

Research Briefing

15 February 2023

Number 9727

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Earthquake in Syria and Turkey

February 2023

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Summary

This is a developing situation. The briefing should be read as correct at time of publication

On 6 February 2023, south-eastern Turkey and northern Syrian were hit by the most powerful earthquake in the region for over 80 years. This was quickly followed by a further earthquake and hundreds of aftershocks.

While the situation is still developing, widespread destruction has been reported. At 18 February 2023, [more than 46,000 people have died](#) and this figure is likely to increase. The natural disaster has exacerbated the high level of humanitarian need in the region, with many Syrian refugees concentrated in the 10 affected provinces of southern Turkey, and Syria suffering from over a decade of civil war.

This briefing summarises the current situation, local and international responses, and the challenges of organising aid for Syria in the context of sanctions against the Assad regime, limited cross-border aid corridors, and the damage caused the country's civil war.

Difficulties for delivering aid

In contrast to Turkey, where a central and unified state is able to use its infrastructure and social protection systems to respond to the earthquakes, [a decade of civil war in Syria](#) has caused extensive damage to infrastructure. The country is divided into hostile areas, and [President Bashar al-Assad's regime is internationally isolated](#).

In north west Syria, opposition groups control many of the worst-affected regions. Before the earthquakes, [the region had a high level of humanitarian need and displacement](#), and the UN said its [funding for the area was already overstretched](#).

Delivering aid is complicated by attitudes to the Syrian regime. Following the [outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011](#), the country was expelled from the Arab League, and the UK and others applied additional sanctions against the regime following to its violent response to protests and [breaking of chemical weapons conventions](#).

While the Assad Government has said it stands ready to deliver aid to all of Syria, [the regime has a history of aid diversion](#) and many governments, including the [United States](#) and [United Kingdom](#), have said they will not work with the regime. They have [emphasised that although there are sanctions, these have humanitarian exemptions](#). The [US expanded these exemptions on 9 February](#), and the UK on [the 15 February](#).

There are [now three cross-border crossings into northwest Syria](#), up from one (Bab al-Hawa) on the day of the earthquakes. Due to earthquake damage, Bab al-Hawa [could not be re-opened until three days after the disaster](#).

The UN, Turkey, local groups and NGOs such as the White Helmets are expected to [lead the response in north west Syria](#).

Local responses

In Turkey, the [Government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has declared a state of emergency](#) and announced the deployment of additional personnel and emergency funding to the 10 affected regions. [Political opponents have criticised his response as too slow](#).

In Syria, most aid is likely to be sent via the UN and independent NGOs. Opposition groups in the north west have also called for aid, and [the White Helmets are providing the immediate response](#).

International response

Turkey's Government [states more than 60 countries have sent aid and assistance](#). 2,600 foreign personnel [have been deployed](#).

The [UN has released US\\$50 million in emergency funding](#). It has launched a US\$397 million [aid appeal for Syria](#) and US\$1 billion [appeal for Turkey](#). The UN emphasises [only 48% of its pre-existing humanitarian funding request for north west Syria has been met](#).

The [UK provided an initial £8 million in immediate assistance](#), including the deployment of search and rescue teams, and an additional [£3.8 in funding to the Syrian White Helmets](#). A [further £25 million](#) was pledged on 15 February.

[The United States](#) and [European Union](#) have also announced emergency assistance and funding, as has [NATO](#). The [EU will host a donor conference](#) to mobilise funds for Turkey and Syria in March 2023.

UK charities and earthquake appeals

The UK's Disaster Emergency Committee has [launched an emergency appeal](#). The UK Government will match up to £5 million in donations.

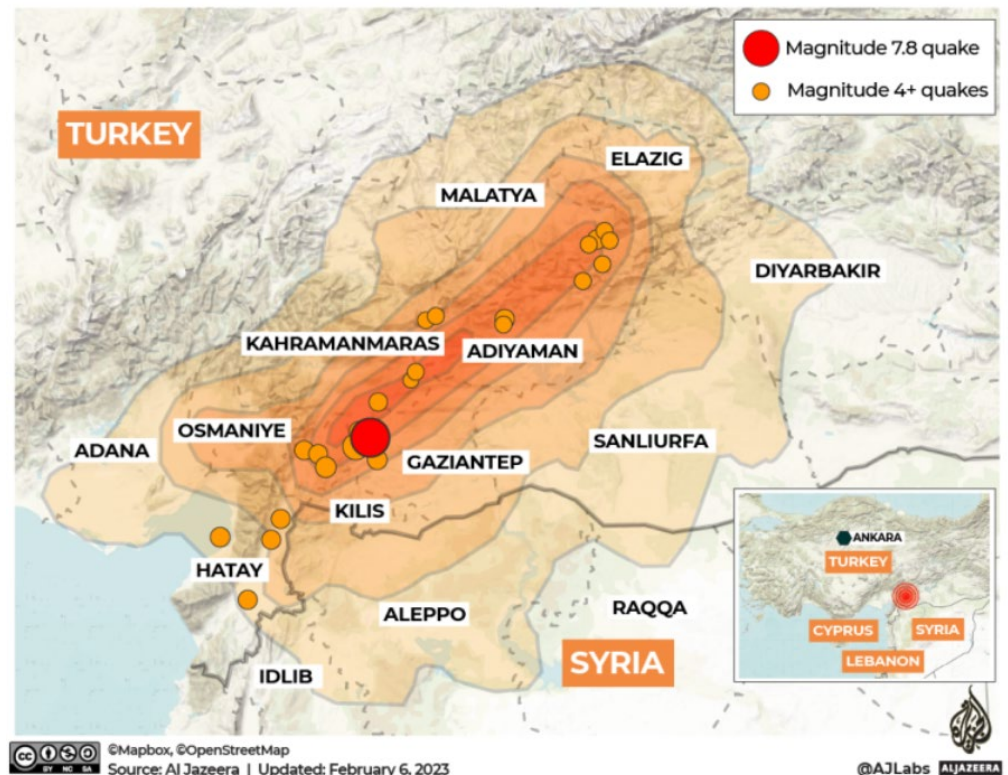
The Charity Commission has [issued guidance on safe giving to support the relief efforts](#). Individuals can check if an organisation is registered online:

- England and Wales Charity Commission, [Search the charity register](#)
- Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, [Search the register](#)
- Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, [Search the register](#)

1

Current situation

On 6 February 2023, [two earthquakes and hundreds of aftershocks occurred in the Gaziantep, Ekinozu and Kahramanmaras provinces](#) of south eastern Turkey. This impacted both southern Turkey and northern Syria, including the Assad-controlled City of Aleppo and the opposition-held region around Idlib.¹



Source: Al-Jazeera, [Major earthquakes kill thousands](#), 6 February 2023, [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

The full impact of the earthquakes and their ongoing effects are not yet established. On 11 February, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, Martin Griffiths, said the [total number of deaths may be in the region of 50,000](#).²

Below is the situation as of 18 February 2023:

- **Casualties:** The number of people killed stands at over 46,000 though this figure is likely to rise further. According to Turkey's Government,

¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), [Türkiye: Earthquakes, southern Türkiye on 6 February 2023](#), 6 February 2023, provides a map. All sources accessed 8-10, 13-14 February 2023.

² [Turkey-Syria earthquake death toll expected to more than double, says UN aid chief](#), Sky News [Online], 12 February 2023

40,642 people have been killed and 108,000 injured. Authorities in Syria have confirmed 5,800 deaths and 8,100 injured (to 14/15 February).³

- **Homelessness:** An estimated 300,000 people across the region are left homeless. More than 12,000 buildings in Turkey have collapsed, and 9,000 have been destroyed or partially destroyed in Syria.⁴
- **Infrastructure damage:** In north west Syria, the UN estimates that 120 schools have been destroyed, and 57 hospitals partially damaged or forced to suspend their services.⁵ The World Health Organization (WHO) reports 15 hospitals in Turkey suffered heavy or partial damage.⁶
- **Number affected:** The UN estimates around 15 million people in Turkey and 8.8 million in Syria have been affected.⁷
- **Value of financial damage in Turkey:** Damage has been estimated at between US\$50 billion and US\$84 billion. The ten affected Turkish regions represent 15% of the country's population and 10% of its Gross National Product.⁸ There are no estimates for Syria at present.

Syrian refugees in Turkey

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees displaced abroad due to the country's civil war: Around 3.7 million (69%).⁹ In some of the affected provinces, 50% of the population are refugees.¹⁰

Past Turkish, European, and World Bank support has meant the [majority of Syrian refugees are now housed in towns and cities rather than camps](#).¹¹

However, before the earthquakes there were reports of increasing poverty and more people returning to Syria.¹² These returns are partly linked to the economic challenges that Turkey faces, with inflation [reaching a 24-year high](#)

³ Relief Web, [Turkey/Syria: earthquakes—Feb 2023](#), accessed 20 February 2023 and [Death toll tops 5,800](#), Daily Sabah [online], 14 February 2023

⁴ [Death toll rises, rescues dwindle in earthquake aftermath](#), AP News, 10 February 2023 and Relief Web, [Turkey/Syria: earthquakes—Feb 2023](#), accessed 20 February 2023

⁵ UNOCHA, [North west Syria: Situation report](#), 13 February 2023

⁶ WHO, [Flash appeal earthquake response](#), 12 February 2023, p2

⁷ UN, [Aid convoys will keep crossing into Syria \[...\]](#), 17 February 2023

⁸ [Earthquake could cost Turkey up to \\$84 billion—business group](#), Reuters [online], 13 February 2023

⁹ UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), [Türkiye factsheet](#), September 2022 and [Southeast Türkiye: Provincial breakdown](#), June 2022

¹⁰ UN, [Türkiye, Syria quake latest: full scale of disaster still unfolding. UN humanitarian warn](#), 7 February 2023

¹¹ World Bank, [10 years on, Turkey continues its support for an ever-growing number of Syrian refugees](#), 22 June 2021

¹² Erdoğan [unveils plan to send 1 million Syrians back as anti-refugee settlement escalates](#), Al-Monitor [online], 4 May 2022

[of 85% in October 2022](#),¹³ and the intentions of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to [resettle one million refugees in northern Syria](#).¹⁴

A September 2022 report by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that [56% of refugees \(of all nationalities\) were able to access essential services in Turkey](#), 65% were able to access health services and half could access education.¹⁵

Existing humanitarian situation in Syria

Prior to the earthquake, [around 4.1 million people were dependent on humanitarian assistance in north western Syria](#), according to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). This is around 84% of the region's population. Around 2.9 million (63%), were internally displaced.¹⁶

In recent months, the region has [suffered from a cholera outbreak and heavy rains and snows](#).¹⁷

The UNOCHA says [the existing humanitarian response for the region was already "largely overstretched."](#) with a funding gap of 48% in the last quarter of 2022 (US\$371 million being required, out of US\$802 million).¹⁸

To February 2023, cross-border UN aid to north-western Syria came through only one border crossing with Turkey, at Bab al-Hawa.¹⁹ The earthquake caused the crossing to be temporarily shut due to damage. See below, page 13, for more.

A decade of conflict in Syria has also caused extensive damage to the country's infrastructure, including housing and hospitals, a severe weakening of social protection systems, and challenges in access for aid organisations and NGOs.

In September 2021, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimated that [45% of the 1,800 available public health centres were not fully functioning](#), and that half the population of north west Syria was dependent on external, cross-border health assistance.²⁰

¹³ [Facing poverty and hostility, refugees in Turkey mull return to war-torn Syria](#), VOA [online], 9 December 2022

¹⁴ As above

¹⁵ UNHCR, [Inter-agency protection needs assessment analysis, round 6](#), September 2022, pp4-5

¹⁶ UNOCHA, [Northwest Syria situation report](#), updated 6 February 2023

¹⁷ UNOCHA and WHO, [Whole of Syria cholera outbreak situation report no.11](#), 15 January 2023 and UNOCHA, [Severe winter weather hits north-west Syria](#), update 3, 25 January 2023

¹⁸ UNOCHA, [Northwest Syria situation report](#), updated 6 February 2023

¹⁹ CSIS, [The implications of the UN cross-border vote in Syria](#), 4 June 2021

²⁰ IRC, [11 years of violence against health care in Syria](#), March 2022, pp23

Secondary effects of the earthquakes

While the immediate focus is on saving lives, the earthquakes are likely to exacerbate existing challenges in Syria, increasing humanitarian need and food insecurity, reducing access to services due to infrastructure damage, and leading to further population displacement. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has described the situation as “an emergency within an emergency.”²¹

In Turkey, extensive damage to infrastructure and buildings have been reported. Both energy and internet communications have also been affected.²² Winter conditions are likely to make the situation worse.

In its flash appeal on the earthquake, the WHO says main future health threats include hypothermia due to exposure, increased risk of infectious diseases (including cholera, measles, and Covid-19), malnutrition, gender-based violence, and increased maternal and child mortality through disrupted access to services.²³

Regularly updated resources on the situation

- Relief Web, [Türkiye/Syria earthquakes—February 2023](#). Collates a range of resources, reports and press releases from countries and NGOs relating to the humanitarian situation, including the [UN’s funding appeal for Syria](#).

2

Local responses

Government of Turkey

Although Turkey has a developed response and emergency system, this has been strained by the scale of the earthquakes.

The [Government has declared a three-month state of emergency](#) in the 10 affected provinces to aid relief efforts. A state of emergency allows the president and cabinet to bypass parliament to enact laws or to limit certain

²¹ IRC, [Earthquakes near Turkish-Syrian border deepen crisis](#), 8 February 2023

²² [Deadly quake damages energy infrastructure, major port](#), Daily Sabah [online], 6 February 2023

²³ WHO, [Flash appeal earthquake response](#), 12 February 2023, p4

rights. It is due to expire shortly before parliamentary and presidential elections, which must be held by June 2023.

The last state of emergency, introduced following a failed coup in 2016, lasted for two years.²⁴

The Government has faced criticism for reportedly [suspending Twitter access for two days](#), and opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has accused Erdoğan of leading a delayed response to the earthquakes. The President has criticised the use of the natural disaster for political campaigning.²⁵

Turkey's Government [has also announced US\\$5.3 billion in financial support for the affected regions](#), the deployment of 53,000 search and rescue personnel, and tents and humanitarian aid to the region.²⁶

Turkey's Government is expected to lead the disaster response in those areas of northern Syria where it has a presence (see below, pages 12 to 13, for territorial control in Syria).²⁷

Assad and opposition areas in Syria

The Syrian regime led by Assad [has called for international assistance to the country](#), and criticised the external sanctions applied against it. The regime has said it will provide aid to Syrians throughout the country but has not specified how this will be achieved given the conflict.²⁸

The diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime, the closure of many of the aid corridors to opposition-controlled areas, and the damage to Syrian infrastructure complicates the delivery and organisation of aid. The issue of sanctions and cross-border aid is discussed below, section 4 (page 12).

In opposition-controlled north west Syria, jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its affiliated Salvation Government run Idlib province. They have said [they do not have the capacity to respond to the disaster](#) and called for immediate assistance.²⁹

The Syrian Civil Defence, [known as the White Helmets, has played an important role](#). It is a group of around 3,000 volunteer first responders and was formed in the early stages of Syria's civil war. It now provides essential

²⁴ [Erdoğan declares state of emergency for Turkey quake zone](#), Reuters [online], 7 February 2023

²⁵ [Twitter restricted in Turkey two days after quake, says NetBlocks, Reuters](#) [online], 8 February 2023; [Turkey earthquake: Erdoğan "responsible for this" Opposition leader says](#), BBC News [online], 8 February 2023

²⁶ Presidency of Türkiye, ["We have decided to declare a state of emergency..."](#), 7 February 2023

²⁷ HC Deb, [7 February 2023](#), c771

²⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Damascus trumpets foreign aid it says will reach "all Syrians."](#) 7 February 2023

²⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian militant group HTS responds to Idlib earthquake](#), 7 February 2023

services in north western Syria, such as firefighting and bomb disposal. The group is non-affiliated and does not work in regime-controlled areas.³⁰

3 International response

International support for Syria is complicated by the diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime: The US, European states, and many in the Middle East have long called for him to stand down as Syria's president and do not engage with the regime directly. Most aid will be sent and organised by the UN and NGOs.

United Nations and World Bank

The [UN has released US\\$50 million from its central Emergency Response Fund](#) to provide life-saving assistance in the region.³¹

On 14 February, the [UN launched a US\\$397 million aid appeal](#), with the aim of supporting 5 million Syrians for three months.³²

For Turkey, the UN [launched a US\\$1 billion appeal on 16 February](#). This will assist 5 million people, including refugees, in Turkey for three months.³³

The World Health Organization has released an initial US\$16 million.³⁴

The [World Food Programme says it will require US\\$46 million](#) over the next three to four months to address immediate humanitarian needs in the region.³⁵

The World Bank has announced US\$1.8 billion in assistance for relief and recovery efforts in Turkey. It is conducting a further assessment of need.³⁶

United Kingdom

In its initial pledge of £8 million, the UK Government said it would provide tents, blankets, and hygiene kits to meet the needs of 15,000 people and

³⁰ [Who are the White Helmets?](#), ABC News [online], 8 February 2023

³¹ UNOCHA, [UN emergency fund releases additional US\\$25 million to boost earthquake response](#), 10 February 2023

³² [Guterres calls on countries to fully fund \\$397 million quake appeal for Syria](#), 14 February 2023

³³ UN, [UN launches \\$1 billion to scale up aid operations in Turkey](#), 16 February 2023

³⁴ WHO, [WHO sends health supplies to reach 400,000 people impacted by earthquakes](#), 10 February 2023

³⁵ World Food Programme, [WFP Türkiye and Syria earthquake response, report 1](#), 8 February 2023

³⁶ World Bank, [World Bank announces initial US\\$1.78 billion](#), 9 February 2023

other support.³⁷ It has provided an additional £3.8 million to the White Helmets (Syrian Civil Defence).³⁸ On 15 February, the Government announced £25 million in new overseas aid to support further emergency relief and support for UN and other agencies in Syria, and the Turkish Government.³⁹

The [UK has also sent a team of 77 search and rescue specialists](#) and search dogs to Gaziantep, in Turkey. An emergency medical team will also conduct an assessment on the ground,⁴⁰ and a field hospital has been deployed.⁴¹

The UK has also helped transport a NATO Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team to support a [NATO plan to establish shelters in Turkey](#).⁴²

The Government says it is providing the support requested by the Turkish authorities and would continue to assess the situation and [“stands ready to provide further long-term assistance as needed.”](#)

In north west Syria, [the UK has provided funding to the White Helmets for its search and rescue response](#). UK aid is also directed through NGOs and the UN. In the last year, the UK provided £2.3 million to the White Helmets and an additional £0.8 million for frontline search and rescue operations.⁴³

UK aid to Syria, 2011-2021

In response to the civil war in Syria and rising humanitarian need, the UK has provided a total of £3.8 billion in official development assistance to Syria from 2011 to 2022.⁴⁴ The level of annual bilateral aid spending peaked in 2016, at £352 million, and fell from £181 million in 2020 to £91 million in 2021.⁴⁵

For wider UK aid to Syria, see the Commons Library briefing, [The Syrian civil war: Timeline and statistics](#), section 3.1, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s [UK’s humanitarian aid response to Syria crisis: Factsheet](#), updated February 2023.

Speaking in February 2023, the Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, said [funding allocations for 2023 have not yet been made](#).⁴⁶

³⁷ FCDO, [UK sends life saving support to earthquake hit Turkey and Syria](#), 8 February 2023

³⁸ FCDO, [UK commits additional funding to the White Helmets](#), 9 February 2023

³⁹ FCDO, [UK commits major new aid package to Turkey-Syria earthquake response](#), 15 February 2023

⁴⁰ FCDO, [Plane carrying UK search and rescue team arrives in Turkey](#), 7 February 2023

⁴¹ Ministry of Defence and FCDO, [UK sending medical aid and specialist equipment](#), 9 February 2023

⁴² Ministry of Defence, [UK leading NATO’s response to Turkey earthquakes](#), 17 February 2023 and NATO, [NATO stands with Turkey](#), 16 February 2023

⁴³ FCDO, [Plane carrying UK search and rescue team arrives in Turkey](#), 7 February 2023

⁴⁴ PQ 21283 [[Syria: Development aid](#)], 28 June 2022

⁴⁵ FCDO, [Statistics on international development, 2021](#), November 2022, Table A4b

⁴⁶ HC Deb, [7 February 2023](#), c773

Russia and Iran

Both Russia and Iran provide direct military and financial support for the Assad regime and have a military presence in Syria. More detail on this is provided in section 2 of the Commons Library briefing, [Syria and its civil war](#).

In response to the earthquakes, Russia has mobilised its troops already deployed in Syria to assist and has deployed further assistance to Turkey.⁴⁷ Iran says it stands ready to support both and has sent aid to Syria.⁴⁸

European Union and United States

The [European Union has announced €6.5 million](#) (£5.6 million) in emergency humanitarian assistance: €3 million for Turkey and the remainder for Syria, as well as aid in kind such as shelters and deployment of specialist personnel.⁴⁹

This followed a request from the Syrian and Turkish authorities to activate the [EU Civil Protection Mechanism](#) for search and rescue teams, shelter, and medicine.⁵⁰

In Syria, aid will be sent via UN agencies and NGOs, and some existing humanitarian projects will be refocused.⁵¹

To 13 February, EU countries had offered 1,600 rescuers and 100 search dogs.⁵²

The European Commission has announced [it will organise a donors' conference](#) for Syria and Turkey to mobilise funding, to be held in March.⁵³

The [United States has deployed a team to assess the situation](#) and provide search and rescue capacity in Turkey. It has also re-focused efforts of some existing humanitarian work,⁵⁴ and announced US\$185 million to address urgent humanitarian needs.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ [Russia sending aid to Turkey, Syria after devastating earthquake](#), The Moscow Times [online], 7 February 2023

⁴⁸ [Iran FM vows to help quake-hit Syria, Turkey](#), Tehran Times [online], 7 February 2023

⁴⁹ European Commission, [Earthquake: EU mobilises emergency help](#), 8 February 2023

⁵⁰ European Commission, [European Civil Protection and Humanitarian aid operations](#)

⁵¹ European Commission, [Earthquake: EU mobilises emergency help](#), 8 February 2023

⁵² EU ECHO, [EU mobilises more emergency assistance for Syria and Turkey](#), 13 February 2023

⁵³ European Commission, [European Commission and Swedish presidency of the council will organise a donors' conference](#), 8 February 2023

⁵⁴ USAID, [The US' response to Türkiye /Syria earthquakes](#), updated 9 February 2023

⁵⁵ US State Department, [US announces additional earthquake relief](#), 19 February 2023

Response of Arab states to Assad

Direct engagement between the Syrian regime of President Assad and many Arab states remains rare: Following the outbreak of conflict in the country in 2011, Syria was expelled from the Arab League and [many leaders called for Assad to stand down](#).⁵⁶

The Arab League is an alliance of Arab states across the Middle East and North Africa and seeks to support collaboration between its members.

The leaders of the three Arab Gulf states that have re-established relations with Syria (Bahrain, Oman, and UAE) have had direct contact with Assad since earthquake, and pledged aid and relief. Lebanon and Iraq have also sent aid to Syria.⁵⁷

Qatar has pledged aid to affected areas in Turkey and Syria without stating which groups would receive the aid (Qatar backs the Syrian opposition), while Kuwait has pledged aid for Turkey.⁵⁸

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, has called the Turkish President to convey his condolences, but has not been in contact with Assad as the two countries do not have diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia has activated its aid response for both Turkey and Syria, which will reportedly reach all Syrians "regardless of their location."⁵⁹

4

Getting aid to affected areas in Syria

Division of Syria into hostile areas

More than a decade of conflict in Syria has divided the country into hostile areas. The Assad regime controls most of the country, but the northern regions are controlled by a variety of armed and opposition groups:

- **The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces** hold substantial areas in north east Syria (around 20-25% of the country), where a small number of US forces are also based.
- **Turkish-backed forces** hold some narrow strips around the Turkish border in the north.

⁵⁶ For more, see section 3.3 of the Commons Library briefing, [Syria's civil war: A future under Assad?](#)

⁵⁷ BBC Monitoring, [Damascus trumpets foreign aid it says will reach "all Syrians."](#) 7 February 2023

⁵⁸ [Gulf countries rush earthquake aid to Turkey, Syria](#), Al-Monitor [online], 6 February 2023

⁵⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Gulf countries in spotlight over earthquake aid to Syria](#), 8 February 2023

- **Idlib, in north west Syria**, is controlled by several rival opposition groups. These include the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (considered a terrorist group).⁶⁰

In the Syrian north west, the Turkish Government is expected to take the lead in coordinating a response, alongside the UN. The [region also receives aid from the Turkish Red Crescent](#) and NGOs such as the White Helmets ([Syrian civil defence](#)) active there.⁶¹

Humanitarian aid corridor to northwest Syria

Bab al-Hawa border crossing

In 2014, the [UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), which established four crossing points for UN agencies and humanitarian partners to deliver aid to Syria, alongside those already in use.⁶²

At the UN Security Council, [Russia in particular has subsequently blocked the renewal of three of the crossings](#) and has instead called for sanctions against Syria to be lifted.⁶³ Vetoes have meant that only one of the crossings remains open: Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkey-Syrian border, near Idlib.

The [border crossing was renewed by the UN Security Council](#) in January 2023 for six months.⁶⁴ However, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes [the crossing was closed due to damage](#), halting the delivery of UN aid to one of the worst-affected areas.⁶⁵

On 9 February, three days after the earthquakes, [the first UN aid convoy reached the region](#).⁶⁶

Calls for additional UN corridors and alternative routes

On 12 February, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, Martin Griffiths, said that “we have so far failed the people in north west Syria,” who “felt abandoned” due to the relative lack of aid delivered.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Chatham House, [Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria](#), November 2020, p4.

⁶¹ [Is Russia about to block a key aid route to north west Syria?](#), New Humanitarian [online], 27 June 2022

⁶² UN, [With millions of Syrians in need, UN adopts resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), 14 July 2014

⁶³ [Is Russia about to block a key aid route to north west Syria?](#), New Humanitarian [online], 27 June 2022

⁶⁴ UN, [Adopting Resolution 2672 \(2023\)](#), 9 January 2023

⁶⁵ [Quake halts UN cross-border aid to Syria](#), Reuters [online], 7 February 2023

⁶⁶ UN, [First UN convoy reaches Syria's northwest since disaster](#), 9 February 2023

⁶⁷ [Rescuers denounce aid “failure” in Syria's devastated northwest](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 12 February 2023

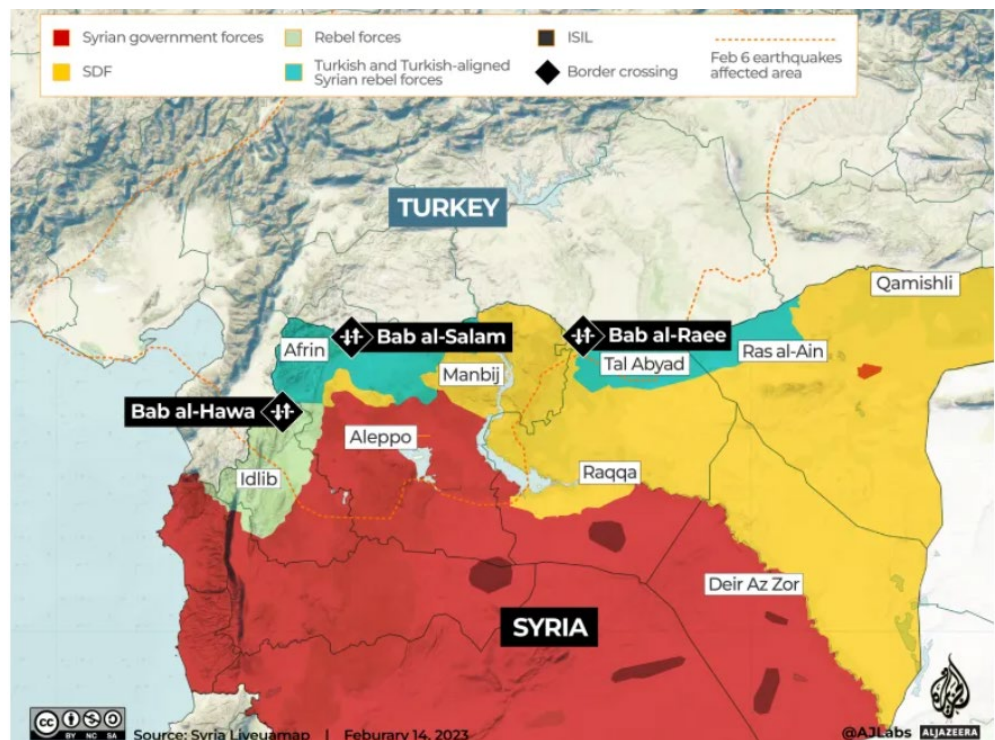
On the same day, the US called for an urgent vote at the UN Security Council to authorise additional UN corridors for northwest Syria. These corridors would allow additional aid to the region without requiring the permission of the Syrian regime led by Assad.⁶⁸

While it is possible for aid to be sent through Assad-controlled Damascus via the UN and other neutral agencies, there is a [history of aid being diverted by the regime](#).⁶⁹ On 17 February, an International Red Cross/Crescent official said that aid deliveries to the Syrian northwest via Damascus had been blocked.⁷⁰

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north east have pledged to facilitate the delivery of aid. It's been reported the [US will fly aid to Qamishli, a Syrian city controlled by the SDF](#), where it will be transported by land to the affected region.⁷¹

Establishment of further corridors, 13 February

On 13 February, the UN said President Assad agreed to open two further crossing points into northwest Syria from Turkey for an initial period of three months. These are at Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra'ee (see below map).⁷²



⁶⁸ [US pushes for UN vote on aid routes into earthquake-ravaged Syria](#), Al-Monitor [online], 13 February 2023

⁶⁹ CSIS, [How the Assad regime systematically diverts tens of millions in aid](#), 20 October 2021

⁷⁰ UN, [Aid convoys will keep crossing into Syria \[...\]](#), 17 February 2023

⁷¹ [US prepares to fly aid to Syria with Kurdish help](#), The Wall Street Journal [online], 8 February 2022

⁷² UN, [Statement by the Secretary-General on opening of crossing points](#), 13 February 2023

Source: Al-Jazeera, [Turkey-Syria earthquake live](#), 14 February 2023, [CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

The decision to open the corridors has been welcomed by the UN, but some analysts have criticised the slow pace of its response, and argued the UN instead prioritised managing its relations with the governments of Syria and Turkey.⁷³

Engagement and pressure on the Assad regime

In its initial response to the earthquakes, the Assad regime did not endorse greater cross-border access from Turkey into non-regime-controlled areas, arguing all aid should be sent via regime-controlled Damascus.⁷⁴

On 10 February 2023, however, Syrian state media reported that the government approved aid delivery across the frontlines.⁷⁵

This proposal been complicated by what one UN spokesperson described as “approval issues,” with the Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham armed group in Idlib. The group opposed aid from regime-controlled areas, arguing that the Assad regime is seeking to use the crisis to increase its legitimacy.⁷⁶

While the German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, has called upon Russia to put pressure on the Syrian regime to open further corridors, US or European direct engagement with the Syrian regime is unlikely.⁷⁷ On 6 February 2023, US [State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, said:](#)

Now that its people [Syrians] are suffering even more, we’re going to continue doing what has proven effective over the course of the past dozen years or so: providing significant amounts of humanitarian assistance to partners on the ground. These partners, who unlike the Syrian regime, are there to help the people rather than brutalize them.⁷⁸

On 13 February 2023, Russian Government Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Russia was “not putting pressure on the legitimate leadership” of Syria and that arrangements for the provision of aid should be resolved through contact with the Assad regime.⁷⁹

⁷³ [For Syria, aid is “too little, too late.”](#) Politico [online], 13 February 2023

⁷⁴ UN, [Bassam Sabbagh \(Syria\) on the situation in Syria](#), 6 February 2023

⁷⁵ [Syrian Govt approves aid delivery across frontlines](#), Al-Awsat [online], 10 February 2023

⁷⁶ BBC Monitoring, [Syrian rebels reject quake aid via government areas](#), 10 February 2023 and [Syria quake aid held up by hardline groups, UN says](#), Reuters [online] 12 February 2023

⁷⁷ [Germany calls to allow entry of aid to opposition areas in Syria](#), Middle East Monitor [online], 8 February 2023

⁷⁸ US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 6 February 2023

⁷⁹ [Russia makes great efforts to help Syria after earthquake—Kremlin](#), TASS [online], 13 February 2023

Sanctions against the Assad regime

Many countries, including the US, UK and the European Union have increased sanctions against the Assad regime since the outbreak of civil war and the regime's violent response to protests in 2011.⁸⁰ There are no UN sanctions against the regime, due to opposition from Russia and China.

These sanctions include limits on some financial transactions but [include exemptions for food and medicine](#). While some NGOs have reported challenges in transferring money or arranging Syria-related bank accounts, the UK and others have defended the use of sanctions as means to put pressure on Assad and ensure the regime's accountability.⁸¹

In response to questions in Parliament on easing sanctions following the February 2023 earthquakes, the UK Government [emphasised its sanctions have exemptions for humanitarian support](#).⁸²

China has been among those calling for the US to lift sanctions against Syria.⁸³

On 9 February, the [US Treasury announced a further exemption for humanitarian aid to Syria](#) in response to the earthquake, which will be in place for 180 days (6 months).⁸⁴

This was followed by the UK on 15 February, [which issued two general licences to acquire, supply or deliver petroleum products and related financial services and funds](#) for the exclusive purpose of facilitating humanitarian assistance in relation to earthquake relief.⁸⁵

The licences are valid for six months.⁸⁶

Further reading on Syria's civil war and organising aid

- Brookings Institute, [Northwestern Syria needs humanitarian assistance. Getting there must be a priority](#), 8 February 2023

⁸⁰ Commons Library, [Syria and its civil war: A future under Assad?](#), section 5

⁸¹ As above, section 5

⁸² HL Deb, [6 February 2023](#), c968

⁸³ [China calls on US to lift sanctions on Syria](#), China Daily [online], 9 February 2023

⁸⁴ US Department of the Treasury, [Treasury issues general licence 23 to aid in earthquake disaster relief efforts](#), 9 February 2023

⁸⁵ Department for International Trade and Department for Business and Trade, [New general trade license Syria sanctions](#), 15 February 2023

⁸⁶ FCDO, [UK takes steps to facilitate further aid flow into Syria](#), 15 February 2023

- BBC Monitoring, [Explainer: Syria's borders, ports and airports—how will aid get through?](#), 10 February 2023. BBC Monitoring is accessible to Commons Library users via the [Library catalogue](#)
- Commons Library, [The Syrian civil war: Timeline and statistics](#), September 2022. Timeline of events since 2011 and a summary of the humanitarian situation.
- Commons Library, [Syria and its civil war: A future under Assad?](#), November 2021. The state of the civil war, debates on sanctions, and the position of Assad.
- US Institute for Peace, [Enormous earthquakes exacerbate Syria's humanitarian crisis](#), 7 February 2023
- CSIS, [Earthquake may deepen Syria's divides](#), 7 February 2023

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