

# The Latest on the Deadly Türkiye-Syria Earthquake

Sapna Suresh: February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

On February 6, 2023, Syria and Türkiye were struck by a large earthquake, at a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale. As rescue workers in both nations are trying to search for people alive under the rubble, the death toll has increased dramatically. As of February 28, 2022, the death toll is 49,000 in Türkiye and 6,000 in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

In response to this earthquake, Australia sent search and rescue specialists to assist in the matter. Most of the personnel sent consists of the Fire and Rescue NSW, who have a substantial amount of training in such missions. The commissioner of the organization, Paul Baxter, is confident the team's training will be adequate in carrying out this mission. In addition, Australia also sent personnel from the foreign affairs department, police, and health workers.



**Photo Credit 1**

<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-64540696>

The U.S. has also expressed its solidarity regarding the earthquake that struck Syria and Türkiye. President Biden offered support and sympathies towards the victims of the catastrophe. Biden communicated with Turkish president Erdogan and pledged to offer rescue and recovery teams. In addition to assisting Türkiye, Biden also promised to offer support to Syria, which was also struck by the earthquake. Biden emphasized that all areas in Syria struck by earthquake will receive humanitarian assistance, regardless of who controls the territory. Recently, Secretary Blinken has visited the areas struck by the earthquake and promised about \$100 million in aid.<sup>2</sup> On February 6, 2023, the EU sent 31 rescue teams and 5 medical teams to Syria and Turkey. In addition, the EU bloc pledged that the Syria would receive 3.5 million Euros (in dollars, \$3.7 million), while Türkiye will receive 3 million Euros (in dollars, \$3.2 million). The overall objective of these funds is to provide sanitation, shelter, water, and any other health related concerns in addition to the search and rescue missions. Notably, the ECDC has warned of a cholera outbreak and other viral infections in the impacted areas.<sup>3</sup>

The Secretary General of the UN Antonio Guterres, has expressed the idea of supplying aid to Syria through other border crossings, besides Bab Al-Hawa crossing which was approved by the UN. He would like to see from the Security Council a resolution that calls for the opening of other border crossings. The UN has sent six trucks into Syria through the Bab Al-Hawa, but more is needed. Recently, the UN appealed for an aid package of \$1 billion and the secretary general stressed that "The needs are enormous, people are suffering and there's no time to lose. I urge the international community to step up and fully fund this critical effort in response to one of the biggest natural disasters of our times." <sup>4</sup> According to a report by the World Economic Forum, the earthquake could cost Türkiye about \$85 billion and the areas hit by the quake contribute to 10% of Türkiye's GDP.<sup>5</sup>



**Photo Credit 2**

<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/national-international/turkey-earthquake-before-and-after-satellite-images-show-scale-of-destruction/4095351/>

### **The Politics of Aid-Giving**

Officially, the US government has announced that there will be a 180-day exemption period (roughly 6 months). The Deputy Secretary of Treasury Wally Adeyemo emphasized that

“As international allies and humanitarian partners mobilize to help those affected, I want to make very clear that U.S. sanctions in Syria will not stand in the way of life-saving efforts for the Syrian people. While U.S. sanctions programs already contain robust exemptions for humanitarian efforts, today Treasury is issuing a blanket General License to authorize earthquake relief efforts so that those providing assistance can focus on what’s needed most: saving lives and rebuilding.” <sup>6</sup>

However, the issue with sanctions is not that simple. The Syrian government argues that the sanctions are impeding aid and should be lifted. However, others argue that the impact of sanctions are greatly exaggerated. In the words of Karam Shaar, a political economist focused

on Syria and a nonresident fellow at the Middle East Institute, he argued that “The main factor hindering humanitarian aid is not sanctions. It is the fact that Bashar al-Assad is quite simply a thief.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Syrians broadly argue that sanctions relief should come in parallel with talks of a political solution.

Aside from the sanctions on Syria, the amount of destruction has prompted many to question President Erdogan’s past policies on earthquake safety measures. From one of Erdogan’s campaign rallies for the 2019 local elections, a video recirculated that showed Erdogan revealing how they allowed contractors to build apartments by using “zoning amnesties.” This was the term for allowing contractors to ignore safety codes. Erdogan’s decision comes in contradiction to his earlier positions. Notably, Türkiye’s Duvar news site posted a 2013 tweet from Erdogan, marking the anniversary of the 1999 Marmara earthquake. The tweet said that “Buildings kill, not earthquakes. We need to learn to live with earthquakes and take measures accordingly.”<sup>8</sup>

However, many argue that at the core, Erdogan’s increasing centralization and autocratic governance have contributed to worsening the situation.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his time in power, Erdogan has restricted the freedoms of civil society, and today the very same NGOs are finding difficulties in giving out aid.<sup>10</sup> How the earthquake will impact the upcoming Turkish presidential elections in May is too soon to tell. Already, Erdogan has gone after critics of the government’s response, by stating that he is not to blame.

### Who controls what in Syria



### Photo Credit 3

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>



### Photo Credit 4

<https://www.ft.com/content/cb147e12-4a64-47cd-a4bd-95c5b537c9f6>

## Further Reading:

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<sup>1</sup> George Wright, "Turkey earthquake: Rescue effort ends in all but two areas," *BBC*, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64697506>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Key developments in the aftermath of the Turkey, Syria quake," *Associated Press*, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/nato-2023-turkey-syria-earthquake-government-recep-tayyip-erdogan-8ce37276b676db5d011dd52e4de8cd0d>

<sup>4</sup> "UN launches \$1 billion appeal to help Turkey earthquake victims," *France24*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230216-un-launches-1-billion-appeal-to-help-turkey-earthquake-victims>

<sup>5</sup> Ian Shine, "EU raises growth forecasts, Turkey faces \$85 billion in quake costs and other economy stories you need to read this week," *World Economic Forum*, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/eu-economic-growth-forecasts-turkey-earthquake-economy-stories-17-february/>

<sup>6</sup> "Treasury Issues Syria General License 23 To Aid In Earthquake Disaster Relief Efforts," *U.S Department of the Treasury*, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1261>

<sup>7</sup> Murtaza Hussain, "Are U.S. Sanctions Against Syria Stalling Humanitarian Aid After the Earthquake?" *The Intercept*, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/02/19/syria-earthquake-us-sanctions/>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kenyon, "Videos show Turkey's Erdogan boasted letting builders avoid earthquake codes," *NPR*, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/13/1156512284/turkey-earthquake-erdogan-building-safety>

<sup>9</sup> Alec Luhn, "How Erdogan's Obsession With Power Got in the Way of Turkey's Earthquake Response," *Time*, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://time.com/6256540/erdogan-turkey-earthquake-response/>

<sup>10</sup> Bobby Ghosh, "Erdogan has undermined Turkey's earthquake response," *The Japan Times*, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2023/02/09/commentary/world-commentary/turkey-earthquake-response/>