Use of Aid After the 2023 Turkey–Syria Quake

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On 6th of February 2023 at 04:17AM, earthquakes with a registered magnitude of 7.7 and 7.6 hit the southern part of Turkey and northern Syria (British Red Cross, 2023). The epicenter of the disaster was based in Turkey, but it had devastating effects on Syria as well. The earthquake resulted in over 59.000 confirmed casualties, millions being displaced, widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis. Unconfirmed reports claim that the

death toll may be higher than official figures give —however reliable estimates vary.

Due to the scale of destruction, an unprecedented flow of international humanitarian assistance fled to Turkey and Syria. Governments, the EU, international institutions and UN agencies mobilised billions in pledges and appeals in emergency aid, funding for reconstruction and humanitarian relief (European Commission, 2023; OCHA, 2023). The EU, USA and international financial institutions announced assistance packages while the UN organisations and NGOs mobilised ground operations.

Fig. 1: Overview of affected regions in 2023 Turkish & Syrian Earthquake https://www.britannica.com/event/2023-Turkey-Syria-earthquake

Despite such a 'coordinated' global response, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that a significant part of the aid intended for victims in Turkey and Syria was delayed or misappropriated (ALNAP, 2025; Amnesty International, 2023). Weaknesses in aid distribution systems, political interference, corruption and flaws of oversight mechanisms undermined the effectiveness of pledged aid. This paper will argue that, even though international aid was substantial, the institutional and systemic failures in Turkey and Syria limited the appropriate use of post-earthquake aid.

2.1. Turkey

In Turkey, the central authority in aid coordination is assumed by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, also known as AFAD, working together with the Ministry of Interior and governors of local authorities. While AFAD has substantial experience in disaster response, it has a high level of political centralisation. They are directly subordinate to the executive, the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. This subordination increases concerns and questions regarding transparency and impartiality of AFAD. Distribution decisions were top-down, with limited involvement of independent NGOs. Numerous independent reports have claimed uneven aid allocation in Turkey, with some receiving rapid aid while others, particularly opposition-led municipalities, reporting shortages of necessities required to survive such as tents, food and medical supplies during the early aftermath of the earthquake (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

2.2. Syria

Due to the then ongoing civil war in Syria, distribution of aid was even further constrained (OCHA, 2023). In regions controlled by the Assad regime, assistance was delivered and coordinated through state institutions. Opposition-led northwestern Syria heavily depended on aid authorised by the UNSC, which was implemented through NGOs (OCHA, 2023' Human Rights Watch, 2023). Fragmentation of control, political interference and

security risks in the region led to bottlenecks. Such structural vulnerabilities made it easier to divert and politicise humanitarian aid.

Fig. 2: Political Map of Syria at the time of the 2023 earthquake https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64544478

Multiple credible reports indicated that aid was diverted, politicised or distributed ineffectively in Turkey and Syria. These did not take place as a single and centralised event, but rather as a result of patterns, selective allocations and weak accountability. All such factors together undermined the humanitarian response (ALNAP, 2025)

3.1. Turkey

According to the Turkish media, the lack of transparent reporting on donations and expenditures led to much difficult tracing of usage of billions of Turkish liras in domestic and international aid (Turkish Minute, 2024). Large amounts of donations, especially collected through national fundraising efforts, were transferred to state-controlled funds without independent audits or parliamentary oversight. 115.000.000.000 Turkish Liras (6.1 billion USD in 2023) was raised by the Turkish public and business community overnight. It has been claimed by experts that the raised money was not used for the earthquake (Cumhuriyet, 2023)

It was claimed by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group that there were documented complaints from earthquake survivors stating that access to assistance including housing, compensations or relocation support were not even, and sometimes politically conditioned (IAHE SG, 2025). Opposition-led municipalities claimed delays and insufficient delivery of tents, containers and basic supplies despite nationwide support and national assurances that enough resources were available. Omran Alswed and his family in Southern Turkey had not received a tent for almost three weeks after the disaster, despite repeatedly applying to official channels (Reuters, 2023)

3.2. Syria

Unlike Turkey, aid misuse was much more systematic and structurally embedded within the system —reflecting the political economy of humanitarian assistance in an authoritarian context (Hilhirst et al., 2021). According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, humanitarian aid was delivered to regime controlled areas and was distributed through organs linked to political elites or security services (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). This increased concerns regarding preferential treatment for regime affiliated regions while opposition supporters faced exclusion from basic humanitarian aid. Affected families that spoke to the media expressed that they had felt forgotten, emphasising on lack of aid – including tents – and how it affected the families (Welt Hunger Life, 2024). It was also reported that the first official aid convoy sent by the

UN containing medicine, blankets and tents could cross the Bab al-Hawa border 3 days after the earthquake hit, because of the instability of the region and the Syrian government (AP News, 2023).

Due to national rules, international NGOs and UN agencies were required to work with government approved partners. Multiple watchdog reports claimed that aid supplies were diverted willingly to local markets, withheld or redistributed to reward political loyalty of individuals to the regime. In northwest Syria, led by the opposition, risks of diversions were claimed to be lower even though aid was delayed as a result of the political blockages and access restriction (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2023). This produced de facto aid denial during the early periods of the earthquake, the most critical hours after a disaster.

4.1. Political Interference and Centralisation

In both Turkey and Syria, political control over aid distribution was the leading cause of the aid misuse. In Turkey, a centralised governance structure led to the executive holding the decision-making power —hence limiting the role of institutions, municipalities, NGOs and civil society. Such power held by the executive led to selective use of aid and reduced transparency and accountability: allocations intersected with electoral politics. Just five months after the earthquake, Turkey held the 2023 presidential elections, where Erdogan was ahead in eight out of the eleven municipalities within the earthquake-affected regions (Euronews, 2023). In Syria, political interference was more explicit compared to Turkey. The Assad regime has treated humanitarian aid as a resource, using it as a tool to reward loyal communities and punish opposition. The aftermath of the earthquake also followed this pattern, where aid went mostly to Assad-led communities while opposition-controlled regions received less or late support. The strategy of the Assad regime reinforced a system of control over humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

4.2. Weak Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms

In Turkey, already weak accountability mechanisms were significantly weaker in the aftermath of the disaster. Emergency legislation regarding disaster support reduced opportunities for the parliament to interact, consolidating the power at the executive branch of the government—even though practically impossible due to the government holding a majority. The Government had complete and full power over aid allocation and expenditure. At the same time, civil society organisations faced legal and administrative barriers that limited their ability to monitor aid, provide independent assessments, or publicly report misuse of aid. The lack of independent oversight and publicly accessible reporting tools made it more difficult for NGOs to trace aid and assistance that were never used. Lack of civilian oversight and accountability mechanisms increased the risk of

misuse without detection. In Syria, oversight was much weaker due to structural and security related constraints. Lack of access to humanitarian organisations, ongoing insecurity inside the country, and the legal doctrine of forcing international NGOs and other UN agencies to operate through intermediaries approved by the Syrian Government damaged and limited independent monitoring of the aftermath of the earthquake alongside other violations of international law inside Syria. These limitations and practices resulted in humanitarian actors being unable to verify beneficiary lists, delivery routes or distribution outcomes. Direct access to the affected population was limited. This reduced donor oversight capacity and made it possible for aid to be diverted and distributed selectively easier. As a result, weak oversight mechanisms and accountability are not isolated incidents, they are systematically and structurally enabled by the Syrian governments.

4.3. Logistical, Legal and Security Constraints

Damaged infrastructure combined with disrupted supply chains and harsh winter conditions in Eastern Turkey and Western Syria led to aid loss and delay (ALNAP, 2025). In Syria, additional international sanctions, border restrictions and political deadlock in the UNSC further limited cross-border operations (OCHA, 2023). Such factors do not necessarily justify the misuse of aid, but they did increase the dependency on local and national authorities to deliver aid, raising diversion risks (Hilhorst et al., 2021).

5.1. Humanitarian Consequences

Human suffering was exacerbated when aid was diverted or delayed. Delays in shelters such as tents and containers left thousands exposed to harsh winter and unsanitary conditions. This increased the risk of diseases and mortality for the survivors. Due to the unequal distribution of aid, some communities received overlapping assistance while others received shortages of food, healthcare and shelter. In Syria, displaced populations faced pre-existing vulnerabilities. This reinforced the patterns of exclusion applied prior to the disaster. The failure of the Syrian government to reach vulnerable citizens undermined the humanitarian objective of saving lives and reducing suffering. The disaster left 1.5 million people homeless according to the UN, requiring hundreds of thousands of new housing limits —which is near impossible to achieve due to lack of outreach in Syria (UN, 2023). An article on an earthquake's impact on health has claimed that people in inadequate shelter conditions with worsened access to clean water and sanitation (WASH) increases the risk of disease transmission both in Turkey and Syria—this also had implications for a possible national health emergency (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2023)

5.2. Political and Economic Consequences

In Turkey, frustration from the public on how the government handled the disaster response and distribution of aid led to declining trust in state institutions and intensified the already-intense political polarisation in Turkey between the government and opposition supporters (Bellini & Sauter, 2025). Distorted reconstruction priorities in the disaster zone risked inefficiencies and corruption, and resulted in slower long-term recovery (Transparency International, 2023; U4 Anti-Corruption Resources Center, 2025). In Syria, misuse of aid strengthened authoritarian control mechanisms and weakened inclusive recovery, where opposition communities were excluded. By relying on and empowering patronage networks in Syria, humanitarian aid contributed to the political status quo rather than fostering resilience or social cohesion.

5.3. Damage to International Credibility

Aid mismanagement damaged the credibility of international humanitarian actors. Donors, such as states and NGOs, faced criticism for not monitoring and overrelying on authoritarian, politically compromised partners. Such damage risks reducing the confidence of donors and public support for humanitarian operations locally and globally that may be required in the future.

Fig. 3: Overview of aid distortion in 2023 Turkish & Syrian Earthquake

6.1. Strengthening Monitoring and Oversight

Lack of accountability following the earthquake was linked to the lack of independent and continuous monitoring systems. In both Turkey and Syria aid flow was opaque with limited public data. Emergency procedures and rules decreased the transparency even further, restricting information. International organisations, NGOs and donors should implement an independent monitoring mechanism consisting with third-party audits, verification of beneficiaries and monitoring the real-time flow of aid. Reporting platforms should be publicly accessible. This will enhance transparency and allow civil society and media to critically evaluate aid use. In the long-term, this might increase humanitarian aid received by a country due to transparency and accountability. Monitoring mechanisms should be re-designed to a way that it automatically triggers corrective actions. Independent bodies should be granted authority under law to flag irregularities and control aid flow. Emergency legal frameworks should have sunset clauses and a set minimum transparency requirements to prevent erosion of oversight. Together, these measures would highly increase monitoring and oversight in a humanitarian perspective.

6.2. Empowering Local Communities and Civil Society

Local communities and NGOs must be involved in assessment of needs, distribution and monitoring of aid. NGOs, civil society and local governments are generally the first point of contact for locals and know the requirements of the community more than the central government does. Community-based feedback can help identify gaps in aid, detect diversion and ensure aid is sent to communities who are in need and not as a result of political priorities and loyalty. Accountability can be increased if community participation is institutionalised, rather than relying on ad hoc consultations. Formal feedback mechanisms should be integrated into the system. Civil society actors and independent media outlets should be protected with the fullest extent of the law, and should be allowed to report without restrictions. The media's ability to report away from political pressure is essential to report irregularities. The national governments should involve local governments and NGOs when aid is getting allocated—subnational actors are better positioned to understand and identify underserved groups in communities. This increases legitimacy and reduces risks of political aid allocation as well.

6.3. Conditionality and International Coordination

International donors should apply transparency and accountability conditions on funding and supplying aid. This should be done while avoiding measures that can punish civilians collectively. In Turkey, decentralising a disaster government and restoring oversight of the Parliament and Judiciary; in Syria, expanding the cross border access and reducing reliance on regime-supporting intermediaries would make this possible. International donors should coordinate enforcement and strengthen leverage by aligning conditionality standards on aid.

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