



## **The International Community's Response to The Earthquake in Turkey and Syria, Amid Mounting Pressure**

Written by/Hagar Essam

Edited by/ Mohamed Badawi



**The International Community's Response to The Earthquake in Turkey and  
Syria, Amid Mounting Pressure**

**Egyptian Coalition for Human Rights and Development (ECHRD)**

It is an initiative launched by the Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue (FDHRD) consisting of 500 associations and development organizations in 9 governorates that aims to enhance the human rights situation in Egypt, strengthen partnerships and exchange experiences.

The NGOs participating in the initiative are distributed in 9 governorates: Cairo, Gharbia, Beheira, Alexandria, Beni Suef, Sohag, Luxor, Qena and Aswan.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100090569196942>



**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED-  
2023 ©FDHRD**

At dawn on February 6, 2023, the world woke up to the news of a 7.8-magnitude earthquake, centered in Kahramanmaras, southeast of Turkey. It affected 7 countries, led by Turkey and Syria, causing extensive human damage in addition to large material losses in the infrastructure of the two countries and the disruption of public facilities and services. This major disasters that affected the region was met with varying responses by international community organizations to help both countries. The World Health Organization WHO estimates that the disaster is expected to affect 23 million people, including 1.4 million children, who were already in need of aid due to the civil war and conflicts in Syria. The buildings in the affected cities such as Aleppo, Adlib and Latakia were severely affected. The earthquake caused misery in a region suffering from conflicts for 12 years, and created a health crisis with the slow response of the international community and the restrictions imposed on Syria.

### **Introduction**

The earthquake in both north Syria and southern Turkey caused thousands of disasters and many victims. The two countries relied on the international community to help families affected by these disasters. So far on Monday, February 14, more than 35,000 people were reported dead in Turkey and Syria, with thousands of survivors homeless. The number of casualties is expected to increase. However, the international responses have differed in providing aid to both countries. (Missing sentence)

The United Nations (UN) hastened to mobilize immediate responses to help those affected by the earthquake in Syria and Turkey. Moreover, the United States of



America (USA) directed humanitarian aid to both countries. Despite this, the methods of aid reaching both countries varied.

In Turkey, local rescuers were joined by volunteers from all over the world, in addition to international aid shipments. As for Syria, the situation has worsened, as only two convoys of humanitarian aid passed through a single border crossing with Turkey. The closure of most of the Syrian borders hindered the speedy arrival of humanitarian aid to it.

The Syrian refugees in Turkey also face another tragedy due to discrimination and ill-treatment. Some Syrians in Turkey are still under the rubble, and searches are underway for them. However, there is not enough assistance from the international community for them. We will discuss in some detail the most important obstacles facing the international community to confront the crisis, the regime's exploitation of the disaster, the reactions of countries and international organizations, and finally, the discrimination in humanitarian aid for both affected countries.

#### **A) The obstacles facing the international community to face the crisis**

There is no doubt that the nature of the rule of Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria on the one hand, and the weakness of its relations with the international community on the other hand, made Western countries cautious in dealing immediately with the disaster in Syria. It was rather met with unjustified and biased reactions of the international society, which limited the speed of rescuing the survivors in Syria, and wasted time. This forced local humanitarian organizations located near the earthquake zones to bear the sole responsibility of rescuing the victims as well as supporting the families. However, the slow international responses and insufficient rescue equipment, meant that large numbers of people who had already been rescued passed away. Living in a conflict area makes it difficult to deal with emergency



crises, which deepens the crisis. Therefore, the local population is left with the responsibility to quickly overcome the problems. This led to the displacement of half a million Syrian citizens from their homeland amid the civil war, which made it difficult for the international community with its various organizations to provide aid to the areas that were destroyed because of this disaster.

The United Nations and international non-governmental organizations have offices dedicated to facing the effects of the earthquake and humanitarian challenges, however, dealing with the tragic effects of the earthquake was not that easy. Thus, the extent of the humanitarian aid at the international level in Syria were limited. The infrastructure damaged by the earthquake will require a long time to be reconstructed. This is in addition to banning aid access in some areas, which makes long-term recovery difficult in Syria. The United Nations has also recognized the problems it faces in its aid efforts in Syria. The UN Special Envoy in Syria stated that the Syrian government will support United Nations' efforts in all parts of Syria due to the stumbling block in the arrival of aid due to internal fighting

**B) Syrian government's exploitation of the disaster and efforts of different countries in the face of the crisis:**

The Syrian president is pressing for the delivery of aid at home, taking advantage of the outpouring of sympathy for the afflicted Syrians, hoping to coordinate aid with his government, which is avoided by the West. However, Western governments have not shown any willingness to deal with the Syrian regime, as the US State Department refused that the opportunity to communicate with Damascus.

However, because of the difficulties facing cross-border aid flows to northwestern Syria, which is controlled by the rebels, the cessation of international aid for a long time in the region since the earthquake occurred, and the inflexibility of the Syrian



government, and its insistence that humanitarian aid pass to the rebels in the northwest through Syria and not the Turkish border, the leaders of some Arab countries that have close relations with USA have normalized relations with the Syrian regime since the crisis, and have sent aid convoys to Damascus.

As for Russia, it viewed the delivery of aid to northwestern Syria as a violation of Syrian sovereignty. The extension of relief operations to Syria has sparked quarrels between Russia and the Western powers in the Security Council. The Syrians are also concerned about cutting off aid if the Turkish route and flows controlled by the Syrian government are closed.

In the context of the worsening crises in Syria, an Israeli military official threatened to bomb Iranian humanitarian aid to Syria, claiming that Iran seeks to take advantage of the tragedy to send weapons and military equipment to its ally, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. This threat comes two weeks after an Iranian convoy of food aid for Syria was targeted by Israeli drones.

The head of the Russian Reconciliation Center criticized the institutions of the international community, stressing that they do not provide real assistance to the victims of the earthquake in Syria, while the Syrian government continues its efforts to distribute convoys of humanitarian aid, reaching the ports of Tartous and Latakia in devastated areas for the local population.

### **C) Partial lifting US sanctions on Syria**

Syria has been subject to US sanctions since 1979, as a state sponsor of terrorist operations. The US has tightened restrictions on Syria amid the Iraqi war, and the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, which contributed to the collapse of relations between the Bashar al-Assad regime and the West in general.



In an effort to mitigate the impact of the devastation in Syria, and the death of nearly 23,000 people, the United States belatedly announced 180-day waivers from Syrian sanctions for humanitarian aid in Syria, after many victims died. Some critics say that the abolition of sanctions does not mean that there are no other obstacles. It is rather an attempt in the hope of reducing the fears of financial aid providers, and other volunteer agencies, to provide assistance to Syria in the face of the disaster.

While Damascus, along with allies such as China and Russia, are keen to describe Western sanctions as exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Syria, the Russian Reconciliation Center also stated that the relevant international organizations do not help the Syrians affected by the earthquake.

According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, in the government-controlled part of Syria, some 1,414 people have died, and the rebel-run Salvation Government's Ministry of Health reported 3,160 deaths on February 13.

#### **D) The efforts of international organizations and aid discrimination**

Given the extent of the damage caused by the disaster in terms of victims and affected people, the collapse of buildings and the destruction of public facilities, Turkish President Erdogan's called for the immediate assistance of the international community. Many European countries responded, including Western countries that still have troubled feelings towards the Turkish president. They have already sent rescue teams in the first hours of the devastating earthquake; to find the survivors immediately. The European Union also led a coordinated emergency response center to deploy rescue teams to Turkey.

In Syria, the situation has worsened, as both government and rebel-controlled areas have been affected since the earthquake occurred, bringing the total death toll to



2,500, according to what the Syrian media reported on February 8. These negative repercussions come as a result of the international isolation that has taken place. It was imposed by the international community on the Assad regime since 2011 due to the regime's brutality at home and the killing of citizens.

The White Helmets rescue teams in northwestern Syria, which are the only local rescue teams in northwestern Syria, criticized the slow response of the international community in most regions of Syria. They expressed their grave concern about the increase in the number of wounded and injuries, calling on the international community and the United Nations to send urgent aid. They are lacking sufficient equipment to excavate under the rubble and supplies. Most of the aid they received from small teams from Egypt and Spain lacks rescue equipment and is not by international relief teams.

In an attempt to speed up aid, two border crossings with Ankara, Turkey, were opened to bypass the restrictions imposed by the Security Council on the Bab al-Hawa crossing (the official route recognized by the United Nations for aid to Syria) for a period of 3 months to facilitate the arrival of humanitarian aid. This coincided with the intransigence of the Syrian regime, and its refusal to let aid convoys reach the afflicted rebels in the north-west. The regime stipulated that it undertake the distribution of aid in Syria, while citizens accuse Damascus of directing aid in the areas under its control in light of the massive destruction in the country.

## **1. UNICEF**

UNICEF has provided aid, search and rescue in Turkey, in cooperation with the Turkish government directly. However, in Syria, aid efforts have been limited to assessing the effects of the earthquake and the urgent humanitarian response to ensure that affected children and families receive the support they need. On the



ground, the arrival of humanitarian aid to the affected areas is more difficult, which creates another challenge for search and rescue efforts in Syria, along with the continuation of the economic crisis and hostilities in Syria.

Spreading epidemics such as cholera also pose another danger to families. The health technical advisor to the International Rescue Committee in the Middle East and North Africa confirmed that the humanitarian situation in Syria has been exacerbated by Covid19 and the sharp economic downturn. It is expected that the number of people in need of healthcare will increase. This creates a challenge for the international community and its institutions to provide the necessary healthcare services for families and children.

## **2. Security Council**

In the wake of the crisis, the US called on the Security Council for an urgent vote, for the passage of United Nations aid to northwestern Syria through Turkey, which is controlled by the rebels. The United Nations was already able, with a mandate from the Security Council, to deliver aid to the needy in the northwestern part of Syria, but it was limited to one official border crossing. The United Nations aid coordinator (Martin Griffiths) stressed the necessity of requesting that aid reach Syria through two border crossings, because there is an urgent humanitarian need. The Security Council also expressed its hope to use a well-argued argument about urgent needs to overcome Russia's resistance, noting that the rescue phase, which consists of pulling living people out from under the rubble, is coming to an end, but now there is an urgent need to provide shelter, psychological and social care, and education. This is the commitment of the international community now, as Geir Pedersen, the UN envoy to Syria, urged solidarity of support, and the Secretary-General's call for the international community to provide international assistance to those affected in Syria.



### **3. UNRWA**

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugee has announced the death and injuries of multiple Palestinian students in Syria due to the devastating earthquakes, in addition to the damage to twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Syria. Now about 90 percent of the Palestinian refugee families need humanitarian aid in Syria. UNRWA teams are also conducting assessments of damaged facilities for Palestinians, closing schools in affected areas, and working to continue providing humanitarian aid, sanitation and health care, and providing shelter for the displaced in response to the growing needs with United Nations agencies in Syria.

### **4. OCHA**

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has indicated the need for international cooperation; to assess the damage in cooperation with United Nations teams, expressing that Syria is facing enormous humanitarian needs. Conveyed information from the local authorities in the country, reporting at least 769 deaths and 1448 injuries in Aleppo, Hama and Leticia. The humanitarian response faced a funding gap of 48%, declaring the need for more financial support. UNHCR joined hands to provide urgent relief to the survivors through UNHCR field teams; to provide support to those affected in Syria.

### **5. World Health Organization:**

The World Health Organization has sent sanitary supplies; to avoid secondary disasters, and works with international partners to provide health care to both Turkey and Syria. Tedros Adhanom (Head of the World Health Organization) met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, expressing the Syrian president's openness to consider cross-border access points to pass emergency humanitarian aid. However, this aid comes too late after hundreds of victims have died in Syria.



### ***Conclusion:***

There is an absolute necessity to activate the role of the United Nations organs, and for each member state of the Security Council to leave behind their individual interests and take into account the interests of the Syrian people. On one hand, many countries have shown solidarity with Turkey as a result of the devastating earthquakes. On the contrary, Syria cannot rely as much on international aid after 12 years of civil war and international sanctions imposed against its leaders, at a time when Damascus is trying to take advantage of the crisis to legitimize the Syrian regime. Thus, the challenge before the international community is magnified, as it concerns the years of conflict and the humanitarian crisis in Syria, in addition to difficulties in helping the survivors. International aid was slow to arrive after many have already died and many families have been lost. There is also discrimination in the way the afflicted Syrians are treated in Turkey. Moreover, the first United Nations' humanitarian aid to Syria came late, after many survivors died as a result of the freezing cold and epidemics. To add to that, humanitarian aid convoys face danger due to the destruction of the corridors along borders. Thus, efforts to help citizens in the stricken areas of Syria are still facing a major challenge by the international community.