

07-02-2024

The Earthquake in an Unresponsive World

How Syrians Faced Catastrophe Alone

Mohamad Katoub
ترجمة: Rex Stretton



I visited Gaziantep twice last year. During my last visit, ten months after the earthquake, the city was bustling and new neighbourhoods were being established rapidly. I went inside to visit some friends, and came out an hour later to find the place filled with dust; as they explained to me, “Our neighbours’ building is damaged and has been assessed as

too dangerous – it's been referred for demolition.”

There is no neighbourhood without a ruined building. On entering some of those houses, their owners exhausted from lack of support, you find cracks in the walls which they have not been able to repair, like unhealed scars – but the real scars, which no amount of time, repairs or rebuilding will ever be able to remove, are the anxious looks on the residents' faces.

Gaziantep hosts the humanitarian platform that responds to northern Syria, and most of my friends are people who work in this field. 2023 was exhausting for everyone: inflation, the effects of the Covid era, the war in Ukraine and then in Gaza, are visible everywhere on the earth. In Gaziantep however, one event in particular will take a long time to recover from, which is the earthquake: not just because the city itself endured it, but because it was unable to come to the rescue of northern Syria for many weeks.

The UN and International Response to the Earthquake

Over the past year, the UN organised more than **300 field visits** to areas in northwest Syria – for the first time. Throughout the 12 years of response before the earthquake, cross-border operations were limited to working with local organisations which implemented projects on Syrian territory in the northwest of the country, without UN personnel actually entering those areas. After the earthquake meanwhile, high-ranking UN officials started visiting northern Syria: this was not sufficient, as these visits were only to take pictures.

A year after the earthquake, humanitarian needs in Syria generally, and in the north in particular, rapidly worsened.

The humanitarian funding allocated for the earthquake (approximately 400 million dollars) was offset by a corresponding decrease in humanitarian funding for the Syrian humanitarian crisis. It also used the same emergency humanitarian response system that has been operating for 12 years, which does not have mechanisms to support the recovery of affected communities. This has led, year after year, to **acute exacerbation of the region's needs**.

The annual **Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2024** shows an increase in the number of Syrians in need of assistance in different sectors, now exceeding 16 million people – an increase of roughly one million people from the previous year. The **amount of funding for Syria in 2023** also shows a decrease from the funding in 2022, as the total figure amounts to 2.3 billion US dollars, the same amount of funding allocated to Syria annually in the previous four years. In reality it has decreased by approximately 20%, since around **400 million US dollars that were allocated to communities** affected by the earthquake at the special Brussels Donor Conference were included in that amount. This represents less than 10% of the earthquake damage, since the **World Bank estimated the damage caused by the earthquake in Syria to exceed 5 billion dollars**.

As the **World Food Program announces a reduction in its aid** to Syria as a result of the decrease in US funding several months after the earthquake, we find that the UN, across all its agencies, has not increased its logistical response to the northwest of the country – the area most affected by the earthquake in Syria. On the contrary, the number of trucks crossing the border from Turkey has decreased, with no more than **5000 trucks entering in 2023** (while the number exceeded 7500 trucks in 2022, before the earthquake.)

The UN's Irresponsible Response and Root Causes

International donors have become fatigued by the crisis in Syria, and their interest has significantly waned as conflicts in other countries, such as the war in Ukraine and the ongoing genocidal war in Gaza, have worsened – and this is normal. But the problem is in the response system itself, which perpetuates Syrian reliance on aid year after year and prevents local communities from recovering and standing on their own feet – for reasons which are purely political.

Several factors played a role in shaping the UN's irresponsible response to the earthquake. It is of course easy for the Secretary-General of the United Nations and his Emergency Relief Coordinator to justify its sluggish response by saying that the programmatic humanitarian platform in Gaziantep and the logistical platform in Antakya were affected by the earthquake, on the individual and the infrastructural levels. In reality, there was much that the UN and other organisations could have done internationally, especially those in possession of rescue equipment and advanced teams in their bases in the region (not least of which, the USA) without any violation of international humanitarian law or of the principle of sovereignty which the UN uses as its excuse for not using the border crossings “without the approval of the Security Council or the Syrian government.”

The politicisation of the humanitarian response in Syria and the absolute dependence of northern Syria on Turkey are the two main factors which contributed to weakening the response to the earthquake. Logistically, the response was entirely focused on southern Turkey, while on the other side

of the conflict areas, the regime used the first hours after the earthquake to denounce Western and international sanctions, which it accused of “hindering its ability to respond.” In actual fact, the regime took advantage of the earthquake quickly and maliciously, constituting no minor embarrassment to the countries imposing the sanctions and prompting them to provide emergency aid to regime-controlled areas. Thus, a years-old hiatus in official relations and in airspace use was broken, and planes began to be sent under non-governmental designations such as the German Red Cross. Visits by delegations and high-profile individuals started to reach an unprecedented level, be it from the European Union or the United Nations, as more than **306 emergency response planes** landed at regime-controlled airports in Syria within a single month. To add to this, the USA, EU and UK **partly lifted sanctions** against the Syrian regime.

Syrians are greatly divided in their positions on the sanctions and their impact, but everyone recognises that, if we were to list the reasons for the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in regime areas, the sanctions would be at the very bottom of the list, while at the top would be the corruption of the regime itself, its corruption of the humanitarian response system, and its use of aid as a weapon of war. However, the pro-regime lobby has succeeded in exploiting the disaster to its own advantage, coinciding with the acceleration of regional normalisation with the regime.

Cross-border medical referrals are a clear example of how dangerous it is to rely totally on neighbouring countries for basic services. Amounting to 30 cases per day, these referrals were stopped completely after the earthquake,

leading to worsening cases of patients in need of advanced medical care unavailable in northern Syria, and most prominently cancer patients and heart surgeries.

All of this meant that Northwest Syria was left to fend for itself for many long days. The emergency response was limited to what was in stock before 6 February; UN trucks entered the region far too late, without bringing any rescue equipment. No rescue teams entered the area, and Syrians were left alone under the wreckage. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator **stated after the earthquake** that the UN “coordinated the deployment of over 4,948 search & rescue experts” in Syria within the first 72 hours after the earthquake. In reality, none of them entered northern Syria. The international rescue teams worked side by side with the Turkish rescue teams, the Syria Civil Defence was left alone, and Syrians in the north were left to fend for themselves amidst a crisis of shelter, water, sanitation, unidentified bodies, separated families and unaccompanied children. Before long, this led to deaths from diseases which required medical referrals across the—now closed—Turkish border.

More tents

For years, Syrian humanitarian organisations have been campaigning for the construction of decent housing, and for displaced people to be moved out of tents unable to withstand the winter every year. After the earthquake, which was accompanied by many weeks of snow and harsh weather, the primary need of those affected in Syria and Turkey was shelter. Those who were well off in Turkey were able to move to other areas not affected by the earthquake,

and the rest settled in tents purchased and provided by Turkish relief organisations. In Syria, the main concern of those affected by the earthquake in Syria was simply to find a tent. Because northern Syria is greatly logistically dependent on Turkey, itself severely affected by the earthquake, tents ran out quickly, and people lived in the open without shelter for days until local markets started to react and tents began to be manufactured locally. The tents that arrived in some aid convoys were very thin and suitable for camping in the summer, and they did not give any privacy to those inside them.

Within a few weeks, newly established camps spread out along the road between Jindires and Afrin, the Syrian regions most affected by the earthquake. Residents preferred to remain near their homes to stay close to their necessities, rather than go to other areas. The camps were quickly met with the problem of water supply and sanitation requirements: water was already scarce in the area for several reasons, one of which because water stations had previously been bombed. The infrastructure of this area was already weak and could not withstand the earthquake: in particular, it was not possible to build sewage channels for the new camps. The earthquake thus exacerbated the water crisis and groundwater pollution, resulting in a cholera epidemic. The number of cases of cholera symptoms **exceeded 200,000 in northern Syria.**

Abu Ammar is a friend who works in one of the local relief committees in the Aleppo countryside. When I asked him about the fate of the camps a year after the earthquake, he told me about the conditions there: "Some of them have repaired their homes with the help of some organisations. More than half of the tents are empty now, but of course,

from time to time, another wave of displacement occurs due to bombing or military escalation. After the earthquake, I had a 24-metre tent for me and my family, and I no longer needed it, but a family that had been displaced by the bombing on Darat Izza came and I gave them my tent. The need for tents will not go away as long as this situation persists.”

The neglect of the UN and the international community in responding to the earthquake was so clear that the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths, could not conceal it. A few days after the earthquake, he stated from the Turkish-Syrian border: “We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria.” The responses of UN spokespeople to questions from researchers and journalists after the earthquake were confused, angry, or simply were not responses at all. A year later, none of this any longer mattered. Syrians either died with their voices suffocated under the rubble, or survived, only to have their voices suffocated again, a year later.

Stifled Voices, Unanswered Questions

For a Syrian living in Turkey, the situation before the earthquake was already unprecedentedly suffocating. Syrians were the fodder of the campaigns for the upcoming Turkish election, which targeted them with threats of forced return, deportation, escalation and hate speech. This was clearly reflected in the lives of Syrians, the majority of whom were deprived of freedom of movement in Turkey as a result of the temporary protection system that prevented them from moving between Turkish provinces. The Turkish authorities waited a few days before realising that this decision meant keeping hundreds of thousands of Syrians in

the affected areas out in the open. There was a spike in rent prices for houses spared by the earthquake, but particularly painful were reports that showed the slow response of Turkish rescue teams to Syrian homes and a failure to give them priority.

Across the border, unanswered questions emerged. The same border that allowed the bodies of Syrians to cross from Turkey to Syria was slow to open its arms to aid. During the first week, 1310 bodies of Syrian earthquake victims residing in Turkey entered, but only 58 aid trucks. It did not stop there: the border also remained impenetrable to families who had been separated, allowing them to enter in one direction only. Unaccompanied children who survived the earthquake without their families remained trapped on one side of the border, unable to reach their relatives. After long visits to hospitals, Syrians who searched for their relatives' bodies in the Turkish authorities' vital records were unable to find them, as a number of them were refugees who had not obtained Turkish identification documents, and as such their fingerprints are not on the Turkish registration system. In cases like this, involving disasters which cross conflict zones or borders, the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross is highlighted; this institution does not work in Turkey and northern Syria, as it took a politicised position in favour of the regime from the very beginning.

The earthquake crossed the border, and the bodies of earthquake victims managed to cross it; but for any effort to resolve a human rights crisis worsening on both sides, the border remained closed.

The Response of Syrians who Crossed the Border

The earthquake, by its very nature, did not understand the conflict, did not understand Turkish policy, and did not wait for a Security Council resolution or approval from the regime, waiting for United Nations aid to cross the border. The response of Syrians throughout the Syrian geography and in the diaspora was itself just like an earthquake. They took no notice of all of that, did not wait for approvals, took no notice of the conflict that had occupied their revolution before it occupied their lands. They began everywhere to organise efforts, collect donations, and hold events in every part of the world. Syrians stood in solidarity with each other, in diaspora, within Syria, and across conflict lines, and rushed in countries of asylum, either to collect donations or to organise medical missions to travel to Syria with the aim of working to treat the injured. The image of the 70 trucks constitutes an important symbol. The trucks, filled by Syrians in the Jazira Region with emergency supplies from their homes, arrived before international aid despite all the complications of the conflict lines between northeast and northwest Syria, and was a powerful symbol of what can be possible and sustainable across conflict lines - which is solidarity between Syrians themselves.