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Urgent Action Required to Respond to Earthquake Stricken Northwest Syria

On February 18, 2023, the Munich Security Conference, the European Institute of Peace and the Rockefeller Foundation convened a strategic dialogue of key diplomatic and non-governmental stakeholders present in Munich on the recent 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Syria and Turkey.

Participants highlighted the catastrophic humanitarian situation in northwest Syria, noting the human costs of the natural disaster and the absence of meaningful emergency response. The UN Emergency Coordinator's acknowledgement of the failure to respond to the needs in northwest Syria was appropriate.

With thousands of dead in Syria, most in rebel-controlled territory, the participants called for urgent high-level political attention and a more coordinated international approach. According to the United Nations' flash appeal for relief resources, at least 8.8 million people have been affected by the earthquake in Syria and 4.9 million of those have the most urgent humanitarian needs. The participants noted that the desperate situation and sense of hopelessness, especially in rebel-controlled territory, due to the limited international humanitarian access (see UNSCR 2672) and dwindling attention that Syria has received in recent years.

Key points emerging from the discussion are:

- The earthquake and its devastating impact are a wake-up call. They must catalyze a more coherent international response, both with regard to northwest Syria's immediate needs and, over time, for unblocking the political challenges that have condemned the civilian population to insecurity and destitution.
- Some immediate steps must be undertaken urgently to facilitate a process to address this situation, whether through the United Nations, the Syria Contact Group, or through other formats.
- The prospect of significant cross-line assistance is very limited; the immediate focus must be on cross-border. All access points should be opened and remain open without time-limits. In terms of crossings, the private sector and NGOs are not under the same constraints as the UN. The role of local actors and NGOs present on the ground must therefore be supported as a matter of urgency.
- The larger political context cannot be ignored. The international community has struggled to implement a coherent approach towards Syria for too long. Engagements by partial groupings or multiple bilateral actors with the regime in Damascus will not produce the type of progress that is required. Continued efforts to instrumentalize humanitarian aid and humanitarian organizations must be categorically rejected.
- A strong, unambiguous call for action, whether from a like-minded coalition of neighboring and regional countries or from a regional organization, would provide the foundation for broader action by the United Nations Security Council or for humanitarian access in the absence of UNSC action.

- It is vitally important to bring key parties to the table, along with transatlantic partners. Regional leaders, including from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have a crucial role to play. Türkiye's role is of course critical.
- The objective must be to agree on a set of minimum benchmarks, from which humanitarian access determinations can be made. These benchmarks must also include timelines for action, underscoring the need for urgency.
- Upcoming international discussions – including the donors conference convened by the EU (date tbc¹) – should be leveraged to generate momentum for aggressive and coordinated leadership and engagement. Including the perspective of Syrians directly affected by the disaster is important.

While a heart-breaking tragedy on a massive scale, the earthquake offers an important opening that must be seized both for immediate action and for a more strategic approach by international actors. Missing this opportunity will only compound the disaster and extend the suffering of the Syrian people, who have already endured over a decade of war and civil strife.

Recognizing that a comprehensive resolution to the situation in Syria will require determination and strategic leadership, the participants highlighted that uncoordinated, bilateral approaches cannot work. They underscored the need to support the United Nations in all its efforts in Syria and on behalf of the Syrian people, including the tireless efforts of Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to advance a UN-facilitated political process.

¹ A previous version of this text stated the conference would take place on 16 March. This date now awaits confirmation.