

After earthquake, Syria abandoned to its fate as Turkey seeks to quell public anger

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The impact of Monday's massive earthquakes on the Turkish-Syrian border is steadily worsening. As of this morning, the death toll in Turkey has reached 12,873, while reports indicate that at least 3,162 people are confirmed to have died in Syria.

World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe Dr. Hans Kluge announced a "grade 3 emergency" in the region. Three days after the earthquakes, tens of thousands of people are thought to still be under the rubble in the freezing cold in both countries.

Millions of people affected by the earthquake in Syria, ravaged and divided by the civil war fomented by the NATO powers since 2011, are largely abandoned to their fate. The US and European powers still refuse to lift the crippling sanctions imposed on the country. Moreover, US forces' continued occupation of oil fields in northeastern Syria deprives Damascus of critical revenue to deal with the disaster.

The World Food Program of the United Nations said in late January that hunger in Syria was at its highest level since 2011. It stated that 12 million Syrians don't know where they will get their next meal, and 2.9 million are at risk of starvation.

In Turkey, there is enormous public anger over the failure of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government to take any precautions against the expected earthquakes, despite many warnings from scientists, and over the inadequate and uncoordinated official response to the earthquakes. The government is more interested in suppressing this social opposition than in saving those trapped under the rubble.

Erdoğan made this clear in his remarks on the catastrophe during his visit to the earthquake zone yesterday. "These things have always happened. These are things that are part of fate," he said, falsely portraying the preventable deaths of tens of thousands as an

inevitable "natural disaster," rather than a social crime.

In Kahramanmaraş, the epicenter of the earthquake, Erdoğan said: "Our work in the earthquake zones will accelerate and become much more comfortable. At first, there were problems at airports and roads in some places. We will overcome them too. Today we are more comfortable, tomorrow we will be more comfortable." In reality, it is known that the first hours after a major earthquake are critical for rescuing those trapped under the rubble.

Speaking in Hatay, another city badly damaged by the quake, Erdoğan said: "Of course there are shortcomings. The conditions are very clear. It is not possible to be prepared for such a major catastrophe." Calling for a period of "unity and solidarity", he attacked criticism of his government's late and inadequate response as "filthy negative campaigns."

The government's restriction of access to Twitter during Erdoğan's visit to the region sparked massive outrage. With pro-government media blacking out the situation in the earthquake zone, and even cutting off the speeches of earthquake victims, Twitter had become the main independent news center in the country. Moreover, many people still trapped under the rubble were making their voices heard on Twitter.

Erdoğan's statement, "It is not possible to be prepared for such a major catastrophe," is a political lie. In fact, scientists have been warning for years that major earthquakes are extremely likely in this region, and indicating what could be done to avert mass death.

After the January 2020 Elazığ earthquake, well-known geologist Professor Naci Görür warned about the Kahramanmaraş area, noting that there might have been a "stress transfer" to the fault lines in the region. Drawing attention directly to the location of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake, Görür said: "The last earthquake in the Türkoğlu region of Kahramanmaraş was 7.4 in 1513. So

this is also an earthquake-prone area. We need to pay special attention to these places. We have to take mitigation measures now.”

However, measures that the central government, governorships and local governments could have taken in coordination to prevent earthquake devastation were not taken, and millions of people were left to their fate.

While a total of 6,444 buildings have collapsed in Turkey, more than 2,700 have collapsed in Hatay, one of the hardest-hit provinces. Hatay Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Lütfü Savaş said yesterday, “Everywhere is really destroyed. We could only reach 2-3 percent of the destroyed buildings.” This could mean that tens of thousands of people are still under the rubble in Hatay alone.

However, it was known that Hatay, like other major cities in the region, is located on fault lines. Aslıhan Gündoğdu’s master’s thesis on Antakya, the central district of Hatay, titled “Urban Regeneration Policies in Turkey: A Field Research on Urban Regeneration in Antakya,” published in 2019, stated the following:

80 percent of the buildings in the urban area consist of risky structures. Although these facts have been put forward in reports, and it is known that this city is in urgent need of transformation, no significant work has been done on this issue to date.

The devastating implications of the failure to strengthen buildings and public infrastructure in Antakya and other cities, to make them earthquake-proof, is now apparent. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of people are trapped under collapsed buildings, and their chances of being rescued from entirely preventable deaths are fading by the hour.

Speaking to BBC Türkçe in Antakya yesterday, an aid volunteer said: “People are waiting by the rubble. There are living people inside... There is very little work in the rubble. The situation is very bad.”

Geophysical engineer Professor Övgün Ahmet Ercan’s estimates of the number of people still under the rubble are frightening. Yesterday, he said, “It is a place where there are about 4 million buildings. While 13 million people live in these buildings, about 7,000 buildings have collapsed, and people are desperate.”

He added: “According to my calculations,

approximately 200,000 people were under the collapsed buildings, based on assuming there are 4 floors and 8 apartments [in every building]. The number of people pulled out of the collapse is about 8,000.”

Murat Arel, a columnist for the daily *Cumhuriyet* who is in the earthquake zone, said yesterday that in Hatay, “people have given up hope in the state, and everyone is trying to pull out their relatives under the rubble with their own means ... Everyone is coming here to help, but there is still a lack of coordination. There are also teams coming from abroad. The pain here is indescribable. Unfortunately, there are places where no teams have reached.”

He added the following:

We are living in a situation of diminishing hope. After this hour, we are going to hear huge cries. Because people have blatantly died. Before, we used to call out from above the rubble ‘can anyone hear our voices?’ Now people are calling out from below the rubble ‘can anyone hear our voices?’ The main problem is lack of coordination, the main problem is the mentality of ‘with the blessings of our president,’ the main problem is the inability of state institutions to come together and carry out the work in a coordinated manner.

Social anger is growing in the earthquake region and across the country. In Adıyaman, which was severely affected by the earthquake, the governor was met with protests by earthquake victims. Yesterday, it was announced that the governor of Ordu had been temporarily appointed to replace him, while Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Adil Karaismailoğlu was also met with protests in the city.



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