

Syria/Turkey Earthquakes: How Has Vital Aid to Worst-Hit Areas Been Restricted or Blocked?



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Syria/Turkey Earthquakes: How Has Vital Aid to Worst-Hit Areas Been Restricted or Blocked?

International law obliges the parties to a conflict to allow and facilitate the passage of aid as long as they are unable to assist the civilian population, especially under large-scale humanitarian disasters and limited available resources



At dawn on 6 February 2023, two large-magnitude [earthquakes](#) and a series of aftershocks hit several parts of Syria. The tremor took the lives of thousands, rendered scores more injured, and caused widespread devastation. However, the deadly impact of the earthquakes failed to urge the expected response from the parties in the Syrian conflict.

A disaster of such scale should have prompted these parties to facilitate or at least warrant safe and rapid humanitarian assistance deliveries to the worst hit areas. Instead, the government of Syria (GOS)—based in Damascus, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)—affiliated with the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)—led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have obstructed the passage of aid into the region from crossline routes. The restrictions and deliberate delays led to poor response and unnecessary deaths.

These parties continued to impede relief and rescue efforts despite local demands for faster and more inclusive responses as survivors struggled for non-existent lifesaving resources. We Exist, a Syrian civil society advocacy alliance operating in Europe, [urged](#) the International Community to send search and rescue teams and deliver aid to all affected areas across Syria. Additionally, the alliance demanded the use of every possible route to rescue and channel aid to the affected population throughout the country.

Voicing similar demands, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) and 137 other Syrian civil society organizations [called on](#) concerned entities to take action to guarantee that all quake-hit areas, without exception, have access to relief operations and humanitarian aid and that aid delivery is not hampered or blocked by any political or military party.

Notably, the politically driven aid blocks have been making headlines with their catastrophic impacts reported and documented by various independent international organizations. In a [statement](#) to Reuters, World Food Programme (WFP) Director, David Beasley, said that the organization is facing difficulties in delivering aid to northwestern Syria as authorities there continue to deny them needed access, pointing out that they are "bottlenecking our operations". Beasley added, "I don't know why they are blocking. Why play games at a time like this. I will call them out and will not be silent about this."

For its part, Human Rights Watch [described](#) aid delays as deadly to survivors, adding that "the slow humanitarian response to the earthquakes that severely affected opposition-held northwest Syria highlights the inadequacy of the United Nations Security Council-mandated cross-border aid [mechanism](#) in Syria and the urgent need for alternatives."

With hopes of finding alive people underneath rubble growing thinner after a week from the tremor, Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, [delivered](#) an apology on behalf of the United Nations (UN). Griffiths [tweeted](#) that "[w]e have so far [failed](#) the people in north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived."

In this brief report, STJ documents how the various parties in the Syrian conflict have blocked or hampered urgent aid deliveries to areas exceptionally devastated by the earthquakes that so far have [claimed](#) the lives of over 41 persons in Syria and Turkey, among them thousands of Syrians. Additionally, STJ explains how impeded relief efforts contributed to the rising toll of the earthquake.



Notably, several of the accounts STJ collected demonstrate that political complexities and divides only aggravated the woes of the earthquake victims. Worse yet, they indicate that negligence on the part of the conflict parties and deliberate blockage of aid have hampered rescue efforts that could have saved the lives of hundreds of innocent people buried in the debris of collapsed buildings.





I. Legal Opinion and Recommendations

During armed conflicts, authorities that control a territory or several territories are obliged to address and provide the basic needs of the civilian population in those territories. Should these authorities be unwilling or unable to provide such needs, they must positively respond to offers of relief/humanitarian assistance from impartial humanitarian actors. Even though international humanitarian law recognizes that a positive response is subject to the consent of the parties in a conflict, consent must not become a tool for arbitrary refusals that may threaten the lives of the civilian population. Notably, the consent condition is not requested in the case of occupation because the occupying power has a double duty to respond to the needs of the civilian population in the areas it occupies. Therefore, it cannot condition its consent to offers of impartial humanitarian assistance when it is unable to assist.

Therefore, parties in the Syrian armed conflict are obligated under international humanitarian law to consent to assistance offers and facilitate the passage of humanitarian aid as long as they are unable to respond to the needs of the civilian population due to the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe and the limited resources available. Even though the party that offered to provide this assistance might be considered a party to the armed conflict—the AANES, delegating the responsibility of aid distribution to the White Helmets as a humanitarian organization guarantees that humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are met.

Additionally, international humanitarian law prohibits parties in a conflict from obstructing the passage of humanitarian aid, regardless of how they do so. Placing conditions considered political or profitable on humanitarian deliveries is prohibited and does not correspond to the margin available to the parties in the conflict to monitor and inspect aid to ensure that it does not reinforce the enemy's military operations.

Accordingly, under the applicable provisions of international law, the parties listed below must adhere to the following obligations:

1. Turkey, as the occupying power, bears the primary responsibility in the areas it occupies and where it controls active armed groups to respond to the urgent humanitarian needs of all the civilian population without discrimination. Turkey must provide these areas with all resources necessary to respond to this disaster and set up monitoring and implementation mechanisms to ensure that populations most affected and in need have fair access to these resources.
2. The GOS is responsible for providing the humanitarian needs of the civilian population in its territory. Since the GOS does not exercise effective control over some Syrian regions, it must allow the passage of humanitarian aid without conditions or complications.
3. The GOS must send humanitarian aid that arrives through outlets it controls to the affected areas, even if these areas are not under its direct control.
4. All factions dominating Syrian territories must unconditionally allow and facilitate humanitarian relief operations. They must refrain from diverting aid or controlling it or parts of it. These factions must allow impartial humanitarian organizations immediate access to the populations most in need, protect them, and facilitate their activities.
5. UN relief agencies must coordinate with all parties to facilitate humanitarian access through all crossings and not limit access to the Bab al-Hawa crossing.





6. Countries that have pledged or already sent humanitarian aid should put in place specific mechanisms to ensure that this aid reaches those in need in the affected areas immediately without discrimination or diversion.

II. Northeastern Fuel Convoy Denied Access to Northwestern Syria

On 7 February 2023, nearly 24 hours after the earthquakes hit, Abdul Hamid al-Mehbash, the Co-Chair of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES), made a statement regarding the administration's quake response. He [announced](#) that the administration is preparing a convoy of fuel tankers and other relief materials to be consigned to the northwestern Syria, which is one of the worst hit areas in the country.

The AANES [posted](#) a photo on its official account the next day, showing fuel tankers heading from Manbij city, held by the affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), to the Umm al-Julud crossing, from where it would cross to northwestern Syria, controlled by Turkey-backed Syrian armed opposition groups.

On 10 February 2023, the Co-Chair of the AANES' Media Department and a member of its Crisis Cell, Jiwan Mulla, [said](#) that a second convoy had left Manbij city for al-Tayha/Abu Kahef crossing, which links SDF-held areas with those controlled by the GOS. The [convoy](#) was mainly bound for the Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Asharafiye neighbourhoods and the IDP camps in the al-Shahbaa region.

However, on 11 February, the AANES announced that both convoys were not allowed into their destinations and were held at the crossings. A journalist who accompanied the convoy stopped at the Umm al-Julud crossing narrated:

"With the convoy, I left northeastern Syria for Manbij. Then, we arrived at the Umm Julud crossing at around 11 a.m. on Thursday, 9 February. Notably, the convoy reached Manbij on 8 February. It consisted of 30 fuel tankers and three trucks loaded with relief items, blankets, and wintry clothes."

The journalist added:

"Before we arrived at the crossing, AANES officials told us that the White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence) and other civil entities would receive the convoy. They stressed that these entities did not expect the other parties in northwestern Syria to obstruct the convoy because of the disaster, and since the issue is humanitarian, pointing out that political struggles would not hamper the convoy. We also learned that the U.S. was mediating to facilitate the convoy's access. The AANES officials seemed reassured that the delays would not be longer than an hour or two, saying that the U.S. was acting to guarantee its entry. They were quite certain that they would deliver it to the other side. However, the convoy never passed the crossing and was stuck there."

A second journalist, who also accompanied the convoy deployed through the Umm Julud crossing, provided STJ with an exclusive account of the situation:





“We arrived at the Umm Julud Crossing, which connects the AANES- and the opposition-held areas, and saw a convoy of 30 fuel tankers and three small Inter trucks carrying blankets, clothes, and relief items. We reached the crossing at around 11 a.m. on Thursday, 9 February. The convoy was in Manbij on 8 February. We waited for the trucks to pass after AANES’s officials said they had communicated with the White Helmets, which made contacts to ensure they would receive the delivery. The officials added that the White Helmets then reconsidered the issue, fearing an attack by armed opposition groups that refused AANES’s aid.”

The journalist confirmed that the armed opposition groups allowed commercial goods to enter the area but still denied the convoy access. In other words, the factions deliberately impeded the convoy for purely political reasons, against reports that the crossing was inactive.

For a comment on the situation, STJ reached out to a first-rank commander from the opposition’s Syrian National Army (SNA). In an exclusive account to STJ, the commander said that the decision to obstruct the convoy’s entry was purely Turkish. He added that the decision was passed down to the head of the SIG, [Abdurrahman Mustafa](#), who refused to let the convoy in the area and accused the AANES of exploiting the situation for their political interests. The SIG’s response faced general popular discontent.

A second SNA commander told STJ that fighters in several factions extensively pressured their commands to accept the AANES’s aid, especially fuel needed for operating rescue equipment. The majority of the people stuck under debris are these fighters’ families.

For his part, a relief worker, who helped pull victims from the rubble, told STJ that rescue teams had to overcome vast challenges, particularly the limited capacity of the machinery. Available equipment could never accommodate rescuers struggling with the debris of thousands of collapsed houses.

The worker added that rescue teams also lacked fuel for the rescue machinery, which prompted rescue crews to ask all parties in the Syrian conflict for fuel supplies:

“Fuel supplies in northern Syria were so scarce that they could have never operated the equipment involved in rescue operations because the equipment is heavy and consumes large amounts of fuel. Some consume 220 fuel liters per hour, so you can estimate the amounts needed for dozens of dozers, cranes, ambulances, and logistical support vehicles, which had to be operated simultaneously and were nonetheless not enough to pull thousands of people stuck in the rubble. Northwestern Syria was cut off from the rest of the world and received nothing but dead bodies from Turkey over the first five days. No assistance was sent either from the areas of the Syrian regime or elsewhere. The area was left to its own devices under such acute needs.”

Commenting on fuel shortages, during a White Helmets Conference held on 10 February 2023,¹ the director of the organization Raed Al Saleh said: “Despite the severe cold, many

¹ “Remarks by Raed Al Saleh, White Helmets Press Conference on the Latest Developments in NW Syria”, 10 February 2023 (Last visited: 16 February 2023). <https://www.syriacivildefence.org/en/latest/media-releases/remarks-raed-al-saleh-white-helmets-press-conference-conference-latest-developments-nw-syria/>





people cut off the fuel from their families and provided it to us instead so that we could go on with the rescue operations.”

In a 10 February flash update on Syria, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [reported](#) the affected areas’ urgent need for life-saving resources such as fuel and other relief items. The update reconfirms the adverse impact aid blocks had on the lives of the quake victims, which resulted in otherwise preventable deaths.

Notably, the authorities in northwestern Syria allowed the first northeastern [convoy](#) to enter their areas on 13 February, over a week from the tremors. The convoy was [sent](#) by Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah provinces. However, the authorities refused to grant AANES-sent fuel trucks access. On 16 February, the AANES summoned the fuel tankers back, [stating](#) that the factions linked the convoy’s access to political issues and positions at the expense of the quake victims.

Other relief efforts in northeastern Syria included the *Huna Suriya* ([Syria’s Here](#)) campaign initiated by the [Coalition](#) of Civil Society Organizations in North and East Syria to support the earthquake victims in northwestern Syria.

III. GOS Denies a Convoy Access into Aleppo and Suburbs

Not far from the Umm al-Julud crossing, linking AANES- and SNA-held areas, a [fuel convoy](#) of about 100 tankers with a [medical convoy](#) of the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC), waited at al-Tayha/Abu Kahf crossing. The AANES sent the convoy to several areas in Aleppo and its countryside, which the GOS controls.

These two convoys also had similar difficulties accessing their destinations. The KRC reported successfully delivering an aid convoy into affected areas on the first day after the earthquakes struck. A [medical crew](#) from the Jazira region, AANES-held northeastern Syria, managed to enter the al-Shahbaa area north of Aleppo, which hosts IDPs primarily from the Afrin region. However, the KRC issued several subsequent statements saying the GOS denied its second convoy access to the region.

Concerning this convoy, several open sources reported that the GOS demanded “half of the convoy’s contents” in exchange for entry. This information was corroborated by one of the informed sources STJ met with for this report. The source was accompanying the convoy.

For additional details on the KRC convoy, STJ reached out to a medical source on 14 February 2023. On the condition of anonymity, the source narrated:

“After deaths and injuries were reported in Aleppo’s Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Asharafiye in the aftermath of the 6 February quake, the KRC sent relief items to both neighborhoods on the first day. The deliveries were an initial response and included tents, relief items, and medications.”

The source added:

“[The KRC] sent a second convoy on 11 February. It reached the al-Tayha crossing in Manbij’s countryside. The convoy headed for Aleppo and its suburbs. It remains at the crossing with nearly 100 diesel and gasoline tankers sent by the AANES.”





The source added:

"The KRC's convoy consists of a medical crew, including doctors, paramedics, and relief workers. Additionally, it includes a two-truck trailer, two ambulances, and a small Inter truck, loaded with medical supplies and relief items."

The source added:

"When the convoy arrived at the al-Tayha crossing, the GOS demanded over 50% of its load in return for allowing some of its items into the destined areas in Aleppo and its suburbs. However, the AANES has not yet accepted the demands of the GOS. The situation remains thus while al-Shahbaa IDP camps continue to struggle for urgent relief like the rest of Aleppo's areas. Thousands of civilians fled the Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Asharafiye neighbourhoods, afraid to stay in their homes that have been adversely affected by the quakes."

The reports on the second convoy remain contested. On Wednesday, 15 February, the AANES [confirmed](#) that the GOS continued to deny its convoy access to Aleppo. However, a few hours later, several [sources](#) reported that the convoy managed to enter the GOS-held areas in the evening of the same day. STJ inquired into these reports but obtained no information about how the convoy entered the area and whether the GOS simply granted the convoy access or had an agreement with the AANES following five days of dispute.

Notably, obstructing and diverting aid are common GOS practices, which independent international rights organizations have even labeled as a "[weaponization of aid](#)".

IV. HTS Obstructs Aid Delivered through Cross-Line Routes

While the AANES's convoys were held at the crossings of Umm al-Julud and al-Tayha/Abu Kahef, several reports documented that HTS's obstruction of aid delivered through [cross-line routes](#), including the shipments [sent](#) by World Food Program (WFP) following a decision from the Security Council.

On 11 February, a circulated document from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Aleppo to the Governor of Aleppo, Ahmad Hussein Diab, stated that the GOS agreed to send aid through cross-line routes to Idlib province (Sarmada) per Resolution 388 of February 8. The document also stressed that assistance was undelivered due to "logistical difficulties" with the other party, in a reference to HTS. The HTS controls parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces and is designated as a terrorist group worldwide.

Covering restrictions on aid on 11 February 2023, Reuters [quoted](#) a spokesperson for the UN humanitarian aid office, saying that "issues with approval" are impeding aid deliveries through cross-line routes between the GOS- and the opposition-held areas.

For a comment on the situation, STJ reached out to an HTS political commander. In an exclusive account, the commander said:

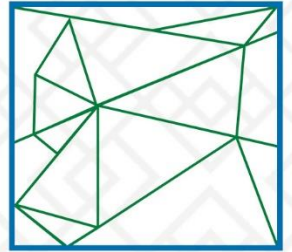




“[The HTS] turned back aid sent through regime-held areas to maintain the pressure on the UN to open the border crossings in northwestern Syria and deploy aid through crossings with Turkey, not to mention that locals largely refuse to receive aid from areas controlled by the Syrian regime.”

The commander added, “The HTS had acted properly in adopting this stance,” even though the timing is critical as the victims of the earthquakes remain in desperate need of help.





About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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