

Situation Assessment



**Failure of the International in dealing with
the earthquake disaster in northwestern Syria**

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February 2023
dimensioncenter.net



Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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Introduction

The Qahraman Maresh earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on February 2023, 6, has killed nearly 41,000 people as of the date of this report, including 1,414 in regime-controlled areas and 4,420 in areas⁽¹⁾ outside the control of the regime. Despite the arrival of massive aid to Turkey, and significant aid to the regime areas, the areas outside the regime's control remained alone with little assistance, as almost no rescue teams or rescue assistance equipment reached them until late in the actual response; moreover, aid convoys, that usually arrive in these areas, stopped during the first three days. Then, the arrival of aid was resumed on the fourth day of the earthquake with only 14 trucks, which were not intended to respond to the earthquake originally. The United Nations has admitted through the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, that it has failed Syrians in northwestern Syria⁽²⁾.

(1) Minister of Health: 1414 deaths and 2357 injuries of the earthquake victims so far, Syrian News Agency (Sana), 2023/02/14: <https://bit.ly/40UcGfA>

(2) Martin Griffiths verified Twitter account, 2023/02/12: <https://bit.ly/3HWazz8>

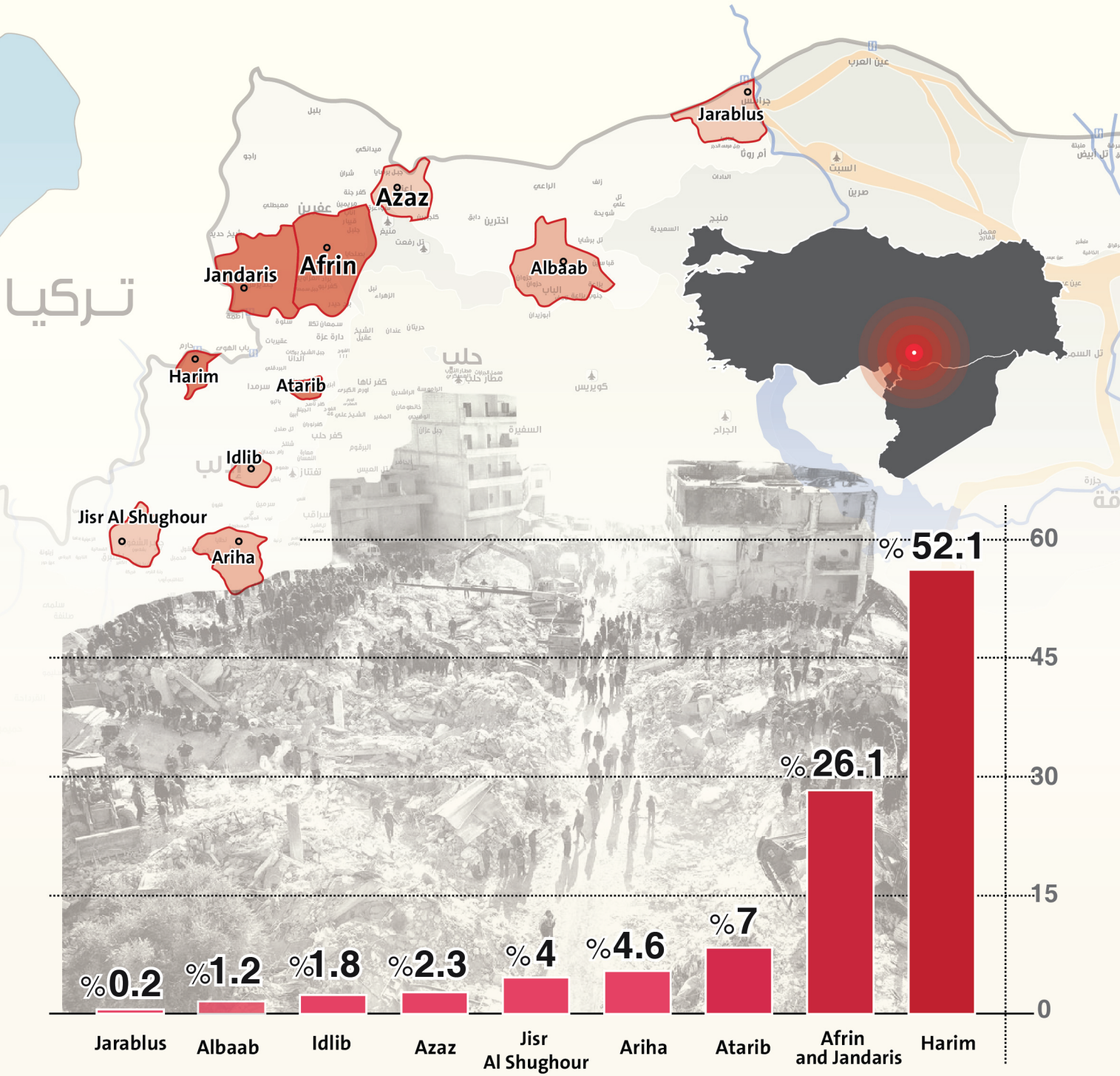


Distribution of earthquake victims in northwestern Syria



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15/02/2023





International Aid and Support Corridor

Since the earthquake, we have witnessed many offers of international support and assistance, especially after the Turkish Interior Minister declared the areas that were affected by the earthquake as fourth-degree disaster areas that require international support. Many countries, then, have begun to send search and rescue teams, as well as a range of assistance relevant to responding to such natural phenomena.

In northwestern Syrian areas, and in complete absence of any kind of external assistance and support, a number of local Syrian organizations and groups, headed by the Civil Defense Organization (White Helmets), began to carry out search and rescue operations with modest and simple capabilities that do not give the opportunity to work more widely than available; while some local organizations and local initiatives were active to secure the basic needs for the survivors of this earthquake within the minimum limits, especially when it comes to a disaster of this type.

While eyes were on the United Nations as a key actor in such circumstances, the organization was almost entirely absent from the relief arena.

What is expected of the United Nations?

The United Nations defines itself as a body that plays an essential and important role in responding to various disasters on different scales⁽³⁾.

The organization was expected to play a key role in its response inside Syria, which hypothetically lacks the possibility of external intervention on the same level as Turkey. The United Nations was expected to carry out mobilization and advocacy campaigns for the Syrian situation in order to urge the main supporters and actors to provide assistance and deal impartially with victims in Syria, regardless of their locations. It was also expected to use the tools legally and logistically available to it to provide support to those affected, including the use of all crossings, and pressure to use exceptional tools commensurate with the special exceptional circumstance.

(3) Roles and Responsibilities of the United Nations System in Disaster Management, Office of Legal Affairs-UN: <https://bit.ly/3xIJEbd>



Unfortunately, none of the expected happened. Contrary to that, we witnessed a suspicious silence by the United Nations until February 12, when the United Nations Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, visited the Syrian side of the Bab al-Hawa crossing (after refusing to enter Syria, under the pretext of not violating the sovereignty of Damascus). Only then, he expressed his “regret that the United Nations disappointed the Syrians and did not meet expectations⁽⁴⁾.”

In the same visit, the United Nations sent 58 trucks of aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, including 14 trucks that crossed on February 10, without clarifying whether this aid was sent specifically to those affected by the earthquake or had been already scheduled to be sent earlier!

Apart from these trucks, the United Nations did not mention any other type of actual aid, other than declarations to allocate \$25 million to those affected by the earthquake, without further explanation⁽⁵⁾.

Politics Before Relief

The United Nations proved once again that politics is more important than humanity, as it seems that the United Nations found in the recent earthquake an opportunity to pursue its demand to work "more across the lines of contact" towards the opposition-controlled areas in north and northwest Syria, in addition to renewing its demand for the provision of additional border crossings, despite all reports that indicate the failure of the United Nations to operate the crossing currently open through Bab al-Hawa, as there was no emergency support to be sent to the areas of northwestern Syria, except for the shy number of (58) trucks sent by the United Nations since the earthquake.

While such a situation seems somewhat unexplained, it could be more realistic if we look back a few months, as major donors have begun "seriously" looking for an alternative to some UN coordination activities, bearing in mind the possibility of not renewing the UN resolution to use Bab al-Hawa as a humanitarian border crossing, especially with the complexities and bureaucracy that usually limit the UN's ability to act in such complex situations.

(4) Syria quake aid held up by hardline group, U.N. says, Reuters, 2023/02/12: <https://reut.rs/3YMkRIM>

(5) UN emergency fund releases an additional US\$25 million to boost earthquake response in Syria, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2023/02/10:



It was remarkable that the United Nations, after the disaster, talked about the need for additional border crossings, despite the fact that the Bab al-Hawa border crossing was not used, and in total disregard of recent reports on the distribution of damaged sites in opposition-controlled areas, where more than 60% of the losses and damage were reported in northwestern Syria alone, with the remaining 40% located in northern Syria easily accessible through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, and then towards northern Aleppo. In fact, it multiplies the gap between the United Nations and the actual affected population.

The international Food Organisation used this regrettable fact to remind the world of the importance of delivering aid through these lines. Corina Fleischer, WFP Regional Director for the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe, stressed “the need to resume and accelerate the delivery of aid across conflict lines from government-controlled areas to opposition areas”; and she did not miss the opportunity to recall the need to “allow the use of additional crossings”, as the official said: “Our stocks are running out and we need access to bring in new stocks,” referring to calls for the reopening of the crossing in the Bab - Assalam Crossing - to northwestern Syria as well⁽⁶⁾.

Hours after these statements about providing assistance to those affected by the earthquake in northern Syria, the Secretary-General of the Syrian National Coalition, Haitham Rahma, accused Fleischer of spreading false and misleading information about the United Nations response to the earthquakes in Syria. Rahma said in a statement: "Fleischer claimed to distribute aid in the liberated areas of northwestern Syria, while the scenes she showed were from the city of Aleppo controlled by the Syrian regime."

As a wave of popular discontent spread towards the UN's failure to perform its supposed role with neutrality, integrity and effectiveness, and to express their criticism of the UN's position, Syrians relapsed the UN flag on the buildings destroyed by the earthquake in the town, saying: “The United Nations left thousands of Syrians to die without assistance.”

(6) UN: Aid reaching earthquake victims in Syria is good but not enough, UN News, 2023/02/10: <https://bit.ly/3lpvwno>

Conclusion

It seems very unfortunate that the United Nations has politicized its humanitarian and relief role and taken advantage of the great plight of the Syrians. The international organization, which over the past years has not been able to name the perpetrators who cause the destruction of hospitals and schools, seems very open to talk about the "generous offer of the President of the Syrian regime" to allow temporary opening of the border crossing to allow support for the same people and the same hospitals and facilities that he himself killed and destroyed directly in front of the UN, as documented by the reports of the Organisation itself!

The United Nations has simply ignored the effects of the Syrian regime's gross violations over the past years; it ignored the needs and feelings of the affected population in northwestern Syria; it exploited a very unfortunate disaster for its political agenda, and it allowed the regime - with its biased policies - to exploit the humanitarian catastrophe for further political and even economic gains.