TRANSCRIPTION OF GOVERNANCE UNCOVERED EPIODE 46

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered, a podcast brought to you by the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg. This podcast is supported by the Swedish Research Council. This episode will focus on different aspects of a crisis and what the struggles may look like for society trying to recover. First up is an interview with Will Toddman, who researches how energy infrastructure is affected during and post conflicts.

Very often, the necessary imports, whether that's fuel or pieces or technology, those imports are are disrupted during conflicts, so people aren't able to operate infrastructure even if it is still intact.

Following this is an interview with Professor Rabia Polat, who will talk about her research on Turkish local authorities reception of the country's 3.5 million Syrian refugees. We'll also hear a discussion on the crisis response on the recent earthquake in Turkey.

This also creates certain ambiguities for municipalities because, basically, they don't know what they should be doing for the refugees. There is no clear legal frame, and actually, they don't have clearly set responsibilities in terms of what they should be doing.

Sticking to a discussion about the earthquake for our last segment, Mohammad Al-Ashmar brings the Syrian perspective on crisis response to the table. Thinking about local initiatives, international aid and how the already fragile areas in Syria have been affected by the earthquake in February 2023.

The most affected areas are the North West of Syria, which is the opposition controlled areas, and it's the worst affected regions. Before the earthquakes, the region has a high level of humanitarian need and displacement and the UN always say it's funding for the area was already overstretched.

We hope that you enjoyed this episode. Don't forget to like, share and subscribe if you do.

First, we'll hear from Will Toddman, who is a fellow in the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Will spoke to Ellen Lust about his recent report on how energy can be transformed and promoted in post conflict areas, with examples from the Middle East. They discussed the different ways energy infrastructure can be destroyed or debilitated during conflict, and how local actors operate to adapt by finding new ways to produce electricity. As well as what the obstacles stemming from political interests might be in rebuilding a functioning energy infrastructure in post conflict settings.

My name is Will Toddman and I'm a fellow in the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS in Washington, DC.

Thank you Will, for joining us today.

Thanks so much for having me.

You've just had a, a really interesting report that's been published. It's looking at the question about energy and how we can transform, but also promote energy and post conflict areas. Maybe you can tell us just a little bit about the problem that you think exists with regards to energy production in post conflict settings.

So often energy infrastructure is either destroyed or debilitated during conflicts. So part of that is certainly through physical destruction of, you know, power stations, transmission lines. But there are other ways in which it is undermined by conflict as well. Very often, the necessary imports, whether that's fuel or pieces or technology, those imports are are disrupted during conflicts, so people aren't able to operate infrastructure even if it is still intact. And then a third way in which it's undermined is by the displacement of key personnel. So a lot of this infrastructure is very complicated, difficult to operate and the people who usually do that can be displaced. So for a lot of countries that are emerging from conflict, the infrastructure may not be there in the first place. Or what is there is is basically impossible to operate. So in this vacuum when you know centralized state systems, breakdown and fragment, there are often lots of local adaptations that fill the void. People find ways to create electricity and to produce electricity. Sometimes that happens really at the individual level, but quite often it happens at the Community level and then over time, warlords and other political actors see this as a source of profiting, and so it becomes a real political asset to be able to provide electricity, to reward allies or supporters and to deny it from others as a weapon of war.

So that's interesting, I mean you've started to touch on what I think is one of the most interesting aspects of the report, which is really to think about this as a political problem and to think about the ways in which you have some key actors who may not even want to see larger projects succeed because they lose political control in the mean time, right? It's incredibly difficult not to crack and in a way. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that political struggle looks like on the ground?

Definitely. So yeah, I think this is a really important piece of the problem, that there are a lot of people who benefit from a dysfunctional electricity system and that sort of sounds counterintuitive. But when you know, state systems break down, informal systems and informal providers can charge a huge amount of money for services. So an often cited example of this is Lebanon, where there are private generators at the neighborhood level who often have ties to political elites, and they can charge huge amounts of money because the state just can't provide electricity. And very often they have a monopoly over the area that they operate in. And they certainly do not want to see improvements to state electricity supplies because they would lose out. But it goes, I think, even even higher to that. There are a lot of actors who don't want to view post conflict reconstruction as an opportunity to build back better, which is a cliche, but a lot of people, you know, don't view this as a chance to improve how these systems work. They would much prefer to just recreate what

existed prior to the conflict. A big example of this is multinational corporations, big energy companies, often western energy companies that have billion dollar contracts with governments often, and they do not want these contracts to change or, you know, these tenders to to open up again because they can't risk losing that much money. So this happened in Iraq, where after really severe destruction, particularly after Isis, big companies like GE and Siemens, they wanted to reconstruct the major power stations, which are often gas fired because they wanted to ensure that they still controlled these contracts and they can make huge amounts of money from it. Regardless of the fact that Iraq doesn't really need to have lots more power stations, what it actually needs is, you know, rehabilitation of the grid so that losses aren't as high. They need to improve tariff collection. But a lot of these reforms go against powerful political actors interests.

So when you think of how how to solve this in a sense, right? I mean, you've spent a lot of time, you've gone to to countries you've spoken to a lot of the actors who are working with it from the donors and the AID side as well as people in the local communities, if I understand. So what are you hearing or what are you seeing, are the the potential solutions?

So I think it might first be helpful to say how international donors usually approach this. So they are really hesitant about engaging in unstable environments when conflict endures. They might provide emergency assistance to key humanitarian infrastructure, to hospitals, to schools, perhaps. But this is very often short term interventions. It's providing emergency fuel and it's not intended to really improve how these systems operate. Then when fighting has ended and they think that it's safe enough, then they will go in and and they tend to try and help these big companies to come in and win these multi $1,000,000 contracts for huge power stations. They're meant to help support the rehabilitation of of grids and you know transmission lines and distribution lines. That does often happen, but what they're working up against is all of these actors that I mentioned before who don't want to see these improvements because that would cut into their profits, and so then the other pillar of typical, you know, international actors strategies is to try and encourage reforms in the electricity sectors, to try to limit some of the corruption and profiteering and and the grift that we've been talking about. And that has had a very poor record to the international actors ability to bring about reforms, going back to Lebanon for more than 20 years, donors have failed to encourage the Lebanese Government to establish an independent electricity regulator for the sector, which is, I think, most people view as really a key step to improving the future of the electricity sector.

Can I just ask for a clarification here, because when you're talking about these these failures, I want to link it back to the issue of the political actors who gain from not necessarily having such reform succeed, right? Do we find evidence that they are basically kind of undermining such efforts, or is it that these efforts are wrongheaded and wouldn't succeed even if they're not being undermined by political actors and stakeholders who don't necessarily benefit from their success?

I think depends country by country, but certainly we see a huge amount of resistance from political elites in places like Lebanon and Iraq to any of these reforms. I would say the evidence is the fact that the Lebanese Parliament passed this this law calling for the independent regulator in 2002, it's now 2023. More than 20 years, none of the many governments that have, you know, taken office in

those last two decades have actually implemented this independent regulator. And the reason for that I think is that there are huge pressure on them not to take steps that would undercut some of the profiteering that I talked about and, it's important to mention that this isn't just at one level. It's not just at the central political level where you know certain key business people can profit from, you know these multi $1,000,000 contracts that might not really be the the, the proper solution. But even at the really local level. I mean the there has been a lot of political mobilizing to prevent any kind of initiative that could undercut local business peoples ability to profit. Again an example from Lebanon, where the Lebanese government had tried to hire a Turkish power barge that would unload its, its energy, its electricity through a port in in Lebanon. And these local generator owners organized settings to block the roads all around where this was meant to be. They said it was for environmental concerns. They claimed that this was going to be polluting. In reality, the systems that they operate are very polluting, have terrible effects on the environment and public health, and so I think you can quite clearly see that this was really about they were worried that customers would be less reliant on their services, so it happens at lots of different levels.

So I wanted to return to the question then what's the solution? How do you see it prospects moving forward?

This is where technology and advances in renewable energy technologies, I think really provide opportunities that haven't been there before. And what I try to argue is that we need to - we as international actors, seeking to improve this situation - need to not just adopt a standard pay book that you know we've been operating or for for, for decades, but instead to take inspiration from some of the ways the really ingenious ways in which local communities have provided cheaper, more reliable electricity for themselves. And This is why I wanted to really look at the local level, because there are lots of examples from Yemen, from Lebanon, some in Libya and Iraq as well, where communities did take matters into their own hands. And come up with systems that are often integrating solar panels and reducing their reliance on imports of of fuel to to provide for their people. And I try and bring in some examples from places like Yemen where firstly, Yemen, particularly rural areas in Yemen had terrible electricity access prior to the conflict. It's even worse now during the conflict, but Yemenis turned on mass to solar panels as a an adaptation and a cope coping mechanism. There are lots of problems with this, because there's no regulation and there was an influx of poor quality technology. But some communities have discovered that by working together they can come up with community scale infrastructure that has really wide-ranging benefits. I talk about the example of a women run, micro grid in northern Yemen, where the people used to go to sleep at 7:00 PM because there was simply nothing to do after dark without power. I mean now, not only do they stay up, but they can operate sewing machines to make a living. Their children can do their homework at night. They can keep their food refrigerated without worrying about it spoiling. The benefits of accelerating the recovery, even while conflict still endures, I think are multiple and and wide reaching. And So what I try to argue in the paper is that we need to try and build on and highlight some of the positive examples that these communities are already coming up with on their own and at the very least, not destroy them by just rebuilding these, these huge, dirty, expensive power stations. But saying you can actually act much earlier than you think, and this infrastructure is more secure for lots of reasons. But I argue that it is possible to implement it even more conflicts are still going on, and then it can set these societies on a pathway of sure environmental sustainability, but also really boosting economic recovery much earlier, preventing

some of the, or the entrenchment of these networks of exploitation that I was talking about, and I think then it can can set these societies on a more positive trajectory going forward.

No I think that's an interesting thing and and really kind of exciting proposal, right? Because it also reduces ever so slightly, but the the costs of the war itself. Because the notion that you wait until the war is over and then you try to support and intervene. And in some cases, you're right that local communities have managed to find ways to succeed, but other times, some of these lessons might be able to be transfer. So thank you very much for both joining us, but also for a really, really interesting report and I'm excited to see it out. So thank you.

Thanks so much for having.

Next, we'll hear from Professor Rabia Polat from Isik University in Istanbul, Department of International Relations. Together with Professor Vivianne Lowndes from University of Birmingham, Rabia has researched how Turkish localities have responded to Syrian refugees. Addressing the challenges local authorities in Turkey have faced in attempting to respond for the 3.5 million Syrian refugees in the country during the past decade. Rabia talks to Ellen Lust about how local governments have had limited resources, a lacking legal framework and constraints from the central government. They will also talk about the recent earthquakes in Turkey, as another example of overcentralization that has been insufficient in coordinating with local actors during a crisis situation.

Hi, thanks for having me. So this is Professor Rabia Polat from Isik University in Istanbul, Department of International Relations.

Welcome. It's really, really great to have you with us. What we're going to talk about today is thinking about governance in Turkey and particularly local governance in Turkey. You've done some really interesting work with Vivianne Lowndes at the University of Birmingham on the question of how localities have responded to the Syrian refugees. At the time you were doing this of 2018-2019, there were about, I think it was 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, and that was about 4.5% of the population. But most importantly, most of them didn't live in camps, as some people might think of it, but rather were in urban areas and in localities. And came into contact and in a sense, kind of most immediately under the governance of the local authorities, even if they didn't necessarily have a lot of authority to provide their needs. So I think you've done some really great work about thinking about how the local actors, municipalities, officials and muktar's and and NGO's and others perceive this as an issue and and how they responded to it. So I'm glad that we have a chance to talk about it and to let others know about your findings here. So let me start just by asking you to tell us a little bit about the constraints that municipalities had, but also then how they saw the challenge that they were faced with.

Well, I think first of all, we should start by emphasizing the scale of this issue. As you mentioned, there are still 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. And this would be a huge policy challenge for any

country and Turkey as a developing country doesn't have the resources, the the capacity to deal with such a huge policy issue. And this is true both for the central government and local government, which is my main research. By the way, when I say local government, in Turkey there's a dual local government structure. So we have appointed local government which is more like the continuation of the central government. We also have elected local government the the municipalities. When I say local government, I'm actually talking about these municipalities. So the scale, the size of the issue is I think should be the starting point. But also there are issues around the status of refugees in Turkey. Because although I use the term refugee, they are not legally recognized as refugees. This because Turkey applies a geographical limitation to the general Convention, so Syrians in Turkey live under temporary protection, which was introduced in 2014. This also creates certain ambiguities for municipalities because basically they don't know what they should be doing for the refugees. There is no clear legal framework and actually they don't have clearly set responsibilities in terms of what they should be doing for providing services or for integrating them into the society. Because integration is now becoming more and more important as we left behind the initial years of the crisis. And obviously another problem is about funds, money, local authorities, local government, municipalities are financially dependent on the central government. And central funds are allocated based on the local population. The number of citizens, not the refugees. So even if you have, let's say as a municipality, you have 100,000 citizens and 20,000 refugees, you don't get an extra penny for those refugees. So I think these are really the problems for municipalities just to start with.

I appreciate that. And actually one of the things that I think you're in some ways highlighting is that smaller municipalities, right, which would always have fewer resources just in terms of their own population sizes. Regardless of the numbers of of refugees who came in. So imagine you're over by the Turkish Syrian border, right? A lot of those are smaller municipalities and then have a lot of Syrian refugees, are not getting more funds just because they happen to be the recipients of more refugees or more Syrians? Is that correct? Do I understand that correctly?

Yeah, exactly. They don't receive any extra funds from the central government, even if they have as many refugees as their own local population. And actually there are places like that. For example, there is a small normal province called Kilis, and its refugee population was it 80% of its local population, so that means it has to double everything. All the infrastructure, health services, even waste management, everything. But they are very creative and very pragmatic. This was a surprising finding in our research. We were happy to see that municipalities are doing their best to generate capacity, for example by accessing international funds. Usually, they cannot do that on their own because those funds are not available for municipalities. So what they do is they establish partnerships with NGOs and in that way they brought excess funds but also expertise, because these NGOs are specialized in issues like child protection or women's rights. The municipalities are not experts in these fields, so these partnerships are really valuable, not only for generating funds, but capacity in in general. So we were really happy to see these kind of initiatives.

Can you speak a little bit more about that initiative in particular, because it also seemed like there was a way in which it comes into a little bit of tension with the perspective of the national government itself, right? So can you talk a little bit about how that fits within the relationship between the municipalities and the central government?

That's a very good point because we witness that the Turkish Government has been very critical of the West in general, but more specifically the European Union. The Turkish Government accused the EU for not taking enough responsibility in terms of the number of resettled Syrians. But also in terms of financial responsibility, so there is always this tension between the Turkish Government, the European Union, but on the ground there are also pragmatic approaches, because these municipalities know that they need this money. So they develop projects to access these funds and these funds are also used for the local communities and actually many of the municipalities are trying to have a 50/50 share between the local beneficiaries and the Syrian beneficiaries. In order to avoid any criticism from the local population, so they can more easily justify what they are doing for this. So for example, if they open a Community Center with funds coming from the European Union, this Community Center is open for the Turkish citizen as well, and they provide services for kids or vocational training. So they serve those to provide services, but they also serve as a venue for integration, bringing these communities together and these are all possible with funds coming from the European Union. Of course, these funds are still really, really small compared to what was spent by Turkey over this course of many, many years, but I think it's still important when they are used based on smart projects, they really create a difference both for Syrians and the local community. And you know right, here, it looks like there is a tension between the central government and the European Union, but at the local level, municipalities and NGOs, their main concern is to address these needs, because this is what they face every day on the ground. These people are here. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian people and they have to, I mean municipalities have to do something for them. So they think that it's better to be more pragmatic rather than ideological in a sense.

Right. And in some ways, you're pointing to that the resourcefulness of the municipalities, but your work also discusses the basis, how the municipalities and those within them, see the Syrians and how they justify the actions they do right? So you talk a little bit about how they think about it in a lens of social cohesion, or about thinking about it in terms of equal rights in terms of pragmatism, that comes through. To you, what was perhaps the most surprising or the most interesting lens that you found that municipalities applied to the problem of the Syrian refugees, that you might not have expected before?

So in my earlier work I looked at the official discourse, ATP's discourse on Syrian refugees, and that discourse, especially at the beginning, was very positive. It was based on religious solidarity. The idea that Syrians are all Muslim brothers and sisters. And also the idea that this is Turkey's historical mission. I mean, we have to help these people, they are the victims of an evil regime, etcetera. So it's all very ideological, very heroic. And sometimes very anti-Western as well. There's kind of a binary between Turkey as having this humanitarian approach, while on the other hand, the European Union is always talking about human rights but not doing enough, when it comes to addressing the needs. So there is this official discourse, a discourse, but at the local level, we haven't seen such ideological approaches. The narratives that we identified at the local level are also humanitarian, but they will also emphasis on equality for example. Many local actors thought that the narrative should not be based on religious solidarity. It should be based on humanitarian needs, and the idea that we should provide equal services. Obviously there are anti-refugee narratives as

well as you would expect in any context. But I was really surprised about this, let's say less heroic, less ideological, more realistic and maybe pragmatic approaches at the local level.

This kind of pragmatism that's both emerged and in some ways, that municipalities have been forced to practice because of the lack of resources, at least from the center, right, giving a a lot of responsibility, even if it's informal responsibility and yet not really be given the support to meet the needs. This is a bit of a right turn in this sense, but I'm trying to understand how we might think about the current crisis, the crisis around the earthquake, and the unfortunately the thousands of lives lost, but also a lot of humanitarian needs that are arising from it and infrastructure needs. How can we think about again the relationship between the Center and the municipalities in the context of the earthquake?

Maybe we could make it assessment from the perspective of over centralization in Turkish politics recently. This over-centralization of power has affected the refugee policy. But now we are witnessing how it also created this huge damage following the two earthquakes last week. Since last week, we have been talking about why the damage is so big. Like OK, the magnitude of the earthquakes will really big, but similar earthquakes happened in other countries as well, and the damage was not so big. So there must be reasons beyond the geological ones, right? So people have been talking about poor building standards, the corruption in the construction sector, the frequent adoption of Amnesty laws for unsecured buildings. And this happened 7 times under the government in 20 years. But I think the real problem here is over centralization, because in 2017 we shifted our system to a presidential one. But this is a Turkish style presidential system with no checks and balances. So since 2017 non accountability has become the norm. So lots of mistakes are being made. But there are no mechanisms to take decisionmakers into account, so I will just give two examples, though one is about the earthquake tax. In 1999, we had another big earthquake. It also led to death of thousands of people, and it was supposed to be a lesson for everyone and the party government introduced a special earthquake tax so that we would collect funds and we will be more prepared for the next earthquake, because obviously Turkey expects these earthquakes. And 20 years later today, we don't know how much money have been collected. We don't know what happened to that money. Just when we really need that money. And there aren't any mechanisms for accountability. And the second example is the government also established a special organization to deal with this emergency situations. It's called Ofhat, and Ofhat was quite successful, especially in the initial years of the refugee crisis. But later it also became very centralized and bureaucratic, with no connections to localities, local actors, civil society organizations. And during the emergency response, you need that, you need to cooperate and coordinate with local actors and civil society organizations. No government can deal with such a big disaster on its own, but unfortunately because of that, overcentralization, We lost those roots, those branches, we don't have that coordination and cooperation and capacity. So I think the refugee issue basically improved Turkish civil society and we had lots of partnerships with local authorities and civil society organizations. So civil society in Turkey benefited from the arrival of refugees in terms of generating capacity, learning how to establish partnerships, etc. And there is a chance to benefit from that capacity now in another crisis following the earthquake, but unfortunately that over-centralization is a big problem and we will be discussing this more and more, I think.

Yeah, and it is a particularly important time to be discussing it, right, with elections coming in with a lot of political system, and and seen as already very animated and it seems to be one more aspect. It's a horrific event, I mean, I think we all agree on that, but it will be interesting to see how that's played out in the political scene and as well as the extent to which, like you said, the civil society and capacity, can be brought to bear in this case. So I just want to again thank you for joining us and also to wish you and to everyone all of the best. And again, congratulations on great work and thank you very, very much for sharing it with us.

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

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Mohammad Al Asmar is a PhD student and research fellow at the Center for Syrian Studies at the University of Saint Andrews, School of International Relations. He is also a humanitarian worker and consultant for NGOs and international organizations, in Syria and in the region. Ellen met with Mohamad to discuss the current situation in Syria, considering their political and economic instabilities and particularly the crisis of the recent earthquakes. They will touch upon its psychological impact and the more direct effects on infrastructure and. Livelihoods, the local. Responses from Syrians living within and outside Syria. The complex role of international aid and the challenges people face on the ground with the Syrian authorities, rebels and other opposition groups.

Firstly hi, thank you very much for having me. My name is Mohamad Al Ashmar. I'm a PhD student and a research fellow at the Center for Science Study at the University of Saint Andrews School of International Relations. And also a humanitarian worker and consultant for several NGO's and international organizations in Syria and the region. I have been working with several humanitarian agencies and donors during the last ten years on issues related to empowerment of IDP's, displaced people, refugees and also on several issues related to protection of people inside Syria and also on the emergency and recovery response inside.

Thank you, Mohamad, for joining us. I look forward to your expertise and learning from you about the current situation in Syria, particularly following the earthquakes that took place in the last month. Maybe you can start by just describing a little bit the situation subsequent to the earthquakes and how that response has looked like.

In Syria, as we know the the earthquake was about 20 days ago, and in contrast to Turkey, where a central and a unified state is able to use its infrastructure and social production systems to respond to the earthquake, the decade of the Civil war in Syria has caused extensive damage to the infrastructure. And severely affected thousands of people inside Syria, especially in the north and northwest of Syria. The country as we know is divided into hostile areas, and the and Bashar Assad regime is internally already struggling and also internationally isolated. The most affected areas are the North West of Syria, which is the opposition controlled areas. This area are controlled by opposition groups, rebels and it's the worst affected regions before the earthquakes. The region has a high level of humanitarian need and displacement, and the UN always say it's funding for the area

was already overstretched. Those areas in the Northwest area where the heaviest hit areas, it was the closest to the apex center in the northern Turkey and in in addition to that, the community in this area is very vulnerable. There is about four to five million depending on humanitarian aid, including medical assistant and food and among others, and about third of this population have been forcibly displaced from from other parts of Syria. More than 80% of those population has been displaced between 6 to 20 times. So we have here a population that has lost its assets over and over again, and in addition to that, this area has a very fragmented governance. This area as I said is managed and controlled by rebels and opposition and militia that some of them are supported by Turkey. So we here in the NW we have a very hazard and fragmented gas. While when we look at the other side of Syria, which is the government controlled areas, the affected areas are the city of Aleppo and the coastal region Latakia. These areas, the impact of the earthquakes was little or less than the other region in the Northwest, but many villages and towns and neighborhoods are also already very poor areas and already suffered from the 10 years of the conflict, and some of these areas in the government held areas where a battlefield between the opposition and the regime during the last 10 years.

Can I just stop us for a second? And I want us to break down a little bit the issues that you're raising, right, because one issue that you're raising is almost as sort of the psychological trauma that people are facing, that the earthquake is bad enough essentially, right? But we're not talking about people who were having perfectly happy, stable lives up until the period of the earthquake. What you're saying is somebody's been displaced 6 to 20 times. That's a lot of trauma that has existed for people, so one of the things I think that's important to think about is the extent to which the psychological damage in the psychological trauma from the earthquake is even more extraordinary than we might often think it is. Is that something that is being taken into account? Is there any form of assistance from the trauma side, before we talk about infrastructure and and livelihoods.

Unfortunately, no, but currently what I can say about this part about the support to this population is very limited and only offered by local NGOs charities who are trying just to offer immediate support and response to this population. Currently the focus, this is related also to the governance or how the local response is going on inside this area, the response is only by local NGOs, by international NGOs, by UN agencies, in both areas, in the northwest and in in the government held areas. I mean the main support is only in terms of food, Health Protection, shelter. So, this is what everyone is trying to offer, while things related to trauma, social protection, or psychological support, that's unfortunately no one is able to go to this level of support because the needs are very high and as we know, the UN is already acknowledged their failure in supporting those people.

I mean in a sense, it's sort of a second order problem, if you will, and and that part. When we think about the infrastructure itself and, I'm sort of working backwards towards thinking about the people. But these were areas that have already experienced, if I understand correctly, bombardment and already sort of a weakened infrastructure, both in terms of building structures but also water and other resources. Is that correct and is that an equal problem? Whether we're talking about the government held or the opposition held territories?

Yeah, only Latakia, which is the the coastal region, that didn't suffer or has been a battle ground before, but Aleppo city, especially the north of Aripo and the rural part of Aleppo, which is also very has very weak infrastructure even before the conflict because this area are very rural areas and very poor. So all the areas that are affected by this earthquakes, as I said, it's very poor, It's suffered from the air is dry.. Especially after the Russian interventions in this areas, and also because this area is a very populated areas. It has about two or three millions displaced from other areas, the infrastructure is already very weak and also in terms of the social services and the public services, which is not available in some of these areas. So we're talking about areas that don't have a water electricity. It's kind of, let's say, triple crisis, a crisis that came or let's say a tragedy with more tragedy before.

No, exactly. I'm wondering when we think about the international aid community, some have argued that the international aid community found it easier to work with the Assad regime, or that there was a way in which tended to be a kind of an uneven flow of support. In your view, is that a correct assessment? Is there a difference in terms of how much the international community is helping the Assad regime held areas versus the opposition held areas at the current point in time under the crisis?

Yeah, I think there is some. I mean, this is my current opinion or many people's opinion, that there is some sense of international agreement on supporting the regime or supporting the Syrian government for for many reasons. With that, we still don't know. I mean many people say that this is related to the normalization trend with the Assad regime and the Turkish support to this normal. So we have now the UN sending and many countries, especially including many European countries, sending assistance and support to the regime, including Romania, Germany, Denmark, Norway, all of them send are sending assistance and humanitarian aid to many airports. And bases inside Damascus and to the regime, and also in addition to to the UN, the UN has many, many offices. The government held areas and this international acceptance of support to the regime and let's say giving him more stake or upper hand on the international response or the humanitarian response to the earthquake. But however this is is affecting the people because we all know that the Syrian regime has a very bad history in manipulating the humanitarian aid and diverting the humanitarian aid to to his benefit.

So I wanna shift then, a little bit, in terms of thinking about if it's relatively absent in opposition held areas, how are those areas responding? Because we talk about the opposition, but of course it's multiple oppositions. There's a lot of different groups, sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating. Can you give us a sense of the variety of responses that we're seeing under the opposition held territory?

I mean part of the problem in these areas, I mean, as you said is controlled by several radical groups and militia and Islamist rebels. And some of them are supported by Turkey. There is international assistance coming through the borders from Turkey to this areas by the UN and by some international NGO's and also by local NGOs and Syrian alliances and internal Syrian diaspora organizations who are sending assistance to to this area. Yes, but this assistant or this uh

humanitarian aid is only limited to food, medical assistant and the basics assistant that that aim to help people survive. But also many of these rebels, groups and militia are using this humanitarian aid also to upgrade their authority and upgrade their control on this population and areas. But there is also a very important dimension or thing about this that the solidarity between the Syrians inside Syria and outside Syria is very interesting and very, I mean growing and growing during the last few weeks. Many convoys and many donations and support is coming through the borders from Turkey, from Europe, from the US inside this area. So here we have local NGOs and charities who are leading or able to provide and offer many services including, as I said, medical assistant healthcare to families building shelters, building small camps for people who lose their houses. So we have some, let's say, kind of collective efforts and local response between the people inside Syria and outside Syria. But as I said, there is also challenges going on on the ground with these authorities and militia and rebels.

It's interesting because in some ways there's an aspect of this that strengthens solidarity and strengthens cooperation right. But it also provides, as you're sort of alluding to, another battleground for control over rents, control over resources, ultimately people and and allegiances. I think this is incredibly important and useful to think through. Is there any other aspect or any other message that you want to make sure that people know or understand with regards to the current situation?

I mean the main message that I want to say is, unfortunately, this earthquake is giving the regime the advantage to survive politically and to use the earthquake to normalize itself, not only the regime but also Iran militia and affiliated organization are using this earthquake to take the lead or to enforce. For example, in Aleppo, the Iranian militia and organization are enforcing themselves as an authority. I mean, it's very important to be aware how these authoritarian regimes and authoritarian actor are using this kind of disaster. So, a message is that I want to say that we should keep advocating or be aware of this. And also understand that this regime is the main reason behind the suffering of the Syrian people. We should advocate to counter these efforts of the regime and his allies, whether they are Iranians or Russians or other maybe who are trying like, for example, the Arab Emirates or Egypt or Jordan, who are trying to legitimize this regime as as the government or. This regime is not able to offer anything, the affected populations in his.. So that's the main thing. The other thing is this a disaster will have a very or already had very devastating impact on the Syrians. So to keep supporting Syrians to keep looking for trusted organization to support them on the ground, there is many organizations who are very trusted and working on the ground like White Hamlets, Milham team and this kind of organization. So I just wanna encourage people to donate and support this local actors and these initiatives that aim to support the Syrians and recover and survive this disaster.

Thank you very much. I mean, I think you're right. There's a humanitarian crisis, right that requires the assistance and it takes place obviously, in Syria and in Turkey both. There's also not that it needs to be the only focus on it, but for people interested in governance, there's a an important governance aspects to what's taking place, right? Both the history and how that has affected the ability of different groups to to respond, but also the impact of this right. We were also talking to a professor regarding Turkey and the extent to which that will affect the Turkish regime and also is

affecting the Syrian regime, arguably in different ways. But both cases there are important political effects as well as humanitarian crises. So thank you for taking time right now to talk about this, I really, really appreciate it and wish you all the best.

Thank you very much. Thank you.

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