

The Earthquake in Turkey and Syria

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ABSTRACT

On February 6, 2023 two high-magnitude earthquakes, each recording 7.4 or above on the Richter scale, struck northern Syria and southern Turkey, killing more than 50,000 people and causing over 80 billion dollars in infrastructural damage. Repair and recovery from the devastation will likely take decades, as over 15 million people in the region have been or will be affected. Historical sites and entire communities have been completely destroyed as well. The devastation in terms of human, social, and economic cost is monumental, making it one of the biggest natural disasters in the history of the region. However, as subsequent analysis has shown, the disaster is not completely 'natural.' The extent of the devastation from the earthquake and the multiple subsequent catastrophic failures at the local and international level are the result of human decision making, implicated in politics and political economy, structures of power and wealth, and geopolitics.

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The Earthquakes' Devestation

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In the days and months after the earthquake, a number of vigorous and contentious debates emerged within Turkey and Syria, as well as globally, reacting to different aspects of the catastrophe. It is clear that there was a [failure within Turkey](#) to prepare for an entirely predictable occurrence due to the capture of power and wealth in key institutions. Additionally, the instrumentalization of the earthquake in Syria by the Assad regime and the role or lack thereof of sanctions against Syria in delaying effective aid to the country has been controversial. Furthermore, there has been a stark contrast between the cynical responses by Syrian and Turkish governments and the civil society mobilization and generosity from ordinary people. And lastly, international institutions involved, specifically United Nations organizations, as well as local and regional governments, have failed to provide immediate and effective aid when it would have counted the most. These controversial topics have surfaced in the wake of this disaster and are key global security issues for the region.

The Political Economy of Power in Turkey

While international politics clearly plays a role in the relief response in both Syria and Turkey, the political conditions for disaster relief and recovery in Turkey differ significantly from those in Syria. Turkey has been under the governance of the [Justice and Development Party \(AKP\) since 2002](#), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

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Although the AKP initially positioned itself as a democratizing social force that appealed to a diverse constituency, the history of Erdoğan's leadership shows an increasing consolidation of power, which accelerated after the [coup attempt of 2016](#). With President Erdogan at its helm, [over the last 20 years](#) the AKP has taken several measures to ensure its authority in the face of a number of social and political challenges. The AKP party has responded to political contestation by silencing dissent and criminalizing of the opposition, centralizing government operations, and granting Erdogan [sweeping power](#) over all sectors of the government. This consolidation of power has also included an increasing capture of sectors of the media and economy by loyalists to the government. The impact of the earthquake was exacerbated by the resulting corruption, lack of meritocratic appointments, cronyism and populist economic policies generated. Some of those economic and social policies, such as the 'construction amnesties' have suited larger sectors of the population struggling to expand housing options. One dubious appointment includes [İsmail Palakoğlu](#), formerly the Presidential Counselor at the Presidency of Religious Affairs, who is now the leader of the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and has a [degree in theology](#) but no engineering or emergency response experience whatsoever. The appropriate authorities time and again [failed to listen](#) to engineers and scientists and did not make necessary preparations.

Professor Firat Demir explains in a [Security in Context interview](#) that the region in Turkey surrounding the East Anatolian Fault Line had been selected for several preemptive earthquake mitigation projects because it is at high risk for extreme earthquakes. In 1999, a magnitude 7.6 earthquake occurred near Istanbul, with estimated casualties ranging from 17-30 thousand people. After this catastrophe, Turkey implemented a tax to develop emergency disaster relief plans so that the country would be prepared for the next inevitable earthquake: a fund that accrued \$38 billion since its inception in 1999. However, Demir goes on to explain that most of these funds have not been used for their intended purpose. According to Demir, "most of the money was not used to reinforce buildings or for disaster preparation, the government even admitted, on multiple occasions, that they used the funding to build roads and for other priorities." Despite the earthquake's predictability and despite federally implemented response policies, the country was poorly prepared for this disaster.

Professor Demir explains that after the 1999 earthquake, the Turkish government instituted more stringent building code requirements to prevent or mitigate the damage from future earthquakes. However, many contractors constructed buildings that were not up to code by exploiting [government provided construction amnesties](#). These amnesties allowed developers to bypass federal regulations, which lowered the cost of construction and was enforced by a small fine. Consequently, thousands of buildings that might have otherwise withstood the earthquakes collapsed. [In 2018 alone, 70,000 people](#) applied for construction amnesty.

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The media response within Turkey has been largely critical of the aforementioned failure to prepare for the crisis, while the state-run media covers for the government's costly inefficiencies. Additionally, Turkish authorities have [censored many journalists](#) and tried to dampen dissenting voices in order to control the narrative. The government has done this by formulating obstacles for independent media in Turkey such as fines and broadcasting bans. Additionally, lawmakers continue to expand censorship powers by considering a new ["disinformation law,"](#) that enables the government to penalize individuals and media outlets for "distributing deceptive information publicly." It has been reported that many protesters have been detained and the government has also taken control of private donations and funding.

Though [President Erdoğan and government affiliated media](#) have claimed this an act of destiny, as Professor Seda Altug revealed to Security in Context in an exclusive interview, ["this earthquake was absolutely predictable."](#) She goes on to explain that, "because of a lack of preparedness for the earthquake and the mismanagement of the aftermath, this is not only a natural disaster but also a political disaster."

Several months after the earthquake, many people of Turkey continue to suffer without housing, access to clean water, proper sanitation, or adequate medical care. Millions remain displaced while only a fraction have access to temporary shelters. Furthermore, the already suffering population has endured several aftershocks and extreme weather conditions. According to a recent [OCHA report](#), an estimated 20% of those who were evacuated from the earthquake-affected provinces are returning. However, the area has not been rebuilt yet and the UN predicts that an influx of refugees in conjunction with unpredictable weather will be challenges moving forward. Furthermore, according to the same UN OCHA report, the "Flash Appeal for US \$1 billion to assist 5.2 million people affected by the earthquakes is 30.2 percent funded, receiving \$303.6 million as of 27 April 2023."

Furthermore, Turkey continues to struggle with the severe cost of earthquakes as extreme weather and a series of aftershocks continue to affect the population. According to another [OCHA report](#), as of May 11th, "[a]round 2.4 million people are living in formal sites and informal settlements (1.6 million people in informal settlements and nearly 800,000 in formal sites). The key needs in informal sites continue to be access to adequate water and sanitation, information on available services and social protection schemes." Additionally, as of April 29th, certain relief partners [plan to end the supply cooked meal provisions](#) moving forward.

The Politics of Humanitarian Aid in Syria

In 2011 Syria was affected by the [wave of protests](#) in the Middle East North Africa region. What was a largely non-violent protest movement was met with severe

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[repressions](#) by the Assad government. Since then the conflict metastasized into what has been referred to as one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes since World War II. Multiple regional and international actors became involved in the conflict with presence in Syria, including [Hezbollah](#), anti-government Islamist groups, and organizations from Turkey, [Iran](#), [Russia](#), and the United States.

The overlapping conflicts in the country have left it politically divided and the population severely vulnerable and reliant on humanitarian aid. However, the distribution of humanitarian aid is incredibly complicated, as world powers, namely the US, have imposed sanctions on Syria inhibiting the flow of trade. Because different regions are controlled by different governing bodies, or in some cases, no governing body, distributing aid through reliable channels is nearly impossible despite the growing need for aid in the country.

The earthquake has affected Syrians who have already been experiencing over a decade of a deadly and devastating conflict and severe economic and humanitarian conditions. The earthquake's devastation has only amplified these dire conditions, as 90% of the population lives in poverty. According to [an OCHA report](#), "[c]lose to 9 million people in Syria have been affected by the devastating earthquakes."

[In northwestern Syria](#), an estimated 78 camps have been constructed to house over 40,000 people who have been displaced, according to estimates made in late February. These camps rely on routine aid from the UN and other entities to sustain their shelters. Before the series of earthquakes, of the estimated 4.6 million people living in northwestern Syria, 72% were already food insecure, 63% internally displaced, and 39% already lived in camps. Medical facilities in Syria and Turkey have also been damaged by the earthquake, and consequently many people don't have access to medical services.

Although Syria's ongoing reliance on UN humanitarian relief has been intensified by the earthquake, some claim that the UN response has been unnecessarily slow and lackluster. Members of the disaster relief team in Syria have criticized the UN for failing to provide any additional aid to Syria. According to [Raed Al Saleh](#), the leader of the Syrian White Helmets emergency response group, the UN response in Syria has been "catastrophic" and the UN should "apologize to the Syrian people for the lack of help it provided."

The UN did not directly respond but did comment publicly on aid delays, citing road closures as the principal cause. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) [reported](#) fourteen trucks carrying humanitarian aid had crossed into Syria on February 10. The trucks included blankets, electric heaters, tents, according to the IOM. However, When asked whether the fourteen trucks constituted additional aid tied to the earthquake response, IOM spokesperson Paul Dillon stated that the "pre-positioning" of aid was not the concern. He [stated that](#), [t]he issue is that critically needed humanitarian

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aid that is suitable for people who have been displaced, including tents, blankets and other materials, are being delivered to northwest Syria at this time."

As Syria suffers from internal conflict and systemic poverty, the country has also been under heavy sanctions from the US and the EU since 2011. Bashar al-Assad and others in the media have called for an evaluation of these intense sanctions in the wake of this natural disaster. However, Assad, who has been harshly criticized for human rights abuses and his authoritarian practices, has been accused of using the catastrophe as a tool to lift sanctions and extend his power. The Syrian Government has called on the US to lift sanctions so that they can more easily provide aid to the most affected regions and the latter countered stating that the [sanctions](#) do not concern aid or humanitarian relief.

The people of Syria continue to suffer from the aftermath of the earthquake. While some humanitarian aid has made its way to the country, a [recent OCHA report](#) shows, "[a]lmost 15 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and an estimated 8.8 million people have been affected by the 6 February earthquakes." As of April 25, hundreds of thousands have received some sort of shelter and emergency cash assistance. However, According to this same UN report, "[a]s of 27 April, the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan for 2023 is only 7.8 percent funded." The country, plagued by internal conflict and earthquake devastation, needs more direct and immediate assistance from the international community. Although Assad's reputation in the international community is poor, the well being of everyday people in Syria should be the main concern for the international community. Months after the earthquake, Syria's UN disaster relief budget isn't even 10% fulfilled. This does not indicate a swift and effective international relief plan for an already suffering country.

Overall, this catastrophe has revealed and created a number of controversies within both Turkey and Syria as the people of both countries suffer greatly from the consequences of political corruption, sanctions, and uneven humanitarian aid.

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