Arab Reform Initiative

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Syria's Earthquake Exposes Broken Aid Machine

→ Sara Kayyali



Why was it so difficult for aid to reach Syria after the devastating earthquake on 6 February?[1] In particular, why did so little aid reach opposition-controlled parts of Northwest Syria which was the hardest-hit region in the country?

For the casual observer, the lack of support in Northwest Syria following the earthquake was baffling, especially when compared to the degree of mobilization witnessed just across the border in Turkey. For those more familiar with the Syrian context, the earthquake starkly highlighted the politically induced challenges that have long-plagued aid operations in the country.

The earthquake was felt in Syria across areas controlled by different groups. The impact was felt most keenly in the Northwest as well as in Aleppo, Latakia, and parts of Hama. Opposition-held areas in the Northwest were the most impacted. Of the 5,714 reported dead in Syria as of 13 February, 4,400 were in opposition-held parts of Northwest Syria. More than 1,700 buildings have been entirely destroyed in the area, with another 6,300 buildings severely damaged. In a region characterized by humanitarian needs and barely standing infrastructure, the earthquake compounded existing humanitarian crises. Yet, the area received less aid and attention than other affected areas.

It was only on 9 February, the fourth day after the earthquake, that the first six trucks from the UN finally reached the region. The trucks contained shelter and non-food items that had been pre-scheduled for camps but no emergency relief equipment such as fuel and search and rescue equipment which was urgently needed. It was nowhere near enough to relieve the humanitarian crisis. There were no significant search and rescue teams entering, nor did a single UN representative make it to the region.

The response was even slower than that in other parts of Syria – which were already slow and insufficient. Within two days, around a dozen countries had sent in search and rescue teams to Damascus. Representatives of major UN organizations and the ICRC, accompanied by aid, made trips to Damascus, and areas damaged by the earthquake – but, until 13 February, not areas in the northwest.

For once, the catastrophe in Syria was not political but natural, but the paralysis of

the humanitarian response – at least so far – suffered from the long-standing politicization of aid. This article attempts to provide an analysis of the reasons behind the difficulties in providing earthquake aid to Northwest Syria. It begins with explaining what makes the region unique, and why its legal and humanitarian situation, coupled with the history of aid operations in Syria, elucidate the lags in aid provision. Finally, it provides a few recommendations to improve the situation with the hope that the tragic situation will finally lead to a breakthrough in how aid reaches the area.

What is so special about Northwest Syria?

Northwest Syria is the main remaining opposition-held area in Syria. Around 4.6 million Syrians reside there, the majority of whom had been displaced multiple times. As one of the few opposition-held territories in Syria, the area has been subject to multiple military offensives by the Syrian-Russian military alliance. Those offensives were characterized by a complete disregard for international humanitarian legal protections, killing tens of thousands of civilians and destroying protected infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and homes. The attacks also displaced millions, many of whom had already been internally displaced after being forced to flee other parts of the country that were taken over by the Syrian government.

Before the earthquake, around 4.1 million of the 4.6 million population needed humanitarian assistance. The needs ranged from food, to shelter, to access to clean water and sanitation. The United Nations plays a major role in coordinating and negotiating these efforts. The attacks on infrastructure have severely overwhelmed the health sector in Northwest Syria and created a shelter crisis.

Parts of Northwest Syria are controlled by Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group previously affiliated with al-Qaeda, and which is sanctioned by the United Nations, and several countries unilaterally. The sanctioning of HTS has complicated humanitarian operations in the past. For one, there are clear spillover effects from sanctions – even with humanitarian exemptions. Other parts of Northwest Syria are controlled by opposition groups that are supported by Turkey. These de facto

authorities, unlike the "sovereign" Syrian government, cannot make official requests for assistance, formally lobby for recognition, or build any type of permanence in a region that continues to be contested.

Why is aid so politicized in Syria?

The question is difficult to answer without looking at the historical development of aid operations in Syria since the conflict started, and the policy framework in which the United Nations operates.

Humanitarian operations generally require the permission of the government in place to access territories and provide relief. In Syria, the government has long withheld permission to access areas that are held by groups opposed to it. It did this to prevent critical supplies and humanitarian support from reaching those it considered dissident. The strategy was applied in key opposition areas and, coupled with relentless bombardment, it often forced surrender. Even after areas were retaken by the Syrian government, depending on the remaining population in those areas, permission was often withheld arbitrarily.

The Syrian government also used its sovereign advantage to punish humanitarian actors that were seen as resisting its conditions. Foreign humanitarian workers often had their visas rejected or not renewed if the organizations they worked for sought to work in some opposition-held areas or called out abuses by the government. Entire organizations that had worked in opposition-held areas and were outspoken about the government's crimes were labeled as terrorists.

This is not considering the corruption, interference with beneficiary lists, and rejection of humanitarian programs that remain rampant in aid operations in government-held territory.

The aid environment thus became increasingly difficult, and UN agencies, wary of losing access to Syria and thus their funding, were less likely to raise objections to the government's practices and to push back on restrictions that compromised their ability to deliver aid in a principled manner to all those in need.

How does aid then enter Northwest Syria?

In 2014, in response to the significant humanitarian needs in opposition-held areas and the government's refusal to provide access, the UN Security Council passed the UN cross-border resolution to allow aid to enter without government approval. That resolution authorized four border crossings to allow the UN to operate within areas controlled by groups opposed to Damascus (two border crossings for northwest Syria; one for Northeast Syria; one in the southwest near the Jordanian border). Consecutive vetoes (and threats of veto) by Russia, the Syrian government's ally, coupled with the territorial takeover by the government of some of those areas, reduced the access to one border crossing in Northwest Syria known as Bab al-Hawa. Based on the current state of the resolution, authorization to use that border crossing must be renewed by the UN Security Council every six months.

Thus, the primary way that aid enters the Northwest today is through the sole authorized border crossing, which according to data published by the UN, serves around 2.7 million people in the region per month. The second way that aid enters Northwest Syria is through Damascus, where UN agencies cross government-territory into opposition-held territories. The term used for this is crossline operations. Crossline operations have been much less effective than cross-border operations for several reasons, reaching by some estimates, only around 47,000 people. The Syrian government often withholds permission for convoys to cross or imposes certain conditions – removal of specific supplies, certain monitoring requirements – that humanitarians reject. In some cases, such conditionality, and the political weight of accepting such aid, means that authorities within Northwest Syria also reject these convoys.

The focus here is on UN aid because other humanitarian NGOs in the context of whether cross-border access is needed at all in Northwest Syria have already indicated that they do not have the coordinating capacity to scale up needs the way that the UN apparatus can. Thus, UN humanitarian operations are critical to responding effectively to needs on the ground.

How has the response to the earthquake played out in Northwest Syria?

In the aftermath of an earthquake, every minute matters. How fast one mobilizes directs how many lives are saved. In the first four days, while the Syrian government received aid from the UN, and around a dozen other countries, Northwest Syria had received no aid. At first, there were claims by UN OCHA and others that the roads were damaged. The cross-border hub of Bab al-Hawa was dependent on operations in Gaziantep and neighboring regions in Turkey, which were near the epicenter of the earthquake and had been badly hit, but journalists and activists present on-site at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, indicated that the roads were open, Syrian bodies continued to enter from Turkey since the third day of the disaster, and no serious damage in the roads that would impact aid delivery. It took three days for the first convoy of six trucks to enter through Bab al-Hawa. That convoy contained non-food and shelter items but no earthquake/emergency items. Since then, around 58 UN trucks have made their way into Northwest Syria as of 13 February. Both international and local humanitarian organizations say what has entered is nowhere near enough, and that Bab al-Hawa, is not sufficient to allow the scale of operations required.

There was also an attempt to allow a UN convoy to pass into Northwest Syria crossline, but media reports indicate that that convoy had been held up because of "approval issues" by HTS.

The situation in terms of search and rescue operations was even more dire. On 8 February, a small non-governmental Egyptian technical support team was able to enter Northwest Syria to support the Syrian Civil Defense, a local group in Northwest Syria, that had been responsible for the rescue efforts, followed by a three-person volunteer Spanish team with no equipment. Until the time of writing, no significant search and rescue team had entered Northwest Syria.

Since 7 February, the only regular traffic into Northwest Syria have been trucks bringing the bodies of Syrians from Turkey to be buried in Syria.

So what can be done?

The outcry around the delay in delivering aid to Syria was significant. On the one hand, multiple actors decried the sanctions regime imposed on Syria, blaming it for the delays and difficulties in donating funds internationally to Syria. In response to international pressure, the US applied a general exemption for all aid and financial transactions that are related to the earthquake for the next six months. According to journalists, on 13 February, and as part of closed UN Security Council discussions – the Assad government agreed to allow entry of aid through two additional border crossings for three months. While this move is positive, it would be better served with a long-term commitment that can be objectively guaranteed.

The reprieve from US sanctions is a welcome first step, though it will take time for it to negate the spillover effects. However, for one, it is not clear whether this exemption extends to the counterterrorism measures that have effects in Northwest Syria. It also does not get to the heart of the aid politicization and Damascus' obstruction, including the inadequacy of one border crossing, the inexplicable delays in mobilizing delivery of aid to the region, and the limited support for search and rescue operations in Northwest Syria – all of which remain salient, and all of which have played an unforgivable role in the deaths of thousands of Syrians.

On 12 February, almost a week after the earthquake, Martin Griffiths, the UN Relief Chief, acknowledged in a tweet that the UN has failed the people of Northwest Syria and that his focus would be on remedying that failure. Griffith's statement is an important acknowledgment of the failure that has plagued the response, but actions speak louder than words. The earthquake is an opportunity to reform at least some aspects of Syria's broken aid machine, and there are a few things that the UN and donors can do to make things immediately better:

1. Use additional border crossings into northwest Syria: There is a growing legal consensus among prominent jurists that a security council authorization is not required to deliver aid across borders, particularly where authorities are unable or unwilling to provide consent to save lives. The UN can act on this legal consensus and send more supplies through other border crossings in Northwest Syria and provide greater certainty for

operations in the long term, without requiring consent that is often arbitrarily withheld.

2. Warring parties should commit to allowing aid in: All parties, including the Syrian government and de-facto authorities in Northwest Syria, must allow aid in – in whatever way is needed. The needs are too drastic to be leveraged for political gain. Key allies of the warring parties should pressure them to accept to facilitate aid access.
3. Limit the impact of sanctions on aid: The general exemption on sanctions that may be hampering humanitarian efforts is an important first step, but this facilitation should also apply to areas in Northwest Syria. There is also a need to amplify and make more effective humanitarian exemptions while being careful not to re-empower or reward human rights abusers.
4. Refocus energy to address the status of Northwest Syria and the almost 5 million people living there: The status of the region was already unsustainable before the earthquake. Its residents were living in an area with precarious stability, and dependent on aid that needs to be negotiated every six months.

What the earthquake has shown is that there is an urgent need to resolve the underlying challenges that the aid operations in Northwest Syria have posed. A new approach is needed. If a political settlement is not currently possible, then at least a new arrangement that allows aid to flow to the region in a sustainable and scalable manner to allow the residents to rebuild and meet their basic needs. It is not sufficient to continue to negotiate cross-border access on a six-month basis; it is not acceptable to ignore the governance crisis presented by Northwest Syria in the hopes that it goes away; it is not sufficient to misrepresent and overplay certain variables that make the operations challenging, while avoiding any mention of the real obstacles that plague it for fear of donor withdrawal. Lives depend on it.

Endnotes

1. On 6 February, an earthquake rocked the southeastern Turkey and parts of northern Syria. The earthquake is considered the 7th deadliest in the 21st century, registering at 7.8 on the Richter scale with an aftershock that measured at 7.6. At the time of writing, over 33,000 people have died, and thousands of buildings reduced to rubble.

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About the author



Sara Kayyali

Sara Kayyali is a human rights lawyer and analyst. She was the senior Syria and Jordan researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, and worked with civil society at the Open Society Foundations. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in political science.

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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net

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