Jon Alterman: Natasha Hall is a senior fellow of Middle East program at CSIS. She spent more than 15 years working on humanitarian relief in the field around the world. She has spent a lot of time in Syria and has some special perspectives that we're delighted to bring to you. Natasha, thanks for joining us on Babel today.

Natasha Hall: Thanks for having me, Jon.

Jon Alterman: Southeastern Turkey and northwestern Syria suffered from this earthquake on February 6. Let’s talk about the different Syrian communities that are affected by this. The center of the earthquake is in southeastern Turkey, which has millions of Syrians. You've been there and met a lot of these communities. How large a Syrian refugee community is there in southeastern Turkey, and how are they affected by the earthquake?

Natasha Hall: The ramifications of this earthquake in southeastern Turkey are really devastating. Places like Hatay Province have just been completely leveled. Gaziantep, which is a hub for the cross-border humanitarian response into Syria was devastated. Not only were thousands of Syrian refugees killed in these areas, but the humanitarian response in Syria, the cross-border response, was also affected. In the early days, right after the earthquake, the only thing actually going across the border into northwest Syria was the bodies of Syrian refugees—thousands of them.

Jon Alterman: Let’s go across the border into the affected parts of Syria that are controlled by the government. The United Nations estimates that about 6 million people in government-controlled areas are affected. 200,000 people in the area around Aleppo alone have been made homeless. What kind of aid are they getting, and where is it coming from?

Natasha Hall: Most of the UN agencies had always had a presence in Damascus and in government-controlled areas, so there was a significant humanitarian response there. That never really stopped, but in addition to that aid, we saw about 25 countries directly bringing in aid through plans to various air bases and airports in government-controlled areas. We saw dozens of international search and rescue crews coming in, and most recently, we also saw the United States issue a general license to allow for all transactions related to earthquake recovery that would have previous been hampered by sanctions. So, we are seeing a significant amount of assistance going into these government controlled areas.

Jon Alterman: Do you think that the license has an impact on government-controlled areas where there’re people who are holding back from providing aid that are now more willing to?
Natasha Hall: It’s interesting. When I talk to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are working out of Damascus, they are still unsure as to how this changes how they do operations because the general license is vague, as the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Control has put it. It’s unclear, but I think things like reconstruction might be on the agenda. I think that they’re already thinking about, repairing sewage pipes and things like that, but those were things that you could do prior to the earthquake as well. It’s meant to make things easier, but I think it remains to be seen how that affects the actual humanitarian agencies that probably should’ve had waivers to begin with. But I think that in this case, it probably points to certain elements of reconstruction that might’ve not been allowed beforehand.

Jon Alterman: I also want to talk about areas of Syria that the government doesn’t control—areas that are controlled by groups opposed to that government. How much do we know about the effects of the earthquake on the population there?

Natasha Hall: Proportionately speaking, those areas in northwest Syria were the heaviest hit areas. It was the closest to the epicenter, and therefore the hardest hit. In addition to that, this is an extremely vulnerable community. It’s about 4 to 5 million people depending on the estimates that you use, but about two thirds of that population have been forcibly displaced from other parts of Syria. About 80 percent of the population has been displaced between 6 and 25 times. So, this is a population that has lost its assets over and over and over again. In addition to that, as you said, this is an area that has governance, but it is haphazard governance in certain areas. It’s not standardized, and certainly not a situation in which you would see building regulations, for example. So, you had towns that were completely leveled to the ground, with entire families wiped out in a moment. And that was worsened by the fact that you didn’t really see any of the assistance that you saw getting into government-controlled Syria or Turkey in the days after the earthquake. There were mothers and fathers hearing the screams of people under the rubble, but they couldn’t rescue these people because there were no search and rescue crews coming in. There was not any additional earthquake-related assistance or support, so there is a very troubling situation in a place where, it’s already quite difficult to sustain the assistance needed for both the acute response and for longer-term recovery. That was already an issue before the earthquake as well.

Jon Alterman: Part of the problem is that this area is generally controlled by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian liberation organization—which the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom all consider to be a terrorist organization. How does that affect the strategy of the international donors toward northwest Syria?

Natasha Hall: HTS being in control is one of the factors. Another factor is the fact that the other part of the northwest enclave is run by Turkish-backed groups, and
that has scared off quite a few donors as well. So, it’s not just HTS, but to give you a sense of the problem, most of the stabilization aid—if not all of the stabilization aid—to northwest Syria was withdrawn once HTS took control of all of Idlib governorate back in 2019. That essentially means that there’s no support for governance in these areas, and so we’re seeing the ramifications of that to date.

Jon Alterman: What are the ramifications of HTS running this large governorate of, as you said, more than 4 million people?

Natasha Hall: It’s much harder to bring in aid, for one. In the case of an area that is controlled by internationally recognized government, like Turkey or even the Syrian regime, those governments are able to bring in aid from all types of other governments right away. Whereas our international system in general is less able to handle any area that is controlled by a non-state armed group. So, it’s difficult for a group like HTS, which has the Syrian Salvation Government as its civilian apparatus, to call for aid from every corner of the world and actually get anything from any other countries. That’s problematic as well, but in addition to that, a lot of donors are very heavily dependent on the United Nations to deliver aid because of their risk averseness to working in an HTS-controlled area. The United Nations provides a bit more cover in terms of legal risks, but the UN cross-border response has been threatened every few months in the UN Security Council (UNSC) by Russia—the regime’s most stalwart military ally—because this is an area controlled by the opposition. Throughout the conflict, the Syrian regime—and later Russia—have tied a noose around these various opposition-controlled enclaves, impeding, delaying, and ransacking aid convoys. Russia’s threats to veto cross-border aid is just the latest manifestation of that that.

Jon Alterman: I want to talk more about life under HTS, what it means, and what the United States is trying to do along with its partners in keeping HTS listed as a terrorist organization. It is an Islamist organization, a Salafi organization. Some say it’s a Jihadi organization. What does that mean for people who live there? Are women oppressed? Is there widespread corruption and violence? How does it work for people who actually are living under HTS control?

Natasha Hall: In the case of all of the armed groups throughout the history of this war, they all have blood on their hands. In my interviews with Syrians, I heard about how HTS in particular has arrested and detained people for political reasons—for pushing back against them when they want to interfere with aid, for example. That said, there are a lot of components of real governance that HTS actually undertakes, and what is interesting, especially in the aftermath of this earthquake, is to see the difference between Turkish-controlled areas and HTS-controlled areas in northwest Syria. HTS is a single entity, and that comes with benefits in terms of having a standardized approach to the way that earthquake recovery is happening. Whereas in the
areas controlled by the Turkey-aligned armed groups that make up the Syrian National Army (SNA), it’s chaos. They don’t get paid very much by Turkey, if the get paid anything at all, so they make money anyway that they can—as you see with government-controlled areas where pro-regime militias also aren’t paid very much at all. That leads to quite a lot of chaos in these areas, and we’re seeing that in the earthquake recovery, too. In these Turkish-controlled areas and government-controlled areas, you see things like tents being put on the marketplace, and things like that.

Jon Alterman: And you’ve written in your report that came out about a year ago, Rescuing Aid in Syria, about how the crossline aid—the aid coming from the government-controlled areas to rebel controlled areas—often has the government skimming off it. There is all sorts of corruption on that side. Human Rights Watch also said that HTS is banning aid from coming from government-controlled areas, perhaps to stop that kind of skimming. That leaves us with the only option being this cross-border aid coming through Turkey. How much is coming in? How much needs to come in?

Natasha Hall: I think the issue is not just the skimming because a lot of journalists have asked me why HTS is rejecting this aid and things like that. But I think there is a broader problem with that being the story. At the end of the day, crossline aid is a political decision based on all of the other things we just spoke about. It’s not a real part of the humanitarian response for a variety of reasons. It’s a small fraction of 1 percent of the aid that goes across the border. It is not implemented with those who are implementing aid on the ground, and its delivery—the actual delivery of physical aid in trucks, which is not all of the aid that goes into northwest Syria. When we talk about aid, we’re also talking about salaries for doctors and for teachers. We’re talking about water and sanitation programs and psychosocial programs. None of those things can be delivered crossline, so what I worry about when the conversation moves to crossline aid and accusing HTS, or whoever it happens to be, of refusing crossline aid, is that it’s missing the point that crossline aid is a political decision that’s being used under the guise of humanitarianism. That’s a significant problem, especially now that we have three border crossings that the United Nations could use for the next three months at least. So, in response to your last question about what needs to get through, we know what needs to get through right now—temporary shelters for the acute response, fuel and machinery equipment to remove rubble, and things like that. But I worry about the longer-term response because we weren’t doing a great job of that even before the earthquake. As I mentioned in another piece I wrote on the situation, there were about 400 medical, educational, and water and sanitation facilities suspended last year in northwest Syria due to funding cuts. So, after this earthquake, you had doctors at the front of hospitals just literally picking who was going to live or die because they just didn’t have the equipment and the personnel to manage
it. That leaves these areas vulnerable to the existing long-term crisis, but it leaves them especially vulnerable to the acute crises that we will see. So, I think that’s the biggest concern. You still have over a million people living in informal tents in an area that goes through really, really rough winters and flooding every year. That is not what tents were meant for, so what I get concerned about is whether or not the international community and the major donors are going to use this as an inflection point to realize that this area will likely need a longer-term response—something that isn’t just emergency aid—to make it more resilient in the future.

Jon Alterman: So let me ask you about the long-term response and long-term consequences. I’ve seen you quoted a number of places and you’ve spoken to a lot of journalists last couple weeks about how the outside regime is instrumentalizing the earthquake response to drive its broader strategy. How is it doing that?

Natasha Hall: We immediately saw the regime calling for the removal of sanctions, which have been a contentious issue for a long time for many sides—mainly because it does not seem to be affecting the regime itself, but it seems to be affecting the Syrian people. But I think the larger issue is not necessarily that the regime is using this moment for its advantage or for its interest. I think the larger story is how many countries were right there ready to accelerate the trend of normalization with the regime, or at least grease the wheels of normalization. There were a lot of countries ready to jump on board with normalization, if they hadn’t already. And so, I think that that’s the larger issue—showing that a lot of members of the international community want to move on and they might very well use the earthquake as that motivation to move on. The issue here is that it doesn’t seem like there’s any guardrails or any give and take with those conversations. So, we already see government soldiers restricting who gets aid. There are lots of stories about that already. There are obviously stories of aid being sold in the marketplace—which is very typical. There are accounts of Iranian-backed militias, re-entering Aleppo—a city that they had besieged—but this time giving out aid. So now you see a situation where you’re going to have tens of millions of dollars funneled into a disaster site, in this case one that has a lot of other issues at hand. And if there aren’t really good guardrails for that, it’s unclear if the people will get the assistance that they need. But it’s also unclear as to whether giving away any kind of leverage during this period of time is going to lead to greater stability for Syria or the region.

Jon Alterman: How are Iran and Turkey instrumentalizing disaster relief?

Natasha Hall: For Iran, this is what they do through proxy militias in other parts of the region as well. They see a gap in governance or assistance and try to fill that gap. We’ve been hearing that Iran has been trying to make some headway in parts of Syria that it had failed to do earlier in the conflict—doing so through
humanitarian assistance or under the guise of humanitarian assistance. On Turkey’s side, I’m not sure yet. There have been reports that aid or recovery of search and rescue efforts have been diverted to people who are in a more powerful standing, like parliament members, for example. But that remains to be seen. The devastation from the earthquake is sort of all-encompassing in this situation. But President Erdogan, in one of his initial speeches just after the earthquake, primarily talked about finding dissidents more than he did about earthquake recovery—which is a disturbing manifestation.

Jon Alterman: The United States has pledged $185 million for earthquake relief, some of it for the Syrian side, some of it for the Turkish side. What are the long-term goals that the United States might advance through its earthquake response. How should U.S. policymakers be thinking about this?

Natasha Hall: One of the things that I wished I had seen is a use of drawdown authority or more bilateral assistance to Turkey, but also from Turkey into northwest Syria, because it’s faster. You can escalate a response quickly. That’s what the U.S. military did very well in Haiti. But it’s also necessary because the UN cross-border response is under threat every few months, and the two additional crossings approved by the Syrian government are only for the next three months. So, this is a moment for donor governments, especially the United States, which has more of a capacity to do this. It relies a lot less on UN-pooled funds than the other donor governments. So, I would like to see the United States really increase its bilateral response, especially in northwest Syria. In terms of government-controlled areas and the larger conflict, I haven’t seen a lot of thought on really monitoring how the earthquake recovery is undertaken in government-controlled areas. We are already getting reports that the Syrian government is listing houses or buildings for demolition or evacuation as far south as Damascus countryside, before damage assessments are really being done. That’s concerning for a whole range of reasons, especially for a government like the United States that has said over and over again, as with its European partners, that there will be no reconstruction before a political transition. I think now it’s probably more like “no reconstruction before regime behavioral change.” But we certainly aren’t going to see those changes if all these things are happening. This torrential flood of aid, without any kind of guardrails or assessment of whether it’s doing harm on the ground to those already marginalized by the conflict, is a problem. I’ve said this many times, but through more independent and systematic monitoring and evaluation of the recovery response, donors can get together and unify to address some of the malfeasance that they see in government-controlled areas.

Jon Alterman: Do you think that the U.S. government should use this as an opportunity to either set conditions for allowing recovery aid and reconstruction aid for the first time in government-controlled areas, or to reconsider its relationship with HTS in opposition-controlled areas?
Natasha Hall: I think so in both cases. I think that the United States and European governments can still operate through humanitarian agencies and through the United Nations, but they fund those humanitarian agencies and the United Nations. So, they are sort of a step removed from having to engage fully with these actors on the ground. I think they should keep that distance until they’ve seen something more than what we’ve seen.

Jon Alterman: But diplomacy is getting people to change their behavior, oftentimes by giving them something. Is this something that should be on the table—that we might either de-list HTS, or we might allow longer-term reconstruction, moving beyond early recovery in Syria, if we see different behaviors on the part of the Syrian government? Should that be on the table?

Natasha Hall: Yes. With HTS, I have long made very forward-leaning recommendations on that, primarily because I evaluated projects that were reconstruction as early as 2016. So, I think the reconstruction is happening. They can call it whatever they want to call it, but I’ve seen buildings being rebuilt for humanitarian projects. And with this general license, they’ve also said it will not be reconstruction, but I think it will necessarily be aspects of reconstruction as well. So again, I think that it is probably too soon to say you would reengage or normalize with the regime, because there are so many issues at play, but it’s unclear whether the Syrian regime needs normalized relations with a country like the United States at this juncture—or if we even accept it at this juncture. I think they most definitely need assistance. About 90 percent of people across Syria are under the poverty line at this moment. That said, I think there also really needs to be some robust reflection on what the limits of humanitarian assistance are. Humanitarian assistance is not meant to replace governance. It should be a small fraction of what gets a country back on its feet. And from what we’ve seen in terms of the various ways that the Syrian regime builds capital through Captagon and other exploitative ways.

Jon Alterman: Captagon is a counterfeit narcotic that they manufacture and ship throughout the Middle East.

Natasha Hall: Right—but there are also other exploitative ways they make money. For example, they will not allow for a passport renewal or issuance unless they get a certain amount of money from that individual. There is a range of different ways that they have built up their capital. I think unless we see some movement on that—and I don’t think that we will see movement on that unless there is some kind of engagement on the level of reconstruction, recovery, or whatever it happens to be called—I don’t see that moving in a positive direction. We’ve done this before in places that are less complicated, that have witnessed less severe war crimes than Syria, and it hasn’t turned out well. Lebanon and Iraq are good examples of that. I think once you get to the point where these actors are so heavily empowered, it’s nearly impossible to turn them back. Arguably, these things should’ve been
happening much earlier on, but this is just another moment that the international community could take to make those positive moves. I hope that they're doing it with a comprehensive outlook that there are things that need to change and that funneling aid into these crisis zones is not going to solve these problems. We see that with Haiti, which is still reeling from that earthquake in 2010. There are multiple reports of devastating corruption, despite all the aid that poured into the country. So, we really need to have a hard look at Syria when we're looking at earthquake recovery. It's not, you know, devastation on the level that Haiti was, certainly, but it is certainly a time to really start thinking a bit critically about places like Syria or other places that sort of lack adequate governance but are faced with a natural disaster. We see this over and over and over again, and we see people still devastated with instability reigning for years after these natural disasters.

Jon Alterman: You've spoken to a lot of journalists in the last couple of weeks. It seems to me that the journalists' attention is already starting to wane. How much sustained attention do you think Syria's going to have in a month's time? You talked about how there's some really long-term trends that people need to seize on, but I'm not sure we're going to have much long-term attention.

Natasha Hall: That's my biggest fear. Immediately after the earthquake, I had a UN official tell me we have a small window where they're going to be paying attention, and I think that's, that's exactly right. For all acute disasters, that tends to be what happens, and we forget about the 14-year-old kid that lost her leg and all of her family members and has witnessed nothing but this war. And I don't think that we can forget it, even if the media does—and necessarily will because other stories will emerge. The United States and other actors that have been interested in Syria and have given tremendous amount of aid need to just ensure that that aid is adequately dispersed in a way that doesn't promote further instability later down the line. When it comes to responses to conflicts or responses to natural disasters, prevention is far better than having to respond to something that is much more dangerous later down the line. And we've seen that over and over again, even within the Syria conflict. One has to wonder how far you can push a population, and I think that we've pushed this population to the point of really no return—and that's especially true for northwest Syria. This is a really resilient population. They have endured a lot. So, if the international community is willing to come together and actually think about this area for a longer-term range, I think that will infinitely help these people. It will help Turkey. It will help the region more broadly, and I think U.S. national interests over the long term as well.

Jon Alterman: So, if listeners want to help, what should they do?

Natasha Hall: I think the first thing they can do is continue to show their interest with their governments and here in the United States with their Congressional representative to ensure that Syria remains front of center and mind for at
least the next few months of recovery. Certainly, I think in general, supporting organizations that I’ve mentioned—local organizations that are the ones primarily delivering and implementing assistance on the ground in Syria—is another thing that can be done. For U.S. and European government officials, I’ve gotten a lot of questions in the past few days about instances of aid diversion or instances where the Syrian government has impeded aid—which we are already seeing a lot of anecdotal evidence for. It can’t just be anecdotal. There needs to be a full throttled effort to really monitor and evaluate this response for the benefit of Syrians on the ground. I think until we see that, we will continue to see predictable crises emerge—in addition to potentially black swan events that we never thought we could see in this “unstable soup” that is Syria at the moment.

Jon Alterman: Natasha Hall, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Natasha Hall: Thank you for having me, Jon.