region is not under the government, there is no official authority that could sign off on allowing heavy machinery for the search and rescue from the building rubble (humanitarian operator- B). It was reported that the Syrian government allowed aid to travel through the line of control almost a week after the earthquake (UN Press Release, 2023).

“The only rescue teams that crossed into the Idlib area were a small group of volunteers from Egypt and a team from Spain. A prescheduled United Nations convoy carrying not emergency aid, not heavy equipment or disaster relief, but blankets and basic supplies, came on the fourth day.” – (Al Jazeera, 2023)

However, the access of heavy machinery to search and rescue people from the rubble was not provided by any authorities or actors involved. Without heavy machinery, no humanitarian volunteers or UN aid was able to help as the people were still stuck under the rubble. Humanitarian Operator B who was present in the north west part of Syria at this time, stated that “the roads were damaged however, owing to the fact that people had their loved ones stuck under the rubble, resorted to local efforts by using bigger cars that were available there to move the heavy rubble”. He also stated that the government after 3 days-

“Government sent heavy machinery to the cross- line check point, but because of mistrust the check point did not allow the Syrian government workers who were moving the machinery to enter, instead they asked them to just give the control of the machinery”- Humanitarian Operator B

This was denied by the authorities and turned back from the check point. It was also noteworthy that within a week of the earthquake, the Syrian government had managed to control the accessibility of aid movement or in this case machinery. Another reason that was cited by the humanitarian actor B was that heavy machinery comes under economic sanctions as they are dual use items, which was something that was still being discussed at the international level.

4.6 Conclusion

As the themes above tackle the sub questions presented in this research, the observations made clearly highlight the challenges humanitarian operators faced after the earthquake. The resilience and unwavering strategizing on the humanitarian operators’ part to keep findings ways to deals with the shifting sands of official diplomacy that surround the current state of Syria has been significant. It was also evident how the strategies like the Syria Government’s push for “earthquake diplomacy” and many opposing countries “economic sanctions” have had a significant role to play in the humanitarian arena.

The constant politicization of the situation of war that Syria has been dealing with since before the earthquake, has impacted the humanitarian operations on the ground wherein, not just the safety and security of the humanitarian operators is in question. But also, the humanitarian principles of being neutral, independent and unbiased, has put a question mark on how apolitical the humanitarian arena can be in reality.

Chapter- 5 Discussion & Conclusion

As described in the previous chapter, the post-earthquake humanitarian effort had one too many challenges from several actors involved. The aspect of accessibility was heavily influenced by international and regional actors that came not just from politicization but the much-debated economic sanctions. While the humanitarian arena has shown great level of resilience and utmost determination to keep their operation going to help as much as possible. They themselves are also the same humans who were present during the earthquake and have placed themselves in very unsafe waters that puts theirs and their loved ones lives at high risk. While they are committed to do their job, it is the job of international actors to minimize these challenges that they face and not add on to the pile.

The humanitarian arena has seen great levels of instrumentalization in the aftermath of this earthquake and elsewhere too. This constant surge of politics that runs through their operations on the ground does not have a positive impact on the humanitarian arena that is solely present to serve humanity. As international actors sit in forums pushing their agendas on one another and making decisions, seem to forget that these decisions affect people on the ground. Be it Syrians or humanitarians' operators, these operations are required to be protected and kept away from international politics that tends to see the zoomed-out version of the world that we live in. This chapter will cover both the discussion surrounding the challenges faced by humanitarian actors on the ground and what could help better their operation on the ground.

5.1 Interventions Required in the Humanitarian Arena

The humanitarian arena as we have already seen above, does not just involve humanitarian actors, but carries the weight of international actors that hold the power to stir the international political arena. As described by Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) governments play a key role in most of the humanitarian crisis and being led by political agendas heavily mix the elements of politics into the humanitarian arena. In the after math of the earthquake, it was international. Actors that were sending aid to Damascus but at the same time had been debating on whether or not to lift the sanctions for a certain period of time. Within this environment, the humanitarian principles led organizations have time and again shown concerns for the level of securitisation, politicization and decreasing level of freedom that has been coming about in the humanitarian arena and causing severe obstructions in the operations on the ground. While the IHL law that states that the issue of accessibility lies in the hands the host country's government, for it is them who hold the rightful sovereignty over the demarcated borders that defines each and every country (Jackson, 1990).

However, it is important to note that the humanitarian arena is not defined by borders or regional lines of control, it is a space that is meant to stretch itself to areas that need it the most.

This on-going civil war in Syria has not just been faced by the countless citizens of Syria, but also by the humanitarian operators who may or may not have any ties to Syria or even the middle east. *“International humanitarian actors working outside their own countries are external actors attempting to provide assistance to people affected by a humanitarian crisis, by several ways like negotiating for access. Along with navigating the internal political, economic and social environment of a specific country, all the while risking their own lives for a greater purpose.”* (Cunningham 2023). While they tirelessly work to keep their operation going on the ground. Or in this case, while they were affected by the earthquake themselves, their safety and security was heavily jeopardized, the very political structure that the official diplomacy fails to recognise is that they have a responsibility towards these humanitarian operators as well.

According to a report by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (2023, P.44) the *“United Nations did not put as much work into opening up the cross borders to the affected areas as they should have nor did they send equipment and rescue teams to the NWS, as in light of such a disaster, even the international law would allow it”*.

Moreover, the international community failed to keep their political differences aside yet again. It is not solely monetary funding that is going from their respective countries to disaster-stricken countries like Syria but also the citizens of these countries that are still the responsibility of several government that approve their emigration to these countries. As the governments of countries that have their own citizens working on these operations, their safety and security should be taken more seriously. The level of interference that track I diplomacy had after the earthquake in blocking the border crossings, wherein the SCPR reported that Turkey closed the *“Bab al- Hawa border for three days right after the disaster, as the priority of the Ankara shifted towards the disaster its own backyard”* (SCPR, 2023, P.45). At the same time the cross-line aid flow as mentioned previously was anyway compromised due to political tensions between GOS and NWS.

5.1.1 What can be done?

While these are international relations between states involved, the suffers are non- state actors. The engagement with humanitarian organizations on the ground should not just be about donor country’s foreign ministries humanitarian desks asking them what they need. But also engaging with them on what can be done and how track I diplomats that engage with other states can attempt to engage more with humanitarian operators on the ground. As it these operators who know first- hand the factors that stir disasters in a way that aggravates the situation on the ground, and can often be overlooked in a discussion that surrounds the macro aspect of the disaster. To support this argument, humanitarian research- A stated that “to see a disaster or a crisis from an

official level can sometimes skip the very nitty gritty of the disaster that humanitarian operators on the ground can help highlight better”. The engagement that was noticed between a European donor country’s Foreign Ministry and the humanitarian organizations they are donors to, signifies that multi track diplomacy engagements surely make a difference. However, the obstructions caused by multiple factors and the very support that humanitarian operators need, has to be addressed in the political forums that engage in international state negotiations like the UNSC. The engages should not just discuss these as issues but collective try to find a solution.

While humanitarian arena is not kept away from track I diplomacy, owing to their engagement with the United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the level of influence that the United Nations Security Council has on it, is somewhat creating problems in the humanitarian arena. It is understood that the decisions that are taken in the UNSC are based on states at large, however the level on influence it has on OCHA misses the very understanding of how these decisions can hamper humanitarian operations on the ground and affect innocent lives.

One such example, apart from accessibility can be of economic sanctions. In the aftermath of the earthquake, when the world watched Russia veto the extension of the resolution that would keep the humanitarian corridors open for an extended period (UN Press, 2023). Humanitarian operators particularly were concerned about the re-establishment of the economic sanctions as they were before the earthquake. *“While we need humanitarian corridors to remain open for aid supply, we need economic sanctions to remain relaxed in order to procure the aid we need right now as well”* stated humanitarian operator- B. Humanitarian operator- C reiterated by saying that *“relaxation of the economic sanctions did help us a lot, but now everything is closing up again”*.

Challenges to the humanitarian arena are multi- sided and multi- dimensional, hence the complexity of the matter can only show us how the resilience of humanitarian operators on the ground has kept several operations going all the while upholding the very principles of humanitarianism. However, with more engagement and deeper research on the matter at hand, better ways can be found to minimize the challenges that cause obstructions to the humanitarian operations in Syria and elsewhere.

5.2 Matter of Economic Sanctions

As for the theoretical outline of economic sanctions, they are meant to be an alternative to a fully armed conflict between states. The main reason behind the implementation of sanctions is to put an end or curb the targeted body’s behaviour through interventions of political and economic nature, without causing harm to general population like a full- blown war would do (Sajadi et al., 2023). Economic sanctions as suggested by international actors are a foreign policy tool that is put

in place to also uphold democracy and human rights (Morgan et al, 2023). However, the reality of economic sanctions being targeted proves otherwise. As suggested by all humanitarian actors (except the humanitarian diplomat) economic sanctions have grave effects on the humanitarian arena and the general Syrian population. The economic sanctions as per Nephew (2023) are not so black and white, meaning that the success rate come with economic sanctions does not consider all elements involved, the sanctions are only judged on whether or not they help achieve the sanctioning states desires.

In the case of Syria, the targeted sanctions that are put on the Syrian government, clearly state that humanitarian arena is exempted from it. However, in the wake of the earthquake, one of the first discussions that was done, concerned the implementation of the economic sanctions on the ground (European Commission, 2023). While the sanctioning actors were waiting to analyse the matter at hand, the Syrian government was quick to denounce their actions by stating that it was the economic sanctions by the west that was causing major obstructions to the search and rescue operations. *“The GOS asked for concessions from political actors in turn for facilitating the opening of crossings or by highlighting the existence of implemented economic sanctions as the main factors that is causing obstruction to aid flow”* (SCPR, 2023, P- 43).

What has been suggested as “earthquake diplomacy” by the Syrian government, the strategy did not just stop itself at the agenda of deisolating itself. But it also worked on ways to shed light on how it was economic sanctions and the involvement of the west in Syria’s internal matters that was creating problems for humanitarian operations in both the GOS and NWS. The NWS being out of the domain of control of the Syrian government lacks one single internationally recognised authority and has rebel groups that have been tagged as “terrorist organizations” that curtains major humanitarian interventions and international aid flow. The government was also seen discriminating and controlling humanitarian aid flow, as being the internationally recognized government to date, international aid came to Damascus. (SCPR, 2023, P-9)

As observed by (Peksen and Son 2015) sanctions against Syria gave way to crises like economic inflation and deteriorated welfare system for the civilians. Not just this but sanctions have caused a huge problem for foreign monetary inflow for Syria, as it is completely cut off from the global banking system. Sanctions have severely undermined the welfare of Syrian civilians and humanitarian operations as the access to foreign remittances is disrupted, this puts an obstruction on a vital lifeline of getting to buy even the basic needs.

To this end, humanitarian operator A stated that “I can’t send money to my family back in Syria, as the western union simply says that Syria is under sanctions hence, money transfers are not

allowed”. Even when the economic sanctions were relaxed after the Earthquake and the GL23 was still in place, humanitarian operator C stated that “banks are not willing to go through the process of re-establishing operation in Syria, for a period of 6 months” (Kanfash, 2023).

Economic sanctions in many ways have caused obstructions in the humanitarian arena, as mentioned previously even though the theory suggests that humanitarian organisations are exempted from its effects. However, many European banks stated that their appetite for risk had increased after the implementation of GL23, as they found the emergency license more accessible than its predecessors (Moret, 2023, p-13). While GL 23 was in place, the humanitarian operators who I interviewed did not feel that it made much of a difference, as for the operators in GOS said that their funding does not come from the US and the operators in NWS said that given how contradictory the license was with counter terrorism laws and the SDN list, equipment was still under the tag of “items of dual use” hence procuring it was still difficult. The humanitarian operators further added that monetary flow did not see much of a difference with or without the short- lived license (Moret, 2023, p-14). Humanitarian operators have clarified that while they are free from the effects, their suppliers are not. The countries that they operate in, is heavily sanctions hence imports are too. As suggested by humanitarian researcher A, “unless aid is directly coming from United Nations, the imports are difficult to send into and across Syria”. Local traders and businesses that might not have any role to play in the on-going conflict, exist in the same plain as the conflict and its perpetrators live in, this makes them susceptible to being clubbed under the same roof of “trouble makers” that the sanctions target.

5.2.1 Different Course of Action

As proven many times, economic sanctions are not solving the purpose that they are put in place for. The purpose suggests, make the perpetrator and wrong doers stop their wrong doings. However, these sanctions are causing a major spill over effect that is causing problems for humanitarian operations on the grounds in terms of aid in flow and procurement. As humanitarian operator A stated “what worked for in one region, can not necessarily work in another” and that is what is happening in Syria right now. The sanctioned Syrian government has strong allies like Russia, China and Iran and with its current de- isolating agenda, it won't be long till other international actors will defreeze their political ties. As economic sanctions, will still exist and seep in more and more into the humanitarian arena through political aspects that international diplomatic strategies keep bringing in. It is highly evident that economic sanctions by the international parties should be revised and updated as per the region they are implemented in. Not only this but international sanctioning authorities should come together to discussion their

guidelines to be more in sync with one another, in order to further prevent technical contradictions. They should also discuss how humanitarian operations that are procuring their supplies locally can have a “list” that can safeguard local businesses from falling under the axe of economic sanctions. For example, the “Goods Review List (GRL) that was implemented in 2002 during the Iraq war, allowed goods that were vital for the civilian population and had no substitute to be sent to Iraq” (Gordon, 2010). While the factor of dual use and smart sanctions are already in existence. Identifying such a list that will have less loopholes would be a possible aspect for the international community to look into.

While economic sanctions are implemented for a reason and has stopped the sanctioned Syrian government from committing more grave human rights violations, the international community needs to acknowledge that the humanitarian arena does not exist in a vacuum. It is very much part of the same highly politicised world that we all exist in and has to have better strategies to work on their operation while being independent from the spill over effects of track I international politics.

5.3 Instrumentalizing and Politicising Humanitarian Aid

As already indicated previously, the principles of humanitarianism that are supposed to be upheld by the humanitarian organizations working on the ground, the practicality of it is far more challenging for implementation. While the aftermath of the earthquake saw many shifts in international politics and the changing behaviour of several states towards the Syrian government, the effects were felt in the humanitarian arena (Gowayed, 2023). Placing humanitarian NGOs in a conflict zone wherein military led interactions are an unsaid, holding onto the principles of being neutral is extremely difficult, thus leading to having humanitarian aid being used as a tool (Dany 2019). The fact that there are several players in a conflict zone that oppose one another’s very existence and would go to great lengths to push their own authority. Humanitarian arena is a socially negotiated space and approached in a way through which actors involved see it as a means to push their agendas and strategies forward (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). In this kind of a highly politicised setting every person whether humanitarian or not, may have to pick sides to not just keep their operation going but also to stay safe.

In Syria, wherein the line of control defines whose authorities is till which point, humanitarian operations had to worked with limited resources while tackling the serious issues of politics on a regional and international level. With accessibility compromised as international corridors were not fully functional, NWS was completely stranded and had to rely on local efforts (Tello, 2023). The GOS was facing high level of interference from the government of Syria that clearly had to

control over where humanitarian aid and operation could be reach and wherever not. This was not just after the earthquake, but even when the discussion to extend the time for the humanitarian crossing (Bab al Hawa) to remain open was conducted in July. The UN stated that the Syrian government's conditions to "commit to full cooperation and coordination with the government" and "not communicate with terrorist organizations" could not be accepted (UN Press, 2023). This clearly shows that states fail to understand that where a war is going on, morality and basic humanity to keep non actors away from the fight is given less importance.

We have witnessed this in Syria for past 12 years and this earthquake only makes it more obvious. If humanitarian operators are obligated to keep up with the humanitarian principles, then the principle of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) should not be kept on the backburner.

With the humanitarian laws suggesting that accessibility is up to the host country, the basic idea of how alone humanitarian actors are in fending for themselves, let alone fending disaster struck human lives clearly suggests that the system itself leaves humanitarian operator no choice but to politically handle these challenges that no international actor is able to solve for them (Schwendimann, 2011). Whether it is accessibility or aid, track I actors as in this case the Syrian government and its allies have time and again caused obstructions for humanitarian operations on the ground. Not only this but a major obstruction is also caused by economic sanctions that are imposed by international actors who wish to put an end to the Syrian government's authoritative behaviour, however in the meantime fail to keep the humanitarian arena away from the effects of its decisions (Kanfash, 2023). The constant tug of war between the international state actors has made it very difficult for humanitarian organizations to remain neutral and unbiased. Humanitarian research B shed light on the topic by saying

"when humanitarian operators on ground are left to negotiation terms and conditions of their position and accessibility within the conflict zone, it is quite literally making them involved in the politics".

He further explained that it is highly unlikely for any actor on the ground to keep away from strategies or compromising with the authorities,

"otherwise there is no accessibility, which means the project is stagnant and you are in the bad books of the authorities".

While the Syrian government and its allies constantly play a tug of war between who gets to control the accessibility and aid flow of the humanitarian organisations on the ground, other states involved and international organizations especially the UNSC should focus more on finding collective solutions to these issues. The responsibility to keep humanitarian arena as A-politicised as possible. However, in a conflict zone wherein an authoritative government in power and in turn

has the right to state sovereignty is much more complicated. Based on Cunningham (2023) research on the correlation between INGOs and that host country's government, helps seek the answers to the very question of how instrumentalization and politicization are elements that lead up to difficult state and humanitarian organizations (INGO) relations. He further reiterates that "practices must be defined by the state's intentions and goals in order to find strategies for humanitarian operators or actors to negotiate". This further will help find a more common way to embed themselves in the midst of a conflict to keep up with their operation and reach people who need them the most.

The idea behind the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid and politicization of the humanitarian arena is not something very recent (Bridges, 2010). The very existence of politics within the arena calls for international actors that includes both track I and II actors to give more space of power and support to humanitarian organizations to negotiation their agendas in a conflict zone. While making sure that the no side of the conflict feels pressured or villainized. While in the case of Syria the war has been caused by the state actors, these actors could be reassured that the sovereignty of their country is not challenged by the humanitarian arena. The humanitarian space may not be existing in a vacuum but humanitarian organisations surely aim to be kept away from the conflict and simply do their job of access and helping the vulnerable population of Syria.

5.4 Conclusion

While the main question and sub questions that this research is based on aims to identify the key challenges faced by the humanitarian arena in the aftermath of the earthquake. The challenges precede the earthquake and have been influenced by the 12 years on going war in Syria. The complication to this war is multi-dimensional and both state and non-state actors have a vital role to play in it. However, the recommendation given in this chapter aim to highlight where the problem is based in and how more engagement is required to solve it. Whether it is the track I diplomats that are working in the international political arena or the track II diplomats that are negotiating humanitarian terms between track I and track II diplomatic channels, more communication and engagement is required. In these terms it is not just the diplomatic channels between only side of the conflict that is required, despite what has been going on in Syria, the sovereignty still legally lies with the state of Syria, which is the government of the Syrian president Bashar al- Assad. This needs to be looked at more carefully in order to negotiate with the Syrian government not just for the accessibility but also the safety and security of those who are running the humanitarian operations on the ground. As suggested by the humanitarian operator C:

“this earthquake has brought out the understanding of how high level of politics can make or break an operation on the ground, and it is the humanitarian operators on the ground who know first-hand the cost of these political decisions and interactions”.

While humanitarian resilience has been the major reason behind the humanitarian work that was done after the earthquake and before too, the collective action by the regional authorities and local organization had a role to play as well. Despite the high politization of the humanitarian arena and instrumentalization of humanitarian aid, the said authorities and GOS and NWS, the humanitarian efforts to make sure that people survive this earthquake, was not just international effort but also local collective action. It is these high and ground level collective action that better a bad situation and should be kept in mind for the future.

Political upheaval and its effects on humanitarian disasters are complex problems with no simple answers. Promoting democratic governance, tackling economic injustice, and aiding peacebuilding projects are a few possible remedies, nevertheless. Furthermore, even in the face of political unrest, humanitarian actors must put the security and well-being of humanitarian workers and the disaster struck civilians (Debroy, et al. 2023). Regardless of the conflict, with more research these challenges can be solved in time.

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