



Political Rifts Might Slow Relief Efforts After a Massive Earthquake Hits Syria and Turkey; Death Toll Still Rising

Internal and international political rifts could hamper relief efforts in rebel-held parts of northern Syria after parts of Türkiye and Syria were devastated by a series of massive earthquakes. The first quake was a massive 7.8-magnitude earthquake according to the United States Geological Service. Its epicenter was located about 20 miles from Gaziantep, Türkiye. This earthquake was followed by a 6.7 magnitude aftershock about 10 minutes later. The aftershock was just 1 of at least 20 aftershocks that followed the initial quake. The second earthquake, a 7.5 magnitude, struck about 100 miles north. The second quake took place just 6 miles from the surface. Shallow earthquakes cause significantly more damage. So far, over 20,000 deaths and thousands more injured have been reported between the two affected countries. Türkiye has declared a state of emergency for the affected regions.

Northern Syria was hit especially hard by these quakes, as many of the buildings there had already been severely damaged by the nearly decade-long, ongoing civil war. Many of the region's hospitals have also been destroyed in the fighting, leaving the remaining hospitals severely overwhelmed. Cold weather has been hampering rescue efforts and caused intense hardship for those left without a home. 70-80% of the people living in these areas were already refugees from the civil war, and are now facing homelessness once again.

Syria has been party to an ongoing civil war turned quasi-proxy-war between the United States, which backs Kurdish rebel groups, and Russia, which backs Bashar al-Assad. Many of the rebel-held areas are the ones that were hit the hardest because of the existing damage from over a decade of war. The internal politics and restrictions on aid to rebel-held areas will make the recovery effort complicated. Rebel-held areas will not receive support from the Assad government to help the recovery effort, and organizations working in rebel-held areas are not allowed to work in government-held areas. The Syrian government considers these organizations terrorists for working with rebel groups. So far, only one United Nations convoy carrying aid has made it to Northwest Syria. The one route for aid into rebel held areas, the Bab-al-Hawa crossing, was damaged by the earthquake. The Bab-al-Hawa crossing became the only route for aid from Turkey into northwest Syria in 2020. Syrian refugees have not been allowed to cross into Türkiye since 2015. Existing sanctions the United States has levied against Syria for past human rights violations have also complicated the entry of aid into Syria.

The United States has been at odds with Bashar al-Assad and his regime since 2011 when U.S. President Barack Obama called for Assad to resign during the Arab Spring. In 2013, Obama famously described Assad's use of chemical weapons on his people as a "red line" that would draw U.S. retaliation. When Assad used sarin gas later that year, Obama did not keep the promise to retaliate. Instead, sanctions were levied against Syria. Because of this, the United States has been extremely cautious about working with the Assad regime. During a press briefing Monday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price expressed

that the United States would help all those affected by the disaster, but would not provide humanitarian aid directly to the Syrian regime. He also told reporters that "it would be quite ironic—if not even counterproductive—for us to reach out to a government that has brutalized its people over a dozen years now—gassing them, slaughtering them, being responsible for much of the suffering that they have endured." In these comments, the United States seems to indicate that they will not work with the Assad regime during the search and rescue operations, as well as the recovery to follow. Other nations have increased their funding for search and rescue efforts.

The dire situations in northwest Syria demands an immediate and drastic response. The existing political rifts will create many unnecessary obstacles for much-needed aid to flow into Syria. Slowing aid will only cause further death and suffering in an area that has already been through so much. In the interest of human life, it is important that the US sanctions be suspended to allow aid to flow more easily into Syria. This aid must be subject to oversight to assure it is being used properly. There also needs to be an effort made by the United States and international community to open up more pathways for aid from Türkiye into Northwest Syria and allow refugees from the area to seek shelter in Turkey. These policies must be enacted quickly to ensure that as many lives are saved as possible.