

Natural Disasters in Conflict Situations: Compounded Crises in Syria and Their Implications for Human Security

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Abstract

This article discusses what human security practices and challenges have emerged in the compounded crises of a sudden large-scale natural disaster during an armed conflict, using the case of the northwest earthquakes in Syria. Approaches to human security practices include protection and empowerment, with priority given to protection, particularly in emergencies. This article employs an analytical framework using three forms of protection: protection of lives (lifesaving operations such as the provision of humanitarian assistance), protection of livelihoods (humanitarian, reconstruction, and development cooperation), and protection of dignity (e.g., prevention of and response to violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation). In the case of large-scale natural disasters, the international community usually works together in the subsequent reconstruction efforts. In conflict situations, however, reconstruction is affected by the antagonism between the parties to the conflict. In the case of the Syrian conflict, a complicated set of international relations has affected reconstruction efforts. Finally, this article discusses three catalysts that could facilitate the promotion of human security in these circumstances: the bottom-up empowerment of the people of Syria, the partial easing of Western sanctions, and a rapprochement between the Syrian government, the Arab League, and its member states. This article highlights the serious human security challenges of providing timely protection against compounded crises of conflict and natural disaster.

Introduction

Armed conflicts (hereafter “conflicts”) continue to pose a serious crisis to human security, as evidenced by the fact that the death toll in the Russia-Ukraine war alone exceeded eighty thousand in 2022 (Department of Peace and Conflict Research 2023). Many conflicts involve urban fighting, threatening the lives of large numbers of civilians and causing widespread homelessness, joblessness, and poverty. Protracted conflicts destroy key infrastructure such as schools, hospitals,

power plants, and water treatment facilities. Governments and businesses are also adversely affected. The negative effects of protracted conflicts lead to a deterioration of the social, economic, and governance infrastructure. The crisis caused by a conflict cascades into other crises, and these crises are compounded. Furthermore, while crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other unexpected large-scale natural disasters occur independently of conflict, the responses to these crises are affected by the disruption caused by the conflict. On the other hand, the nature of these crises can influence the course of the conflict in question. In other words, individual crises interact and

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reinforce each other. Such situations of compounded crises—where one crisis triggers others, or where single crises interact with others—are not limited to Ukraine and Syria. They can be seen in many other conflicts, such as those in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Yemen.

From a human security perspective, this article discusses the impact of such compounded crises on the people exposed to them and possible international cooperation to address them. Human security is a concept that places people at the centre of security: it focuses on the protection of lives, livelihoods, and dignity. Therefore, human security is threatened not only by conflict but also by a wide range of other crises that interact with one another. These include unexpected large-scale natural disasters (for instance earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods), poverty, financial crises, climate change, and pandemics. This article focuses on conflict and earthquakes, both of which are readily identifiable as crises. It highlights how compounded crises affect human security and explores measures and challenges to protect lives, livelihoods, and dignity in compounded crises as well as challenges. Specifically, this article focuses on compounded crises that occurred during the writing of this article in 2023, namely the Syrian conflict and the earthquakes in northwest Syria. The affected places include areas governed by the Syrian government and areas controlled by the antigovernment forces. When the earthquakes struck, people's lives, livelihoods, and dignity had already been threatened by 12 years of conflict. This article examines how the earthquakes influenced the course of the conflict and how the reconstruction was affected by the conflict. It also analyzes how these compounded crises affected the security of people living under the control of different parties and how the international community addressed.

Approaches to human security practices include the protection and empowerment of people, with priority given to protection, particularly in emergencies. The next section therefore presents the analytical framework, focusing on three forms of protection. It organizes the range of protection approaches that put human security into practice in the context of a sudden, large-scale natural disaster during a conflict. Section 2 focuses on the earthquakes in northwest Syria. It provides an overview of the conflict prior to the

earthquakes, and analyzes the efforts and challenges to protect people in emergencies. Section 3 discusses the human security responses and challenges in the face of these compounded crises. Finally, this article offers some concluding suggestions. This article employs a qualitative research methodology and its analysis is based on data collected through interviews with organizations involved in international cooperation in Syria and a literature review. The research methods used are narrative analysis and process tracing.

1. Various Aspects of Protection

1.1. Three forms of protection

As noted above, the basic idea underlying human security practices, which involve the protection of people's lives, livelihoods, and dignity, combines the two approaches of protection and empowerment. "Protection" here refers to policies and measures aimed at securing people's lives, livelihoods, and dignity. "Empowerment" refers to people's ability to take action for themselves and for others (Commission on Human Security 2003). While protection and empowerment can be combined in myriad ways, the protection of lives—especially survival—is a critical factor in emergencies such as conflict and unexpected large-scale natural disasters. As people try to escape emergency situations and return to normal life, the focus shifts to empowering people. This includes the restoration of social, economic, and governance infrastructure, leading to the protection of livelihoods (Muto et al. 2018). Protecting people's dignity is the foundation of human security in all circumstances. Of course, even in emergencies, some people are empowered and capable of acting for themselves and others. However, facilitating empowerment—enabling people to live autonomous lives—generally becomes more difficult in protracted crises, such as conflicts, and in situations where compounded crises occur, endangering lives and requiring prolonged protection.

So, what is the scope of the protection approach? *Human Security Now*, the current foundation for human security concepts and practices, cites humanitarian assistance as an example of lifesaving protection practices (Commission

on Human Security 2003). Humanitarian assistance has traditionally involved the provision of food, water, sanitation, healthcare, and shelter to people affected by conflict and other disruptions. Rescue operations, including the search for survivors under collapsed buildings, are also directly related to the protection of lives. As noted above, in emergencies such as conflicts and unexpected large-scale natural disasters, the priority must be to save individual lives through traditional humanitarian assistance and rescue operations.

As immediate emergencies subside, the need to protect livelihoods in addition to people's lives becomes increasingly important, but in fact the protection of lives and the protection of livelihoods are interrelated issues. It is not as if one practice (protection of lives) ends when the other practice (protection of livelihoods) begins. For example, humanitarian assistance in its current form goes beyond the provision of food and healthcare to include a wide range of initiatives in agriculture, education, and early recovery. According to *Human Security Now*, protection develops national and international norms, processes, institutions, and frameworks for the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms. Specifically, protection requires "working institutions at every level of society: police systems, environmental regulations, healthcare networks, education systems, safety nets and workfare programs, vaccination campaigns, diplomatic engagement, and early warning systems for crises or conflict" (ibid., 132). These contribute to the protection of both lives and livelihoods.

Situations where crises are compounded have serious implications for the protection of dignity. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee's "Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action" (IASC 2016) identifies situations in which people are not protected: in particular, exposure to violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation.¹ Even when there is no immediate negative impact on lives or livelihoods, human security is not ensured when people are exposed to violence, abuse,

coercion, and deprivation. Today's humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and development cooperation can directly protect people from such risks. These include: collecting and recording information on violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation; providing physical and psychological protection, including shelter and mental healthcare for children and victims of gender-based violence; clearing landmines; and protecting rights to housing, land, and property. While these activities do not guarantee that those at risk will be recognized as human beings and not treated unfairly, they at least aim to achieve such results. However, even if international cooperation fully implements these activities at all levels of society, it is difficult to conclude that human dignity is secured. Notably, this set of activities is only one example of the protection of dignity.

The discussion so far has clarified that among the two approaches to human security, three forms of protection practices are strengthened during emergency situations: lives, livelihoods, and dignity. These three forms are closely interlinked and, in fact, cannot be clearly separated. The above discussion is summarized in [Figure 1](#). As this figure shows, the first priority in emergencies is the protection of lives (lifesaving operations such as the provision of humanitarian assistance). However, this alone is insufficient to achieve people's security. The protection of livelihoods (humanitarian, reconstruction, and development cooperation) is also an urgent necessity. Protecting livelihoods helps to prevent crises from occurring and to provide humanitarian assistance that protects lives when crises do occur. Basic infrastructure, social infrastructure such as education, healthcare, and administrative systems, economic infrastructure, and the governance infrastructure that is required for their operation are put in place to protect livelihoods. Initiatives to protect dignity (e.g., prevention of and response to violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation) are also needed, whether in the context of normal life or when a crisis occurs. Nonetheless, as noted above, the mere practice of protecting dignity does not always in itself enable the full protection of human dignity. Initiatives to protect human dignity cannot be considered feasible without the protection of lives and livelihoods. The protection of lives, livelihoods, and dignity are thus deeply interlinked. In emergencies, implementing activities with an

¹ The Policy defines violence as "The act or threat of physical or psychological abuse," coercion as "Forcing someone to do something against his or her will," and deprivation as "Preventing people from accessing the goods and services they need. This can be deliberate or unintended, direct or indirect. It may include discrimination" (IASC 2016, 13–15).

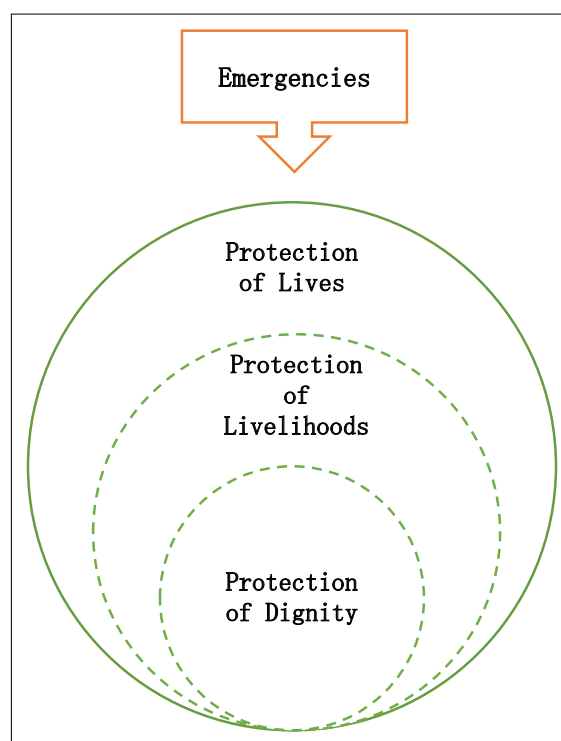


Figure 1 Analytical Framework: Three Forms of Protection to Human Security that Are Prioritized in Emergency Situations

Source: Created by the author

awareness of the three forms of protection shown in **Figure 1** is helpful in effectively promoting human security.

It should be noted that it is primarily the government that puts protection, one of the two approaches to human security, into practice (Muto et al. 2018). The social, economic, and governance infrastructure put in place by governments, along with stable public order, form the core of human security. In addition to governments, local NGOs and civil society organizations also contribute to the promotion of human security. In recent years, business firms have been promoting human security through their social contribution activities and human rights-oriented businesses. In addition, various organizations support the promotion of human security through humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and development cooperation. These include multilateral cooperation organizations such as the United Nations (UN) agencies, bilateral cooperation organizations such as JICA, and regional organizations such as the Arab League, as well

as international NGOs and foundations. Thus, diverse organizations are involved in the provision of protection. However, human security is about more than just a matter of strengthening protection in emergency situations. The comprehensive promotion of human security requires the empowerment of people, not merely their protection. The next section will expand on the discussion of how the three forms of protection work in the face of the compounded threats: conflict and unexpected large-scale natural disasters—the main theme of this article.

1.2. Protection in the context of compounded crises: Conflict and large-scale natural disasters

When a threat emerges, the international community concentrates on protection of lives through lifesaving operations such as the provision of humanitarian assistance. As the threat is contained, it becomes more important to

prioritize the protection of livelihoods (humanitarian, reconstruction, and development cooperation). In implementing any form of protection into practice, the international community simultaneously works to the protection of dignity (e.g., prevention of and response to violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation). These protection practices are common to both conflicts and unexpected large-scale natural disasters. However, two differences can be observed in the protection practice of the international community in the face of threats arising from conflict and large-scale natural disasters.

One difference concerns the actors who put protection into practice (Hanatani et al. 2018). In conflicts, antigovernment forces may control some areas and provide protection to people under their control. In some cases, these forces may build trust with the community and function as *de facto* governments. Nonetheless, such forces vary widely in their capabilities, depending on factors including their relationship with central governments and the availability of international assistance. Opposing forces often impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance and other protection practices (Anderson 2006). The international community may not only cooperate with the governments. Depending on who controls an area, it may cooperate with civil society organizations that have necessary local knowledge and provides protection. On the other hand, when natural disasters occur in the absence of armed conflict, the government, along with civil society organizations and the business sector, can play a major role in protecting the affected people. The delivery of humanitarian assistance is unlikely to be hindered by human factors in such cases.

The other difference is the timing of the shift from protecting lives to protecting livelihoods. In the case of conflicts, the international community prioritizes the protection of lives while fighting continues and shifts its cooperation to the protection of livelihoods once the conflict is contained. However, the protection of lives and the protection of livelihoods are provided simultaneously when a conflict is prolonged or the intensity of the conflict varies across regions. In other words, in the case of conflicts, the timing of the shift will depend on the variety of factors, such as the course and intensity of the fighting, and the balance of

power between the parties to the conflict. In contrast, in the case of unexpected large-scale natural disasters, the international community is expected to start cooperating on reconstruction and development as soon as possible after the immediate disaster has passed. The timing of the shift to protecting livelihoods is both faster and more obvious than it is for conflicts (Hanatani et al. 2018).

This leads to the question of what happens when multiple threats overlap and what protective measures should be put into practice in such cases. Sri Lanka, for instance, was experiencing a civil war—the effects of which were felt throughout the country—when it was hit by the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. In the case of Sri Lanka, fighting intensified as parties to the conflict competed over the allocation of reconstruction assistance. In the case of Indonesia, the damage was concentrated in Aceh, the main conflict zone, in the north of the island of Sumatra. As a result, the Indonesian government primarily targeted Aceh for reconstruction, and the international community cooperated, leading to the end of the conflict (Billon and Waizenegger 2007; Perkasa 2019). In the case of unexpected large-scale natural disasters occurring in conflict situations, previous research has demonstrated that contextual factors influence the course of the conflict and international cooperation following a disaster. Contextual factors include the situation of the conflict and the degree of damage. Consistent patterns of protection practices are not evident in unexpected large-scale natural disasters occurring in conflict situations. In more diverse contexts and circumstances affected by compounded crises, approaches to promoting human security will vary and may or may not be promoted.

This section presented an analytical framework for an approach to human security that includes three forms of protection in the face of compounded crises. Moreover, it confirmed that protection practices are not always uniform in the event of unforeseen large-scale natural disasters in conflict situations. Taking the earthquakes in northwest Syria during the Syrian conflict as a case study, the following section extracts the practices of and challenges to the protection approach to human security in the face of compounded crises.

2. The Northwest Syria Earthquakes during the Syrian Conflict: Protection Practices and Challenges

On February 6, 2023, two earthquakes with magnitudes exceeding 7 occurred, with the epicenters located in southeastern Turkey. While the worst-affected areas were in Turkey, parts of Syria, which shares a border of around 900 km with Turkey, were also hit, mainly in the northwest. At the time, Syria had been embroiled in an ongoing conflict situation for the past 12 years. Many of the affected areas were beyond the control of the Syrian government. Given the political situation, not all people in the affected areas were able to access the kind of protection they might have received during normal times. This section first examines the situation in Syria with regard to governance at the time the earthquakes struck. It then outlines the damage caused by the earthquakes, tracing it back to that of the conflict where relevant. Subsequently, this section discusses the practices of and challenges to the three forms of protection framed above.

2.1. The governance situation in Syria during the earthquakes

As stated above, parts of Syria were under the control of antigovernment forces when the earthquakes struck. **Figure 2** is an UN-published map depicting the approximate areas of influence in Syria. Most areas marked in red are governed by the Syrian government. Most areas under the control of opposition forces are in the country's north. At least three forces were actively confronting the government. Their areas of influence are marked in green, green with yellow spots, and blue, respectively.

Next, **Figure 3** indicates the epicenter and seismic intensity in the surrounding areas. The entire region, from the area of the epicenter in Turkey (yellow in **Figure 3**) to northern Syria (blue in **Figure 3**), suffered severe damage. The combination of **Figures 2** and **3** demonstrates that all of the approximate areas of influence (the green, green with yellow spots, blue, and red portions of **Figure 2**) were

affected by the earthquakes. As described, the portion in the red area was governed by the Syrian government. The situation of influence by the other parties to the conflict at the time was as follows.

First, the northwest area lying closest to the epicenter, colored green in **Figure 2**, comprises parts of Halab (Aleppo) and Idlib governorates. This area is mainly under the influence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham ("Organization for the Liberation of the Levant," or HTS) and its governing body, the Syrian Salvation Government. The UN has identified HTS as an affiliate of the extremist group Al-Qa'ida (UNSC 2018). Next, the blue portion of **Figure 2** comprises parts of the Halab (Aleppo) and Al-Raqqah Governorates, along with Al-Hasakah Governorate and part of Dayr al-Zawr Governorate in the northeast of the country. These areas are mainly under the influence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). When the extremist armed group "Islamic State" (IS) took control of some areas of Syria, the SDF took the lead in combatting them, with the support of the United States. The SDF made a major contribution to mopping up IS forces, replaced IS, and expanded their area of control. However, given that the primary component of the SDF is the Kurdish People's Protection Units, its rise has presented a threat to Turkey in particular. This is because the Kurdish People's Protection Units, an affiliate of the Democratic Union Party, are closely linked with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Turkey has designated a terrorist organization. Because of this, since 2016, Turkey has invaded Syria four times, setting up areas of influence on each occasion. Finally, the areas marked in green with yellow spots in **Figure 2** include parts of Halab (Aleppo) and Al-Raqqah Governorates. These areas are mainly under the influence of the Syrian National Army, under the auspices of the Turkish military, and of the Syrian Interim Government, which cooperates with the Syrian National Army.

The region of Syria affected by the earthquakes thus included areas under the influence of the main parties to the conflict: the Syrian government and the three antigovernment forces. The next section provides an overview of Syria's social, economic, and governance infrastructure when the earthquakes occurred and surveys the damage caused by the earthquakes.

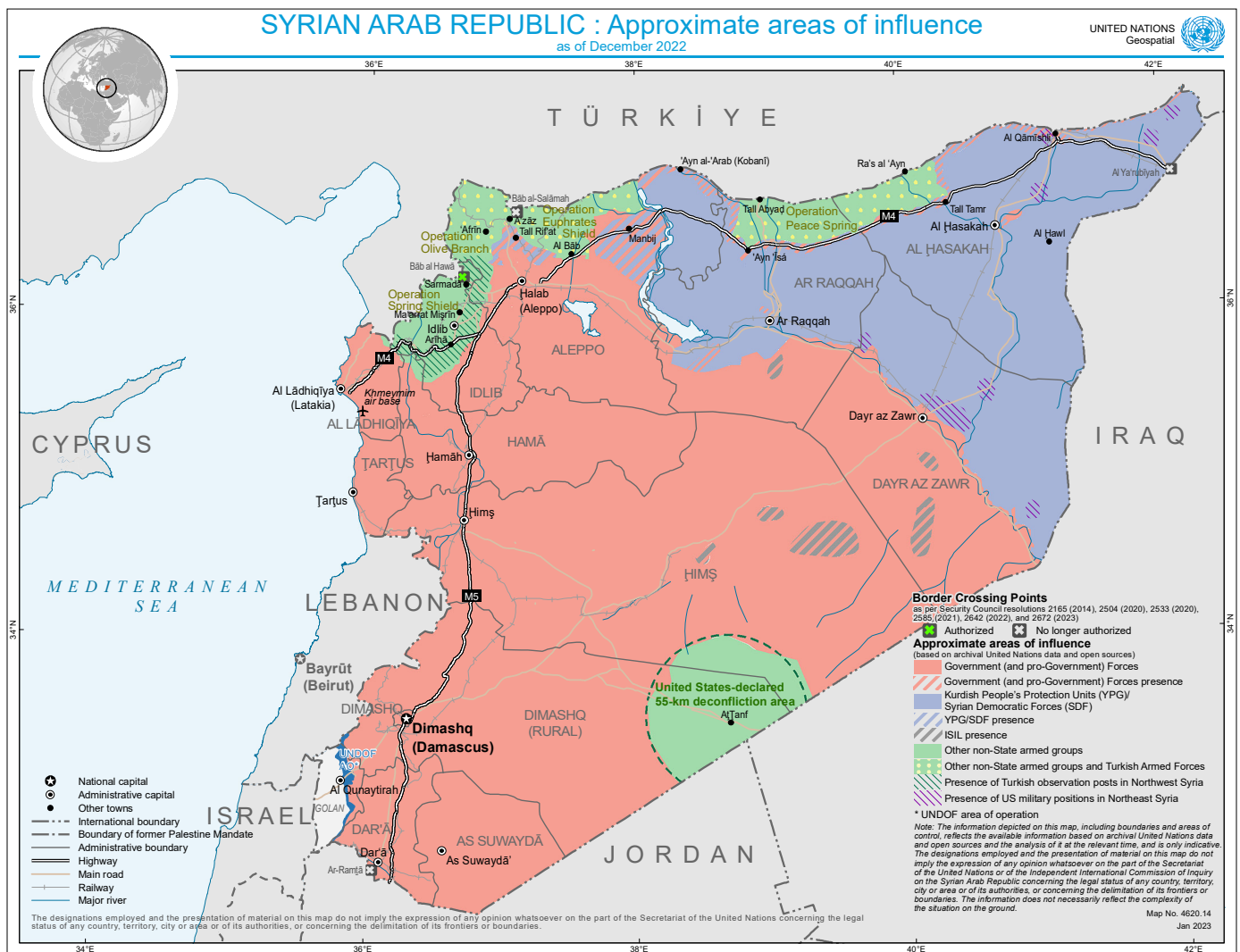


Figure 2 Approximate Areas of Influence in the Syrian Arab Republic²

Source: United Nations Geospatial (United Nations Geospatial 2023)

2.2. Damage caused by the conflict and damage caused by the earthquakes

At the time of the earthquakes, the conflict in Syria had already caused enormous damage. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Russia-Ukraine war produced over 80,000 fatalities in a year and fatalities in the Syrian conflict since its outbreak now exceed 400,000 people (Department of Peace and Conflict Research 2023). In terms of protection of lives, for example, around 15.3 million people

in Syria were in need of assistance in some form when the earthquakes struck. Although precise population figures for Syria have been unverifiable since the conflict began, at its start, the figure was approximately 22 million; thus, the proportion of people in need of assistance stood at roughly seven in ten. Of these, 12.1 million people were subject to food insecurity (OCHA 2022, 9). Over one million homes were totally or partially destroyed or damaged (UN-HABITAT 2022, 8).

The administrative systems and organizations tasked with the protection of livelihoods were also in serious disarray. For example, the economy was affected partly due to the Western sanctions (Al-Khalidi 2020), and the Syrian pound

² The green areas in the southeast, where the United States had a presence, are unrelated to those in the north in terms of background and circumstances. These areas are not discussed in this article because they were not substantially affected by the earthquakes.

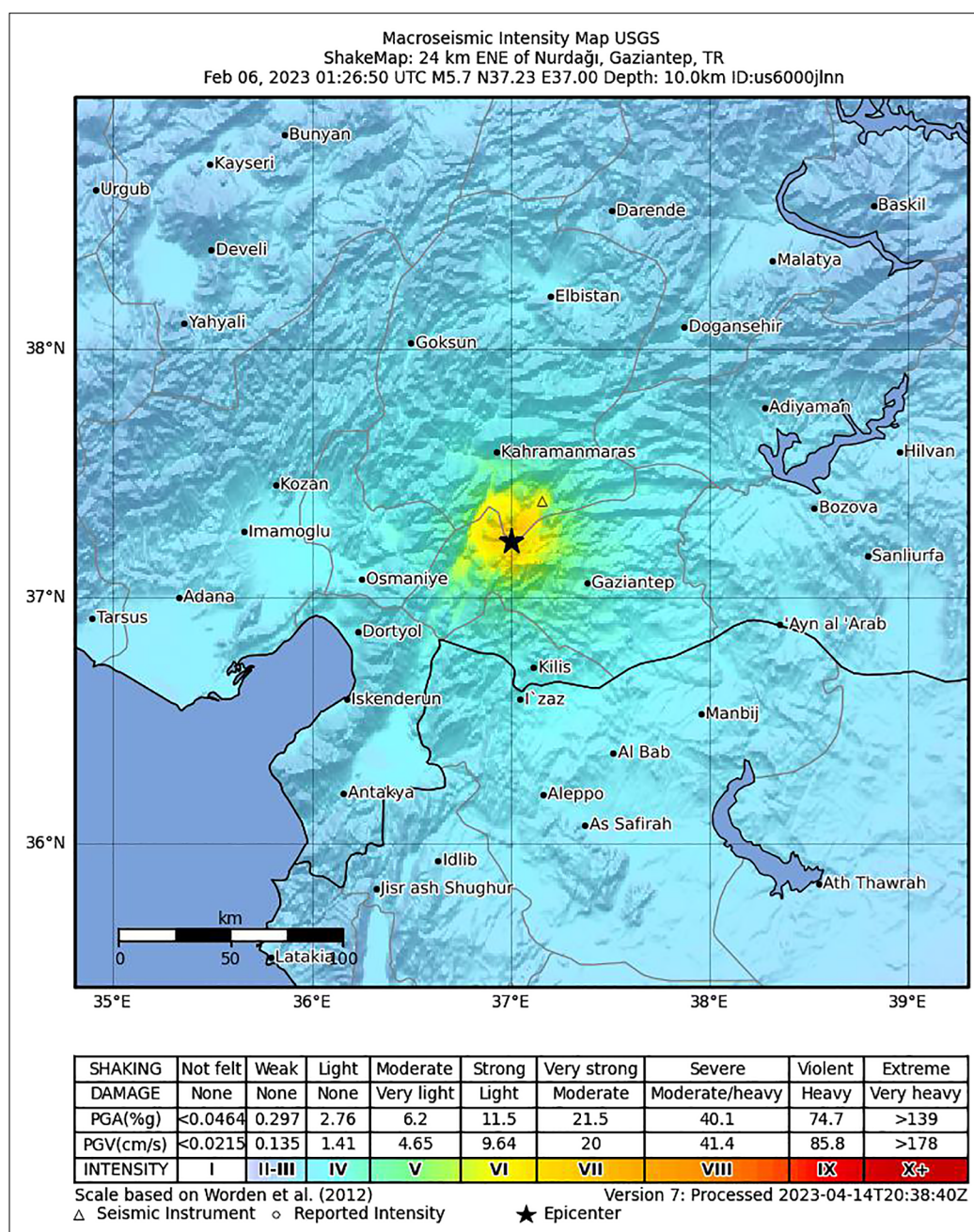


Figure 3 Epicenter and Seismic Intensity in Surrounding Areas of Earthquake in Turkey and Syria

Source: Excerpted from USGS (USGS 2023)

fell against the US dollar by 224% in 2020, followed by a 26% depreciation in 2021. The Syrian economy was also adversely impacted by the sharp rises in food and fuel prices as a result of the Ukraine crisis (Luan et al. 2022, xi–xii). Supplies of electricity were insufficient. Per-capita consumption of electricity from the national grid in 2021 was approximately 15% of that in 2010, before the conflict began (Hatahet and

Shaar 2021, 25). The healthcare system had also collapsed. While vaccination rates in Syria before the conflict began were almost 100%, only 15.4% of the population has received at least one shot of the COVID-19 vaccine. With regard to the protection of dignity, both the government and the antigovernment forces have been considered as engaging in acts of violation of the dignity of the human person:

arbitrary detention and ill-treatment, torture, excessive use of force, and gender-based violence (UNGA 2023). The widespread placement of unexploded ordnance on farmland, roads, private property, and public facilities is also a major concern in terms of security (OCHA 2022).

At the time of the earthquakes, most people in Syria were already facing threats stemming from the conflict and were inadequately protected from a human security perspective. Threats stemming from the earthquakes thus added to the existing threats already facing the population. Roughly three months after the earthquakes, the UN issued a special report on the need for humanitarian assistance in Syria. According to the report, the earthquake damage was concentrated in Idlib Governorate, the northwest of Halab (Aleppo) Governorate including the city of Halab (Aleppo), and the west of Al-Lādhiqiya (Latakia) Governorate. The earthquakes comprised two temblors and over 9,000 aftershocks, including some exceeding magnitude 6. The earthquakes affected approximately 8.8 million people in the areas, regardless of the controlling parties. Tens of thousands of people were displaced, and there was damage to over 390,000 houses, 2,149 schools, and 241 health facilities. According to health center staff and the Ministry of Health, there were over 5,900 fatalities and over 10,000 injured. An estimated 170,000 people also lost their jobs, and approximately 35,000 small and medium-sized enterprises were affected. The toll on female-led households was particularly severe. There was a sudden rise in the number of people complaining of additional stress resulting from the trauma of the earthquakes. Initiatives for the protection of lives and livelihoods (covering the provision of electricity, water, medical treatment, education, and other social goods) had already been falling behind before the earthquakes. The situation now deteriorated further (UNSC 2023a).

Moreover, some agencies have released different figures from those given by the UN agencies. For example, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights gave a figure of 6,795 fatalities as of March 4, 2022; among those, 4,547 had occurred in areas under the control of antigovernment forces (Syrian Observatory For Human Rights 2023). The international NGO International Medical Corps (IMC), which operates in Syria, referred to 7,259 fatalities as of March 8

(International Medical Corps 2023). The protection of lives would depend entirely on prompt and accurate damage assessments. However, it has proved virtually impossible to ascertain the overall extent of damage in the context of conflict and fragmented governance. This has had knock-on effects on the provision of various kinds of assistance.

2.3. Emergency protection

In the face of new threats arising from the earthquakes, the Syrian government expressed its intention to take swift action. On the day of the earthquakes, February 6, President Assad chaired an emergency ministerial meeting to formulate a nationwide emergency action plan. A central operations office, working around the clock, was established to liaise with the government, and operations rooms and relief committees were set up for each of the affected governorates. The Syrian government has expressed its resolve to do all in its power to assist the affected areas and protect the people. The Syrian government immediately dispatched response teams composed of government technicians and Syrian Arab Red Crescent staff to the affected areas. These teams engaged in search and rescue operations and local liaison. Preparations for coordination between various government agencies were also made to communicate needs to UN agencies and other stakeholders. Initiatives for the protection of lives unfolded in this manner (HCT 2023; Syria Report 2023).

Along with the Syrian government's response, efforts on the part of the Syrian public to protect the earthquake-affected people have also been confirmed. Appeals for donations were made in Syria and abroad. Various Syrian organizations that had been supplying humanitarian assistance before the earthquakes played an active role. For example, the Syria Trust for Development (founded before the conflict by Asma Al-Assad, the wife of President Bashar Al-Assad), working together with UN agencies and international NGOs, took the lead in supplying humanitarian assistance in government-controlled areas. The Syrian Family Planning Association began supplying accommodation and lodgings within a few hours of the earthquakes and sent mobile clinics to affected areas to provide emergency medical treatment (Syria Report 2023; IPPF 2023). Voluntary provision and donations of goods, along with the formation of

first-aid teams, were also undertaken by the Syrian Youth Association and other Syrian charitable and private-sector groups (SANA 2023a; Al-Muhriz 2023).

However, as described, Syria's essential infrastructure had been severely weakened by protracted conflict to the point of collapse. Most of the population was already in need of assistance or already receiving humanitarian assistance. Thus, international cooperation was all the more crucial for protecting people in the face of the additional threat of earthquakes. As noted, the international community immediately conducts rescue efforts and humanitarian assistance in the event of an earthquake and cooperates with the government of the stricken country. In fact, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that within a week of the disaster, 96 countries and 16 international organizations had offered assistance and almost 6,500 people from 56 countries were actively working in the field in areas hardest hit by the earthquakes, mainly in and around the epicenter area (Anadolu Agency 2023). In Syria, by contrast, insofar as can be confirmed from media reports, fewer than 30 countries and organizations provided humanitarian supplies and funding; less than 15 countries and organizations undertook rescue operations, sent medical teams, or dispatched personnel to provide humanitarian assistance (SANA 2023b).

The situation was even more serious in areas controlled by antigovernment forces. The "Syria Earthquake 2023 Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment," published by the World Bank in mid-March, noted the following points. While its findings were limited by lack of access to the affected areas, the World Bank reported that the most severe earthquake damage was concentrated in Halab (Aleppo) Governorate, followed by Idlib Governorate (World Bank 2023). As illustrated in [Figure 3](#), both governorates were partly under the influence of the government and partly under the control of opposition forces, yet the areas controlled by opposition forces were closer to the epicenters. From a human security perspective, these antigovernment areas should have received at least as much support as government-held territories. However, they received even less assistance immediately after the earthquakes. As discussed below, there were major constraints to the provision of assistance as a result of the conflict.

Two major issues should be considered regarding the

protection of the affected people in areas controlled by opposition forces. The first is the issue of how assistance should be delivered. There are two possible ways to implement protection in areas controlled by opposition forces. One is to deliver humanitarian assistance, with permission of the Syrian government, from areas controlled by the Syrian government to areas controlled by antigovernment forces by crossing the conflict frontier (Sida et al. 2016). The other is stipulated by UN Security Council Resolution 2672: using the route from Turkey to areas controlled by opposition forces using the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. Through this crossing, the UN agencies and their partner organizations—contingent on notification being given to the Syrian government—can deliver humanitarian assistance directly (UNSC 2023b). On the other hand, regardless of any Security Council Resolution, many Syrians had been crossing the border at points other than Bab al-Hawa³ since before the earthquakes, with the permission of the Turkish government.

Immediately after the earthquakes, however, the arrival of humanitarian assistance was delayed. For one thing, the earthquakes damaged the road leading to Bab al-Hawa on the Turkish side (Makdesi 2023). Humanitarian assistance was first delivered by UN agencies through Bab al-Hawa to areas under HTS control three days after the earthquakes (Chehayeb et al. 2023). In addition, only a few countries—around three or four in total—directly provided relief supplies or dispatched rescue teams and other personnel to the region. Given the scale of the devastation that the earthquakes caused in Turkey, the cross-border provision of humanitarian assistance to any extent must have faced major difficulties. Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, stated, "We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria" (Griffiths 2023). It appears that the international assistance provided through Bab al-Hawa immediately after the earthquakes was markedly less than that made available to areas controlled by the Syrian government.

Another issue of putting protection into practice is that humanitarian assistance can be stolen or its delivery obstructed.

³ Interview #1 by the author with Turkish-based Syrian staff involved in international cooperation for Syria; conducted on Microsoft Teams, July 21, 2023.

Looting and pilfering are widely observed after earthquakes, wherever they may happen. The Northwest Syria Earthquakes were no exception in this regard. Various reports of theft by multiple forces on the ground were noted (Salem 2023; Christou 2023). Blocking humanitarian assistance is also a common tactic used by players in armed conflicts to prevent assistance from reaching their opponents. In the Syrian case, like many others, the provision of humanitarian assistance was often blocked due to the complexity of the conflict. For example, trucks carrying humanitarian assistance arranged by Kurdish organizations were intercepted by both the Syrian government and the Turkish-backed antigovernment forces (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2023). HTS also refused humanitarian assistance from the Syrian government (Azhari and Gebeily 2023). Humanitarian assistance across the conflict boundaries first reached the affected areas in late June (OCHA Syria 2023). Both the Syrian government and the other forces in control of various parts of the country thus failed in the practice of protection.

What came to the fore in these straitened circumstances was the mutual assistance undertaken by Syrians themselves. During the conflict, numerous groups had acted to distribute humanitarian assistance in the areas controlled by antigovernment forces, just as they did in government-held areas. Nevertheless, the earthquakes also hit such organizations. The earthquakes were of a scale unprecedented in Syria. The shock of this sudden experience meant that it took some days for many of the survivors to help those beyond their family members, whose situation had to be assessed first. Even so, the Syria Civil Defense, known as the “White Helmets,” was in the field and engaging in rescue efforts from the day after the earthquakes (White Helmets 2023a). The White Helmets were composed of bakers, tailors, engineers, pharmacists, painters, carpenters, students, and others who had been rescuing survivors from bombed-out buildings in areas controlled by antigovernment forces for several years (White Helmets 2023b). They now faced the challenge of earthquakes—substantially different from bombing—and a serious lack of heavy machinery and other equipment. Nevertheless, the White Helmets mobilized more than 3,000 volunteers and worked with a network of over 300 people from other organizations (Swift et al. 2023).

Another organization involved in international cooperation went into action the day after the earthquakes. Having confirmed their own and their families’ safety, about 30 members immediately began ferrying goods to shelters for displaced persons and transporting medical supplies from hospitals to the affected areas.⁴ A different organization was limited by its lack of authority to disburse humanitarian assistance and did not have any emergency funds or supplies. Even so, the organization’s staff began calling for donations the day after the earthquakes. They were able to start supplying assistance to disaster-affected people after a few days.⁵ The markets were still running, and “cash in itself can be a priority need” (Swift et al. 2023, 15). This confirms the utility of assistance in the versatile form of cash. Faced with the threat of earthquakes and lacking provision of adequate protection, people began empowering each other through mutual support.

In this way, initiatives by the international community to protect lives after the earthquakes were substantially delayed. While some assistance from the international community got through in government-held areas, even here it remained limited. Humanitarian assistance reaching areas controlled by antigovernment forces was much more constricted and vulnerable to blockades. Under these tragic circumstances, Syrians themselves worked extremely hard to provide assistance to disaster-affected people with the resources they had to hand, empowering each other in the process.

2.4. Medium- and long-term protection

This section discusses the situation with regard to the protection of livelihoods and dignity. Following the earthquakes, the Syrian government announced its intention to protect livelihoods as well as lives. It promptly began to check the safety of buildings such as houses and public facilities such as water supply facilities. The Syrian government then began

⁴ Interview #2 by the author with Turkish-based Syrian staff involved in international cooperation for Syria; conducted on Zoom, July 20, 2023.

⁵ Interview #1 by the author with Turkish-based Syrian staff involved in international cooperation for Syria; conducted on Microsoft Teams, July 21, 2023. In the interview, the organization’s staff discussed their limited resource to respond quickly to emergencies due to insufficient authority to handle humanitarian assistance funds prior to the earthquakes.

rebuilding efforts in Halab (Aleppo) Governorate and Al-Lādhīqiya (Latakia) Governorate. The safety of hundreds of thousands of apartments was checked, and almost 60,000 were declared to be in need of reinforcement. To provide employment opportunities to disaster-affected people, the private sector worked with the government to reopen damaged facilities and finance small businesses. Loans were provided to 4,500 households (Zain 2023). Repairs to the Deir Ali power plant near the capital, Damascus, were reported, as was the restarting of the power plant in Halab (Aleppo) (Salameh and Al-Jazaeri 2023; Mhamad 2023a). These initiatives can be understood as priority projects undertaken by the Syrian government to protect the livelihoods of the disaster-affected people and thus contribute to the protection of dignity—although the Idlib Governorate, which was mainly in the hands of antigovernment forces, was not included.

International initiatives were also reported. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) worked on the rehabilitation of damaged health centers and clinics or installed prefabricated buildings and rehabilitated the pediatrics department at Halab (Aleppo) University Hospital. UNICEF worked to protect livelihoods by repairing water treatment and pumping facilities. There were also initiatives for the protection practices of dignity. For example, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) continued to support responses to gender-based violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) trained mental health workers. The WHO also put mobile health teams into the field to provide mental health services, including psychological first assistance, emergency counseling, individual counseling, and referrals to specialized services (UNSC 2023a). Apart from UN agencies, countries such as China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) gave support by providing houses, and the UAE also provided assistance for the rehabilitation of schools (Xinhua 2023; Sharjah 24 2023). The Norwegian Refugee Council signed an agreement with the Syrian government on school rehabilitation and teacher training (Mhamad 2023b). From a human security perspective, while the focus of these assistance initiatives was on lives and livelihoods, they also facilitated the protection of human dignity in everyday life.

However, full-scale reconstruction following an earthquake requires a comprehensive program of public works. While the

protection practices identified so far are beneficial, these are considered to be affiliated with lifesaving operations. The Syrian conflict is coming to an end, with annual fatalities falling below 10,000 since 2020. This figure is lower than the toll in Iraq when the international community started to support reconstruction; it is also less than in Afghanistan, where reconstruction support continued even as the death toll increased (Department of Peace and Conflict Research 2023). While the provision of reconstruction assistance to Syria is technically feasible, the protection provided so far remains limited.

The conflict continues to be the ultimate cause of the delays in reconstruction in Syria. The Hiroshima G7 Summit was held about ten weeks after the earthquakes. The Leaders' Communiqué stated that support for reconstruction would only be considered "once there is authentic and enduring progress toward a political solution" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023, 38). The G7 urged the parties to the conflict to cooperate in ending the conflict for the sake of post-earthquake reconstruction. Nevertheless, as discussed, the Syrian government and the three main antigovernment forces were unable to cooperate even on the provision of humanitarian assistance. Thus, faced with the compounded crises of conflict and earthquake, Syria has been unable to make much progress in reconstruction, development cooperation, or other forms of life- and livelihood-focused protection.

However, the earthquakes have slightly changed how the Syrian government, the Western and Arab countries supporting opposition forces respond to the conflict and provide support. The change in the Syrian government's approach can be seen in its management of the country's borders. A week after the earthquakes, the Syrian government gave consent for UN agencies to access the country via the Bab al-Salam and Al-Ra'ii border crossings (UNSG 2023). As a matter of fact, the Syrian government's consent to open these crossings did not entail any major change in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance workers and supplies had been passing both crossings with Turkish government approval since before the earthquakes.⁶

⁶ Interview #1 by the author with Turkish-based Syrian staff involved in international cooperation for Syria; conducted on Microsoft Teams, July 21, 2023.

Still, the Syrian government's consent now made these crossings available to UN agencies. Its initial response had not been in time but the Syrian government could support the disaster-affected people by cooperating with the UN agencies that respected its sovereignty as a member of the UN.

On the other hand, the Syrian government's handling of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing was different. The effect of UN Security Council Resolution 2672, which authorized the passage of UN agencies through Bab al-Hawa, was of a limited duration. The UN Security Council discussed extending the term of the resolution's effect, but the effort ended in failure in July 2023.⁷ Subsequently, the Syrian government submitted a letter to the UN approving passage through Bab al-Hawa. However, it included the condition that the government of Syria would designate partner organizations to work with the UN agencies (UNSC 2023d). The UN agencies could not agree to use Bab al-Hawa under conditions different from other border crossings and were therefore forced to negotiate with the Syrian government (Lederer 2023). The Syrian government took the failure of the UN Security Council Resolution as an opportunity to demonstrate its relevancy in controlling border crossings from Turkey and overseeing the direct implementation of humanitarian assistance by UN agencies in areas controlled by antigovernment forces.

The second change can be observed in the responses to sanctions taken by the Western countries. Since the beginning of the conflict, various countries and organizations have imposed sanctions on hundreds of Syrian individuals and organizations. These sanctions have restricted trade and cooperation in sectors such as oil, banking and finance, transportation, infrastructure, electricity, and trade. The movement of people has also been restricted. Sanctions were also targeted at HTS. They have negatively affected Syria's GDP (Nasser et al. 2013) and hindered the delivery of humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2014). Moreover, as the conflict drags on, sanctions have intensified. Even trade and

cooperation not subject to sanctions require a complex approval process, significantly increasing the effort and time needed to move goods over the border from Turkey and other countries bordering Syria. While the sanctions have won widespread approval as a means to end the conflict, they have also, with some exceptions, made it more difficult to provide the goods and funds needed for humanitarian assistance inside Syria (Human Rights Watch 2023). The burden imposed by the sanctions has only increased as the conflict drags on.

Nevertheless, since the earthquakes, there have been some slight changes to the strictly imposed sanctions. The US, UK, and EU resolved to implement a partial easing of the sanctions over a six-month period as a response to the damage caused by the earthquakes (Marsi 2023; Government of the United Kingdom 2023a). The sanctions were relaxed even though those countries imposing the sanctions claimed they did not affect the provision of humanitarian assistance for the protection of lives. Furthermore, the UK and EU have decided to extend the relaxation of sanctions (Government of the United Kingdom 2023b; Council of the EU 2023). While the initial response was late, these moves demonstrate that Western countries are trying to implement measures in support of the people affected by the earthquakes. Nevertheless, the effects on the implementation of humanitarian assistance remain limited. Despite repeated pleas from humanitarian assistance agencies, the US did not extend its relaxation of the sanctions (Hagedorn 2023). As noted above, the prolongation of conflicts accelerates the deterioration of the social, economic and governance infrastructure of the countries affected by the conflict. There is a need to examine how the positive and negative effects of sanctions change over time.

Finally, it is worth noting that some members of the Arab League have been taking steps to revive their relations with the Syrian government since the earthquakes. Syria's return to the Arab League was a particularly symbolic event in this regard (Cafiero and Milliken 2023). Since the conflict began in 2011, Syria's membership of the League had been suspended, as its government had been considered responsible for the conflict. However, the period after the earthquakes saw changes in the positions of Saudi Arabia and Qatar,

⁷ Both the draft resolution jointly proposed by Brazil and Switzerland and the draft resolution proposed by Russia were rejected (UNSC 2023c). Syria was not a member of the Security Council and was not involved in these decisions.

which had been the key players in Syria's suspension from the League. Prioritizing the protection of lives, Saudi Arabia provided assistance to all affected areas, both in government and antigovernment hands, to support Syrian people (Alhussein 2023). Qatar, while opposing Syria's return to the Arab League, accepted the decision of its fellow members (Egypt Independent 2023). The change of stance by both countries helped to propel Syria back into the League. Following the earthquakes, these countries accepted that the current Syrian government was going to remain in power, and they moved to restore relations with their Arab fellow government of Syria, regardless of Western sanctions.

Still, it would be somewhat premature to anticipate that Syria's return to the Arab League will provide impetus toward ending the conflict and the concomitant promotion of human security. For example, of the three main antigovernment forces, only the Kurdish parties welcomed Syria's return to the Arab League. The hostility of other forces toward the Syrian government has not disappeared. Also, at least 20 IS fighters used the earthquakes as an opportunity to escape from prison, and the organization remains a threat (Al Arabiya 2023). Furthermore, Israeli airstrikes on Syrian territory are still ongoing (France 24 2023). The conflict, which was already complex before the earthquakes, shows no sign of ending.

In regard to reconstruction, Syria's return to the Arab League has raised hopes of investment inflows from the Gulf states. However, some of the sanctions also apply to implementing the assistance to Syria from third countries, so it may be difficult for the Gulf states to contribute anything other than humanitarian assistance. No progress has been made to return refugees to their home places. As for the protection of dignity, there are ongoing reports of violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation both on the part of the Syrian government and of the antigovernment forces (UNGA 2023). This issue was not raised by the Arab League when Syria rejoined. Even as full-scale post-earthquake reconstruction fails to make progress, the protection of dignity remains the greatest issue that the country faces.

Thus, Syria is burdened with grave problems in the protection of livelihoods and dignity. Most of these problems arise from the course of the conflict and the confrontation

between the Syrian government and the West. This oppositional stance has remained largely unchanged, even after the earthquakes. On the other hand, the Syrian government's relationship with the Arab League and its member states has shifted. Given that the protection practices of livelihoods and dignity are heavily impacted by international relations, this complex web of international interactions will need to be closely monitored going forward.

3. Discussion

The previous sections analyzed the case study of Syria in the context of the compounded crises of conflict and earthquakes. The analysis elucidated practices and challenges in protecting lives, livelihoods, and dignity from a human security perspective. When an earthquake occurs unaccompanied by other disasters, the international community will generally cooperate with the affected country to put protection into practice as quickly as possible, as discussed in Section 1. In the case of Syria, however, the international community's response to the earthquakes was very limited due to the ongoing conflict. Among the various lessons from the Syrian case, three points should be considered in this discussion.

First, the emergence of compounded crises generally makes it even more difficult to put protection into practice. The parties to the Syrian conflict showed no willingness to cooperate in the face of the earthquakes and blocked humanitarian assistance arranged by the opposing forces. The fractured nature of the country's governance structure made it difficult to carry out an overall assessment of the damage, and only a limited number of countries and organizations offered assistance. In other words, in the face of these compounded crises, even the provision of humanitarian assistance and other minimum lifesaving measures was delayed and insufficient. Furthermore, post-earthquake reconstruction, which should be directly linked to the livelihoods protection, proved to be extremely limited due to the conflict. As referred to in Section 2.4, the G7 Summit Leaders' Communiqué made it clear that without the prospect of a political resolution to the conflict, post-earthquake reconstruction will be difficult. This means that a real shift in focus to

protecting livelihoods has not taken place. Moreover, the compounded crises also affect the practices of dignity protection. Even before the earthquakes, all major parties to the Syrian conflict were involved in acts of violence, abuse, coercion, and deprivation. It is impossible to claim that human dignity is being protected under these circumstances. In addition, the people of Syria were left behind by the international response when the earthquakes struck. Without such assistance, lives and livelihoods cannot be protected. A situation where necessary assistance is not provided can be seen as a failure to protect a human dignity. In this way, each of the compounded crises interacted with one another and affected the three forms of protection that should have addressed them. These compounded crises exacerbated an already desperate situation of human insecurity.

On the other hand, and as the second point, it should be noted that these compounded crises acted on the empowerment of the Syrian people. In government-controlled areas, a wide range of organizations took action to protect the affected people after the earthquakes. In areas controlled by antigovernment forces, the White Helmets and various other groups were active. Not all groups have disclosed the nature of their activities at the time, and it is possible that groups other than those mentioned above were in fact active. Hundreds of organizations were active throughout the country before the earthquakes, regardless of the forces controlling the areas, and were capable of being focal points in receiving and distributing humanitarian assistance. This made it possible for Syrians to provide assistance when the earthquakes struck. In the face of compounded crisis, the complexities of international relations prevented external actors from putting the protection of lives into practice. Even in these situations, Syrians themselves acted to protect and empower each other. The fact that the protection available to them was insufficient is in itself a major problem. Nevertheless, strengthening this type of people's empowerment may well lead to the promotion of people-centered human security.

Finally, the emergence of compounded crisis may push the international community toward pragmatic responses. Judging from the areas of influence depicted in [Figure 2](#) and the declining death toll, the Syrian conflict appears to be beginning to wind down. Nevertheless, there is no sign that

the conflict will reach a political resolution. The US, UK, and EU relaxed sanctions, but only in a limited way, and the US has not extended the relaxation. Russia and China have remained steadfast in their support for the Syrian government, and the international confrontation over Syria continues. Since the earthquakes, however, most members of the Arab League have reopened their lines of communication with Damascus. They have provided protection to support the lives and livelihoods of the Syrian people. While their interventions have not been sufficient, they have helped to promote human security. The earthquakes appear to have been one factor in moving the Arab League to accept the realities on the ground and allowing Syria back into the fold.

The outbreak of compounded crisis has led to pragmatic responses, but this does not mean that the international community has become conciliatory. While sanctions may serve, among other purposes, to prevent human rights violations, they may also, as discussed, impede the practice of protecting lives and livelihoods. In contrast, the Arab League and its member states are seen to have prioritized protecting lives and livelihoods, but they did not raise the human rights violation issues by the main parties to the Syrian conflict when they readmitted Syria into the League. The implementation of practices to protect lives and livelihoods does not always necessarily secure the protection of dignity. Human security practices require cooperation between different actors, which has not yet to be achieved in the case of Syria. By resuming dialogue with the Syrian government, the Arab League has taken the first steps toward ending the conflict and starting post-earthquake reconstruction. It remains to be seen whether the practices of realistic protection at the regional level will expand to the international community as a whole, thereby facilitating further promotion of human security and making provision of the three forms of feasible protection.

To summarize the above findings, the international community needs to address the compounded crises of unforeseen large-scale natural disasters in conflict situations. From a human security perspective, it is beneficial for the international community to support the practices of protecting lives, livelihoods, and dignity, regardless of the dominant power in the affected area. While ending the conflict would

provide an effective path toward reconstruction, the occurrence of large-scale natural disasters does not always serve to resolve conflicts. This has been shown in previous research and in the detailed analysis of the case of the Syrian conflict undertaken for this article. Rather, conflicts and large-scale natural disasters interact to render the provision of protection all the more difficult. It follows that there is a need to examine all possible policies, even while the conflict is ongoing, in order to promote human security for the people facing compounded crises.

This article has detailed the protection practices by a wide range of actors, and there is no doubt that the provision of humanitarian assistance by UN agencies has contributed to human security. Funding from UN member states—Japan included—has supported the distribution of humanitarian assistance in hard-to-reach areas. This article has also introduced cases of empowerment underpinned by the Syrian people's desire for reconstruction. Supporting people's mutual empowerment promptly by the international community, albeit as a result of inadequate protection, may constitute an additional approach to promoting human security under compounded crises. From a human security perspective, the international community must continuously make efforts toward the protection of people's lives, livelihoods and dignity, even in situations of intractable confrontation.

Conclusion

Although this article has dealt with only one example case, it has drawn out a number of suggestions for measures to promote human security. It took the earthquakes in north-west Syria during the Syrian conflict as a case study of the compounded crises. From a human security perspective, people in Syria did not receive timely and enough protection in the face of these compounded crises, and as a result, mutual support and self-empowerment were enhanced. The measures to be taken against compounded crises will vary depending on the course of a conflict and the extent and degree of earthquake damage. Still, a combined approach of supporting the provision of adequate protection and empowerment should further promote human security.

Moreover, there have also been some changes in the relationship between the Syrian government and the international community since the earthquakes. Still, there is as yet no clear pathway toward effective measures against the fundamental threat to human security, namely, the conflict itself. In this respect, the future course of the conflict will need to be closely monitored. Another point to note is that compounded crises go beyond conflict and earthquakes: they may also include pandemics and financial crises, climate change and food insecurity, and other issues in various combinations. Finding the appropriate pathway toward promoting human security in the face of adversity is no easy task. However, people's empowerment and the support of the international community are instrumental to achieving it. An accumulation of case studies like this article will contribute to the further promotion of human security in the face of compounded crises.

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