

The Brussels Conference: An Opportunity to Inject Transparency into Syrian Earthquake Aid

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Brief Analysis

With a focus on "the future of Syria," the Brussels Conference can be a platform through which Western and Arab countries can coordinate aid to Syria in an era of normalization.

The Seventh Brussels Conference, organized by the European Union, is [scheduled \(https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%83%D8%B3%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9_ar\)](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%83%D8%B3%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9_ar) to take place on June 14 and 15 under the theme of "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region." With numerous countries in the Middle East pursuing normalization with Assad after more than a decade of isolation, this year's conference holds particular importance as it has the opportunity to provide conditions on aid collected during this round of funding and emphasize limits and conditions on the future role of the regime in those solutions. The return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League without implementing any reforms or demonstrating any goodwill towards the Syrian people raises questions about its commitment, and this cannot become the international norm when it comes to the reconstruction of Syria.

The primary objective of this year's conference is to secure ongoing international support for the Syrian people in line with UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254. At the same time, the conference will place particular emphasis on ways to provide financial assistance to displaced individuals and Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, as well as the potential for international aid responses in the wake of the February earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria.

The European Union and the United States have asserted their intentions to refrain from enacting any legislation that may favor the Assad regime or lift economic sanctions, while continuing to carve out exceptions for

humanitarian relief. However, the United States has temporarily lifted sanctions on reconstruction aid in response to the earthquake, and many Arab countries—bolstered by their concurrent normalization efforts—have poured millions into Syria in response, with little oversight as to how the Assad regime may administer or benefit from this support. These divergent trajectories make clear the need for a more effective, coordinated approach to earthquake aid that supports the Syrian people, not the regime.

Assad's Exploitation of Reconstruction Aid

A recent UN [assessment \(https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/05/1120172\)](https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/05/1120172) estimated that the total damages and losses caused by the earthquake in Syria amounts to nearly \$9 billion. In addition, the estimate suggested that approximately \$15 billion is required for recovery efforts in the affected areas. However, numerous media reports have raised concerns about the impartiality of UN institutions in Syria and their commitment to transparency, especially regarding the scientific methodology employed to differentiate between earthquake damage and the damage caused by the regime's actions during the ongoing war. Many fear that Assad is manipulating these early recovery estimates to demand more aid for his own financial gain.

Case in point, Assad [established \(https://sana.sy/?p=1884445\)](https://sana.sy/?p=1884445) a “National Fund for Supporting Those Affected by the Earthquake” on May 1, intended to oversee and facilitate the inflow of funds for reconstruction support. With no clear accountability, however, the fund enables the regime to take advantage of financial aid from Arab and Western countries alike.

In particular, it allows the Assad regime to capitalize on potential loopholes in the U.S. Department of Treasury's [Syria General License \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1261\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1261) (GL) 23, which authorizes transactions related to earthquake relief for a period of 180 days—transactions that would otherwise be prohibited under the Syrian Sanctions Regulations. Even after the 180 days specified in the license runs out, Assad's national fund will continue to oversee the influx of funds from Arab countries who have donated early and often to relief efforts and who will be looking to expand their economic ties amid normalization.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these funds could be utilized by the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia to advance their agenda of maintaining control over Syria without implementing any significant improvements in the lives of the Syrian people, contrary to the aspirations of the Arab countries supporting this initiative and the West.

Limiting the Potential for Exploitation

It is imperative to ensure that the funds provided by the European Union, Arab countries, the United States, and the United Nations to the Syrian regime undergo stringent oversight and transparency. The following objectives must be upheld:

- The Syrian people should directly benefit from the allocated funds, ensuring tangible improvements in their lives.
- Funds must *not* be directed towards Russian and Iranian companies operating within Syria.
- Individuals and companies listed under European, British, or American sanctions should not be donor-fund recipients or implementing aid projects.
- Donors must be wary of Russia and Iran's expressed prioritization of electricity projects in the early recovery phase, considering the high implementation costs of such projects and Russia and Iran's aim to gain control over the sector as a result.
- Robust oversight mechanisms should be established to ensure compliance with Western policies that advocate for limitations on construction financing and the lifting of sanctions only after the implementation of International Resolution 2254.

- A framework should be developed to guide Arab engagement with the Assad regime, always prioritizing the best interests of the Syrian people that reflects positively on the stability of the region.

To fulfill these requirements, it is crucial for the European Union, Britain, and the United States to seize the opportunity of the Brussels Conference and establish a dedicated system for monitoring and limiting the funds that go towards earthquake relief and reconstruction in Syria. This system would impose an obligation on contributing countries to notify the relevant authorities responsible for sanctions, and should include comprehensive information regarding the donated amount, the intended utilization of the funds, and the entity or organization responsible for executing projects aligned with the aforementioned objectives.

By implementing such a system, transparency and accountability can be ensured by both the West and Arab countries, preventing any misuse of funds by the Assad regime and providing the necessary oversight for the donors. This will represent a pressure tool that the Arab countries can benefit from in their approach to the Syrian crisis. ❖

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