



ISLAMIC RELIEF WORLDWIDE
TÜRKİYE-SYRIA EARTHQUAKES
ONE YEAR ON

ONE YEAR ON...

One year has passed since two devastating earthquakes struck southeast Türkiye and north Syria, their impact intensified by the existing vulnerabilities in the region. Today, hundreds of thousands of survivors, especially children, remain in dire need of assistance.

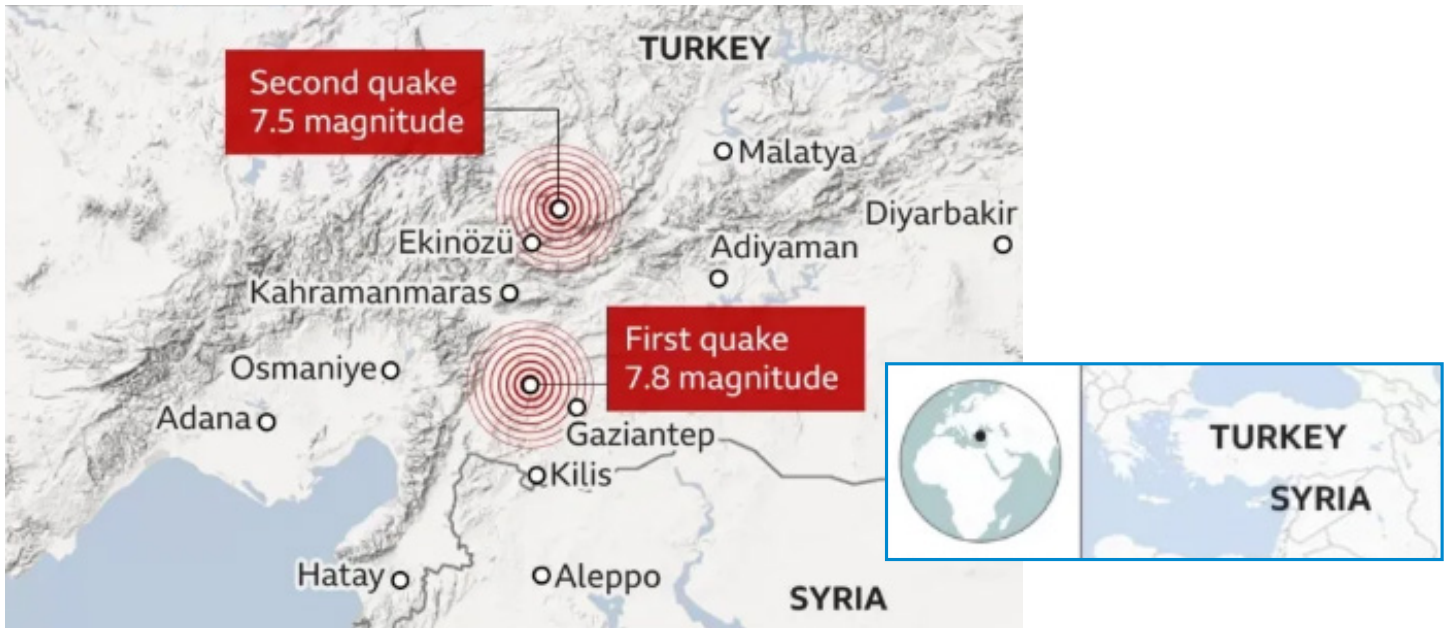
In Türkiye, a country already grappling with a severe economic crisis, the earthquakes have exacerbated challenges across various sectors. Some, 2.6 million were displaced in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, nearly 800,000 of which still remain in temporary settlements with insufficient access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities and healthcare services. Existing infrastructure is straining to address the psychological trauma of survivors, and to restore important services disrupted by the disaster.

The quakes also exacerbated Syria's humanitarian crisis – the widespread destruction post-earthquake cannot be understood without considering the region's pre-existing challenges. Years of crisis, infrastructural weaknesses, and neglect had already rendered many vulnerable in northwest Syria. More than 108,000 individuals were displaced in the northwest of Syria after the earthquake.

The region's geopolitical dynamics add another layer of complexity. The escalation in Gaza, which began in October 2023, is likely to pull much-needed aid funding away from the Türkiye-Syria earthquake response.

While the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes were natural disasters, they have triggered challenges that are political, social, and developmental. Which depend largely on how governmental structures and other entities address the aftermath of the disaster. This report examines the impact of the quakes and the multifaceted challenges post-disaster, focusing on aid response difficulties and the broader humanitarian landscape in Türkiye and northwest Syria. As we navigate these complexities within the report, we set out the case for international emergency responders to act swiftly to adapt their strategies for regions which that do not align with traditional state structures, including northwest Syria.

1. THE IMPACT OF THE EARTHQUAKES



On 6 February 2023, Türkiye and Syria were struck by two devastating earthquakes of 7.8 and 7.5 magnitude respectively, constituting one of the largest disasters in recent history. The first earthquake struck at 4:17am, with the city of Kahramanmaraş at the epicentre, followed by a second earthquake nine hours later. According to numbers reported by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the earthquakes and the powerful aftershocks which followed killed more than 55,000 people and injured more than 130,000 across both countries.¹

The earthquakes devastated 11 provinces in Türkiye, including Kahramanmaraş, Adiyaman, Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Malatya, Sanliurfa, Elazig, Adana, Diyarbakir, and Osmaniye. These provinces include areas with the highest poverty rates in Türkiye, and host nearly half of all Syrian refugees in the country, so the disaster inflicted further devastation on an already vulnerable and marginalised population. In Syria, the impact of the earthquake was concentrated in the northwestern region, where 90 per cent of the population were already relying on humanitarian aid to survive. Such preexisting socio-economic vulnerabilities meant that the impact of the earthquakes was felt far more severely.

According to a damage assessment study by the Turkish Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation, and Climate Change, over 50,000 houses were destroyed or severely damaged, leaving a significant portion of the population displaced and unhoused. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, more than 3 million people were displaced in Türkiye alone. As of 14 December, nearly 800,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation, including nearly 297,000 individuals in Hatay and over 167,000 in Kahramanmaraş. Some of the biggest needs gaps in these areas include winter preparedness, and water, sanitation, and hygiene needs. According to an assessment of living conditions in 313 temporary settlement sites, 37 per cent of people have no protection from snow and rain, and 67 per cent live in leaking shelters.²

Around a third of the sites lack safe drainage systems, and over 40 per cent do not have primary care and public health services on site. The unavailability of sustainable shelter solutions and poor conditions within temporary settlements continue to pose humanitarian risks.

¹Rep. Türkiye: 2023 Earthquakes Situation Report No. 13, As of 6 April 2023. OCHA, April 6, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkiye-2023-earthquakes-situation-report-no-13-6-april-2023-entr>

²Rep. Emergency Situation Report. Support to Life, December 22, 2023. https://www.supporttolife.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/231219_STL_SitRep28.pdf



In northwestern Syria, the disaster displaced around 109,000 people, in addition to more than 2.74 million who were already internally displaced. Total housing damage across affected areas include 87,330 housing units which have been damaged or destroyed, with an estimated cost of around \$880.6 million.

A large proportion of buildings impacted were those which were already weakened or cracked by intense shelling. Significant damage to infrastructure also meant that access to basic services is interrupted, particularly for those living in temporary shelter.

Even before the earthquakes, there were increasing pressures on water sources in Türkiye and Syria due to climate change impacts, population growth, and socio-political considerations, among other factors. As a result of the damage to infrastructure caused by the earthquakes, water scarcity has become an even more pressing problem. The lack of safe drinking water and WASH services have also led to a proliferation of water-borne diseases such as cholera, particularly in northwestern Syria where 100,000 suspected cholera cases were reported between September 2022 and May 2023. For those who fall sick within crowded camp conditions, healthcare is difficult to reach as a significant number of hospitals have been destroyed and staff displaced. In northwestern Syria alone, some one million people are thought to need mental health support, with scant provision available to support traumatised survivors.

The damage caused by the earthquakes also has grave consequences for livelihoods and the economy, leading to a total direct loss of \$5.85 million in Syria alone. Exacerbated by high inflation and decline in value of the Syrian pound, livelihoods lost to the quakes have fuelled food insecurity in Syria. Between October 2022 and October 2023, the price of a World Food Programme (WFP) standard reference food basket for a family of five rose by 162 per cent, reaching 928,587 Syrian Lira (SYR) (approx. \$71). Meanwhile, the national average minimum expenditure basket for a family of five skyrocketed to 2,277,793 Syrian Lira (SYR) (approx. \$174.97).³ Agricultural output and livelihoods declined due to damage to crops and infrastructure, while the cost of living doubled in the first ten months of 2023. According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), nearly half of all respondents in Syria's affected areas reported deterioration in access to food since the earthquakes. Therefore it is clear that the economic impact of the disaster in Syria has caused significant stress in a region that already faced severe threats and socio-economic challenges.

The impact of the earthquakes was felt by everyone within the region, but most acutely by those with vulnerabilities. Population groups which experience social marginalisation

are more likely to suffer worse impacts and have less access to tools of recovery. Older people, for instance, are vulnerable in cases of emergency as they may experience a combination of hearing or sight impairment, cognitive impairment, and reduced mobility, alongside less access to resources and awareness programmes which often have a one-size-fits-all approach. Similarly, people with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from access to basic needs and, because they are often subjected to prejudice, more likely to be subjected to harmful behaviour. Before the earthquakes, 24 per cent of individuals over two years and older in northwestern Syria reported some form of disability, and this figure has since increased. The lack of accessibility requirements and appropriate services such as WASH is a significant challenge in affected areas.

Studies also show that disaster events such as earthquakes have a gendered impact, with women and girls often bearing the brunt of suffering. Women and girls are often excluded from decision-making processes in disaster preparedness and disaster management, leading to the neglect of their needs. Women and girls are also more likely to experience violence in disaster situations, especially as they lack access to safe spaces. Limited access to healthcare is also a major concern for pregnant and breastfeeding women who have unique needs.

Children are also highly vulnerable as they are more likely to suffer from psychological and physical health problems in disaster situations, and may face problems including child labour, increased cases of abuse, and removal from education. According to the Assessment Capacities Project report published in March 2023, the earthquakes resulted in a notable increase in negative coping strategies such as child labour and forced and early marriages. Some 30 per cent of internally displaced people in northwest Syria reported that over half of children living there did not go to school in the month following the earthquakes. At the time of the academic year beginning in September 2023, 27 per cent of children in affected households in Türkiye remain without access to education.⁴

³ Rep. OPERATION UPDATE SYRIA EARTHQUAKE. IFRC, December 20, 2023. <https://www.ifrc.org/media/53426>

⁴ Save the Children International. "Children in Nearly 30% of Households Impacted by Türkiye's Earthquake Miss out as School Year Starts." Save the Children International, September 11, 2023. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/children-nearly-30-households-impacted-t-rkiye-s-earthquake-missout-school-year-starts>

Double-edged sword for vulnerable groups



Southern Türkiye, where the earthquakes occurred, hosts nearly 50 per cent of the country's Syrian refugee population. For those that have already been displaced by the crisis, the disaster is a second major problem. Ahmad is a 43-year-old father of five who fled the crisis in Syria with his family in 2013, crossing into Türkiye where major challenges awaited.

"Upon our arrival in Türkiye, we found ourselves overwhelmed by the new environment. The language barrier was our first significant hurdle, limiting our ability to navigate the local market and seek employment. Despite these challenges, we gradually began to find our footing, but the financial strain of supporting a growing family in a foreign land was a constant battle.

"The cost of living in Türkiye was a shock to us. Rent and utilities became a substantial burden, consuming the meagre earnings we managed to secure. My wife Hamadi and I worked tirelessly to keep up with the escalating bills for electricity, water, and internet, along with the ever-increasing rent."

When the earthquake hit, these conditions worsened: "In the three days following the earthquake, we faced extremely challenging circumstances. Access to basic necessities like food, water, and electricity was severely limited.

"Life after the earthquake became even more challenging. The cost of everyday necessities, such as food and groceries, skyrocketed. I remember a time when 50 Turkish Lira (TYR) (approx. \$1.65) was sufficient for our

daily needs; now, even 200 Turkish Lira (TYR) (approx \$6.59) is barely enough. Meeting the needs of our children, including their dietary requirements, became an increasingly difficult task.

"One of my children fell ill, requiring medical attention that we could scarcely afford. The cost of healthcare, coupled with the need for specialised treatment, added to our mounting debts and financial worries.

"To make ends meet, I took up sewing, using two machines I had acquired. Night and day, I worked tirelessly, accepting any job that came my way. My efforts, though strenuous, were barely enough to cover our basic needs, let alone the mounting rent and utility bills."

Despite it all, the family remains hopeful: "Our situation is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Despite the odds, we continue to hope for a better future. Our journey from Syria to Türkiye, fraught with hardships and setbacks, reflects the plight of countless families displaced by crisis and disaster.

"Our story is but one among millions, a narrative of struggle, resilience, and hope. In the face of adversity, we hold on to the belief that better days are ahead, and with the continued support of kind-hearted individuals and organisations, we inch closer to a life of stability and peace."

2. UNDERLYING DISASTER RISK DRIVERS



The scale of devastation caused by the earthquakes in both Türkiye and Syria reveal the socio-political nature of hazard-related disasters. Although earthquakes are natural phenomena, the severity of impact is determined largely by the vulnerability and the capacities which form the underlying socio-political context of each country and the risk drivers which precede the disaster. It is important to consider, therefore, the man-made factors which have exacerbated the impact of the disaster.

2.1 Türkiye

1. Lack of resilient settlements

Over the past two decades, the construction boom as an engine of capital growth in Türkiye has come at the expense of proper regulatory oversight. According to analyses conducted by institutions such as Istanbul Technical University (ITU) and Middle East Technical University (METU), alongside the severity of ground motion the main determining factors in the damage caused to buildings were man-made factors. These factors included “the low bearing capacity of the soils where buildings’ foundations were laid, the deficiencies in the quality of buildings in terms of design and construction, the ages of the buildings, the noncompliance of the construction of buildings with the legislation, and the difference between floor levels of buildings constructed adjacently”.⁵

⁵ Strateji ve Butce Baskanligi, Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment (2023).

2. Weaknesses in disaster management mechanisms

Under new legislation introduced in 2009, the public institutions which previously shared responsibility for disaster management – the General Directorate of Disaster Affairs of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, the General Directorate of Civil Defence of the Ministry of Interior, and the General Directorate of Turkish Emergency Management – were combined under a single institution called the Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD). The earthquake, however, revealed certain shortcomings in disaster planning, coordination, and management by AFAD with regards to responding to a disaster of such large scale. In the days following the earthquake, hundreds of people reported being left without food, water, medicine, and tents in the middle of winter.⁶ While the extent of the damage constituted a significant challenge for authorities to respond, the weaknesses in the

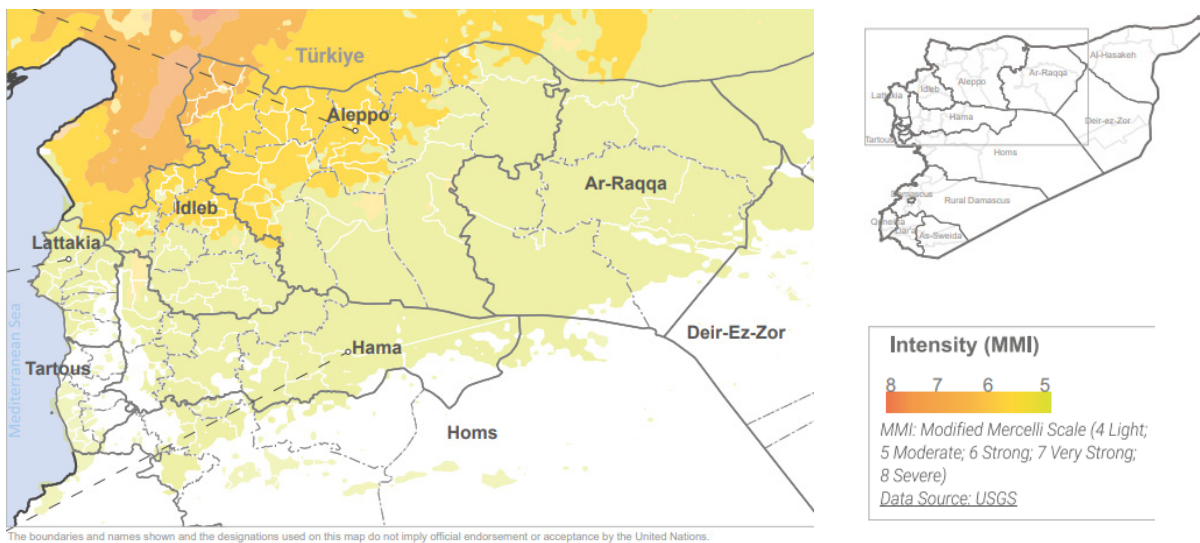
response have shown that there is room for improvement within disaster risk management structures.

According to the Türkiye Earthquake Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment produced by the Government of Türkiye, one of the primary problems is that disaster management response is concentrated under the control of central government and does not benefit from a more horizontal formation which could allow a holistic emergency response. This means that first-responders such as the military, Red Crescent and AKUT Search and Rescue Association are sidelined during the first days of the emergency response, as they must await direct instructions from the centralised institutions. The insufficient involvement of municipalities as well as local organisations in disaster capacities is a problem which also weakens emergency response.



⁶ O'Brien, Erin. "After Turkey's Quake, Some People Left Homeless Say They Haven't Eaten in Days." NPR, February 11, 2023.

2.2 Northwest Syria



1. Crisis and displacement

Syria, particularly northwestern Syria, is highly vulnerable to disaster situations due to the ongoing crisis. Even before the earthquakes, over 2.8 million people in the region were already internally displaced, with a significant proportion living in temporary camps. Moreover, buildings in Syria are more susceptible to being damaged as the crisis has made building standards unenforceable and houses are built using whatever materials are available under highly restrictive socio-economic circumstances. Attacks on hospitals and critical infrastructure mean that services which were already stretched to the limit before the disaster are now under even more pressure. Years of sanctions and dwindling aid have resulted in strained capacity to prepare, plan, adapt, and respond to disaster situations.

Nearly 13 years of crisis has also put civil society organisations under a great deal of strain, shrinking their capacity to respond to emergencies or engage in resilience building. When emergencies happen, local organisations and civil groups, who are often the closest to communities, are frequently the first to respond but they are short of equipment, tools, and capacity, hindering their ability to effectively respond.

2. Lack of conflict-sensitive disaster risk reduction in the humanitarian response

When disasters strike, quick responses save lives – but when the earthquakes occurred UN political considerations delayed the start of humanitarian aid in northwestern Syria for a week, with long deliberations over safe corridors and border openings. This showed that conflict sensitive disaster risk reduction (DRR) and conflict sensitivity principles have not been integrated effectively within humanitarian spheres, leading to poor planning and preparation. For example, coordinating an effective response requires engaging in direct contact with first responders such as the White Helmets. Questions around how to work with non-state groups in pursuit of disaster risk reduction, and how to deliver aid into highly restrictive regions must be addressed before a disaster situation arises.

This under-investment in conflict sensitive DRR is in large part due to long-standing problems which plague the humanitarian sector, including insufficient aid, short funding cycles, and siloed funding. Most funding in Syria focuses on emergency humanitarian aid, which does not allow for long-term disaster management or planning for acute but predictable risks such as natural disasters. As risks grow larger due to climate change, economic crises, and shrinking aid funds, it is more critical than ever to develop an effective framework for holistic and integrated funding which allows for conflict-sensitive DRR.

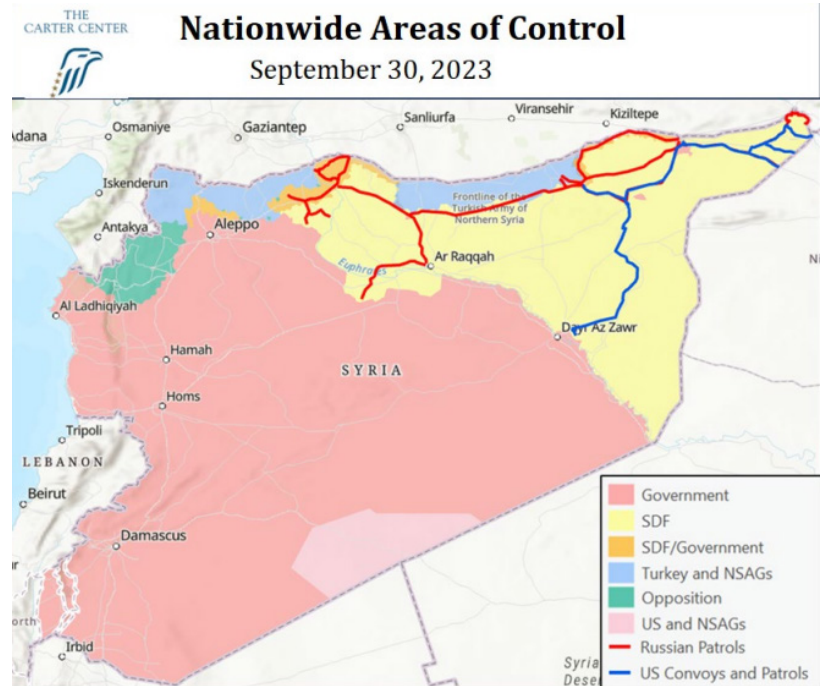
3. CHALLENGES FACED BY HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

3.1 Search and rescue challenges

Following the first earthquake in Kahramanmaraş Türkiye's rapid emergency response, including a state of emergency declared by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, underscored a decisive and well-supported reaction, reminiscent of global solidarity seen after the 1999 İzmit quake when numerous countries, in response to Türkiye's call for aid, contributed humanitarian assistance such as search-and-rescue teams, medical personnel, and supplies.⁷

In the aftermath early in 2023, the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) and United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams swiftly activated, deploying 48 INSARAG teams and over 1,500 UNDAC staff.⁸ They collaborated with UN agencies, local administrations, and civil society to support ongoing government efforts in the wake of the disaster.

Just across the border from the earthquake stricken region in northwest Syria, which is controlled by the opposition group, challenges emerged as the White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence) faced a shortage of resources for rescuing trapped individuals. The absence of heavy search-and-rescue equipment hampered relief efforts, and Damascus' failure to declare a state of emergency compounded the situation by limiting recognition and support for operations in the northwest. Syria's persistent crisis worsens the long-term impact of earthquakes on its socioeconomic conditions.



Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 30 September 2023.

People in fragile settings, such as Syria, face heightened vulnerability to natural disasters, making their needs challenging to address during emergencies. In these areas, disaster readiness is often compromised due to ongoing conflicts, hindering aid access. Unlike stable areas where aid can be redirected during crises, regions like Syria lack such flexibility due to continuous crisis. Both the ongoing crisis and earthquakes harm infrastructure and human development, leading to lasting productivity declines.

For effective support in Syria, cooperation from the Syrian authorities was deemed crucial, but international aid organisations encountered limitations due to an uncompromising government. Although the Syria government is one of the key players in the ongoing conflict, urgent engagement with Damascus became necessary to negotiate safe and unhindered access for sustained aid delivery by the UN

⁷ Global Response to the Earthquakes in Türkiye. Published by: Center for Strategic Research (SAM) (2023)

⁸ The Disaster of the Century, Relief Diplomacy, and International Solidarity. Author: Erman AKILLI. May 2023

agencies. This situation prompts the question of whether the same protocol for government approval in aid delivery during a natural disaster would apply in the context of the conflict. The response to the earthquakes shed light on the fragility of international and UN humanitarian systems when operating in the challenging context of a natural disaster compounded by a prolonged crisis. Furthermore, it underscored that neighbouring countries' ongoing efforts to normalise relations with Damascus were predominantly influenced by strategic considerations and the

geopolitical interests of regional actors.

Despite these challenges, even if compromising is the only means to end the crisis, it must be in the best interest of Syrians. The UN agencies hesitated to increase aid delivery through border crossings without approval from the Security Council or Damascus. The UN's delayed response to the earthquakes had a deterrent effect on countries, discouraging them from providing immediate emergency assistance and deploying search-and-rescue teams directly to the northwest.

Advocacy focus: Enhancing coordination and collaborative responses to earthquake challenges in Syria and Türkiye.

Following the devastating earthquakes on both sides of the Türkiye-Syria border, particularly in northwest Syria, there is a recognised need for more comprehensive support and assistance from various entities. The situation has highlighted areas where further collaboration and resources could enhance relief efforts, emphasising the importance of unified action.

To address this, there is an urgent imperative for enhanced coordination and synergy between governmental bodies and humanitarian

organisations. Such collaboration is pivotal to effectively address both the immediate and long-term needs of the impacted communities. Specifically in Syria, the earthquakes have exacerbated challenges due to the scarcity of rescue resources and outdated equipment. Although international humanitarian agencies have rallied to initiate rescue operations, their efforts were stymied by the region's constrained resources and a fragile healthcare infrastructure. Recognising these constraints, it is paramount to rally increased international support. This entails not only targeted humanitarian aid but also dedicated efforts to rebuild critical infrastructure and bolster the healthcare system.



3.2 Cross-border aid system challenges in Syria

Border closures and bureaucratic challenges impeded humanitarian efforts. Many humanitarian agencies face significant obstacles due to border closures and bureaucratic challenges. There are border crossings facilitating cross-border aid delivery from Türkiye to Syria even before the earthquake. However, the UN was restricted to using only Bab al-Hawa⁹ due to the limitations of the active UNSC resolution to use only this crossing (the resolution expired on 21 July 2023). After the earthquake, damage to this crossing impeded the UN's ability to provide assistance to northwest Syria. It was not until 9 February, after the critical rescue window, that the UN's first convoy reached northwest Syria, following the restoration of accessibility to Bab al-Hawa. In this emergency scenario, alternative crossings could have been employed, considering their logistical accessibility and the nearby functional airport in Gaziantep. This airport, located just a couple of hours' drive from the impacted areas in northwest Syria, could have facilitated swift aid delivery, especially considering the proximity of UN hubs and staff in Gaziantep.

From February to May 2023, almost 2,400 humanitarian trucks entered northwestern Syria, but post-disaster monthly averages were five per cent lower than those in 2022. By 14 February 2023 with Syrian government approval, the UN began using additional crossings like Bab al-Salam and Al Ra'ee. From February to May 2023, almost 2,400 humanitarian trucks entered northwestern Syria, but post-disaster monthly averages were five per cent lower than those in 2022. By 14 February 2023 with Syrian government approval, the UN began using additional crossings like Bab al-Salam and Al Ra'ee. From February to May 2023, almost 2,400 humanitarian trucks entered northwestern Syria, but post-disaster monthly averages were five per cent lower than those in 2022.¹⁰

Access through Bab al-Salam and al-Ra'ee crossings was extended until 13 February 2024; while Bab al-hawa crossing was extended for six months until 13 July 2024. The current extensions of border crossings are granted by the government of Syria in Damascus and are not reliant on the expired UNSC mechanisms for authorisation. The failure of the UNSC to renew the cross-border resolution, which safeguards access to vital humanitarian aid for northwest Syria, is unacceptable. Uncertainty persisted, with short-term permits and periodic renewals until mid 2024. The six-month authorisation period continues to pose a significant risk to the effectiveness of aid delivery to Syrians. It also risks cutting or curtailing specialised services – those most critical to people in northwest Syria – and severely limiting the chance of early recovery gains, which require predictability to plan and execute. Efficient, safe, consistent, and non-politicised humanitarian access to Syria is crucial. Islamic Relief urges the member countries of the UNSC to prioritise finding a swift solution that ensures impartial, non-politicised, and sustainable humanitarian access.

On the other hand, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and humanitarian partners played a central role in the emergency response in northwest Syria. Social solidarity following the earthquake was mainly humanitarian through the high level of response by civil society, local initiatives, and the private sector. It showed a culture of social solidarity in the face of adversity, an essential factor in overcoming the social degradation that affected Syrians through the crisis.

⁹ The primary humanitarian corridor under the UN Security Council Resolution 2165

¹⁰ Syria Economic Monitor, Summer 2023: The Economic Aftershocks of Large Earthquakes. World Bank. September 2023

Advocacy focus: Prioritising non-politicised, long-term cross-border aid solutions.

Internal disagreements and insufficient approved border checkpoints disrupted humanitarian relief operations. According to a **World Bank report**, from February to May 2023, the monthly average of aid trucks from Türkiye to Syria was roughly five per cent less than in 2022. Even now humanitarian aid has resumed, data indicates no notable rise in activity at the designated Syria-Türkiye border crossings for post-earthquake aid distribution.

Islamic Relief emphasises that aid delivery should not be a political tool. The international community must commit to long-term, open cross-border mechanisms to ensure swift and efficient aid delivery and enable organisations to plan beyond a six-month expiration date. The goal should be to

ensure slow but steady supply of essential items. This means finding safe alternative access routes, for example, using sea freight to build a continuous pipeline of international supplies and constantly delivering supplies to badly hit areas using small vehicles.

Activating the developmental role of civil society and local initiatives to address the impacts of the earthquake necessitates more effective coordination among active forces in the social field. This involves building genuine relationships with partners, including the UN agencies. Such a role requires civil cross-regional entities to take the initiative in leading the humanitarian aid system, being responsible for partnering with the community, determining priorities, and implementing them while being accountable to society.

3.3 Sanctions and humanitarian exemptions in Syria

While sanctions are not the main driver of Syria's deteriorating economy, they likely worsen the situation and pose challenges for humanitarian agencies indirectly. The United States (US), the European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom (UK) have imposed extensive sanctions on Syria since 2011, targeting the regime, opposition groups, and various individuals and companies, creating compliance issues and complicating funding transfers for aid projects due to financial institutions avoiding traditional banking in-country. **The Caesar Act** of 2019 introduces 'secondary sanctions' on foreign entities supporting the Syrian regime or profiting from the conflict, putting even non-Syrian entities at risk.

Furthermore, northern Syrian opposition groups face additional sanctions in areas under their control. Northwest Syria is home to people who are effectively trapped, lacking resources to relocate, unable to cross into Türkiye, and fearing persecution if they attempt to move to government-held areas. Even before the earthquakes, at least 4.1 million people in northwest Syria relied almost entirely on humanitarian aid to survive.¹¹

The chilling effect of sanctions, stemming from their broad scope and unclear legal frameworks, poses a significant challenge for banks, exporters, and aid agencies seeking to comply with various sanctions. This complicates fund transfers for aid agencies, hindering programmes and payments to local staff and suppliers, even for transactions exempt

from sanctions. The fuel sector is particularly impacted, causing severe shortages despite legal avenues for humanitarian fuel purchases.

The US government employs specific humanitarian carveouts, primarily through the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC)-issued general licenses, which act as standing exemptions to prevent undue harm to civilians and facilitate necessary humanitarian assistance. These exemptions also include regular licenses that necessitate case-by-case approval.

In response to the earthquakes, the US, the EU, and the UK modified their individual sanctions regimes to expedite earthquake relief efforts. Notably, just three days after the earthquake, OFAC issued **Syria General License 23**, permitting all transactions related to earthquake relief efforts in Syria, which would otherwise be prohibited under Syria Sanctions Regulations. This 180-day license allows fundraising for earthquake relief and explicitly covers the processing or transfer of funds on behalf of third-country persons to or from Syria. Banks are authorised to rely on the representations of the funds' transfer originator, providing reassurance to facilitate financial transfers for earthquake relief.

While the exemptions gave some flexibility in aid delivery, they were too short-term (only lasting six months) and too narrowly focused on earthquake relief, excluding other crucial programming, like repairing damaged homes.

¹¹ Earthquakes: North-west Syria Situation Report No 2. OCHA. 15 March 2023

Advocacy focus: Engagement in dialogue to solve challenges created by sanctions that obstruct the work of humanitarian organisations

Sanctions should focus on acting as a deterrent or corrective measure rather than being punitive. Consistent bottlenecks around administrative processes mean that timely aid does not reach those that need it the most acutely. The earthquakes cannot be an exception to the status quo of suffering – there must be a long-term solution which allows adequate and reliable access to humanitarian aid and financial services in Syria. Islamic Relief continues to call for the full implementation of **Resolution 2664**

and for engagement in dialogue to solve the underlying political challenges which harm the most vulnerable communities in Syria and hinder their access to aid.

To further enhance the humanitarian impact, sanctioning authorities should engage in regular and extensive consultations with aid agencies on exemption operations. Agencies providing crucial aid to Syria need to be transparent about how sanctions impact their operations. Humanitarian exemptions should extend beyond immediate relief and address secondary and tertiary effects, grounded in clear evidence of causal relationships.

3.4 Economic factors and exchange rate in Syria

The earthquakes significantly impacted Syria's economy, particularly accelerating currency depreciation and consumer price inflation. Following the disaster, the exchange rate has reached 14,900 Syrian Lira (SYR) (approx. \$1)¹² By December 2023, the Syrian pound had experienced a depreciation of about 130 per cent compared to its value at the beginning of the year. In the broader perspective, the Syrian pound has depreciated by 99.64 per cent against the dollar compared to its pre-2011 value.¹³

The earthquake exacerbated the already soaring price of key commodities and food such as bread, lentils, vegetable oil, sugar, and rice. Some regions experienced sharper increases due to diverse impacts from the disaster and subsequent response efforts. Disruptions in supply chains from Türkiye led to significant fuel price hikes in affected areas. The monthly inflation rate in Idlib governorate increased by 4.2 per cent and in rural Aleppo by 2.2 per cent after the earthquakes.¹⁴ This represents a new deterioration in real household income and deepens the suffering and severity of poverty. It also leads to a rise in production costs, threatening further economic contraction.

¹² Syrian Central Bank Lowers Pound Value, Black Market Dollar Reached 14600

¹³ Worst since the beginning of the 20th century: What does 2024 hold for Syria's economy in freefall

¹⁴ The Impact of the Earthquake in Syria: The Missing Developmental Perspective in the Shadow of Conflict. SCPR. September 2023.

3.5 Additional funds and resources are needed from the international community and donors

Even though the immediate danger has passed, both countries are still suffering. The **17 million people affected** face a long road to recovery – many are left with nothing.

In Türkiye, as of 29 December 2023, only **54 per cent** of the UN's Türkiye Earthquake Appeal was funded. This appeal requested \$1 billion to reach 5.2 million people.

In Syria, the UN launched an earthquake flash appeal for February to March 2023, seeking \$397.6 million to assist 4.9 million individuals. This appeal complements the 2022-2023 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). By 20 July 2023, donors had fully met the flash appeal, but only **36 per cent** of the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria was funded by 29 December 2023.

Donor fatigue looms large as Syria grappled with the earthquakes amid an ongoing crisis. Moreover, the persistent challenges around having a long-term solution for cross-border access have led many international NGOs to reduce their operations. This uncertainty hampers effective and efficient humanitarian assistance, making it more costly and less reliable for those in desperate need.

Reports before the earthquake showed that

funds for Syria have dwindled over the last decade, despite a soaring growth in need. Particularly after the war in Ukraine, Syria has slowly lost significant donor support as some governments and international institutions shifted a significant portion of funds to Ukraine. Looking forward, the region's geopolitical landscape presents further challenges. The ongoing crisis in Gaza threatens to worsen humanitarian conditions in Syria as existing aid budgets are overstretched, leading to significant aid withdrawals. For example in June 2023, the **WFP** cut aid from 5.5 million recipients to 2.5 million, citing "an unprecedented funding crisis" – and this was before the escalation in Gaza began, leaving millions more people in the region desperate for help. After months of warning that drastic cuts would be inevitable if donors didn't step up, on 4 December 2023 the WFP announced its **main food aid programme** would end in Syria in January 2024. Although two appeals have been launched in the aftermath of the earthquake in both Türkiye and Syria, there is still an urgent need for long-term committed investments that focus on rebuilding the necessary infrastructure for Syrians to regain their livelihoods.

A consistent supply of priority needs is clearly



needed short-term necessities include shelter, food, clean water, and improved hygiene. However, it is expected that many families may be living in temporary container settlements for the next two years. For Syrian refugees, already displaced and struggling in Türkiye, the earthquakes have further heightened vulnerabilities. By early August, an estimated 1.6 million people were still living in informal sites, in tents or makeshift shelters with

limited or no access to services. An additional 800,000 people were living in tents or containers in more formal settlements across earthquake-affected areas.¹⁵ In both countries, children affected by the earthquakes are especially vulnerable to severe psychological trauma, making essential renewed global efforts to address their mental health needs through immediate and tailored interventions.



Advocacy focus: Investment in long-term rebuilding and protection efforts that contextualise the disaster within the broader background of the 12-year crisis.

The path ahead demands coordinated reconstruction efforts and unwavering international support. A proactive approach, including flexible cash donations and adaptive aid responses, is crucial to navigate these complexities and ensure sustained support for those in need.

Relief efforts must engage in long-term and sustainable solutions that consider support to existing displaced communities, rebuilding of infrastructure which has been damaged by more than a decade of crisis, the provision of basic services, and the facilitation of livelihoods for the people in the region.

The end goal of relief efforts cannot simply be a return to the status quo prior to the earthquakes, which saw the suffering of millions of Syrians, but a well-established and focused initiative to increase the self-reliance and resilience of the region as a whole. However, such an endeavour relies strictly on the availability of sufficient funds. It must also be strongly emphasised that this direct correlation between the scale of damage after the disaster and the extreme vulnerability in the area means that any earthquake relief efforts in the area must necessarily involve a broader rebuilding effort that appropriately contextualises the disaster. Efforts should gradually shift towards rebuilding damaged infrastructure and restoring essential services, as well as supporting affected communities to rebuild their livelihoods and promote sustainable development.

¹⁵ Recovering from earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye. UNICEF. 4 August 2023

4. ISLAMIC RELIEF'S RESPONSE

One year on since the disaster, Islamic Relief remains committed to our ongoing emergency response efforts. Following a strategic assessment, we restructured the response plan into two distinct phases: the initial phase entails providing immediate support to the affected communities, while the subsequent phase focuses on implementing recovery projects designed to yield lasting benefits.

Islamic Relief was able to expand our orphan sponsorship programme in southern Türkiye, and managed to sponsor around 2,000 orphans after earthquake in Gaziantep. The sponsored orphans include Turkish and Syrian children. Islamic Relief also expanded our sponsorship programme in Syria, with 1,450 children currently sponsored in the country.

The initial response was started in less than 24 hours and started distributing the ready food including cakes, juices, water and dates to cover the needs of families in different locations.

In Türkiye

Islamic Relief has concentrated its efforts in the provinces of Adıyaman, Kahramanmaraş, and Hatay, regions identified as the most severely impacted by the earthquake. Emergency response activities were also underway in the provinces of Şanlıurfa, Adıyaman and Kilis (six governorates in total). We started delivery less than 12 hours after the earthquakes struck, on 7 February 2023 primarily targeting internally displaced people, members of host communities and refugees.

During Phase 1 of our emergency response, we initiated operations in Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, Adıyaman and Kilis (six governorates). In close collaboration with various stakeholders, we delivered in-kind and financial assistance to the affected communities. We operated across various sectors, including non-food items (NFI),

food security and livelihoods (FSL), WASH, and emergency protection. As of 1 December 2023, Islamic Relief has provided humanitarian assistance to over 58,300 individuals in Türkiye affected by the earthquakes. Our response strategy was meticulously designed to address existing gaps, and our team effectively reached remote rural locations to provide crucial support.

Given the multitude of stakeholders addressing immediate community needs in the initial response phase, discussions were held to strategise and implement long-term recovery projects with a sustained impact on the affected populations. The second phase, slated for a three-year duration beginning in the last quarter of 2023, sees the implementation of projects in Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Adıyaman, and Gaziantep.





ease their financial burden.

Livelihoods is the initial sector targeted in Phase 2, with projects initiated to support families in restarting their income-generating activities. The following activities constitute the first set of projects:

- Grant (in-kind) support for farmers, particularly those impacted by the earthquake, providing access to agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and agricultural tools.
- Grant (in-kind) support for livestock breeders, offering a set of sheep, goats, or cows, along with fodder for a specified period and technical support from the project's veterinary team.
- Provision of bees, apicultural tools, and technical support to beekeepers, including full and empty beehives.
- Grant support (in-kind) for micro, small, and medium-sized businesses to get devices, equipment, and raw materials necessary to restart operations affected by the earthquakes.
- Unconditional cash assistance of 6,700 Turkish Lira (TRY) (approx. \$248.94) provided to affected households, aiming to

The second set of projects includes the following activities:

- Providing entrepreneurship training to individuals in targeted areas of Hatay, Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş.
- Specialised and focused training for entrepreneurs to enhance their management skills.
- In-kind grants for entrepreneurs to initiate or relaunch their businesses.

The second sector chosen for intervention is education, with two projects in coordination with the Turkish Ministry of National Education. These projects aim to reconstruct four schools in Kahramanmaraş, ensuring education activities without interruption.

In northwest Syria:

Starting shortly after the earthquakes, Islamic Relief took immediate action by communicating with local and international stakeholders. We started the immediate response within eight hours of the earthquake by providing the essential medicines and disposables to health facilities to provide services to the injured. This was quickly followed by our response in various other sectors. We also mobilised our teams on the ground, and conducted a rapid needs assessment (RNA) in Idlib and Aleppo on 13 February 2023. Preliminary relief distributions were of NFI kits including tents, mattresses, blankets and plastic sheets, emergency food parcels, ready-to-eat meals, baked bread, dignity kits, solar panel kits, stoves rubble removal in few areas, clean drinking water, and heating materials.

To alleviate the increasing burden on an already struggling health sector, Islamic Relief has supported several healthcare centres with stipends for staff, operational expenses, mobile clinics for earthquakes displaced population, drugs and disposables, referral vehicles, and baby formula. We distributed hygiene kits, water tanks, water trucking to provide clean drinking water and garbage bins, built latrines and removed solid waste. Nearly 414,000 people benefitted from the first phase of our earthquake response.

In Phase 2, Islamic Relief is undertaking six major projects in health, education, livelihood, shelter and WASH sectors.

Education: In the realm of education, our initiatives include providing stipends for 400 educational staff over a span of 20 months. Additionally, 68 teachers in Idlib governorate are set to undergo occupational training. As part of our commitment to improving educational infrastructure, 28 schools will receive support for building repairs, school assets, and furniture. Furthermore, these schools will benefit from the distribution of school stationery, occurring in two annual cycles, along with stationary kits for over 21,200 students. Another facet of our support involves 27 schools, which will receive assistance in the form of hygiene materials/ kits and heating materials distributed over two annual cycles.



Livelihood: In the livelihood domain, our comprehensive approach involves supporting 1,700 medium or small-scale farmers, with 900 located in Aleppo and 800 in Idlib, by providing them with essential agricultural inputs and technical assistance. Furthermore, we are dedicated to aiding 310 medium or small-scale farmers cultivating summer vegetable crops in Aleppo (specifically in Afrin, Al Bab, and A'Zaz) by supplying them with agricultural kits. Additionally, these farmers will receive vouchers for agricultural purposes. Focusing on small-scale livestock breeders, 3,250 individuals (2,000 in Aleppo and 1,250 in Idlib) will be equipped with fodder for their animals. As part of our commitment to animal health, vaccinations will be administered to 100,000 ewes in Aleppo and 100,000 ewes in Idlib. To further bolster the livestock sector, 5,200 breeders (2,600 in Aleppo and 2,600 in Idlib) will receive veterinary kits, while 16,000 breeders (6,000 in Aleppo and 10,000 in Idlib) will benefit from veterinary services and activities. Moreover, our initiatives extend to providing capacity-building support to 650 cow breeders.

Shelter: 906 houses will be built to provide families with safe, dignified shelter.

WASH: With the aim of enhancing access to WASH services for earthquake-affected internally displaced people and host communities in northwest Syria, a project is set to span 24 months. This initiative includes installing six solar-powered water pumping

systems designed for community use. Additionally, efforts will be directed towards repairing, re-establishing, and expanding three damaged water supply networks. A critical focus on Al-Bil camp residents involves providing essential WASH activities, encompassing the provision of clean potable water, daily management of solid waste, regular cleaning of latrines, monthly dislodging of septic tanks, and supplying cleaning materials while maintaining latrines. Further community support entails the distribution of 100 solid waste tub containers in Afrin and providing hygiene items to 1,580 individuals with disabilities and older people. The project will also involve the construction, repair, and maintenance of WASH facilities in 31 schools located in Azaz and Al-Bab.

Health: Dedicated to reinforcing healthcare centres with vital resources, a 24-month project is initiated with the objective of supporting health care facilities with essential drugs and disposables. This endeavour encompasses providing financial assistance to two health facilities to cover running costs and stipends for healthcare staff. Additionally, support will be extended to 11 health facilities, ensuring the provision of medicines, medical disposables, and necessary equipment. Recognising the significance of efficient patient transfer, the project involves the support of four referral vehicles through monthly stipends to facilitate the seamless transportation of patients.

5. LESSONS LEARNED: POST-EARTHQUAKE DEVELOPMENTS

In Türkiye:

1. Underpinning Türkiye's emergency preparedness is the Türkiye Afet Müdahale Planı (TAMP), "a comprehensive emergency master plan". This plan not only enhances coordination with authoritative stakeholders but also facilitates access to state funds. Accreditation as an implementing partner within the TAMP programme is crucial for effective and streamlined emergency response efforts.
2. Recognising the importance of sustainable livelihoods, Islamic Relief Türkiye underscores the necessity of programming aimed at building the self-reliance of vulnerable host communities and refugees. This strategic approach seeks to foster long-term resilience and economic stability, acknowledging the enduring nature of the refugee situation.
3. In response to the needs of refugees and host communities, Islamic Relief Türkiye has implemented cash assistance programmes, including food and multi-purpose cash. Notably, about 93 per cent of recipients have expressed a preference for cash and cash voucher assistance over in-kind support or in-kind vouchers. However, satisfaction with the transfer value, set at 6,700 Turkish Lira (TRY) (approx. \$219) per household, has been reported as relatively low. It is noteworthy that the assistance provided, especially in the form of cash transfers, constitutes the primary source of income for half of the families that receive it. As these programmes evolve, addressing factors influencing satisfaction with transfer values will be pivotal in optimising the impact of financial assistance initiatives on the affected populations.



In northwest Syria:

1. To be ready for any sudden crisis

The main lesson learned from phase one projects was the need for prepositioning non-food items (NFIs) and shelter items such as tents, plastic sheet and blanket to enable fast response to such crises. Due to the severity and scale of the event, the first few critical days markets will be closed and various other procurement will be big challenge. Even more, many of the suppliers themselves were affected by the crisis delaying even more the procurement process.

2. The importance of coordination

Coordination with other NGOs through official and unofficial forums at the start of the crisis is critically important to provide lifesaving assistance to the affected populations. Many of the local and international NGOs relied on non-official coordination mechanisms such as social media and chat groups to direct and plan their response.

3. Multi-level coordination for efficiency

The intervention highlighted the significance of close collaboration across all tiers, spanning from field operatives to cluster-level and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) coordination. This robust coordination structure bolstered the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the intervention.

4. Localised response team for timely engagement

The presence of a local response team enabled swift and appropriate action immediately following the earthquake, including undertaking rapid needs assessments. Building on this experience, Phase 2 will continue to prioritise establishing and empowering local response teams.

5. Emergency procurement policies

During the emergency, regular procurement and documentation procedures have to be revised in order to ease and speed up the distribution of urgently needed items. A successful use of the emergency procurement policy enabled the project to hasten the process and quickly reach the affected population with project items.

6. Flexible intervention strategies

While implementing emergency responses, flexible strategies such as adjusting the distribution plan and targeting areas would bring about strengthened response and extended project impact.



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