

Letter from a Syrian reader on the earthquake's catastrophic impact

A Syrian reader of the WSWS
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The earthquake hit the border area between Syria and Turkey and left behind a terrifying humanitarian catastrophe ... There were no governmental preparations to deal with a disaster of this magnitude despite the existence of a supreme committee for disaster response and governmental plans on paper to deal with disasters and to evacuate public buildings. Before the catastrophe, the country suffered from the results of a devastating war that Washington planned and financed with the aim of overthrowing the existing government and replacing it with a dependent regime subject to the directives of the White House and the policies of the International Monetary Fund ...

This situation resulted in a real crisis situation, as millions of Syrians were forced to leave their homes and villages. Some of them left the country, while many others fled from areas of armed confrontations to various other cities and regions within Syria...

The country was also subjected to a real drain on its human resources, as more than 300,000 people were killed in the war, and many thousands more were injured, with many left with disabilities. ... Health care was one of the sectors worst affected by the war, which led to the emigration of thousands of doctors and nurses in search of job opportunities in various other parts of the world... Hospitals and health centers were also damaged, and the emergency system suffered from a shortage of staff and the loss of spare parts for ambulances. This is not to mention the breakdown of important medical equipment such as MRIs and CT imaging equipment as a result of the inability to secure parts needed for the operation of these devices.

With regard to medical response plans for disasters, and this is an area in which I worked when I was an employee in the public health sector many years ago ... one of the conditions for developing effective response plans is the existence of a database that includes human resources from doctors of various specializations, nurses and health workers. This has become almost impossible in light of the bleeding of human resources and the difficulty in updating data ...

In Syria, the public health sector is supervised, in theory, by the Ministry of Health, which manages the largest part of health centers, dispensaries, and hospitals, in addition to the emergency system. While each of these parties has a plan to deal with disasters, it lacks coordination with the rest of the parties.

I do not mean to justify the poor response of the public health sector to the earthquake disaster, which it was never equipped to deal with, even though the country is located in an area that has

historically been exposed to many devastating earthquakes ...

As for rescuing those trapped under the rubble, it is, in principle, one of the tasks of the Civil Defense, which in Syria is under the Ministry of Defense, and has never dealt with a disaster of this magnitude. In addition to all of this, the suffocating fuel crisis and the lack of electricity for long hours disrupted communications as a result of many devices being out of service due to the inability to charge their batteries...

The earthquake came as a shock, and it was clear from the first moment that the government's response was delayed as a result of the mentality of waiting for instructions that are supposed to come from someone or somewhere ... Therefore, attempts to rescue those trapped under the rubble was begun by people who lacked both experience and the necessary equipment ...

On the other hand, the popular reaction was wonderful, as tens of thousands of those who lost their homes were housed in public buildings such as mosques and churches, as well as in homes ... Many major contractors donated heavy machinery to participate in removing the rubble, but there was great difficulty in reaching the affected areas. Active participation in the work 24 hours a day also became impossible for the drivers of heavy vehicles, who were not allowed to work more than eight hours a day and unable to hand over the vehicle to anyone else because they are responsible for them in the eyes of the vehicles's owners

The housing problem

In the city of Aleppo, more than 50 buildings collapsed, and hundreds of others were damaged, forcing more than 100,000 people to leave their homes, while only 30,000 were accommodated in state-run buildings ... This happened in a city where 60 percent of the buildings were destroyed during the conflict that has been ongoing for more than ten years... Less than a month before the earthquake, a residential building collapsed in Aleppo and left 16 people dead as a result of the building owner's failure to adhere to either safety rules or the Syrian engineering code. The state's regression in monitoring construction operations is joined with the greed of contractors who do not hesitate to use the worst materials in construction without observing safety conditions ...

In the coastal city of Jableh, dozens of new buildings collapsed, while not a single stone fell from the building of the ancient Roman theater ... The people of Jableh villages, who were displaced from the city, responded with solidarity for those affected by the disaster, but it is impossible for this to continue. The residents of the area's countryside are already complaining of difficult economic conditions, and most of them are unable to provide for their own families' minimum living requirements

Some believed that renting apartments temporarily could be a solution, but speculators took advantage of the crisis and doubled the rents. Rents in the city of Jableh rose from 150,000 pounds per month before the disaster (and this sum already exceeded the monthly income of thousands of Syrians) to one million pounds per month ...

The disaster was followed within one week by a more than 20 percent general rise in food prices ... Unfortunately, the government decided to raise the price of diesel fuel for purposes other than heating, which caused another rise in food prices.

Generalized poverty

There is generalized poverty in the country, with 90 percent of the population living below the official poverty line, and there were huge groups living off the aid sent by family members residing outside Syria after the deterioration of the value of the national currency ... I lived through a period when the exchange rate was four Syrian pounds to the dollar ... Then the national currency situation deteriorated until it reached 45 Syrian pounds to the dollar in 2010; but today, one dollar trades for close to seven thousand pounds.

Before the disaster, the government had taken a decision to set the value of dollars transferred from abroad according to the market price, after it had clung for years to a set price of less than two thousand pounds to the dollar, which paved the way for the emergence of a black market of currency speculators.

The economic situation led to a suffocating crisis. The *Qasioun* newspaper, published by a Stalinist faction, estimated that minimum food costs were the equivalent of 1,441 percent of the minimum wage! Not to mention the burdens of paying house rent, transportation and health care. The United Nations estimates that nearly 14 million Syrians suffer from food insecurity.

The government response

The government's response was haphazard and lacked a clear vision due to the lack of data on both available resources, as well as on the scale of the disaster. However, the Syrians have become accustomed to not relying on the government since it abandoned its social role. Instead, it adopted neoliberal economic policies that gave those with huge wealth and those with influence in the

bureaucratic apparatus an opportunity to reap billions of dollars at the expense of impoverishing large segments of the people.

On the other hand, many reacted to the disaster in a positive spirit, and many civil initiatives were launched to collect cash and in-kind donations and deliver them to the affected areas and to the areas of refuge.

The cost of rebuilding what was destroyed by the earthquake has been estimated at \$30 billion. One of the most important problems that the country will face in the next phase is securing safe and decent shelter for those who have lost their homes. The government put forward the idea of providing loans to those affected, but the value of the proposed loans wouldn't cover the cost of building a single room, even if free land were provided for construction.

Over the past years, the government's construction agencies, which more than 40 years ago were able to build modern infrastructure that included housing complexes, bridges, tunnels, and dams, have been paralyzed. Today, there is no company in the country capable of constructing housing projects that can accommodate all those affected by the destruction. On the other hand, there are various projects involving thousands of housing units that have stalled under the influence of the war and the siege, but they are private properties.

The people's disappointment with the failure of Western countries to provide serious aid to Syria cannot be dismissed under the pretext that this would mean restoring relations with a government that the US and its partners spent billions of dollars to overthrow. It is true that some Arab governments took the initiative to provide some aid, but the amount was small and incomparable to what these same governments provided to help Turkey. On the other hand, there were popular initiatives from many Arab countries that included donations of money, foodstuffs, and clothes.

In short, the situation in Syria is catastrophic, and a global campaign must be launched to demand the lifting of economic sanctions and to stop the interference of foreign powers in Syria's internal affairs.



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