



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE: IMPACTS OF THE NATURAL DISASTER WITHIN WAR-TORN AANES TERRITORIES

JULY 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

The earthquake that hit the regions of southern Turkey and northwest Syria on February 6th 2023 - and the second that occurred just two weeks later - collided with a situation already characterized by devastating living conditions in Afrin and Shehba, Syria. Afrin has been occupied by Turkey and controlled by Turkey's proxy force, the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA), since Turkey invaded the region in 2018, while the Shehba region is governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and forms a part of the geographic and political entity of North and East Syria (NES). Administratively inside the AANES, Shehba is geographically separated; an enclave, surrounded by Turkish and SNA forces to its north and Syrian government forces to its south. Shehba faces a severe economic siege imposed by the Government of Syria (GoS) and is at the same time challenged with hosting several thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), who fled the war in Afrin when Turkey invaded in 2018.

As RIC documented in the latest Occupation Report¹ NES' Turkish-occupied territories are characterized by human rights violations including unlawful arrests, killings, shelling, theft and the seizing of property of the native, mainly Kurdish inhabitants. Most of these crimes are conducted by the SNA, which is under the control of Turkey. Afrin's residents have little to no opportunity to lodge complaints or proceedings against arbitrary arrests and rights abuses.

The earthquake shook this region and its population once again, deteriorating the situation even further and, according to UN information for the whole region of north-west Syria, left more than 4,500 dead, 350,000 – 500,000 displaced and more than 10,600 buildings collapsed or seriously damaged, with 1,100 dead in Afrin and Jinderes cities alone.²

After the earthquakes, as this report will document, there was widespread blocking of humanitarian aid, military attacks on NES by Turkey, and theft of humanitarian relief supplies by the occupying Turkish proxy militias. The report concludes that the people living in Shehba and occupied Afrin are widely affected by the much-reported "weaponizing" and "politicization" of humanitarian aid.³

With this report the Rojava Information Center (RIC) provides well-sourced information including first hand sources from the ground in Afrin and Shehba. The report aims to shed light on the circumstances and conditions the people

1 rb.gy/sgk66 (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

2 <https://rb.gy/1nybh> (www.reliefweb.int)

3 In short it can be defined as the misuse of humanitarian assistance and bring it into action to serve their strategic interests.

<https://www.mironline.ca/aid-and-politics-the-weaponization-of-humanitarian-assistance/>

in the earthquake-affected regions of NES have been facing, and why the death toll was so severe and increased over a long period of time. RIC aims to support the efforts made to understand the impacts of this natural disaster in a complex political environment on the ground and therefore to contribute to identifying the main obstacles for adequate ongoing and future responses to it.

Rojava Information Center, July 2023

1.1 AUTHORS

The RIC is an independent media organization based in NES. It is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from different countries across Europe and North America. As there is a lack of clear and objective reporting on NES, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground, the RIC was set up to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced and transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

1.2 METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

This report is restricted to the areas most affected by the earthquake within the territories currently or formerly governed by the AANES. Therefore in this piece RIC focuses on the cantons of Afrin (now Turkish-occupied) and Shehba as well as the two majority-Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah in the city of Aleppo as they were in most urgent need of immediate emergency response.

At some points, this geopolitical frame also has to include the Idlib Region. Although it was at no time part of NES governed by AANES, it is included where it is necessary to give broader context.

After giving an overview of the initial conditions of the aforementioned geopolitical frame, this report covers a period of time starting with the occurrence of the earthquake on February 6th 2023, and ending about four weeks later. In this report, that time frame is considered to be sufficient to map the relevant developments and to get an understanding of the intertwining

effects of the political context and the natural disaster, although on some occasions the description of the further developments will exceed this time frame.

Although RIC aims to give a wide range of information and contexts, this report is not all encompassing. To give one example, the report does not cover the situation and developments related to Aleppo airport, although it played a role in the emergency response.

This report uses RIC's Open-Source Intelligence Research. For verifying information, RIC is in contact with several Non-Governmental Human Rights Organizations such as the Afrin Human Rights Organization, a NGO that collects testimonies on the ground.

RIC also reviewed a variety of local news sources and global media outlets like Al-Jazeera, Washington Post and Reuter, and analyzed relevant reports published by the United Nations as well as academic articles. In addition, RIC conducted Interviews with officials from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC), the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the White Helmets, who provided us with valuable background information as well as first hand information from the ground.

For further reading regarding the geopolitical context, history, and sociopolitical situation of the areas covered in this report, previous RIC dossiers offer detailed background information on the occupied and besieged territories of NES.

In July 2022, RIC published "The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria", a comprehensive report about the current state of the SNA militias and other armed groups active in the Turkish-occupied territories of Syria, which thoroughly examines the relationship between the SNA and its political counterpart, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as the Turkish authorities.⁴ For detailed insights into the occupied Afrin canton, RIC's latest Occupation Report is also available on the RIC website.

For this report, sources in Kurdish, Arabic, English and German language were used.

⁴ <https://rb.gy/0bp1m> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

2. THE SITUATION BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE

The following section gives an overview of the pre-earthquake political and everyday living conditions in the areas that were later affected by the earthquake in order to understand how the natural disaster intertwines and multiplies with effects of a long lasting and continuous political and humanitarian crisis.

2.1 AFRIN CANTON

The canton of Afrin, together with Kobane and Jazeera, is one of the three constituent regions which the Syrian Arab Army and Syrian government fled from in July 2012, allowing new political and economic institutions to be built up in the months after; a moment popularly known as the Rojava revolution.⁵

According to estimations conducted by the Afrin Human Rights Organization, before the Turkish invasion of Afrin in 2018, there were 570,000 Kurds living in the canton, comprising a majority of the entire local population (around 95%).⁶ With the displacement of about 300,000 Kurdish inhabitants and the subsequent settlement of about 450,000 Arabs, Turkmen and Palestinians in Afrin canton, the native Kurdish population decreased significantly to less than one third.

According to RIC's own database, the entire Afrin canton is occupied by at least 18 different Turkish proxy militias, all of which are factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA)⁷. The militias have established a wide range of military bases and camps, in addition to 17 military bases directly belonging to the Turkish army, as per RIC research.⁸ Above and beyond this confusing and hard-to-catch situation, the incursion of the organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) into the Afrin canton in October 2022 generated an even more complex situation on the ground as HTS, coming from Idlib which is located south of the Afrin canton, is not affiliated with the Turkish state to the extent the SNA militias are, but rather, an offshoot of al-Qaeda and al-Nusra-Front and therefore capable of pursuing its own agenda in the region more independently.⁹

5 <https://rb.gy/lef7a> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

6 See RIC's Occupation Report: <https://rb.gy/czm2j> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

7 For further information on SNA, see the RIC's dossier „The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria“ <https://rb.gy/ksqzu> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

8 <https://rb.gy/czm2j> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

9 For further information about HTS, see RIC's in depth dossier <https://rojavainformation-center.com/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

Due to the presence of such a high number of different militias operating in the Afrin canton and competing with each other, a dynamic process of composition and recomposition of joint power blocs is taking place, with each bloc trying to gain and secure territory, checkpoints, smuggling routes, and the possibility to impose levies on the population and expropriate property. In Afrin alone, the first half of 2022 saw at least 33 different incidents of military clashes resulting from these power struggles¹⁰. They create conditions of instability, insecurity and present a threat to the civilian population.

Additional indicators point to a highly insecure environment for the civilians. The human rights organization Synergy Association For Victims (Hevdesti) published a report documenting 633 arrests in Afrin canton during 2022 conducted by the SNA and noted that three people died under torture.¹¹ RIC recorded 476 cases of unlawful arrest/kidnapping, 32 cases of murder/killing and 301 cases of theft/extortion in Afrin in the first half of 2022.

In a report, Hevdesti asserted that these arbitrary arrests were a systematic policy conducted by the SNA, pointing out that¹²

“[t]he majority of victims of arbitrary arrests in Afrin during 2022 belonged to specific religion or ethnic minority groups. The SNA’s factions subjected families of the detained to extortion which confirm that such conduct is practiced systematically with a view to push the indigenous population, of the Kurds and the Yezidis origin, to flee the area and the SNA’s fighters could seize their properties.” – **Synergy Association For Victims**

As there are no possibilities to lodge legal proceedings against cases of unlawful arrests or extortion, the Kurdish population in Afrin faces pressure to leave the Afrin canton. There is on the one hand property seizures by SNA factions and on the other hand an ongoing process of constructing new settlements in the region. These new settlements are made from both seized properties as well as newly constructed settlement houses. They are reportedly built to house settlers, who are in many cases family members of the SNA-factions controlling the area.

These coercive demographic engineering efforts, as they are referred to by the human rights organization “Syrians for Truth and Justice”, was recently analyzed in relation to the new housing settlements in the Afrin canton:¹³

10 According to RIC’s own database

11 <https://hevdesti.org/en/documentation-arrests-in-afrin-2022/>

12 <https://hevdesti.org/en/documentation-arrests-in-afrin-2022/>

13 <https://rb.gy/rupx4> (www.stj-sy.org/)

“

“STJ [Syrians for Truth and Justice] learned that up to early March 2022, at least 600 fighters, with their families, have settled in residential villages constructed in Jabal al-Ahlam area. Most of these fighters serve within al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya.” – **Syrians for Truth and Justice**

”

This newly established settlement, located in the south-east of the city of Afrin¹⁴ for the purpose of providing houses for the families of the militiamen, is not an isolated case. Reports of further settlements published by local sources, are giving testament to the comprehensive and intentional characteristics of this process, which human rights organizations categorize as demographic or ethnic engineering.¹⁵

STJ also points out in its report that planning and implementing a settlement project must involve the legitimization of the Afrin City Local Council (ACLC) as well as the authorization of the Turkish governor of the Hatay Region, Rahmi Doğan, who was appointed by the Presidential Decree of President Erdogan in 2018.¹⁶

2.2 SHEHBA CANTON AND ALEPPO NEIGHBORHOODS SHEIKH MAQSUD AND ASHRAFIYAH

After the Turkish military operation in early 2018, whereby Afrin canton was invaded and occupied, Shehba became the exclave it is today. Out of the total of 300,000 residents who fled Afrin as a direct effect of the invasion, about 120,000 sought refuge in the Shehba canton with 65,907 IDPs still remaining in Shehba up to today, which makes up to 72.2% of the total current population according to RIC figures. This has posed an enormous challenge not only in terms of accommodation options, but also to the economy as a whole and to educational and health care infrastructure facilities.¹⁷

In August 2022, the Government of Syria (GoS) began to impose an embargo on the region once again, after the previous one lasted from November 2020 until April 2021. This embargo included Aleppo’s two AANES-governed neighborhoods, Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah. This worsened the economic and humanitarian situation. Shortly before the earthquake shook the region, a report published by Amnesty International stated:¹⁸

14 Coordinates: 36.48202520892711, 36.9080697428376

15 <https://npasyria.com/en/90183/>

16 <https://rb.gy/rupx4> (www.stj-sy.org/)

17 See RIC’s own Shehba Report: <https://rb.gy/0133s> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

18 <https://rb.gy/wpxyg> (www.amnesty.org)

“

“Since the government imposed the blockade [...] tens of thousands of civilians, including internally displaced people, have faced severe shortages of fuel and aid. Medical supplies are now all but exhausted and people are burning household items and plastic to try and keep warm in freezing temperatures. The affected areas, including Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyeh in the north of the city of Aleppo, and more than 50 villages in the Shahba area, are under the control of the Kurdish civilian council, which is affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).” **Amnesty International**

”

Amnesty appealed to the international community and has urged the GoS to “lift the siege on civilians in the predominantly Kurdish areas in Aleppo”.

The Shehba region also sees an incessant Turkish drone strike campaign. Turkish drone strikes create conditions of insecurity and instability in the area, discouraging the population from planning a future there, triggering displacement and engendering fear in the population. According to RIC data, in 2022 the region was hit by 23 drone strikes, leaving behind 4 dead, 22 injured, and damaged infrastructure facilities.¹⁹ But the military targeting of the region is not only restricted to drone attacks as artillery strikes carried out by the Turkish Army and the SNA are also a frequent occurrence.²⁰

The population of Aleppo’s two AANES-governed, Kurdish-majority neighborhoods is also partly composed of IDPs who fled from Afrin after the Turkish invasion back in 2018. However, before the Syrian Civil War started in 2012, people from Afrin had moved there in search of job opportunities. The GoS embargo on these neighborhoods has worsened the economic conditions, caused shortages of daily goods and triggered a sharp rise in prices.²¹

The shortage of fuel is a key problem for these areas. Fuel is used to keep generators and water pumps running and is also used by the inhabitants to heat the apartments. According to Valentina Abdo, co-chair of the General Council of Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyah, the council is making efforts to secure the fuel supply as it is essential in order to maintain the economy of the area.²²

While the situations in Shehba Region and the two Aleppo neighborhoods are comparable in many regards, the former encompasses large rural areas, lacking multi-story buildings, with much of the population accommodated

19 See RIC’s Drone Report 2022: <https://rb.gy/s3pri> (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

20 <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1352975929853796353>

21 <https://npasyria.com/en/91655/>

22 See RIC’s Video from May 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzEDd-xEm6k>

in tents in IDPs camps, while the latter is a highly dense urban environment, in which multi-story residential buildings are the norm. The architectural structures in Aleppo have been heavily affected by the years of the Syrian Civil War and the fighting that took place inside the city. Many building foundations are now weak and prone to breakage. On January 23rd 2023, a five-story building in the neighborhood unexpectedly collapsed, killing 16 people.²³



Sheikh Maqsoud, 2021

23 RIC reported: <https://rb.gy/1kipy> (www.facebook.com)

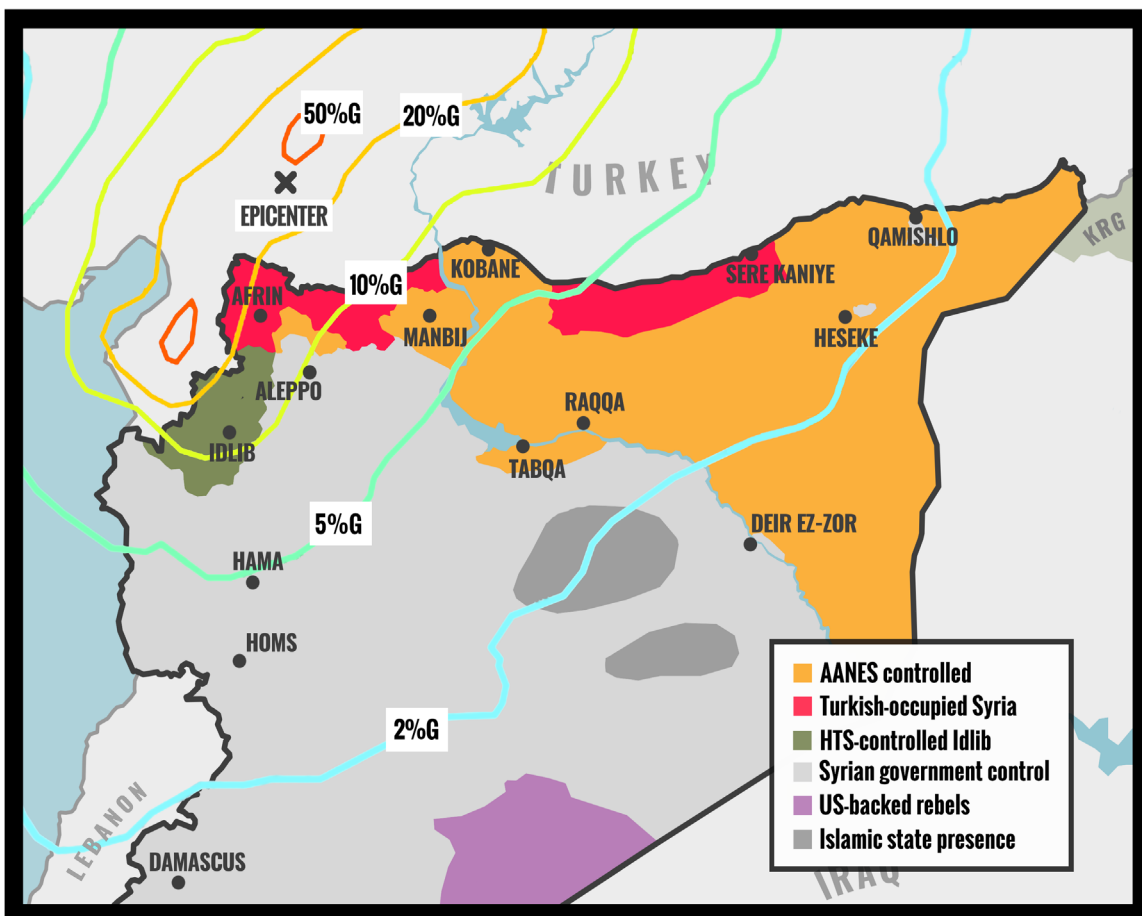
3. THE EARTHQUAKE

The earthquake that hit the region of southern Turkey and north-west Syria in the early morning of 6th February with a magnitude of 7.8 was the strongest in the region since 1939. The epicenter was the city of Pazarcik, Turkey. While the affected area was mainly southern Turkey and north-west Syria, the earthquake was felt as far as Egypt, Georgia and Greece.

3.1 OVERVIEW: SCALE OF DESTRUCTION AND HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

While the 1939 earthquake was reported to have left 33,000 dead²⁴, in the days after February 6th it became apparent that this disaster was even deadlier than the former one. On May 18th, the UN OCHA published a Situation Report

FEBRUARY 6TH 2023 SHAKEMAP



Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) Contours. PGA is equal to the amplitude of the largest absolute acceleration recorded at one specific location during an earthquake. Unlike the Richter Scale, it is not a measure of the total energy of an earthquake. It rather indicates how much the earth shakes at a given geographical point. In this case, PGA is expressed in G, the acceleration created by earth's gravity.

24 <https://news.sky.com/story/turkey-earthquake-the-countrys-deadly-history-12804545>

stating that the death toll of the earthquake had increased to at least 59,259 throughout Turkey and Syria, but at the same time pointing out that, with regard to Turkey,²⁵

“these numbers are undoubtedly under-representative of the true count as there are many reports from villages where victims who lost their lives were buried without obtaining death certificates from the district prosecutor.” **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**

Even by mid-May, 100 days after the earthquake, approximately 2.4 million people in the affected areas were residing in temporary settlements and tents, and these living conditions were likely to continue during the upcoming hot summer months.²⁶

Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization (WHO) regional director for Europe, told POLITICO eight days after the earthquake, that it is estimated to be the “worst natural disaster in the WHO European Region for a century”.²⁷

Against this background, the estimated need for humanitarian assistance is correspondingly large. According to UN OCHA’s Situation Report from February 11th, about²⁸

“280,000 individuals in north-west Syria are currently estimated to be directly affected by the earthquakes and are in immediate need of shelter and/or NFI [non-food-items] assistance. The most urgent needs are tents, shelter kits, NFI kits, basic and winter clothing, and heating fuel.” **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**

At the same time, UN OCHA emphasized that “heavy machines for debris removal; medical supplies, including ambulances and medicine” are priority needs in the disaster area.

After giving this general overview, the following section provides more insights into the impacts of the earthquake within the geopolitical framework defined above.

25 <https://rb.gy/a53er> (<https://reliefweb.int/>)

26 <https://rb.gy/03xco> (<https://reliefweb.int/>)

27 <https://rb.gy/8a06v> (<https://politico.eu/>)

28 <https://rb.gy/8f4m6> (<https://reliefweb.int/>)

3.2 TIMELINE OF EVENTS

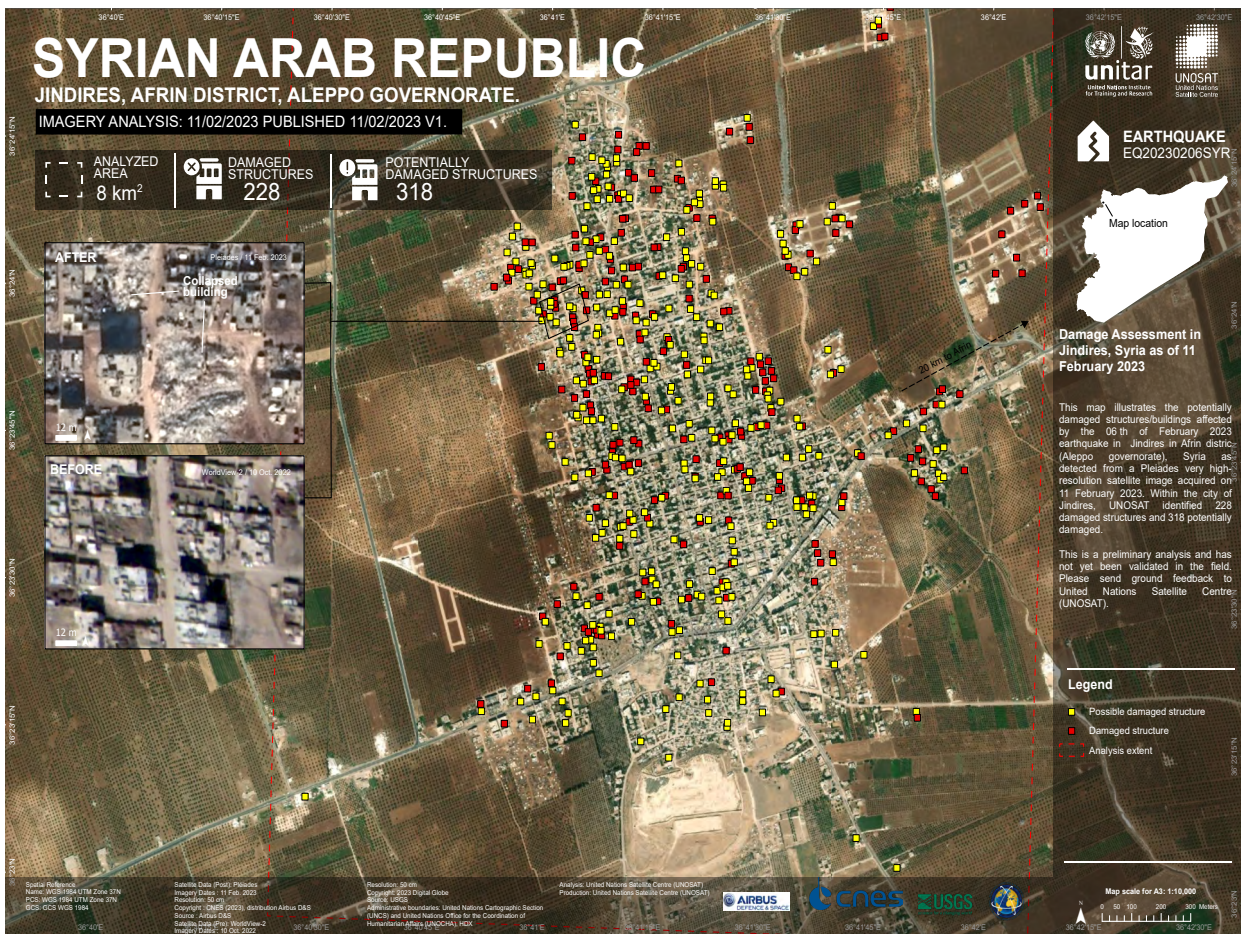
- 06 FEB** Earthquake hit at 4:17 a.m. local time. Magnitude: 7.8 on the Richter scale, epicenter: Pazarcık City, Kahramanmaraş Province in southern Turkey
- 06 FEB** 2nd earthquake hit at 1:24 p.m. local time. Magnitude: 7.5, epicenter: Elbistan City, southern Turkey, 120 km north of Pazarcık City
- 07 FEB** More than 570 aftershocks within 24 hours; arrival of hundreds of residents from Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods to Shehba Canton
- 08 FEB** Death toll tops 18,000 in total with more than 2,500 dead in Syria
- 09 FEB** 1st UN aid trucks entered territory of north-west Syria via Bab al-Hawa crossing
- 10 FEB** 12 aid trucks of Barzani Charity Foundation entered Syria through the Bab al-Salama crossing
- 12 FEB** Death toll passes 25,000 in total with more than 3,500 dead in Syria; Hundreds of thousands homeless in middle of winter
- 14 FEB** 1st UN aid convoy entered north-west Syria from Turkey through the newly re-opened Bab al-Salam Crossing
- 18 FEB** Death toll surpasses 46,000 in total
- 20 FEB** Earthquake with 6.3 Magnitude hit Turkey and Syria; epicenter town of Uzunbag in Turkey's Hatay Province
- 25 FEB** Death toll: 50,000 in total; more than 5,900 in Syria, 4,500 of these in north-west Syria
- 27 FEB** More than 10,000 aftershocks in the three weeks following the main earthquake
- 08 MAR** 53,227 dead in total, including 7,259 in Syria. Estimated 500,000 people have been displaced across Syria
- 31 MAR** In total 1,202 UN-trucks carrying humanitarian aid supplies entered Syria after the earthquake
- 19 APR** Official death toll rises to 59,259 in total. This includes 8,476 dead in Syria

3.3 SCALE OF DESTRUCTION IN AFRIN CANTON

As pointed out in a previous section of this report, the Afrin canton is subject to a wide range of transformations, including processes that can be characterized as coercive demographic change, starting after the Turkish invasion in 2018.

Meanwhile, many IDPs from former opposition-held areas, like rural Damascus, Hama or Homs, were forcibly displaced to the city of Jinderes. Coming from a population of about 14,000 inhabitants, as per Syria's census in 2004, the population of Jinderes increased steeply to 115,000 in 2022 according to local council estimates, which means a rise of about 820%.

Research conducted by the UN, published five days after the earthquake hit the area, identified 228 damaged buildings and another 318 potentially damaged in the city of Jinderes. According to the "Housing, Land and Property Rights" Department of the Syria Report-Project, these figures are estimated to be too low, since the numbers the Local Jinderes Council published were



United Nations Satellite Centre (UNOSAT) - 7 bis Avenue de la Paix, CH-1202 Geneva 2, Switzerland - T: +41 22 917 4720 (UNOSAT Operations) - Hotline 24/7 : +41 75 411 4998 - unosat@unitar.org - www.unitar.org/unosat

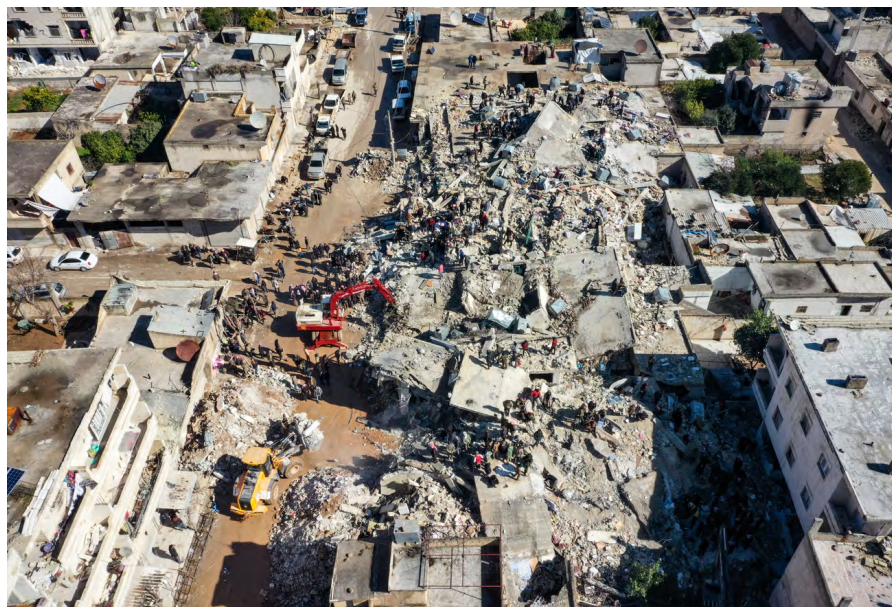
www.unitar.org/unosat

even higher, stating that 257 buildings fully collapsed and 1,100 partially collapsed or were seriously damaged. The report qualified Jinderes as an “uninhabitable disaster zone” and, with regard to the building structure in the fast growing urban environment, stated:²⁹

“The sheer number of people who died beneath hundreds of partially and fully destroyed homes indicates serious construction issues and a lack of even minimal earthquake safety standards.” **Syria Report-Project**

The report claims that safety standards for construction in Jinderes were ignored. It also states that especially in the period of time after the Turkish occupation in 2018, unlicensed multi-story housings were erected, mostly under supervision and with the support of local contractors who are experienced in construction works but lack formal qualifications and know-how regarding safety measures and standards. The report outlines that although all parts of Jinderes were affected by the earthquake, the destruction was centered in the informal neighborhoods, built after 2018 and characterized by multi-story-residential buildings.

The engineer Fehmi Ebdo, who surveyed the buildings in the cities of Jinderes and Afrin, told Rudaw, a media outlet based in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), that 90% of Jinderes had been destroyed or seriously damaged and over 1,000 victims of the earthquake had been counted. Moreover, the engineer stated that he had examined 100 buildings in the city of Afrin and found all of them damaged.³⁰



City of Jinderes, Afrin canton, February 2023

Although satellite imagery analysis provided by the United Nations Satellite Center (UNOSAT)³¹ does not confirm the extent of the damaged buildings in

29 <https://rb.gy/e0s3s> (<https://syria-report.com>)

30 <https://www.rudaw.net/kurmanci/kurdistan/1302202326>

31 <https://unosat.org/>

Afrin City,³² it does show damaged structures clustered around the cities of Afrin, Rajo, Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus as well as the town of Aykadah. While the first two cities mentioned, alongside with Jinderes, are located in Afrin canton, the latter ones are not part of it, but sit in the 'Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle', which is also under the control of the SNA following Turkey's 2016 military operation in the area.³³

The Global Cluster Shelter (GCS)³⁴ concludes in a March 8th report that, "[t]he district with the highest number of deaths and injuries is Halim, followed by Afrin and Jebel Saman. [...] Structural damage is particularly severe in Idlib and Afrin district in Aleppo."³⁵

3.4 IMPACTS ON SHEHBA

Although Shehba canton was situated in the heavily earthquake-shaken area (see shakemap on page 11), the direct destructive effects on it were not as far reaching as in Afrin canton. While parts of Afrin canton are urban areas, which contain significant urban centers like Jinderes and Afrin city, Shehba canton is mostly rural, within which hardly any multi-story buildings can be found and with agriculture as its key sector.

The NES-based media outlet North Press Agency, citing an official of the planning office of the AANES, reported that 340 houses were damaged and at least 40 houses left uninhabitable in Shehba after the earthquake.³⁶ About two weeks later, on February 28th, the Shehba canton Council published the figure of about 1,000 damaged and uninhabitable houses as well as three heavily damaged school buildings, which left thousands of students lacking school lessons,³⁷ but due to the divergent compositions of architecture and living spaces no casualties directly linked to the disaster were reported.

Moreover, the dire conditions caused by the economic siege of the canton deteriorated even further. The administration faced the vast challenge of sheltering and taking care of 2,205 families from Aleppo's AANES neighborhoods who left towards Shehba as their homes were uninhabitable, or they feared imminent collapse of their buildings.³⁸

32 Which could be due to not having access to comprehensive data.

33 <https://rb.gy/5dew1> (<https://experience.arcgis.com>)

34 The GSC is an inter-agency coordination mechanism established to support humanitarian assistance agencies and local authorities as well as national governments and is co-chaired by IFRC and UNHCR.

35 <https://rb.gy/7x13z> (<https://sheltercluster.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com>)

36 <https://npasyria.com/en/93004/>

37 <https://rb.gy/8q5ac> (<https://www.facebook.com>)

38 <https://rb.gy/59tym> (<https://kongra-star.org>)

Melek Hussein, the co-chair of the Council of the Shehba canton, told RIC that the embargo, which is imposed on the region by GoS, causes comprehensive difficulties to the administration to securely provide basic materials and meet fundamental needs. According to Hussein, these difficulties have continued and been exacerbated “until now at all levels, whether food, medicine or fuel, especially at the current stage with a complete lack of fuel, which will lead to cutting off the electricity and stopping the water wells and tractors that deliver water to the people”.³⁹ Due to the lack of fuel in the region under the embargo, the daily working hours of the electricity generators were reduced from four hours to just two hours and finally on April 27th there was a total cut of electricity, as reported by RIC at the time.⁴⁰

Despite the influx of IDPs caused by the earthquake, the embargo remained largely untouched. Fee Baumann, a member of the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) coordination staff who was on the ground in Shehba and Aleppo, told RIC that no humanitarian assistance had arrived in the canton, except local initiatives and a single humanitarian aid convoy that she herself was part of, until March 4th when she left the region.⁴¹ Furthermore, Melek Hussein confirmed to RIC on April 8th that “no international aid or aid provided by the regional countries reached the Shehba canton”⁴² except the convoy of KRC, AANES and Sulaymaniyah, of which Fee Baumann was a part.

This blockade of basic goods in the aftermath of the earthquake was not only restricted to Shehba but also to the two Aleppo neighborhoods that are dealt with in this report.

3.5 SCALE OF DESTRUCTION IN ALEPPO NEIGHBORHOODS SHEIKH MAQSUD AND ASHRAFIYAH

Despite the aforementioned dense urban environment with an estimated population of about 100,000, and an estimated total of 22,000 buildings, including a large quantity of multi-story residential buildings, according to a statement of the neighborhood council, no building collapsed entirely from the earthquake and only six inhabitants lost their lives in addition to about 100 injured.⁴³

The building structures in Aleppo are dilapidated, due to being built up in large numbers informally and due to several years of war. After the earthquake it was reported that about 150 buildings were in danger of collapsing, although

39 Melek Hussein told RIC in an Interview, conducted on April 8th, 2023

40 <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1652288699357360128>

41 Fee Baumann told RIC in an Interview, conducted on March 15th, 2023

42 Melek Hussein told RIC in an Interview, conducted on April 8th, 2023

43 <https://npasyria.com/en/93004/>

the report stressed that the process of assessment still was ongoing when the report was published.⁴⁴

As KRC coordinator Fee Baumann told RIC, and as the visual evidence she provided confirmed, three weeks after the earthquake many people were still living in tents near their apartments because they feared that the damaged buildings would collapse. According to local media, up to 10,000 residents put up tents or temporary accommodation structures. Furthermore about 3,000 families left for Shehba canton to find shelter. Definite numbers are hard to find, however. One reason for this is that in the first weeks after the earthquake, many families were commuting back and forth between the Aleppo neighborhoods and Shehba with an uncertain final destination, as Baumann stated. On February 28th, more than 3 weeks after the earthquake,



Sheikh Maqsoud (above), Ashrafiyah (right), February 26th, 2023. Foto by KRC



the Shehba canton Council said that about 20,000 people from Aleppo were heading to Shehba.⁴⁵

According to local media, the Shehba Council published the required amounts of aid supplies as follows: “50,000 food parcels, 25,000 medical kits and blankets for 50,000 people, in addition to equipment for the Civil Defense teams, which consist of 30 people, who do not have the necessary machinery”.⁴⁶

In the following sections this report discusses case studies and central actors of the emergency response in order to give understanding of the situation on the ground after the earthquake.

44 <https://npasyria.com/en/93004/>

45 <https://rb.gy/dmphg> (<https://www.facebook.com>)

46 <https://npasyria.com/en/93004/>

4. ACCESS DENIED: OBSTRUCTING AND BLOCKING HUMANITARIAN AID

As pointed out in chapter 2, the inhabitants of the Afrin region, particularly the remaining native Kurdish and Yezidi population, are subject to an extended and systematic abuse of human rights as well a deteriorating economic situation and therefore can be characterized as a highly vulnerable population, which were dependent on humanitarian aid even before the earthquake. This latter point is the case for many other parts of Syria too. Before the earthquake hit on February 6th UNICEF stated:⁴⁷

“Syria remains a complex humanitarian and protection emergency characterized by over 10 years of ongoing hostilities and their long-term consequences including widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, explosive ordnance contamination and the largest number of internally displaced people in the world. In 2022, 14.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.2 million from 2021.” **UNICEF**

4.1 THE ONLY GATEWAY: BAB AL-HAWA BORDER CROSSING

The only border crossing through which humanitarian assistance was allowed to enter non-government-held areas of Syria before the February 6th earthquake was the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in the north-west of Syria, connecting Turkey’s Antakya and Syria’s Idlib regions. The latter is controlled by al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In 2020 the UN Security Council curtailed the use of Bab al-Salam, al-Yarubiyah and al-Ramtha border crossing points by adopting Resolution 2533, leaving Bab al-Hawa as the only remaining gateway for providing humanitarian assistance by the United Nations into Syrian territory. Since then the extended use of Bab al-Hawa has to be renewed every six months by the United Nations Security Council.

4.2 THE UN’S FATAL RESPONSE

Shortly after the devastating earthquake hit the region in the very early morning on February 6th, the news broke that Bab al-Hawa border crossing was closed.⁴⁸ While the UN stated that due to damages caused by the

47 <https://rb.gy/gq9i0> (<https://www.unicef.org>)

48 <https://rb.gy/ef51e> (<https://english.enabbaladi.net>)

earthquake itself, Bab al-Hawa crossing was inaccessible, Mazen Alloush, head of media relations for the Bab al-Hawa border crossing told Al Jazeera “Every half hour or so we see cars carrying the bodies of Syrian people who died in the earthquake in Turkey crossing the border into Syria [...] So how can the roads be closed for aid but open for funeral convoys?”⁴⁹

While the Bab al-Hawa border crossing authorities emphasized their doubts about the UN’s public justification, adding to the Al-Monitor media outlet that “[we] are ready to coordinate with any party for the entry of assistance, but it all depends on whether the Turkish side will allow this aid to enter”,⁵⁰ the UN maintained their statement that this significant delay of humanitarian assistance, which lasted until February 9th, was due to road damage, and to damage and casualties which occurred in the UN Transshipment Hub based in Turkish Reyhanlı, some 7km away from Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) official Jens Laerke told RIC that the road damage mentioned that stopped the UN aid was not situated between the UN Transshipment Hub in Turkey’s Reyhanlı and the Bab al-Hawa crossing point, but between the origins of the cargo – Turkey’s Gaziantep and Mersin – and the UN Transshipment Hub in Reyhanlı.⁵¹

The Situational Update of the Logistics Cluster, however, an institution that monitors gateways and access points of humanitarian aid and consists of several UN Agencies and NGOs, referred to by Jens Laerke, dated 7 – 10 February 2023 states: “In Türkiye: crossing in Bab al Hawa (UN transshipment hub) resumed on 9 February after being closed since 6 February with a total of 21 IOM trucks heading to Northwest Syria on 9 and 10 February.”⁵²

While the statements regarding the operational status of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing point are still contradictory, it seems to be most likely that the UN Transshipment Hub itself was only partially functional as Jens Laerke told RIC.⁵³

49 <https://rb.gy/17r0r> (<http://aljazeera.com>)

50 <https://rb.gy/4aifz> (www.al-monitor.com)

51 UN OCHA official Jens Laerke told RIC on March 16th, 2023

52 <https://rb.gy/5ahv3> (<https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com>)

53 Jens Laerke told RIC on March 16th, 2023

“

“Some 17 international and national staff on average were working at the UN Transshipment Hub. They worked at the Hub in Reyhanli, but had accommodation in Antakya. Many of the colleagues were in Antakya on the night of the earthquakes. As you know, Antakya was extremely damaged. Four UN staff passed away including the Manager of the UN Transshipment Hub. A number of other staff were injured.”

Jens Laerke, UN OCHA official

”

The statements made by the UN indicate that logistical difficulties rather than political disputes were the reasons for the aid supplies being delayed for at least three days. However, the Physical Access Constraint maps of the Logistic Cluster show that the roads leading from Gaziantep (the origin of the cargo, according to Jens Laerke) to the Bab al-Salam border crossing remained intact⁵⁴ but that Bab al-Salam was not used, despite it being situated much closer to Gaziantep than the Bab al-Hawa crossing (about only 70km compared with the Bab al-Hawa crossing, located about 200km away from Turkey’s Gaziantep; see map on page 24).

The reason why the Bab al-Salam crossing point was not used can be seen in the restricted legal framework in which the UN was operating. The spokesperson of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Stéphane Dujarric, claimed that it is the “long standing position from the secretary that, in order to deliver humanitarian aid across an international border, we need either the consent of the government or [...] a binding Security Council Resolution”.⁵⁵

On the other hand, international rights lawyers and experts insist on the fact that the 1949 Geneva Convention, to which Syria is a signatory, explicitly provides the possibility to deliver cross-border aid in a war environment to the parties involved in the conflict:⁵⁶

“

“An impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict.” **Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949**

”

A BBC Arabic documentary covering the issue of why the UN aid was delayed for so long, draws the conclusion that this lateness was caused by the incapability of the institution to act outside its inherited framework of

54 <https://rb.gy/6xntw> (<https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com>)

55 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f79sxx> , 26:00 min

56 <https://rb.gy/yrx07> (<https://un.org>)

operations, and adjust to the possibilities that are opened up by international law in an urgent need of emergency response within a confusing political constellation.⁵⁷

However, whether the stoppage of the emergency transport was due to damage caused by the earthquake itself, the denial of aid convoys to enter by the Turkish government, or the inflexibility caused by the operational framework of the UN itself, it is clear that the restrictions of open border crossings for humanitarian relief assistance to a single crossing, exacerbated the situation after the earthquake. Help could not enter or was even actively prevented from getting into the affected areas. As the first 72 hours after the disaster are crucial for deploying search and rescue operations,⁵⁸ the race against time was lost.

4.3 KURDISH RED CRESCENT CONVOY

Although there were actors other than the UN trying to deliver aid into affected areas, like the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC), coming from different directions, they faced similar obstacles. Coming from the city of Qamishlo, a KRC convoy consisting of several trucks carrying tents, mattresses, blankets, some diesel for heating and winter clothing as well as a medical team, tried to reach Shehba and the two Aleppo neighborhoods, Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyah.



KRC staff waiting at the al-Tayha crossing to get access, February 13th, 2023

Fee Baumann, a coordinator of the KRC who was with the convoy, told RIC that it was halted for 10 days by the GoS at the Al-Tayha checkpoint, connecting the areas controlled by the GoS with the AANES-governed region. According to Baumann, the GoS demanded that at least 50% of the aid be handed over to them, including one ambulance, in exchange for getting access to the affected areas of Shehba and Aleppo neighborhoods of Sheikh Masqoud and Ashrafiyah.⁵⁹

57 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f79sxx>

58 <https://www.unocha.org/story/five-essentials-first-72-hours-disaster-response>

59 Fee Baumann told RIC on March 15th, 2023

The KRC convoy remained in place for 10 days, starting on February 11th, at the checkpoint, not willing to give such an amount of humanitarian relief supplies to the GoS, doubting that the GoS would bring that supplies into the AANES-governed areas. KRC pressured the international community to intervene. On February 21st, more than two weeks after the earthquake, the convoy was able to continue its humanitarian mission and delivered the humanitarian assistance to Shehba and the mentioned Aleppo neighborhoods.

4.4 AANES CONVOYS

About four hours after the earthquake, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), a political body officially in charge of the Turkish-occupied territories in NES, declared Northern Syria a disaster area. In its statement the SIG appealed to “all international and humanitarian organizations to provide urgent assistance to the areas affected by the disaster”.⁶⁰

On February 7th the co-chair of the Executive Council of AANES, Abd Hamed al-Mehbash, made a statement announcing that “[w]e are ready to send a medical convoy, medicines, doctors and vehicles if required”. He added that the AANES “is preparing a convoy of trucks carrying oil derivatives and other relief materials to be sent to the areas affected by the earthquake.”⁶¹

Following this announcement, on February 8th a convoy of fuel trucks and relief supplies was sent by the AANES to the affected areas, starting from the city of Manbij and traveling to the the Umm al-Julud checkpoint, which links the AANES governed territory to the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, with its final destination intended to be the affected Afrin canton.⁶²

A source on the ground told the human rights organization Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) that the convoy consisted of 30 Trucks carrying fuel, and three trucks “loaded with relief items, blankets and winter clothes”, reaching Umm al-Julud at 11 a.m. on February 9th.⁶³

According to journalists on the ground, the AANES was in contact with the White Helmets in order to hand over the aid supplies to them. The White Helmets (also called Syrian Civil Defence) is a volunteer staffed organization, founded in 2014 and operating in parts of Turkish-occupied areas of north-west Syria as well as in HTS-controlled Idlib. As they were already on the

60 <https://twitter.com/syriagovernment/status/1622501811583074304>

61 <https://aanegov.org/?p=2311>

62 https://twitter.com/aanes_official/status/162334825594483507
<https://npasyria.com/en/92553/>

63 <https://rb.gy/b8l5a> (<https://stj-sy.org>)

ground in the SNA- and HTS-controlled areas, and due to the lack of other search and rescue teams in the areas, the White Helmets conducted the vast majority of the search and rescue missions in Afrin canton and in Idlib.⁶⁴ Furthermore the source reported to STJ that the US-administration was also involved and was negotiating in the background to guarantee the access of the desperately needed assistance.⁶⁵

CROSSING POINTS, NORTH-WESTERN SYRIA



This attempt to send humanitarian assistance to the affected areas was prevented, however. Even as no other aid was reaching the SIG controlled territory (Afrin canton) until 9th February, and the death toll was constantly rising, the head of the SIG, Mustafa Abdurrahman, rejected the AANES' assistance, saying that receiving aid "from the areas controlled by the SDF militia" cannot be accepted.⁶⁶

While this first AANES humanitarian Aid convoy was stuck at the Umm al-Julud crossing checkpoint and rejected by the SIG, Abd Hamed al-Mehbash, co-chair of the Executive Council of AANES, made a call for "cooperation on humanitarian assistance and [to] put political disagreements aside."⁶⁷ Despite the ongoing denial of access, a second AANES-initiated convoy departed from Manbij on February 10th heading to the al-Tayha crossing point which connects AANES and GoS territories. This time the destination was Shehba canton and Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods. AANES at the same time reached out to Russia and the US to guarantee passage. Despite these efforts, on February 11th, the AANES officially announced that both convoys were being prevented from entering the earthquake-hit areas.⁶⁸

64 The White Helmets told RIC on May 29th

65 <https://rb.gy/b8l5a> (<https://stj-sy.org>)

66 <https://twitter.com/STMAbdurrahman/status/1623696583438094336>

67 <https://npasyria.com/en/92553/>

68 <https://rb.gy/qixax> (<https://stj-sy.org>)

The AANES-humanitarian aid convoy stuck in Umm al-Julud, trying to deliver aid to Afrin, was reported to be withdrawn by the AANES on February 16th due to the constant refusal of the Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector SNA-faction, which controlled the crossing point, and SIG to let any assistance provided by the AANES to enter.⁶⁹ The report by Syrians for Truth and Justice states that the decision to not let the convoy in was handed down to the occupation authorities by Turkish state authorities. Meanwhile, local media reported that SNA fighters pushed their commanders to let the humanitarian aid pass through due to the fact that they had family members still under the debris.⁷⁰

In contrast to the complete rejection by the Turkish occupation authorities of humanitarian assistance provided by the AANES, the convoy heading towards the Shehba canton and Aleppo neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah was reported to gain access to the GoS-governed transit area on February 15th in exchange for 40 of the total 100 fuel trucks.⁷¹

4.5 BARZANI CHARITY FOUNDATION CONVOY

One of the first humanitarian assistance convoys delivering humanitarian aid to the earthquake-affected Turkish-occupied territories of NES was the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF) Convoy. It entered in the afternoon of February 10th, an estimated 109 hours after the disaster hit the region. The convoy passed through Bab al-Salama crossing, which connects southern Turkey with the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle-area (which is controlled by the SNA, Turkey's proxy force). 12 trucks loaded with relief materials entered the city of Azaz, having departed from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). According to local sources, the convoy was held for 2 days at the border before it was permitted to enter. It reached Afrin late in the evening of February 10th.⁷²



BCF staff posing with Suleiman Shah Division commander Muhammad al-Jassem, also known as "Abu Amsha" (in camouflage, upper row), February 2023

69 https://twitter.com/alan_maaesh/status/1626147176509325312

70 <https://npasyria.com/en/93397/>

71 <https://npasyria.com/en/93397/>

72 <https://twitter.com/BarzaniCF/status/1624154171585830912>
<https://twitter.com/STMAbdurrahman/status/1624084361283874821/photo/1>

The video footage published by the BCF itself showed 9 trucks heading to Afrin. However, the KRI-based Rudaw News confirmed that 12 trucks entered via Bab al-Salama border crossing. According to its own statement, the trucks carried about “50 tons of food, medicine, and essential items”.⁷³

A few days after it was allowed to enter the region by the SIG, photos circulated on social media networks showed staff of the BCF posing together with Muhammad al-Jassem, popularly known as Abu Amsha, commander of the Suleiman Shah Division SNA faction. In late 2021 and early 2022, popular protests occurred in the Jinderes subdistrict of the Afrin Canton. The protests called for Abu Amsha to be held accountable for his involvement in various crimes including torture, murder, rape, and arms trafficking, as RIC documented in the Q1 & Q2 2022 Occupation Report.⁷⁴

4.6 SULAYMANIYAH CONVOY

Beyond the UN, governments, and emergency NGOs help given to affected areas, civil society grassroots organizations sprung up to aid earthquake victims.



Trucks of the Sulaymaniyah convoy waiting at al-Tayha crossing, February 2023

On 7th February the municipality of Sulaymaniyah in the KRI launched a campaign, calling on the public to participate in collecting aid supplies “with the aim of helping earthquake victims in Turkey, Syria and Iran”, Awat Muhammad, Mayor of Sulaymaniyah stated to local media.

The AANES confirmed that it had received 25 trucks loaded with humanitarian aid supplies provided by the people of Sulaymaniyah. It said it attempted to transit the goods to the al-Tayha crossing.⁷⁵

73 <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/11022023>

74 <https://rb.gy/4tce3> (<https://rojvainformationcenter.com>)

75 <https://aanegov.org/ar/?p=2755>

Despite originating from the KRI, and not being linked to the AANES, these trucks were also prevented from passing through the checkpoint. Six days after arriving at the al-Tayha crossing checkpoint AANES reported that the convoy still had not passed. According to local media however, part of the convoy was allowed to pass on to the Shehba canton. Photos showed wheelchairs being distributed among the local population in Shehba, declared as being part of the Sulaymaniyah Convoy Campaign.⁷⁶

4.7 FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

On February 14th UN aid entered Syria from Turkey via the newly reopened border crossing of Bab al-Salam, located about 60km north of Aleppo near the city of Azaz (city of Kilis on the Turkish side). Up until that point, the UN had delivered, according to its own information, more than 50 trucks carrying humanitarian aid cargo through the Bab al-Hawa crossing point.⁷⁷ A third crossing point - Bab al-Rai - was also opened for a stated three month period. The latter is situated about 50km east of Bab al-Salam crossing point. Both Bab al-Rai and Bab al-Salam gateways are located in the SNA-controlled Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area.

Eight days after the earthquake, the inflow of aid started to increase due to the opening of the two extra border crossings. As an enumeration published by the SIG shows, up to February 15th, 139 trucks as well as five ambulances were registered coming from Turkey into the affected areas of NES, passing through Bab al-Salam.⁷⁸

These figures do not match with the numbers provided by Logistic Cluster mentioned above as it only records humanitarian assistance delivery by UN agencies, but the Logistic Cluster Situation Update #4 from March 2nd confirms an increasing influx of aid supplies, although three weeks after the earthquake hit, with the vast majority of UN-trucks carrying humanitarian assistance still passing through Bab al-Hawa crossing.⁷⁹

Instances of obstructing and blocking humanitarian aid complexified however, as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) prevented a KRC-convoy from crossing the border between the KRI and NES (the Semalka-Faysh Khabour crossing) as the KRC announced on February 22th on its website:⁸⁰

76 <https://rb.gy/gcb5d> (<https://hawarnews.com>)

77 <https://rb.gy/2tpg1> (<https://reuters.com>)

78 <https://twitter.com/syriagovernment/status/1626556735086379010>

79 <https://rb.gy/s7ic8> (<https://logcluster.org>)

80 <https://hskurd.org/en/2023/02/>

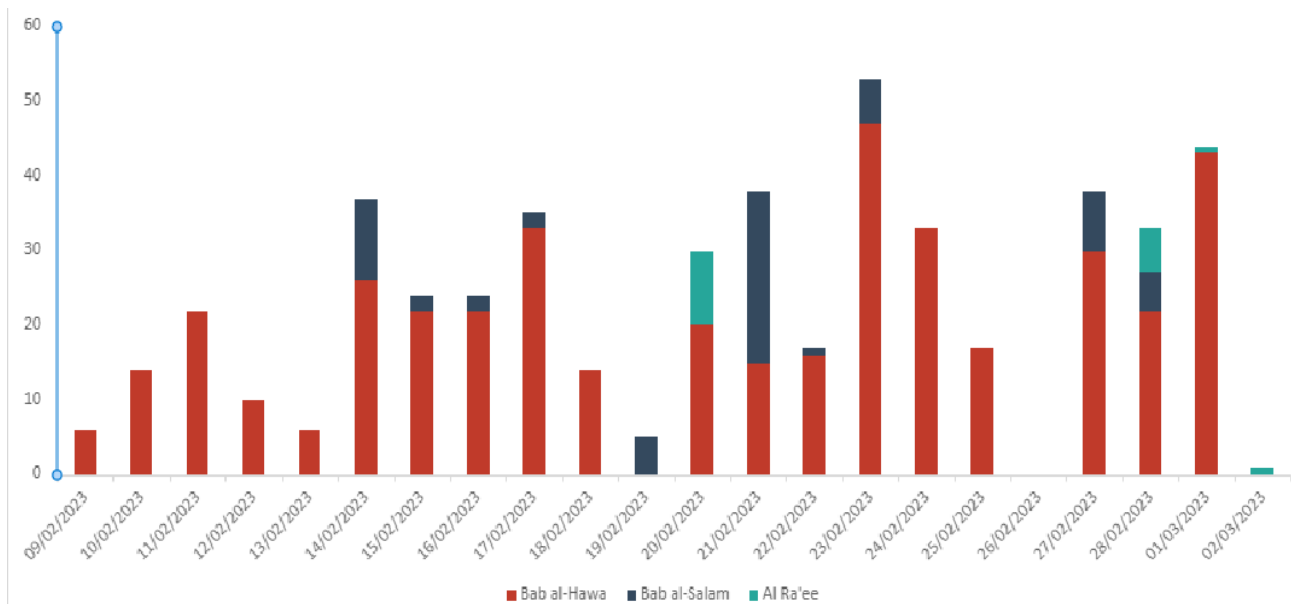


“Unfortunately, without knowing the reasons, we face great obstacles, the latest of which was yesterday (21-2-2023), when our humanitarian aid convoy was denied entry by the Faysh Khabour crossing and its affiliated authorities” **KRC official**



KRC coordinator Fee Baumann, who was herself accompanying the KRC-convoy to Shehba and Aleppo, told RIC she had not seen any other external additional aid arriving in the regions nor could anyone she spoke to in the IDP camps in Shehba or in one of the two Aleppo neighborhoods confirm it, aside from the de-facto joint KRC-ANNES convoys, which were held for over 10 days at the al-Tayha crossing. This situation continued until at least March 4th, the day Fee Baumann herself left Shehba and returned to Qamishlo, from where the KRC convoy had initially left.⁸¹

NUMBER OF UN HUMANITARIAN AID TRUCKS



<https://logcluster.org>

Furthermore, the AANES officially stated on March 14th, 36 days after the earthquake, that, after seven days of waiting at the al-Tayha crossing, another humanitarian aid convoy, meant for the affected people in the Shehba region and initiated by the AANES, was withdrawn. This was due to no recognizable change of the position of GoS and Bashar al-Assad, rejecting the entry of the aid into the GoS controlled area. The AANES statement added that the administration will continue to make efforts to deliver aid into the affected areas.⁸²

81 Fee Baumann told RIC on March 15th, 2023

82 https://twitter.com/aanes_official/status/1635574771378208770

According to UN sources, Idlib's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an authoritarian islamist organization, successor of the former al-Nusra Front, and its political authority entity, the so-called Salvation Government, ended up being another protagonist in the game of aid blocking and obstruction. On February 12th, Reuters Press Agency quoted an unnamed UN official as well as an unnamed HTS source confirming that HTS would not "allow the [Syrian] regime to take advantage of the situation to show they are helping", thus would not accept aid from the Syrian government for the people of Idlib.⁸³

83 <https://rb.gy/9d09p> (<https://reuters.com>)

5. THEFT AND SEIZING AID SUPPLIES IN AFRIN

In a situation of undersupply of humanitarian assistance, the population in the SNA-controlled areas of Syria also saw the continuation of instances of rights violations and crime. As local media stated:⁸⁴

“Nearly three weeks since the deadly Feb. 6 earthquake, hardly a day has passed without new allegations of crimes committed by the ruling Turkish-backed armed factions of Afrin, a historically Kurdish region in northwest Syria. The reported crimes – which include stealing humanitarian aid and forcefully displacing residents – are nothing new. Nor is the fact that violations appear to unduly target Kurds.”
North Press Agency

Specific accusations were made towards the Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia (for stealing and looting from the damaged and therefore abandoned houses) and the Faylaq al-Sham militia (for seizing humanitarian aid supplies while deployed at the checkpoints around the city of Afrin). Those thefts and seizures were carried out “on a daily basis” as per local media.⁸⁵ These allegations were backed up by the Afrin Human Rights Organization, to which RIC reached out for confirmation.⁸⁶ In the city of Jinderes, the second biggest in the Afrin Canton, reports surfaced of SNA militias obstructing the rescue operations by preventing civil volunteers from approaching the damaged buildings. It was suggested that the intention behind this behavior was to keep the damaged buildings free for looting.

The assumption that these thefts had systematic quality is backed by reports stating that in Jinderes city the different militias divided the areas of collapsed buildings in different sectors to stake their claims. This procedure was reportedly applied to avoid disputes about the loot and prevent possible military confrontations between militias.⁸⁷

Regarding the systematic character of the SNA's stealing and looting in the disaster area after the earthquake, the Afrin Human Rights Organization told RIC: “Hundreds of such cases have been documented”.⁸⁸

84 <https://npasyria.com/en/93805/>

85 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26229>

86 See the organizations FB-page:
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100055799197176>

87 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26306>

88 Afrin Human Rights Organization told Ric on May 7th, 2023

Alongside this, various testimonies emerged accusing several SNA militias, as well as HTS, of debating whether to seize humanitarian aid supplies directly or to impose levies on aid to be delivered into the affected areas. An STJ report in April 2023 featured an interview with a “high-ranking officer from HTS”, confirming the partial seizure of aid supplies by HTS and by SNA-militias. The report stated, “in Jindires, the HTS received aid shares from the organizations operating in the region like the rest of the SNA factions. The HTS took 25% of the relief assistance.”⁸⁹

Furthermore it was reported that the Barzani Charity Foundation-Convoy had to pay a levy of 1,000 USD for each truck entering the affected region via the Bab al-Salam border crossing,⁹⁰ which is, according to RIC-data, under the control of the SNA’s Jabha al-Shamiyah.

89 <https://rb.gy/oa9tr> (<https://stj-sy.org>)

90 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26306>

6. ONGOING BOMBING AND SHELLING IN SHEHBA AND BEYOND

On February 7th, just the day after the devastating earthquake and the arrival of several thousand recently displaced people coming from the neighborhoods of Aleppo, Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA continued to shell the outskirts of Shehba region, local media reported.⁹¹ According to the report, the attack did not cause any casualties, but damaged several civilian houses. Tel Rifaat (Shehba) was hit by Turkish shelling on February 16th, killing two civilians: Sheikh Taha Abdel Fattah (50), and Youssef Obeid (70).⁹²

Turkish attacks on NES as a whole continued in the aftermath of the earthquake. The SDF declared that 24 instances of shelling had been recorded from February 6th to the end of the month, which “killed four civilians and injured three others.”⁹³

Furthermore RIC recorded two Turkish drone strikes in this period. First, on February 12th near Kobane and second, on February 22nd on the main road between Qamishlo and Tirbespi cities. Both drone strikes hit cars and together killed three men, two of whom were civilians.⁹⁴ Berivan Khaled, the co-chair of the Executive Council of the AANES requested that the international community note and condemn the Turkish attacks.⁹⁵ Even in light of the 60,000+ casualties in Turkey and Syria, the Turkish government continued its military actions in NES like before.

On February 24th, a car bomb exploded in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo killing Hamza Kobane, a member of the Sheikh Maqsoud General Council Economy Committee. According to local sources, three other civilians were injured. In the statement, released shortly after, the General Council declared that Hamza Kobane was “targeted by a car bomb while he was working hard day and night in order to serve and secure the necessary needs of the people under these difficult circumstances [the earthquake].”⁹⁶ Although the General Council accused the Turkish intelligence service MIT of having conducted the attack, at the time of writing the investigation is still ongoing.

91 <https://npasyria.com/en/92242/>

92 <https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1626902871705890817>

93 <https://rb.gy/e6na1> (<https://sdf-press.com>) for further information about the Turkish shelling of Shehba in 2022, see RIC’s Sheha Report

94 According to RIC’s own database; see also <https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1628737951348801543>

95 https://twitter.com/xalid_berivan/status/1628705528263200768

96 <https://rb.gy/863ow> (<https://hawarnews.com>)

CONCLUSIONS

No sufficient amount of humanitarian aid reached the affected areas in northern Syria within the first 72 hours after the earthquake. There was no additional external assistance for the search and rescue operations in this critical time frame. There were no search and rescue teams with dogs and technical equipment which would have allowed to locate people still alive under the rubble. The White Helmets told RIC that they were the only emergency response organization on the ground in that critical first 72 hours that was “equipped with the necessary training and capabilities to conduct rescue operations of this magnitude” and added, “we received no professional or organized support from the international community for search and rescue operations.”⁹⁷

Furthermore the White Helmets stressed the fact that they did have some heavy machinery during the earthquake response, but that “it wasn’t absolutely not enough to deal with the scale of an earthquake disaster at the time.”⁹⁸ There were no additional heavy machines like excavators brought into the region. In addition, the lack of fuel posed “a major issue”, particularly in the city of Jinderes as the few heavy machines that were available for the rescue missions were fuel hungry.

It took the international community 8.5 days to bargain successfully with the GoS to permit the opening of more border crossings than just Bab al-Hawa. Although the situation on the ground is complex due to the fact that Turkish-affiliated SNA militias are in control of the other two border crossings, Bab al-Salama and Bab al-Rai, the instance of the BCF-convoy, which entered the Bab al-Salam crossing on February 10th, four days before the first UN-convoy passed through that gateway, gives evidence to the fact that humanitarian assistance could have been delivered earlier than February 14th via Bab al-Salama border crossing.

That the UN took so long to respond to the emergency situation caused by the earthquake in north-western Syria is damning. RIC finds two intertwined reasons for the UN’s fatal response: On the one hand the impact of the earthquake itself on the UN Transshipment Hub in Turkey’s Reyhanlı, which according to UN officials caused damage and even casualties among the UN staff, and on the other hand the very limited interpretation of the legal framework the UN restricted itself to, which does not allow it to offer assistance to non-state

97 The White Helmets told RIC on May 29th, 2023

98 The White Helmets told RIC on May 29th, 2023

actors, leading to the result that the UN was “completely paralyzed”⁹⁹ after the disaster struck.

Although the chart on page 28 shows that both the border crossings opened up on February 14th were only marginally involved in the UN logistic response, the list published by the SIG¹⁰⁰ indicates a significant number of trucks using the Bab al-Salama crossing. While the supply situation improved to a certain extent, due to the re-opened gateways setting in motion humanitarian assistance by the UN and NGOs, it nevertheless continued to stay at a very low level.

The agreement to open the extra border crossing was restricted to only three months, ending on May 14th.¹⁰¹ The UN engaged in self-restriction of its legal operating framework, thus is in danger of being again incapacitated in any potential future emergency situation.

As already mentioned, the earthquake hit an area inhabited by an extremely vulnerable population due to the recent episode of war in the region combined with the effects of the Turkish occupation in the case of the Afrin canton, and the situation of siege and ongoing military attacks in the Shehba canton.

In this scenario, the GoS acted against international humanitarian emergency standards and therefore violated humanitarian rights by obstructing the aid supplies. Meanwhile, the UN, the USA and Russia were not capable of, or were unwilling to, mediate successfully and rapidly between the parties involved. This came at the expense of the earthquake-affected people.

A similar but even more rigid approach towards the urgently needed aid supplies was conducted by the de facto authorities of the SNA and its political umbrella, the SIG, in the Turkish occupied Afrin canton as the AANES convoy was forced to withdraw after being denied access to the affected areas. The observation that the international community failed to mediate access to the territory also applies here.

That there was an apparent lack of political will to act in accordance with humanitarian principles and international accountability in a crucial time

99 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f79sxx> min 00:50

100 <https://twitter.com/syriagovernment/status/1626556735086379010>

101 On May 13th both the additional border crossings were reported to have their permissions extended for use for post-earthquake humanitarian assistance, ending on August 13th. Despite this extension this only postpones the restrictions being further imposed. <https://rb.gy/d2jlk> (<https://aljazeera.com>)

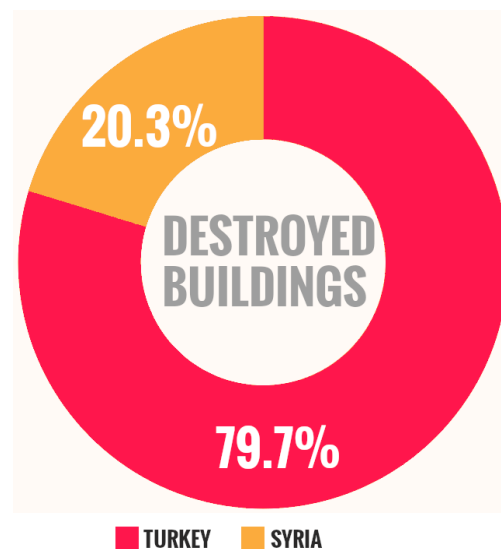
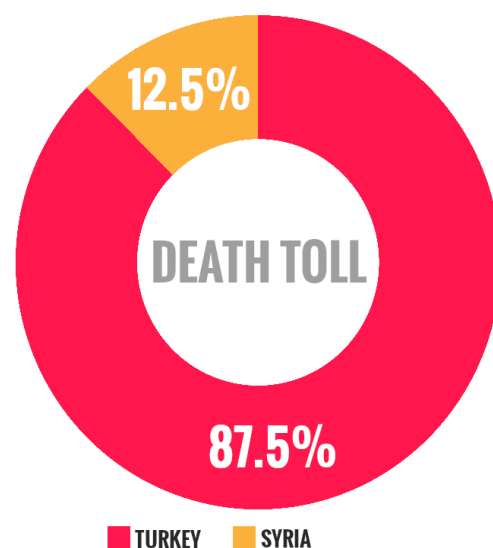
frame, and that the death toll continued to increase over a period of almost two weeks until reaching the final official numbers¹⁰² suggests that more lives could have been saved if the political motivation to do so had been there.

The earthquake hence saw a political disaster intermingled with a natural disaster: a mixture of failures of the international community and the politicization of aid by both the GoS, and the Turkish state and its SNA proxy force. The international community failed because of the hesitant action of the UN. Sufficient aid was not provided within the crucial first 72 hours. The incapability or the unwillingness to mediate the entry of the aid convoys into the GoS area and in the areas occupied by Turkey contributed to the high death toll.

The underlying socio-political environment in the Turkish occupied Afrin canton exacerbated the impacts of the earthquake. Alongside the apathy of the international community, the situation after the earthquake was a continuation of, and in the case of seizing humanitarian aid an extension of, the previous human rights abuses conducted by Turkey and its proxy SNA forces. Indeed, for the enclave of Shehba too, the GoS earthquake response was also a continuation of its previous practices of embargo.

The war-torn infrastructure, especially the multi-story apartment buildings in the dense urban environment of the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah, also exacerbated the impacts of the earthquake. As Fee Baumann told RIC, the future challenge in the Aleppo neighborhoods will be the controlled demolition

IMPACTS COMPARED BY COUNTRY



UN OCHA <https://data.humdata.org/event/turkiye-syria-earthquakes>

102 After February 18th, the official figures for north-west Syria, published by the UN have not increased any further at a significant scale. On the other hand the encompassing death toll of the disaster increased till the end of April to almost 60,000 and is, as has been stated, estimated to be significantly too low.

of the damaged buildings and those which are in danger of collapsing. Therefore heavy machinery is necessary, which is not available in a sufficient quantity. The rebuilding process faces serious obstacles like the shortage of essential materials due to the embargo situation the neighborhoods are exposed to.

In Afrin canton too, there is the risk that the reconstruction endeavors become part of the coercive demographic change efforts which were already in progress in the area.

SUMMARY POST-EARTHQUAKE CHALLENGES

- Assessment of the self restricting interpretation of the legal framework of the UN
- Permanent opening and use of the additional border crossings Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Rai
- Ongoing humanitarian rights abuses by the Turkish-affiliated authorities in Afrin canton and the ongoing military attacks of the Turkish military in the region
- politicization of aid by the GoS and the siege of Shehba canton
- the reconstruction after earthquake damage in danger of being used to ramp up the ongoing coercive demographic engineering process

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