

Joint Report – Syria/ Türkiye Earthquake: Widespread and Recurrent Violations During and After the Humanitarian Response

The community of the 2023 Brussels International Donors' Conference must take measures to guarantee humanitarian aid is not politicized and implicated in HLP violations or demographic changes underway in northwestern Syria

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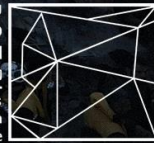
Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
Methodology	11
Legal Opinion and Recommendations	12
The Perspective of Syrian Legislation	12
The Perspective of International Law	13
The Duties of the State/Government	13
The Duties of Non-State Armed Groups	14
The Duties of Türkiye as an Occupying Power	15
Response in SNA-Held Areas	17
Response in Jindires, Afrin.....	17
Blocked Life-Saving Aid	17
Disrupted Rescues and Discrimination against Local Communities.....	18
Discrimination in Aid Distribution	20
Aid Confiscation and Diversion.....	22
Humanitarian Organizations Accused of Discrimination	30
Armed Groups' Monopoly Over Rubble	32
Tents and Relief Items Trade.....	36
Chaos and Arbitrariness	38
HTS Exploits the Catastrophe	40
Property Seizures and Fears of Demographic Change	42
Riots in Faction Prisons	44
Türkiye Delegates Response to SNA Factions	45
Al-Amshat and al-Hamzat Expel IDPs from the Afrin Region	47
Response in Sawran A'zaz.....	49
The SNA Detonates Cracked Houses	49
Discriminatory Rescues and Aid Distributions	50
Response in the HTS-Held Areas.....	51
Response in the GOS-Held Areas	53
Slow Governmental Response	53
GOS Intervenes in Volunteer Teams' Work.....	54





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An aspect of the response to the devastating February 2023 quake in Afrin/Jindires. Credit: STJ.

Executive Summary

This joint report documents a wide range of human rights violations that accompanied and followed the humanitarian response to the catastrophic earthquake that shook Syria on 6 February 2023.

These violations and abuses included discriminatory search-and-rescue orders from some parties to the conflict, prevention or impediment of life-saving aid entry, discrimination in aid distribution, confiscation of all or parts of aid provisions, trading in and profiteering from others, and/or the diversion of their destination. Additionally, several violations of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights were recorded as have occurred in tandem with aid-related breaches.

The various parties to the Syrian conflict were [involved](#) in these violations. Türkiye shut down its border crossings with Syria for the first 48 hours after the tremors. The Government of Syria (GOS) waited an entire week before it consented to life-saving cross-border aid access. The GOS and the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) both impeded cross-line aid to affected communities, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rejected cross-line aid to northwestern Syria, which the United Nations (UN) attempted to facilitate.





At the same time, the slow response to the earthquake revealed the shortcomings of the cross-border aid delivery mechanism mandated by the UN Security Council in Syria and revealed the urgent need for alternatives. Nearly a week after the quake, the UN admitted it had “[failed](#)” to deliver adequate aid to Syria.

Notably, the military and administrative control in Syrian provinces worst affected by the quake is mapped as follows:

- Western Syria: The provinces of Latakia and Hama are entirely controlled by the GOS and its forces.
- Northern Syria: The province of Aleppo comprises of several enclaves:
 - The Turkish-backed SNA maintains military control over the northern and northwestern parts of the province—including the Afrin region, Jarabulus, al-Bab, and A’zaz, leaving their civil administration to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG).
 - The GOS and its forces maintain control over the southern parts of the province.
 - The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) maintains a presence in the al-Shahbaa area, which includes several camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).
- Northwestern Syria: The HTS controls greater Idlib militarily, leaving the civil administration to its affiliated Salvation Government (SG).

On 15 March 2023, the World Bank published a statistical assessment of the quake's impact. The [report](#) demonstrates that “6.6 million Syrians, approximately 31 percent of the country’s population, live in locations where the earthquake intensity reached level VI (strong shaking) or higher . . . Governorates most affected, both in terms of population and intensity, are Idlib and Aleppo. In Idlib, 2.2 million individuals live in areas affected by strong earthquake intensity and 571,000 in areas of very strong/severe intensity. Corresponding figures in Aleppo are 3.5 million (strong intensity) and 200,000 (very strong/severe). Focusing on very strong and severe intensity areas only, the most affected districts are Afrin (Aleppo governorate), Harem and Idlib (Idlib governorate).”¹

Fatality figures in the hit areas either show discrepancies or are under-reported. In northern Syria, casualty statistics remain conflicted. The Syria Civil Defense (White Helmets) recorded 2,247 deaths, while the Response Coordination Group (RCG) recorded 3,467 deaths and the SIG 4,525 deaths. In the GOS-held areas, the health minister provided a provisional count on 14 February 2023, announcing 1,414 deaths and 2,357 injuries.²

In the above-cited assessment [report](#), the World Bank also records the level of decimation in the housing sector in hit areas. The bank documents the partial damage or destruction of 49,778 housing units in GOS-held areas and 23,579 units in opposition-held areas, including 17,302 units in Idlib province and 64,724 units in Aleppo province. The bank stresses that the cities of Jindires, A’zaz, and Harim were the most impacted in terms of housing unit loss.³

¹ World Bank. *Syria Earthquake 2023: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (English)*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099093003162314369/P1721710e2b4a60b40a5940f0793f8a0d24>

² “Minister of Health: 1414 deaths and 2357 injuries, the death toll from the earthquake so far” (in Arabic), SANA, 14 February 2023. (Last visited: 16 May 2023). <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1840593>

³ IBID, World Bank. *Syria Earthquake 2023*.





In its approach, the report builds on the testimonies of direct and indirect victims of the quake and the violations perpetrated by the different parties in the conflict during and after the response in the three sectors mapped out. Additionally, the report corroborates the victim testimonies with the accounts of a diverse group of sources, among them civilian volunteer rescuers, relief workers, and militants from the opposition's armed groups, who controlled the response operations almost entirely in the areas where they are stationed.

Notably, the report pays special attention to northwestern Syria, given its unique demographic, military, and administrative context. The region has a demographically mixed population, especially in the former Kurdish-majority region of Afrin, including Jindires city. Afrin struggles to preserve its local communities despite the massive waves of forced displacement these communities witnessed in the aftermath of the Turkish-led Operation Olive Branch in 2018. Additionally, Afrin is home to a large number of IDPs displaced from elsewhere in Syria, particularly areas across Rif Dimashq (Damascus' Countryside). These IDPs fled their homes, also escaping military hostilities.

Militarily, Türkiye exercises effective control over the region as an “[occupying power](#)” through its proxies of the SNA-affiliated factions, leaving the region's administrative affairs to the SIG and its local councils, which operate only nominally.

Türkiye's military control of the region affected the dynamics of the earthquake response and severely hindered life-saving operations. Türkiye assigned the response management to the SNA factions—which have perpetrated countless documented violations over the past years. Additionally, several of the report's sources stressed that SIG-affiliated local councils in the region were inactive and incapable of responding to the catastrophe for their lack of autonomy and subordination to Turkish government institutions, including the Disaster and Emergency Management (AFAD).

On 18 March 2023, *Syria Direct* published an [investigation](#) probing into this relation of subordination. The lengthy report reveals that local councils in the Afrin region are administratively bound to the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep, Urfa, and Kilis, not the SIG. Additionally, the report demonstrates that AFAD forces those wishing to assist camps in Aleppo's countryside to coordinate with it. Several anonymous sources told the outlet that **“there is an AFAD administration that includes two or three Turks, and nobody can live in or leave the camp without their consent.”** The report highlights that AFAD's consent is vital for work in Turkish-held areas, uncovering that **“[it] was absent from the scene in the first 20 days after the earthquake . . . [which] caused poor coordination between local organizations working on the ground in the area since AFAD is the one that directs their teams' work.”**

In addition to dysfunctional response mechanisms under Türkiye's influence, Turkish soldiers fired shots in the air to disperse and expel civilians, who sought the Turkish military outpost in Tal Slour village, on the outskirts of Jindires city in Afrin's countryside, to request that the military uses the machinery on site in rescue operations, according to several of the report's direct testimonies.

Within this perspective, the partner organizations recommend that the concerned entities **conduct an independent and transparent investigation into delayed or blocked humanitarian aid designated to northern and northwestern Syria in particular**, whether by UN institutions or as a consequence of the impediments by parties to the conflict, including the GOS, the





opposition SNA, and the HTS. Additionally, concerned entities must take effective measures to hold those responsible, individuals or groups, accountable and to ensure the non-recurrence of this situation.

Additionally, the partners demand that concerned entities **establish an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure non-discrimination and non-partiality during aid distribution in Syria**, to prevent the confiscation of shares of aid provisions by the parties to the conflict, to stop the politicization of aid distribution, and to guarantee that all Syrians have equal access to aid.

Moreover, the partners demand that concerned entities **allocate special attention to HLP rights** in quake-hit areas and ensure that humanitarian aid allocations and donations, donors are to pledge during the 2023 Brussels conference, will not contribute to effecting additional demographic changes or perpetuate those underway.

Introduction

The devastating earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria at dawn on 6 February 2023 brought to light the multilayered suffering Syrians continue to grapple with, especially communities in the country's northwestern parts, including locals and IDPs who sought refuge in the region from other areas.

The tremors—classified as the strongest to shake the region in decades—aggravated the woes of a country consumed by conflict for over 12 years. Syria has 6.8 million IDPs, hitting the highest number in the world. These figures also correspond to the largest registered need for life-saving assistance since the beginning of the conflict.

The early hours after the quake brought to the surface the effects of years of war and non-compliance with international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and the principles of humanitarian action. These effects had clear manifestations in the acts of the parties in the conflict and de facto authorities and even in the practices of humanitarian entities and organizations, all of which responded to the catastrophe in a selective, sometimes discriminatory manner, as several of the report's direct testimonies demonstrate.

The quake forced local communities throughout the hit areas to face the acute ramifications of the conflict all at once, especially those with an immediate impact on their daily lives. These communities had to battle with repercussions stemming from various issues, including the opening or closure of some border crossings, the unilateral sanctions imposed on Syria,⁴ the politicization of humanitarian aid and/or the obstruction of its entry, seizure of aid

⁴ In an input for the Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on the Enjoyment of Human Rights, STJ reiterated the call for an independent and impartial assessment mechanism for the impact of the unilateral coercive measures on human rights in Syria, to ensure transparent, objective, and non-exploited findings that do not exclude the SG's obligations towards the population. This call has already been recommended by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

"Input for the Special Rapporteur on the Negative Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on the Enjoyment of Human Rights, STJ, 12 December 2022 (Last visited: 2 April 2023).

<https://stj-sy.org/en/input-for-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-negative-impact-of-unilateral-coercive-measures-on-the-enjoyment-of-human-rights/>





allocations, or diverting their destination.⁵ These communities also continue to experience the turmoil of external involvement in the Syrian affair, foreign occupation, the different areas of influence and control, the rivalries and enmities between the military forces dominating on the ground, and even the political tensions within the UN itself and also between governments and UN agencies.

These repercussions, in tandem, have played into depriving affected communities in devastated areas, especially in the northwestern parts of the country, of a quick and effective response, which could have saved dozens of lives. Instead, the hit areas only saw a detrimentally poor response, open obstruction of aid, and unprecedented discrimination against some communities.

The sluggish reaction to the earthquake, which began with the problem of border crossings, exposed the flaws in the system of cross-border relief delivery that the UN Security Council had mandated for Syria and emphasized the urgent need for alternatives.⁶ Bab al-Hawa was given the brunt of the burden while numerous other crucial crossings, such as al-Yaarubiyah/Til Koçer in northeastern Syria and Bab al-Salama in the north, were still closed.⁷ For the first 48 hours following the earthquake, Türkiye blocked the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. Additionally, the GOS delayed approving the temporary opening of two more crossings for a full week,⁸ while the GOS and the SNA obstructed cross-line aid to afflicted areas. In turn, the HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front) refused to permit the cross-line aid the UN tried to facilitate into northwest Syria.

Notably, the Turkish-backed SNA factions did not only impede cross-line aid designated to northern Syria, which they occupy. Worse yet, these armed groups restricted aid distribution in the make-shift housing centers and areas they control. The groups guided aid shipments passing through their checkpoints, confiscated parts of the allocations, and rerouted them.

⁵ STJ sent a complaint to seven UN Special Rapporteurs on the deviation of humanitarian aid toward building illegal settlements altering the demographics of Afrin. In the submission, STJ urged the Mandate Holders to issue a statement or public opinion addressing the settlement projects in general considering its continuous occurrence as a widespread or systematic policy.

“Syria: A Complaint Addressed to Seven UN Special Rapporteurs on the Deviation of Humanitarian Aid toward Building Illegal Settlements Altering the Demographics of Afrin”, STJ, 22 September 2022 (Last visited: 2 April 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-a-complaint-addressed-to-seven-un-special-rapporteurs-on-the-deviation-of-humanitarian-aid-toward-building-illegal-settlements-altering-the-demographics-of-afrin/>

⁶ “Northwest Syria: Aid Delays Deadly for Quake Survivors”, HRW, 15 February 2023 (2 April 2023).

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/15/northwest-syria-aid-delays-deadly-quake-survivors>

⁷ Millions of people in northeastern and northwestern Syria, many of them IDPs, depend on the cross-border flow of food, medicine, and other necessary assistance. In 2020, Russia used its veto to force the UN Security Council to close three of the four authorized border crossings into northern Syria, which led to the cutting off of international cross-border aid to northeast Syria and made it more difficult to distribute aid in the northwest. Currently, northern Syria relies exclusively on the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Türkiye, becoming the northwest's only access point to UN-designated humanitarian aid and medical supplies. On 12 July 2022, after Russia vetoed a 12-month extension of the Bab al-Hawa crossing mandate, the Security Council decided to extend it for six months instead, setting another vote for mid-winter, which complicated UN aid agencies' preparations. Notably, food insecurity has reached record-high levels in northern Syria, with food prices continuing to rise sharply, basic services remaining very limited, and some three million being IDPs, 1.8 million of whom live in camps or informal settlements.

⁸ The Security Council's authorization of the Bab al-Hawa crossing expires in July 2023. After the February 2023 earthquake, the GOS consented to open two more crossings (Bab al-Salama and al-Rai) with Türkiye. On 15 May 2023, the GOS agreed to extend the use of these two crossings for another three months, according to a [tweet](#) by Bassam Sabbagh, the Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations.





In addition to delayed international aid, the GOS and the AANES's impediment or block of assistance through their control areas indicates that the focus was on “political point-scoring rather than rapid relief for survivors.”⁹ This situation was exacerbated by the UN's slow response across northwestern Syria.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the earthquake's destructive effects were not limited to a particular Syrian region, the recent statistics on the number of fatalities and structural damages revealed that the districts directly under Turkish control were more affected than others. Türkiye-held territories had an unprecedentedly inadequate reaction, due to the majority of local governance systems being subordinated to Turkish authorities, who were unable to respond adequately.¹¹

In a March 2023 [statement](#), Amnesty International demanded that “The Syrian government and Türkiye-backed armed opposition groups . . . stop obstructing and diverting humanitarian aid aimed at alleviating the suffering of tens of thousands of civilians in conflict-torn Aleppo.”¹²

Furthermore, in a May report, STJ stressed that an international determination is necessary to assess the impact of sanctions on a regular and accurate basis, in order to limit their impact on human rights in Syria. STJ demonstrated that Sanctions on Syria may not directly prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid. However, practically, they restrict the work of international institutes, relief agencies, banks, shipping companies, etc. because the latter stop all their work with Syria to avoid any unintended mistake that might expose them to accountability. Over-compliance is a form of excessive avoidance of risk because it involves blocking all activities with a sanctioned country, entity, or individual even when some activities are authorized by humanitarian exemptions or fall outside of the sanctions' scope.¹³

⁹ “In the Wake of the 6 February Earthquake in Syria, a Broken Aid Regime is to Blame”, SJAC, 15 February 2023 (Last visited: 2 April 2023).
<https://syriaaccountability.org/in-the-wake-of-the-6-february-earthquake-in-syria-a-broken-aid-regime-is-to-blame/>

¹⁰ In a [statement](#) to Reuters, a United Nations spokesperson said earthquake aid from government-held parts of Syria into opposition-controlled territory has been held up by “approval issues”. STJ covered these aid restrictions and blocks in a special [report](#).

¹¹ AL-HILU, Khayrallah, *Afrin under Turkish control: political, economic and social transformations*, Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 2019/10 - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/63745>
Retrieved from Cadmus, EUI Research Repository

¹² “Syria: Vital earthquake aid blocked or diverted in Aleppo's desperate hour of need”, AI, 6 March 2023 (Last visited: 24 March 2023).
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppo-desperate-hour-of-need/>

¹³ “Syria: Non-targeted Sanctions Violate the Principles of Justice and the Human Rights”, STJ, 4 May 2023 (Last visited: 16 May 2023).



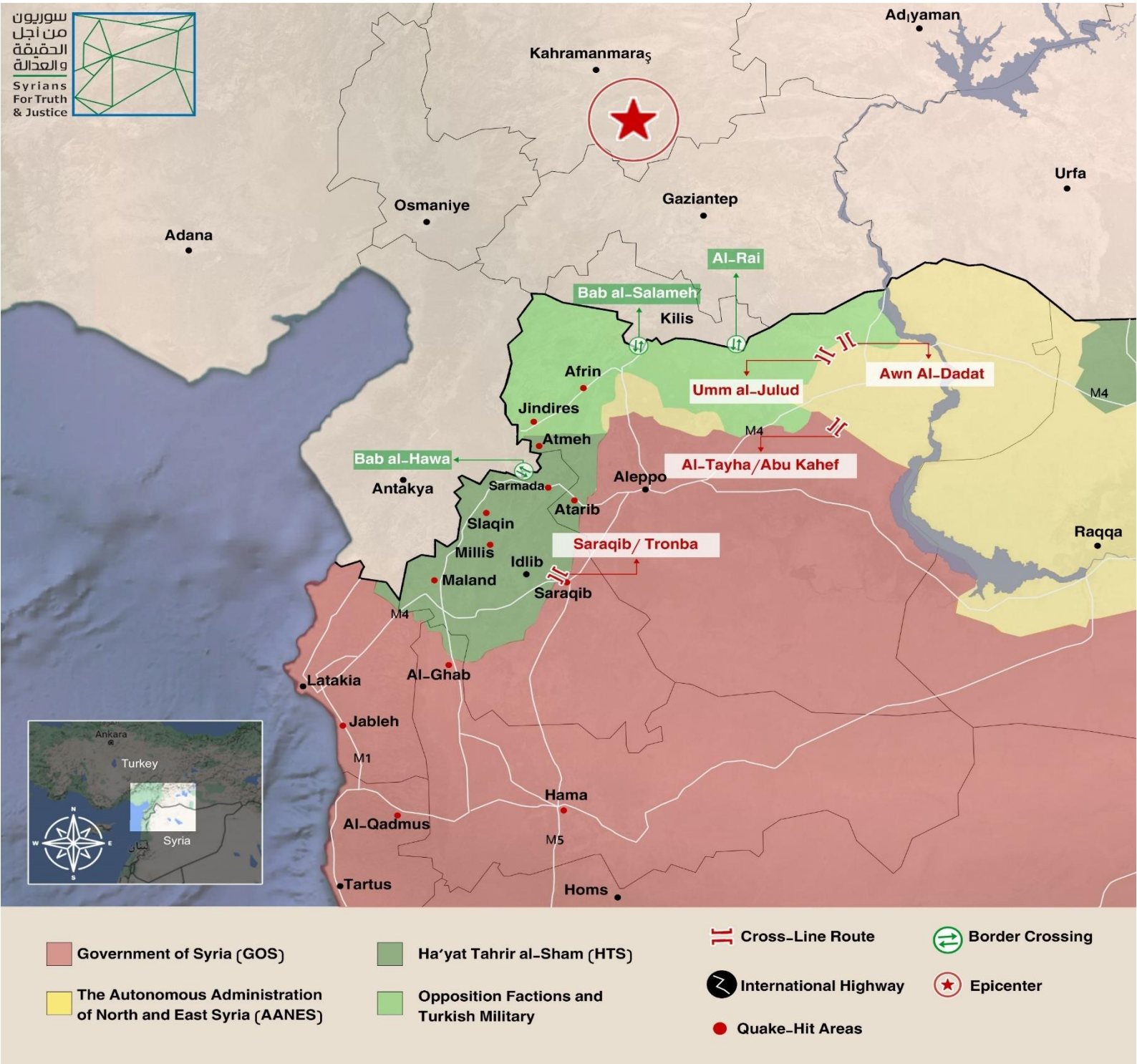


Image 1- The map delineates the various control territories across Syria, also locating border crossings and cross-line routes during the quake response.

<https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-non-targeted-sanctions-violate-the-principles-of-justice-and-the-human-rights/>



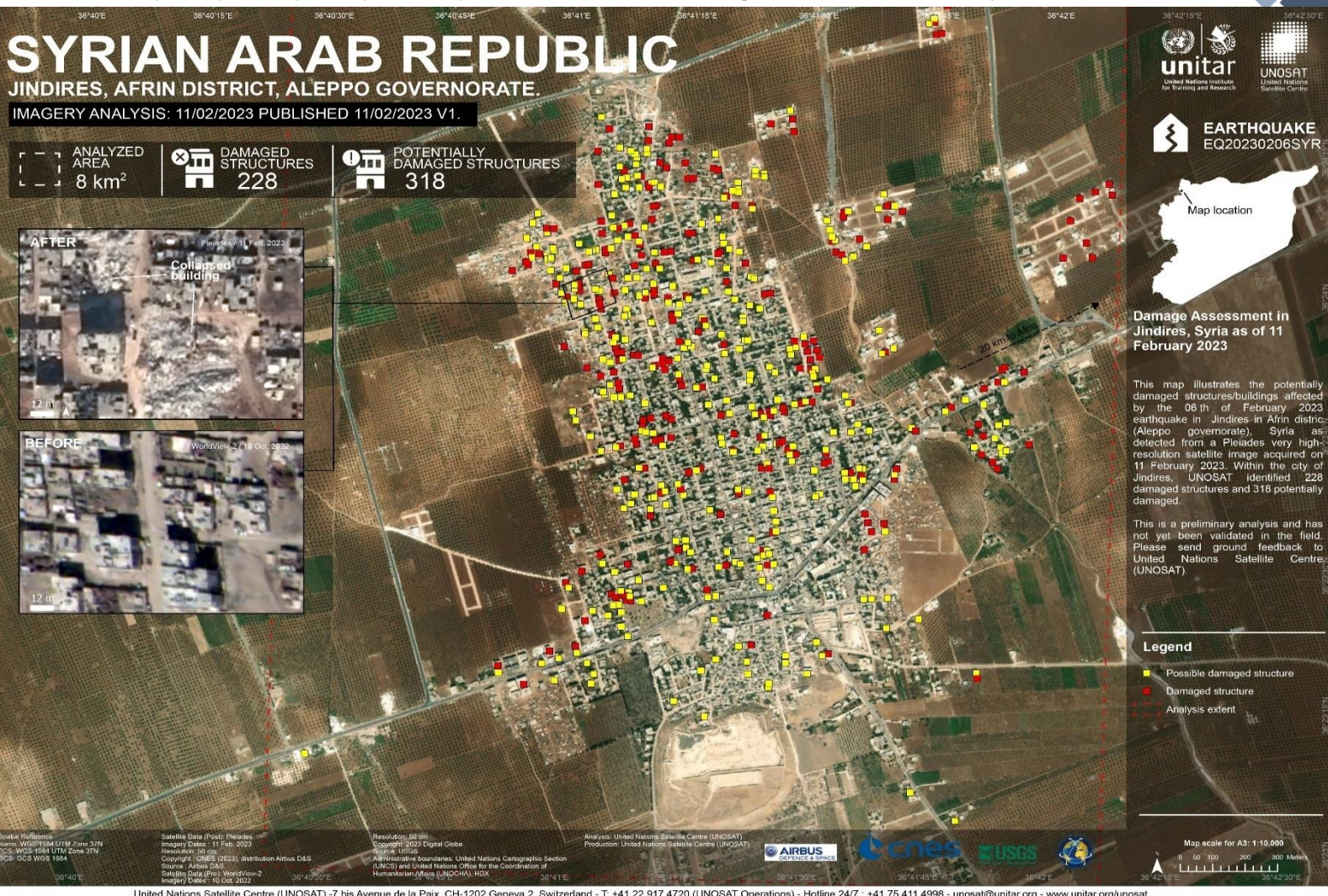


Image 2- Satellite footage locating both damaged sites (red squares) and potentially damaged sites (yellow squares) in Jindires city in the Afrin region. Source: UN.

Methodology

This report is brought by four organizations: [Syrians for Truth and Justice \(STJ\)](#), [PÊL – Civil Waves](#), [Synergy Associations for Victims](#), and [Lêlûn Association for Victims in Afrin](#).

For this report, the partner organizations carried out 44 interviews. The field researchers with the organizations reached out to the interviewees online or in person over the months that followed the quake.

The interviewed eyewitnesses and sources included survivors, affected individuals, and relatives of victims. Additionally, the field researchers reached out to relief workers, humanitarian organizations’ employees, rescuers, media activists, SNA members, and high-ranking officers.

In addition to the direct accounts from sources and witnesses, the report builds on dozens of relevant publications issued by local and international organizations and open-source visual and written material on the Syria quake and its impact, especially in the northwestern parts of



the country. The partner organizations verified the contents of the consulted open sources and cited several.

Moreover, the partner organizations consulted satellite footage of quake-hit areas to identify and document the damages they suffered and incorporated several exclusive live images into the report, which they obtained from field researchers or interviewed sources.

Notably, the partner organizations opted for pseudonyms for several eyewitnesses and sources they interviewed, protecting them from potential security threats they might face due to the sensitive nature of their testimonies.

Legal Opinion

The Perspective of Syrian Legislation

According to the evidence collected for the purpose of this report and the testimonies of witnesses and sources, the GOS has committed a range of violations, including controlling the destination of aid convoys, delaying the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance (such as in northwestern Syria), and politicizing the response plan. Moreover, the government was not able to secure any other alternatives, which contradicts its obligations under the Syrian Constitution of 2012, as Article No. 22(1) stipulates that “The State shall guarantee every citizen and his/her family in **cases of emergency**, sickness, disability, orphan-hood and old age” and Article No. 24 states that “The State shall shoulder, in solidarity with the community, the burdens resulting from **natural disasters**.”

On the other hand, the de facto authorities have granted themselves the power to govern several areas in northwestern Syria. Accordingly, they are responsible for providing services and managing public facilities there, whether in normal conditions or in cases of disasters like the earthquake that struck the region and left human and material damages. Therefore, the de facto authorities cannot claim that this responsibility rests with the GOS under the pretext that the constitution addresses the GOS (State), because these authorities—mainly represented by the Syrian National Army and local councils—govern the region instead of the State, and therefore bear all the responsibilities and tasks of governance.

The ability to respond to all the needs at an appropriate level may be impossible for the de facto authorities. Even countries that have better capabilities may not be able to respond properly (such as Türkiye which also suffered from the earthquake). However, there is no justification for discriminating between the victims based on race, creed, or any other reason. Nevertheless, this report documents giving the priority in aid and rescue operations to the families and relatives of the fighters of the opposition’s SNA. This violates the principle of non-discrimination between citizens mentioned in several international covenants—as detailed in the next paragraphs— as well as in the Syrian constitution of 2012 which states in Article 33 that “3. Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed”.

For example, according to witnesses, members of the SNA have prevented several drivers of construction vehicles from saving the lives of people trapped under the rubble, despite hearing their voices alive (which led to their death) and have forced these drivers to go to





other places to save the relatives of the army members. According to the Syrian Penal Code, this act constitutes the crime of intentional killing. Perpetrators do not necessarily have to perform an action to commit this crime. An omission constitutes an actus reus and rise liability when the law imposes a duty to act and a perpetrator is in breach of that duty, especially when the omission is committed by people in charge—responsible for saving the lives of earthquake victims— like the members of the SNA that govern the area.

According to the Syrian legislator, a person shall be criminally responsible and liable for punishment for the crime of intentional killing regardless of the nature of his/her behavior (commission or omission). A perpetrator is considered responsible for the criminal result if his/her conduct causes the consequences of the crime. Article No. 188 of the Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949 stipulates that “a crime is considered intentional, even if the criminal result of the action or **omission** exceeds the intention of a perpetrator, if he/she had anticipated its occurrence and accepted the risk”.

This report states that according to witnesses, members of the SNA seized part of the relief materials and the rubble of destroyed houses and sold them. This act constitutes a theft crime, and since it is committed during a disaster, then it is considered a criminal offense. Article No. 627 of the Syrian Penal Code stipulates that “Any person who commits theft in a State of disobedience, unrest, war, shipwreck, **or any other vice...** shall be punished with temporary hard labor”.

Moreover, setting up random camps on the lands and properties of citizens without their consent violates several legal provisions including Article No. 15(2) of the Syrian constitution “Private ownership shall not be removed except in the public interest by a decree and against fair compensation according to the law”, Article No. 771 of the Syrian Civil Code “No citizen may be deprived of his/her property except in the cases determined by the law, and in the manner defined by it. This shall be against fair compensation”, and Article No. 768 of the Syrian Civil Code “Only an owner has the right, within the limits of the law, to use, benefit from, and dispose of his/her possession”.

Furthermore, the Syrian Penal Code criminalizes the possession of someone else’s property without official documents. Article No. 723 stipulates that an individual who does not have an official document of ownership or disposition and takes possession of another's property or part of it, shall be punished with imprisonment up to six months, or from two months to one year if the crime is committed with violence or intimidation, and if the crime is committed by two or more armed individuals (which is expected to have happened in the incident mentioned in the report), then it shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to three years.

The Perspective of International Law

The Duties of the State/Government

The Syrian State (government) bears the primary responsibility for providing the basic needs of all residents within its borders including the areas that are under the control of non-State armed groups (like northern Syria). According to Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United





Nations, this legal obligation is a pillar of the State's sovereignty. It is enshrined in the International Humanitarian Law (IHL)¹⁴ and Human Rights Law (HRL).¹⁵ It is also affirmed by several United Nations resolutions and reflected in the regular practices of a State. For example, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights stipulates in the General Comment on the Right to Adequate Food “**Violations of the Covenant occur when a State fails to ensure the satisfaction of, at the very least, the minimum essential level required to be free from hunger [...] the State has to demonstrate that every effort has been made to use all the resources at its disposal in an effort to satisfy, as a matter of priority, those minimum obligations**”.¹⁶ Therefore, when a State is unable to respond to the needs of the population for any reason (for example when some areas are out of its control), it is obligated to cooperate internationally to ensure that all people have access to humanitarian aid.¹⁷

Therefore, the failure of the Syrian State to provide the affected areas, which are beyond its control, with the basic needs is a failure to perform its basic duties mentioned above. It is also an obstruction of humanitarian access and a violation of the IHL. Moreover, banning the humanitarian passage of impartial humanitarian international actors and the refusal of border crossings may amount to arbitrary denial of crucial humanitarian aid, which is prohibited under international law.¹⁸

The Duties of Non-State Armed Groups

Non-State armed groups should meet the basic needs of the civilian population under their control. They do not have the right to refrain from doing the utmost to respond to these needs on the pretext that this is the duty of the State that has the legal sovereignty.

The duty of armed groups to always treat the civilian population humanely—in accordance with Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions—requires them to take all necessary measures to meet humanitarian needs, especially when these needs are crucial to survival (like the case of this report). For armed groups to fulfill this obligation under international law, they must either provide the necessary resources to respond to the needs or accept and facilitate impartial humanitarian access and ensure that it reaches those in need without discrimination.

Moreover, armed groups should ensure that aid is humane (human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found, with particular attention to the most vulnerable) and impartial (humanitarian aid must be provided solely based on need and without discrimination). The IHL does not stipulate that the parties that offer aid must be neutral if the delivery of aid

¹⁴ Rule 55 of the Customary International Humanitarian Law Database.

¹⁵ The provisions of the International Human Rights Law are directed to States and focus on meeting the needs of the people as well as the protection and enforcement of their rights. This is addressed in all human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, etc.

¹⁶ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment No. 12: The Right to Adequate Food (Art. 11), 12 May 1999, E/C.12/1999/5, para. 17.

¹⁷ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations (Art. 2.1), 14 December 1990, E/1991/23, para. 13-14.

¹⁸ Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict, Commissioned by UNOCHA, October 2016, paras. 43-54 (Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Oxford%20Guidance%20pdf.pdf>).





respects the humanitarian principles (humanity and impartiality)¹⁹ and the aid does not contribute to an inevitable military advantage for the opponent. Neutrality in humanitarian action is an operational principle related to the work of humanitarian organizations to maintain their access to people affected by conflict and natural disasters.²⁰

Legally, it is not permissible for armed groups to refuse humanitarian aid sent by third parties on the grounds that it is politicized, because this leads to depriving people of that aid. This act may amount to an arbitrary denial of humanitarian access.

The Duties of Türkiye as an Occupying Power

As an occupying power, Türkiye has a duty to provide the civilian population under its control with all supplies and services necessary for their survival.²¹ The IHL does not provide an occupying power with any margin to justify its failure to fulfill this duty. If an occupying power has limited resources or faces exceptional circumstances (such as the earthquake), and is unable to provide an occupied area with basic needs, it **must** facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid without any discrimination.²² Furthermore, obstructing the delivery and providing aid on a discriminatory basis (making distinction on the basis of nationality or race) is a serious violation of the IHL and may amount to a war crime.²³

The duty to facilitate humanitarian access without discrimination

It is worth noting that the armed groups' refusal of aid provided by other parties was based on a misinterpretation of the principles of humanity, impartiality, and neutrality. However, these groups violated the same principles including impartiality.

International law prohibits any discrimination in providing humanitarian aid. Humanitarian policies and practices of armed groups must consider the potential impact on **all** affected people.²⁴ The duty to accept and facilitate humanitarian access is not a partial implementation of the process of delivering aid to affected areas, but rather an integrated process that must be adhered to. Humanitarian aid should reach those who really need it.

On the other hand, aid diversion, confiscation, taxation, or theft is a violation of the duty to facilitate humanitarian access and to provide the needs of the civilian population. Discrimination against certain groups of affected societies on ethnic grounds is a serious violation of international law and may constitute a form of using humanitarian aid as a weapon of war. Moreover, discrimination against ethnic grounds (as addressed in the report) is similar to what was described in Rwanda as 'the attempt at new genocide after the genocide against the Tutsi tribes'. In Rwanda, the Rwandan Patriotic Army denied

¹⁹ J.S. Pictet, *The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949: Commentary*, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2016, para. 798.

²⁰ Denise PLATTNER, "ICRC Neutrality and Neutrality in Humanitarian Assistance", *International Review of the Red Cross* (1996) No. 311, (Available at <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jn2z.htm>).

²¹ Article 55 of the IV Geneva Convention and Article 69 of the Additional Protocol I.

²² Article 70(1) of Additional Protocol I.

²³ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8.2.b.xxv.

²⁴ J.S. Pictet, *The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949: Commentary*, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2016, para. 573.





humanitarian aid to Hutu refugees on the grounds that they were supporters of the former government, which led to many of them dying of starvation.²⁵

Armed groups are responsible for ensuring that access to humanitarian aid is non-discriminatory by imposing arrangements and measures to monitor the work of humanitarian actors and ensure the respect of the principles of humanity and impartiality. This does not mean that these groups should undertake the distribution of aid provided by humanitarian organizations. The policies and strategies of the armed groups should focus on activating impartial local actors who shall monitor the work of humanitarian organizations and ensure no discrimination is performed. However, the main problem is that discrimination is an integral component of the policies of the armed groups that practice it through other actors under the pretext of humanity.

Finally, it is necessary to underline that Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court stipulates that “‘Extermination’ includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population”. This act constitutes a crime against humanity when committed “as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack”. Moreover, Article 6 of the Statute states that this act is considered ‘Genocide’ if “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a



national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

²⁵ D. M. Johnson, The Root Causes of the Congo Wars: Some Historical Perspectives, *African Studies Review*, 46(1) 2003, 79-99.





Image 3- Rescues of people stuck under rubble following the February 2023 quake in Jindires city in the Afrin region, in Syria. Source: STJ.

Response in SNA-Held Areas

In this section, the report documents several patterns of violations that accompanied and followed the earthquake response operations in SNA-held areas, especially Jindires city in the Afrin region, or the “Olive Branch” Strip as it was called after its occupation by Türkiye in March 2018.

The second largest city in the Kurdish region of Afrin in Aleppo’s northern countryside, Jindires [was the most impacted](#) by the earthquake. It suffered massive fatalities and extensive material [damage](#). The SIG-affiliated Jindires Local Council’s statistics—covering [city](#) and [suburbs](#)—demonstrate the death of 1,100 people. The victims included hundreds of IDPs from other Syrian regions. Additionally, the statistics count 489 buildings as destroyed and 2,529 others as partially damaged.

Based on the accounts of the report’s witnesses and sources, Jindires city, especially its suburbs, topped the Syrian regions that witnessed rampant violations during the quake emergency response. Jindires was a hotspot for various cases of abuse due to the mayhem that accompanied the response operations and the SNA factions’ interference in rescues and the work of humanitarian organizations. The factions encroached on aid distribution, diverted, and profited from aid provisions at the expense of the communities actually affected. These armed groups continued the violations and crimes they have been perpetrating since they controlled the Afrin region with the Turkish military, as documented by [local](#), [Syrian](#), and [international](#) rights organizations.

Furthermore, this section sheds light on the quake response in Sawran town, affiliated with A’zaz, north of Aleppo province. Sawran was a stage for violations similar to those in the Afrin region—especially the SNA factions’ control of rescue operations and later discriminatory practices in aid distribution.

Response in Jindires, Afrin

Blocked Life-Saving Aid

Documentation showing stopping aid from arriving on time caused senseless loss of human life is supported by the accounts of survivors, victims, and civil activists. For instance, the number of fatalities rose because there was insufficient gasoline for the limited rescue equipment. The negative effects of few rescues were especially noticeable in Jindires and other locations northwest of the country, despite the fact that aid restrictions hindered response efforts throughout the Syrian-affected regions, including those held by the GOS.

Ahmad Ezz El-Din (pseudonym) is a survivor from Jindires city.²⁶ He reported his observations of the rescue efforts as follows:

“To save their relatives, many residents from Idlib, A’zaz, and al-Bab brought their machineries [to Jindires]. However, a number of these vehicles came to a stop as their

²⁶ STJ carried out the interview online on 13 February 2023.



fuel ran out. A member of my family works as a pharmacist. Although we could hear his wife crying from beneath the wreckage, she passed away as a result of the slow and ineffective rescue operations. My uncle's great-grandson's foot was also amputated because he was stuck under the debris for a long time. We often heard the screams of individuals trapped beneath the rubble, but we lacked the power or capacity to respond.”

In a [report](#), published on 21 February 2023, STJ documented 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.

Additionally, in a March 2023 [statement](#), Amnesty International said that “the Syrian government and armed opposition groups have pandered to political considerations and taken advantage of people’s misery to advance their own agendas. These politically motivated obstructions of critical aid have had tragic ramifications, especially for search and recovery teams who need fuel to operate machinery.”

Disrupted Rescues and Discrimination against Local Communities

The SNA factions’ interference in the search and rescue efforts for those under the rubble and others affected by the shocks was marked by discrimination. These factions, especially those in northwestern Syria, put the needs of their families ahead of the native population in Kurdish-majority places like Jindires city and IDPs with no military affiliations.

A volunteer from a local rescue team who is from the village of Khalttan/Khalttah in rural Jindires shared an exclusive testimonial of the discriminatory behaviors he saw while assisting individuals trapped under the debris. Using the pseudonym Muhammad Hussain,²⁷ he narrated:

“I was not affected by the quake. Therefore, I joined a group of young men working to free people buried beneath the rubble. As I saw over the first hours, only four bulldozers appeared to be in action in Jindires, while dozens, possibly hundreds, of homes had been destroyed. I saw a bulldozer being used in a rescue mission to dig out a civilian trapped under the wreckage. His voice could still be heard, indicating that he was alive. However, a unit from the Jaysh al-Sharqiya/Army of the East drew closer and asked the bulldozer’s driver to leave the area and accompany them so they could rescue their family members from the rubble. The driver told them that this man was alive and that he had to continue working until he was recovered. The unit attacked the driver. Consequently, he abandoned his bulldozer and run away from them. To release the family of fighters with Jaysh al-Sharqiya/Army of the East, [they] prevented the rescue of a living person—I am not sure if an Arab or Kurd.”

²⁷ STJ carried out the interview online during the final week of February 2023.



The witness' statement matches that of a second volunteer from Jindires city's al-Sina'a neighborhood, who also participated in rescue operations with a volunteer team. The witness confirmed that he observed members of an armed group trying to coerce Civil Defense workers into heading toward the homes that had collapsed on top of their families, showing little concern for the rest of the victims.

For his part, Youssef al-Ahmad (pseudonym),²⁸ an eyewitness to the response operations in Jindires, narrated:

“Even those who sought to assist and had their own equipment were not allowed to utilize it any way they pleased. My relative has a bulldozer. He used it to help immediately after the quake hit. The factions, however, took the bulldozer away and frankly told him: ‘We will rescue our families first.’”

Al-Ahmad also related the tragic tale of a relative of his, who is a Kibar family member. The relative lost six family members, including his wife, daughter, and mother, and both his legs were broken. Al-Ahmad narrated:

“[The authorities] did not approach the buildings with Kurd residents. This was the case with Muhammad [Kibar] and his family. Nobody made an effort to assist them; we had to save them on our own.”

The residents of various villages in Afrin's suburbs contributed in-kind assistance and formed volunteer teams to help with the rescues following the quake.

Jwan Ahmed (pseudonym) is a farmer from Kokan village in the Mobata/Maabatli area of the Afrin region. He said that volunteer committees were organized by the locals of Kokan Fawqani and Kokan Tahtani, Mirkan, Darkir, and Omo as well as other people of the Mobata/Maabatli district. He continued by saying that 11 individuals from his town alone took part in these committees that wanted to help the quake victims. The committees, however, were not allowed entry into Jindires city by the factions. Jwan went on:

“The volunteer committees arrived in Jindires on the morning of 9 February 2023. Our village's volunteers alone had two pick-up trucks, two large air compressors, three electric compressors, and a variety of additional equipment for clearing rubble. However, a checkpoint of the al-Hamzat Division, stationed at the city's entrance, allowed them to enter the city on foot only, without the vehicles, supplies, and tools they had with them.”

He added:

“The volunteer committees insisted on entering [the city] and engaging in rescues. As a result, the al-Hamzat Division seized their cars, equipment, and compressors. The owners were then required to pay a ransom of 400 Turkish Liras each to recover their vehicles and equipment. However, they could not pass into the city and offer help.”

²⁸ PÊL – Civil Waves carried out the interview in early March 2023.





Asa'ad Ibrahim (pseudonym) is a volunteer from Kerzayhel (Kurzêl in Kurdish) village.²⁹ He gave a matching account. With a group of 25 volunteers from Bassouta and Ain Dara villages, he headed to Jindires city. There, they were shocked by the local council's attempt to control the in-Kind assistance they brought with them. He narrated:

“We arrived [into Jindires] between 9 and 10 a.m. The aid was loaded on board dozens of cars. We wanted to distribute the aid ourselves. Nevertheless, the Jindires Local Council asked that we hand them the provisions. We preferred to deliver the supplies to the *mukhtar* (governor) of the Kafr Safra village, where a significant number of the quake survivors sought refuge. We wanted the *mukhtar* to supervise the aid distribution later. We had no better alternatives. After we delivered the aid provisions and unloaded the cars, the group headed to the city to assist in rescues. There, armed individuals, we were not sure whether they were from al-Hamzat or al-Amshat, refused our help on the pretext that we lacked the necessary skills and tools to lift rubble. They gave us the options of leaving or inspecting buildings already dug up and searched for survivors.”

He added:

“We observed that the lives of people were not a top priority for the factions. Massive devastation occurred, and even the smallest action could have helped those buried beneath the debris.”

Discrimination in Aid Distribution

After rescues stopped and aid deliveries into northwestern Syria began, affected people complained increasingly about the practices of the de facto authorities, discrimination in aid distribution, and the chaos that gradually engulfed the distributions.

Chaos and discrimination made headlines. The testimonies provided by sources to [Daraj Media](#) and [The New Arab](#) were consistent. Multiple instances of discrimination during aid distribution were described by the sources, who said SNA factions practiced discrimination especially against Kurdish survivors in Jindires city. Some sources, aid beneficiaries themselves, said they received no or little aid compared to survivors in other areas. Other sources said they were forced to buy tents, distributed for free as relief program items. In its turn, [Syria TV](#) addressed chaos and arbitrariness that dominated the aid distribution mechanism, opening the door for exploitation. The outlet reported that access to aid was conditioned; beneficiaries had to stay in emergent response camps to qualify as relief recipients. This condition drove several individuals to leave their unaffected homes and even IDP camps and reside in the quake camps to obtain aid allocations.

Notably, several of the report's interviewed activists and quake survivors gave matching accounts about discrimination in aid distribution. Discrimination targeted Kurdish survivors particularly, who were deprioritized compared to IDPs or families of fighters, whose groups maintain control over Jindires and its suburbs.

²⁹ Lélûn Association carried out the interview online on 3 March 2023.





Hussain Ali (pseudonym) is a survivor from the Salah al-Din neighborhood in Jindires city.³⁰ Addressing discrimination, he narrated:

“I was sound sleeping on the third floor of our home with my family of seven. As a result, when the earthquake hit, we did not have enough time to rush downstairs. I also had minor wounds and a broken arm. My wife suffered severe injuries. She had fractured her hip, arm, and legs. My kids have light to moderate wounds. Our home was destroyed. The predicament is dire. In Afrin, my wife is presently undergoing medical care. She is residing at a family member’s home. I am in Jindires looking for a tent for my family and myself. The distribution of aid was unjust. The factions repeatedly barred organizations who wanted to provide relief from entering our neighborhood. Our neighborhood is controlled by the Jaysh al-Sharqiya/ al-Sharqiya Army. The organizations were directed by the factions toward the camps housing their relatives and families.”

Adam al-Ali (pseudonym),³¹ a survivor from the al-Sina’a neighborhood in Jindires city, narrated:

“The Jaysh al-Sharqiya/al-Sharqiya Army controls our neighborhood. The factions subjected us to discrimination for being Kurds. [The factions] prohibited several organizations and associations from distributing aid in our neighborhood. Some of these organizations distributed bread and water or packed meals. The organizations continued to distribute aid for two days. On the third, they were banned by a commander from Jaysh al-Sharqiya/al-Sharqiya Army. He said: ‘These are Kurds. They do not deserve aid.’ Then, [the army] ordered the rerouting of aid to the informal camps built just after the quake.”

Manal al-Taher (pseudonym) is a third quake survivor.³² On the interview day, she was staying with her neighbors in a tent erected across from her damaged house. Addressing discrimination, she recounted:

“After my husband was arrested on the charge of affiliation to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, I have not had a breadwinner in over a year. My house was damaged in the quake. Therefore, I sought several organizations. However, they refused to help me, claiming that my home did not collapse but was only damaged and because I had no dead relatives under rubble. I have not received a food basket nor financial assistance, while I keep seeing baskets and donations distributed at the tents of [the Jaysh al-Sharqiya/al-Sharqiya Army’s] families. G Agency gave [these families] 150 USD each.³³ The Jindires Local Council is directing the organizations to these families’ houses [and tents].”

³⁰ Synergy Association for Victims carried out the interview online on 6 March 2023.

³¹ Synergy Association for Victims carried out the interview online on 5 March 2023.

³² STJ carried out the interview online during the final week of February 2023.

³³ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.





Um Hameed is a widow.³⁴ The opposition factions killed her husband years ago. She shares a home west of Jindires with other widows who lost their families in the earthquake. She spoke about how some of the locals were denied access to aid:

“I am a resident of al-Sina’a neighborhood in Jindires. Several organizations, I do not recall their names, visited our neighborhood. However, several people, unaffected by the quake, came to our neighborhood from other areas. They registered their names with the organizations to obtain aid, while none of the neighborhood’s Kurdish residents had access to their relief allocations.”

She added:

“A volunteer team was the only side that helped us. The team depends on donations from Afrin people who are outside Syria. Additionally, even though a different organization had registered my name and the names of my neighbors, we have not received any aid from it so far.”

Abu Qazikli was also affected by the quake.³⁵ He is from the al-Telal neighborhood in Jindires. He lost his shop, which was his source of income. He narrated that dozens of unaffected individuals, who do not reside in Jindires, took aid allocations they did not need at the expense of the city’s rightful beneficiaries:

“Even though large amounts of aid allocations were distributed in Jindires city, the beneficiaries were not city residents but people from outside it. The support Kurds were offered was limited to local initiatives led by relatives abroad who wanted to help their families and friends in Jindires. I remain without [an independent] tent. I am sharing the same tent with three families; they are my neighbors.”

Aid Confiscation and Diversion

The SNA factions did not only intervene in aid distributions. They went beyond that and seized aid provisions and diverted others, rerouting some shares to the families of their fighters who stayed in camps established to deviate humanitarian supplies.

Najmah Ismail (pseudonym) is from Anqala village,³⁶ administratively affiliated with Shaykh al-Hadid district in the Afrin region. She narrated how an armed group forced some humanitarian organizations to relocate their aid allocations to specific camps. She recounted:

“On 10 February 2023, the al-Amshat armed group delegated *mukhtars* to inform people in Shaykh al-Hadid district that they had to go to Heikje/Hêkiçê village to obtain aid provisions. However, before the cars loaded with these items could enter the village, the al-Amshat’s checkpoint stopped them. The checkpoint also forced the cars to distribute their supplies near the Qatar camps, located close to the village. This happened at 8 p.m., and aid was distributed to Arab IDPs only.”

³⁴ PÊL – Civil Waves carried out the interview on 21 February 2023.

³⁵ PÊL – Civil Waves carried out the interview on 23 February 2023.

³⁶ Lêlûn Association carried out the interview online on 1 March 2023.





The visuals collected and verified by the digital forensic expert with STJ matched the testimony cited above. The visuals included a [video](#) posted by the joint force, formed by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat). It shows the two groups' machinery at work on the site of the [camp](#) in Heikje/Hêkiçê village.



Image 4- Screenshot from the above-mentioned [video](#), showing fighters from the joint force while establishing the camp.





Image 5- Photo of the Qatari Camp built in Shaykh al-Hadid district. Source: [Shaykh al-Hadid District Media Office](#).



Image 6- The above live image matched with satellite footage.





Zainab Taha (pseudonym) is a quake survivor and a resident of Heikje/Hêkiçê village.³⁷ She recounted how an armed group tried to take advantage of the catastrophe, using it to boost its media profile. She narrated:

“On 20 February 2023, through the village’s mosque radio, I heard a member of al-Amshat repeatedly tell the people to visit a camp [a housing center] outside the village to receive aid items. I headed toward the center with the people of the village. We took our children. The center is far from the village. There, the al-Amshat gave each family a chicken. They filmed the children carrying the chicken to document that aid was being delivered to beneficiaries. However, after they finished shooting, they took the [chicken] back, and the people returned home empty-handed.”

She added:

“The al-Amshat fighters told us that we must live in the camp to have access to relief items.”

Ayloul Ismail (pseudonym) is an activist.³⁸ She engaged in the distribution of aid sent by Afrin locals living abroad. She narrated:

“On 16 February 2023, my Europe-based friends sent me money to distribute to affected people in Kakhour village, administratively affiliated with the quake-hit Maabatli/Mabeta district. At the entrance to the village, I was confronted by members of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat). They prevented us from entering the village, tried to arrest me, and confiscate my money. However, Arab co-workers stepped in and dodged the problem. Nevertheless, we were unable to distribute the money to the village’s residents.”

The activist claimed that while observing from a distance, she noticed that the Liwa al-Shamal/Northern Brigade headquarters, which is located on al-Barid Street in Afrin city, was piled high with tents and assistance supplies intended for distribution to those in need.

This testimony is corroborated by several open-source visuals that confirm the presence of Liwa al-Shamal/Northern Brigade [headquarters](#) in Afrin city, near the Afrin Pitch. STJ’s digital forensic expert matched screenshots from a [video](#) showing the Brigade’s headquarters with satellite footage.

³⁷ Lëlûn Association interviewed the witness in person on 21 February 2023.

³⁸ Lëlûn Association carried out the interview online on 1 March 2023.





Image 7- Screenshot from the above-cited video showing fighters inside the Liwa al-Shamal/Northern Brigade headquarters in Afrin city.



Image 8- The headquarters. Source: Obeida Al-Hayani.



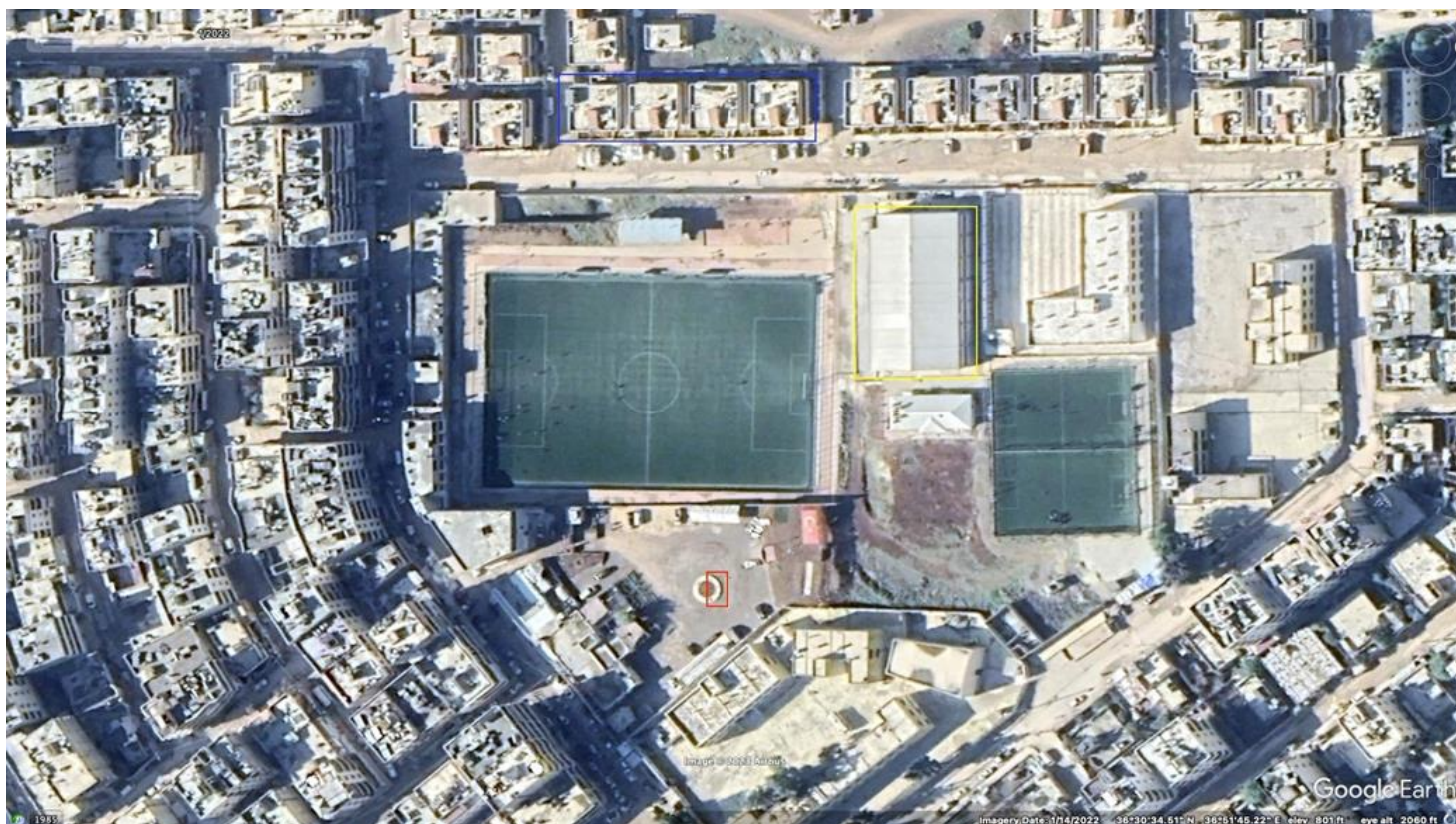


Image 9- The above live photo matched with satellite footage.

Rahmah Abdulrahman (pseudonym) is a worker with an Afrin-based relief organization.³⁹ She narrated how an armed group constructed a camp for its fighters' families for the purposes of diverting aid there. She recounted:

“The al-Amshat was one of the groups that interfered the most with the organizations' work. The group established a camp and gathered the families of its fighters there, in addition to people from other areas. The camp was established in the Driving School on the Afrin-Jindires Road. Currently, the camp comprises of nearly 200 tents. The organizations are forced to visit the camp and distribute aid there. It seems that some of these families stay in the camp only during the day and return to their homes at night.”

The testimony matches several open-source images and videos that document the transformation of said driving school into a housing center.

³⁹ STJ carried out the interview online on 8 March 2023.



Image 10- The Afrin Driving School. Source: [The Afrin Local Council](#).





Image 11- A second photo of the Afrin Driving School. Source: [The Afrin Local Council](#).



Image 12- Members from the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) setting up tents in the housing center established at the driving school. Source: [Abu Amsha's Twitter account](#).



Image 13- Screenshot from a [video](#) of the housing center at the driving school posted by Abu Amsha.





Image 14- Screenshot from a [video](#) of the housing center at the driving school posted by Abu Amsha. In the image, Abu Amsha appears next to Fahim Issa, commander of the Sultan Murad Division.

The situation in Jindires' suburbs does not differ, suffering similar violations recurrent in the city. These violations are also perpetrated by the armed groups that share control over the city's rural villages. One such village is Kafr Safra, the birthplace of activist Zinar Sulieman.⁴⁰ The activist described how members from these armed groups diverted aid:

“Once an organization enters our village, its [workers] would immediately be escorted by two members from the Liwa Samarkand/Samarkand Brigade, which is in control. These two individuals are E. Qadour and H. Ali. They provide the organization with names of people it must offer aid items. They oversee aid distribution in nearly ten villages on the outskirts of Jindires. Aid is often directly relocated to a camp outside our village. This camp is vast and was established years ago. Most of this camp's residents are from other areas and are unaffected [by the quake].”

Humanitarian Organizations Accused of Discrimination

According to the testimonies of several quake survivors and other affected sources, members of the humanitarian organizations operating in the region participated in the distribution of aid in a discriminatory manner. This is likely considering that these organizations carried out the distributions with the direct involvement of the factions in power.

In a different segment of her testimony, activist Ayloul Ismail pointed to likely discriminatory practices on the part of several humanitarian organizations in the area. She recounted:

“On 12 February 2023, 6 days after the quake, [T/SH] organization distributed money to affected people in Jindires.⁴¹ However, the organization did not allocate sums to

⁴⁰ STJ carried out the interview online on 7 March 2023.

⁴¹ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.





the city's locals, especially Kurds. The organization gave donations to only five Kurdish families to cover up its discriminatory tendencies.”

Afshin Mousa (pseudonym) is a quake-affected civilian from the Afrin region.⁴² Addressing discrimination, she narrated:

“On 21 February 2023, the R/C organization,⁴³ I remain unsure to which side it is affiliated, distributed aid to a camp near [Haba' Restaurant](#) in the al-Mahmoudiya neighborhood in Afrin. However, the organization expelled Kurdish beneficiaries, including my family. The organization told them: ‘These aid provisions are designated for Arabs only.’”

She added:

“The organization, whose workers spoke Arabic, distributed aid shares to the camp near the restaurant again on 2 March 2023. The [workers] entered my grandfather’s tent and asked: ‘Are you Kurds?’ My grandfather replied: ‘We are.’ They offered them nothing.”

Image 15-Haba' Restaurant and surrounding camps. Source: Planet.

⁴² Lëlûn Association carried out the interview online on 2 March 2023.

⁴³ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.



Notably, Afrin city registered fewer quake fatalities and material [damages](#) compared to other areas. The tremors killed 15 persons and injured nearly 60 others after four buildings collapsed. In addition to these destroyed buildings, 120 structures have turned inhabitable, while 1950 suffered damages, according to [statistics](#) published by the opposition-affiliated Afrin Local Council. In response to the catastrophe, the council announced it is working to establish 45 housing centers and camps.

In a different segment of his testimony, activist Zinar Suleiman narrated:

“I witnessed an incident nearly a week or ten days after the quake. The G organization entered Kafr Safra village and started handing out money.⁴⁴ They distributed basic items to some families and cash to others. The Kurdish families that received financial aid were considered affiliates of the armed group [controlling the village]. The aid affected Kurdish residents obtained came in the form of private donations from individuals living abroad. The homes of several affected families were destroyed, including the house of a father and a son, who now live with their families in a tent. Their tent stands in front of their home. They have not received aid even though [relief workers] frequently pass by their home.”

In a different segment of her testimony, Rahmah Abdulrahman spoke about the armed groups’ influence on the work of organizations and aid distributions. She recounted:

“Working with organizations, I observed preferential treatment and discrimination in aid distributions. Several organizations work in the area. However, the armed groups keep restricting their activities. When these groups do not intervene, the organizations distribute aid indiscriminately.”

Armed Groups’ Monopoly Over Rubble

After the quake, Jindires city experienced an emergent form of violations. The SNA factions seized collapsed buildings and removed their rubble to designated sites. In these locations, the factions dig into the wreckage and steal valuables, including steel bars, which they offer for sale later. Notably, several armed opposition groups profiteer from the steel business, particularly steel they illegally obtain from dismantling public and private buildings they expropriate.⁴⁵

In another part of his testimony, the activist Zinar Suleiman also spoke about claims of the factions’ profiteering from debris. He narrated:

“Factions such as al-Amshat, Murad Division, and Jaysh al-Sharqiya/al-Sharqiya Army relocate rubble to three or four sites on the outskirts of Jindires city. At these sites, the rubble is searched for steel to be sold later. One of these sites is at the entrance

⁴⁴ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.

⁴⁵ For additional information on the illegal steel trade, see:

“Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Dismantle and Steal Ancient Railway Metal in Afrin”, STJ, 14 March 2023 (Last visited: 20 May 2023).

<https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-armed-opposition-groups-dismantle-and-steal-ancient-railway-metal-in-afrin/>

“HTS and TIP Continue to Pillage and Dismantle Public Facilities in Idlib Province”, STJ, 4 May 2021 (Last visited: 20 May 2023).

<https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-and-tip-continue-to-pillage-and-dismantle-public-facilities-in-idlib-province/>





to Jindires city, and it belongs to the al-Amshat. Machineries and bulldozers demolish vulnerable houses that are about to collapse and then relocate their rubble. Steel dug up from all kinds of falling houses is useable. [The factions] do not allow anyone to extract steel from their destroyed buildings.”

Images 15 & 17 & 18 show a few of the [collection sites](#) where the armed groups gather remnants from collapsed houses and dig up valuable objects, including steel. All these images were obtained by STJ exclusively.

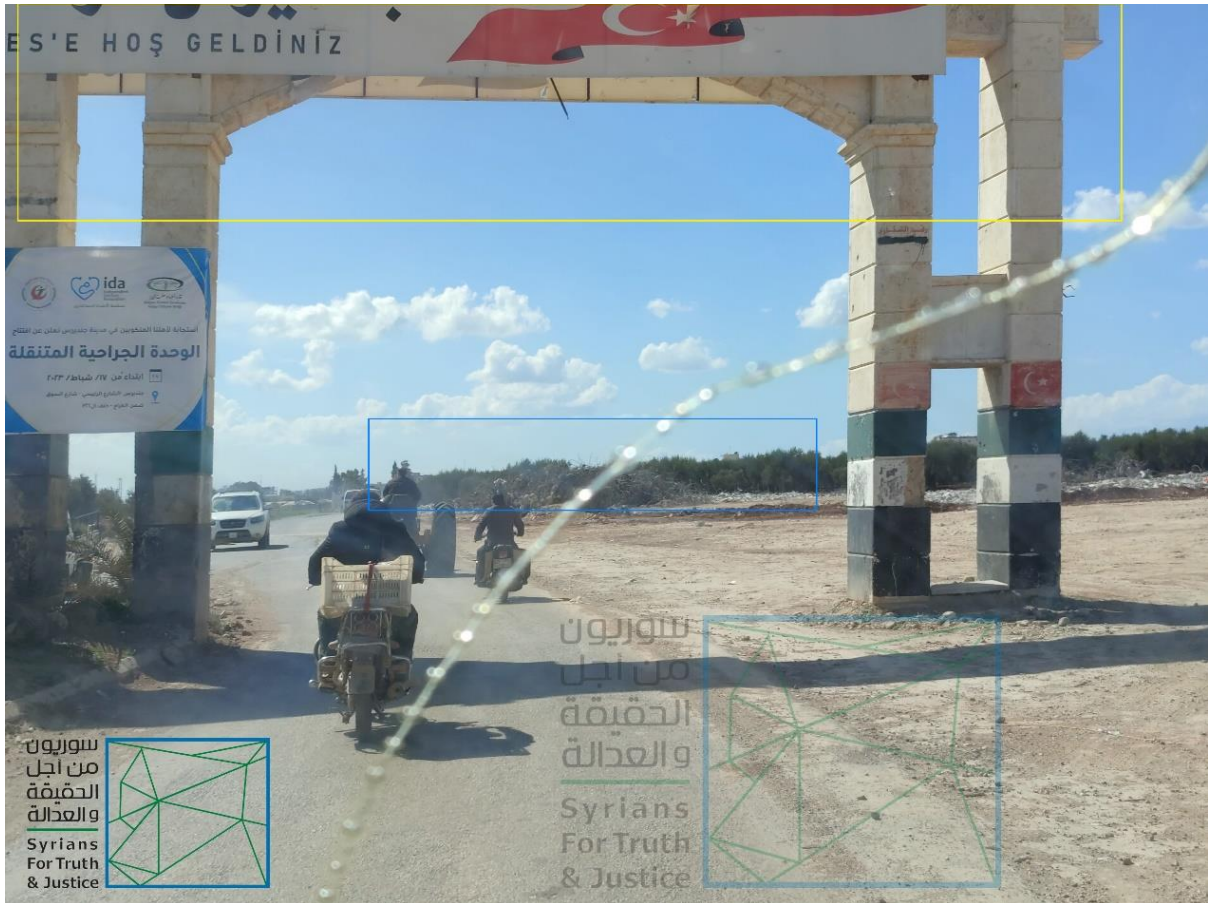


Image 15.





Image 16- The above live image matched with satellite footage.



Image 17.





Image 18.

In an additional segment of her testimony, relief worker Rahmah Abdulrahman spoke about the armed groups' practices involving rubble:

“In Jindires city, the armed groups divided rubble among themselves. Additionally, they prohibited civilians from going near a large number of destroyed buildings to search them later for money and personal belongings of former residents. [They] relocate wreckage to sites in northwest Jindires, close to the city’s northern entrance. There, they search debris and extract steel.”

Abu Abdullah, a survivor from Jindires city,⁴⁶ also said that armed groups banned owners from approaching their destroyed properties, narrating the following incident:

“On 13 February 2023, an old woman wanted to pick up some items from her son’s partially damaged apartment. Her son and his family died under the rubble. The apartment building is near Joud al-Sham Restaurant, on a side road branching out from Yalankouz Street. However, an armed unit of the al-Amshat faction expelled the old woman. They attacked her and violently prevented her from collecting her son’s belongings. The woman wept and left without taking anything with her. However, as soon as she was far from the place, the al-Amshat’s members began looting the house and searching for objects that interested them.”

⁴⁶ Lëlûn Association carried out the interview online on 2 March 2023.



Tents and Relief Items Trade

During the response, Jindires city also became a site for widespread trade in relief items and tents, which forced a large segment of the quake survivors to buy tents after they were subjected to discrimination and denied access to aid provisions. Several local sources corroborated these claims, including Abu Abdullah:

“I know an aid distributor. He is an IDP from Hama’s countryside and hails from a well-known family.⁴⁷ I saw him—on 16 February 2023 I believe—take a car loaded with [food] relief items to the headquarters of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham in Jindires city. He also handed out aid provisions and was among the first to obtain supplies with his family and friends. However, I and others were not offered as much as a rice grain. He is under the protection of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham’s members. Therefore, no one can argue with him. Additionally, he will immediately give you your share of aid if he learns you have connections. One of his brothers is involved in the aid items trade; they are in this business together.”

Judi Muhammad is a resident of Mirkan village,⁴⁸ administratively affiliated with the Mobata/Maabatli district in the Afrin region. He spoke about the relief item trade in his village:

“On 27 February, Sh organization,⁴⁹ based in our village, distributed only small packs of cookies to nearly 120 families. The organization then left without offering any help to the rest of the quake survivors, amounting to 250 families. On 21 March, I went to one of the village’s shops and saw the aid items distributed by organizations there. The items are sold to wholesalers.”

In a matching account, Said Hamza (pseudonym),⁵⁰ an Arab merchant from Afrin’s countryside, narrated:

“In the beginning, tents were sold for 200 to 250 USD. Several relatives and I purchased tents at this cost. There are about six tent shops in A’zaz city located near the *Hammam* (bath). Additionally, there are shops in Afrin that sell relief items. These shops are near Jin Weddings Hall and Jindires Road.”

Based on the local sources’ accounts, the partner organizations believe it is likely that hundreds of tents—meant to be distributed to quake survivors for free by several organizations—were sold for exorbitant prices that locals in hit areas could not afford.

⁴⁷ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.

⁴⁸ Lëlûn Association carried out the interview online on 27 February 2023.

⁴⁹ The name was withheld by the partner organizations.

⁵⁰ Lëlûn Association carried out the interview online on 26 February 2023.





Images 19 & 20- Images of the relief items in said shop, which the source shared with Lêlûn Association.

Claims about the tents trade are also stressed in the testimony of Um Jan (pseudonym).⁵¹ She is originally from Afrin and now based in Germany. She narrated:

“My brother and his family survived the quake. They were pulled from under the wreckage in Jindires city. Five days after the quake, my brother purchased a tent from Afrin city for 250 USD. I had sent him the money from Germany. My brother refused to move into a camp, fearful that the armed groups would seize the remnants of his house.”

Notably, on 6 February 2023, *North Press* [cited](#) an unnamed source as saying that Ibrahim al-Qadi—a high-ranking officer within the SNA’s Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade/Liwa Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh—is involved in tent thefts in Tarmish village in Shaykh al-Hadid

⁵¹ PÊL – Civil Waves carried out the interview on 23 February 2023.





district in the Afrin region. The source said al-Qadi stole 29 tents and attached relief and emergency supplies designated for quake-affected IDPs in Jindires City.

Chaos and Arbitrariness

While [chaos and arbitrariness](#) predominated the quake response in Jindires city, the SIG's concerned institutions were almost inert, even though a disaster operations room was [established](#) after the rescues halted. The room included the local council, the Military Police, the Civil Police, the SNA, and the Civil Defense, in addition to Turkish AFAD.

The first indicators of chaos surfaced with a viral [video](#) of SNA fighters firing their rifles in the air. The fighters were dispersing a crowd of people, some of whom tried to snatch aid boxes from a truck belonging to the Barzani Charity Foundation.

The shooting followed a civilian influx into camps and housing centers on the outskirts of Jindires. Large numbers of people sought the city from other areas to lodge in these camps because the stay there was a prerequisite for access to aid. Notably, opposition-affiliated media outlets [reported](#) the presence of 52 such camps and centers, highlighting that most of their residents either came from pre-quake camps or only suffered minor impacts due to the tremors. Additionally, the outlets pointed out that “people directly affected by the quake made up the smallest percentage of these camps' residents.”

In a different part of his account, activist Zinar Suleiman said that several armed groups constructed camps for the families of their fighters to divert aid toward them. He narrated:

“Families from various areas set up their tents in camps established by armed groups. These families were not affected by the quake and took aid provisions. For instance, there is a camp outside Jindires, located to the north of the city, on Afrin Road. [Families] in this camp receive aid. There is another camp to the west of Jindires, on Idlib Road. There are nearly 200 tents in that camp, and most of its residents were not affected by the tremors. Notably, several affected Kurdish families sought the villages [surrounding the city] and now stay with relatives.”

The partner organizations could not corroborate the claims made by the source, nor whether families in mentioned camps were unaffected by the quake. However, the source provided the exclusive images below.



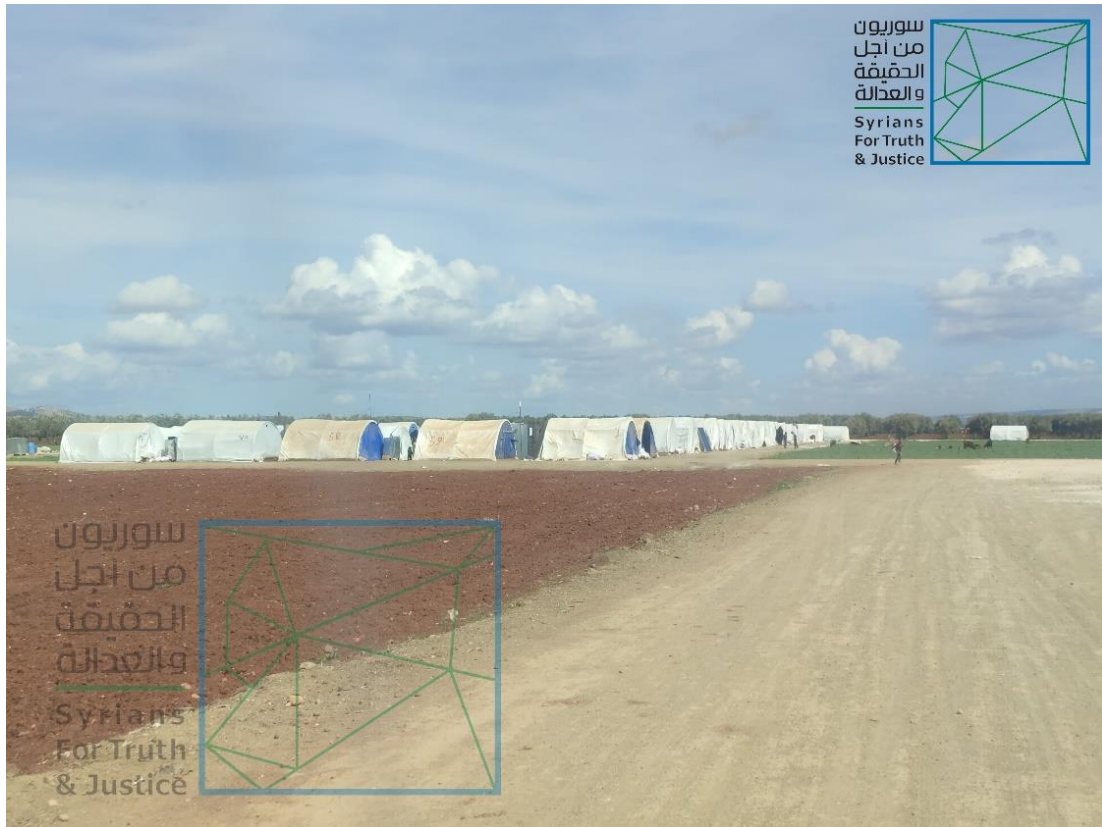


Image 21.



Image 22.





In a [statement](#) to the press, a member of the SIG-affiliated Afrin Local Council admitted “arbitrariness in aid distribution. The reason is that the sides establishing camps are guided by their regional affiliations. They let these affiliations decide their . . . purposes without referring to the area’s local council.” Notably, the Afrin Local Council [signed](#) only three camp agreements, covering those in the old marketplace, the terminal, and the driving school, while it had no role in the construction of others.

In an additional segment of his testimony, Ahmad Ezz El-Din, a survivor from Jindires city, said that chaos likely had a drastic impact on his relative’s fate:

“My cousin is a father to two young men. During the quake, he rushed to the roof, hoping to survive because he lived on the fourth floor. He survived with light injuries, according to his son. The son also told us that, [after his father was injured], he asked him to check on his brother Siban and mother. My cousin was rushed to the hospital unaccompanied. We had no idea about his status nor to which hospital he was taken, especially since we were all busy helping his family. We contacted the hospitals in A’zaz, al-Bab, Jarabulus, and Idlib, all to no avail. We had no clue about his whereabouts. It was not until a neighbor identified his body nearly a week later and by coincidence while he was being buried in a mass grave in Jindires. We reclaimed his body and buried him in the family’s cemetery.”

He added:

“Chaos reigned in the early days. My cousin’s son suspects his father died at a public hospital due to negligence because he was in good shape when he was transferred to the hospital.”

HTS Exploits the Catastrophe

The rise in theft rates was one manifestation of the turmoil that surrounded the earthquake rescue operations in Jindires city. The HTS, [designated as a terrorist group](#), took advantage of increasing robberies to exercise control and polish its image.

The HTS exploitation of mayhem in the wake of the quake is reminiscent of earlier similar instances in the area, where the armed group [capitalized](#) on the unrest that followed the assassination of a journalist and his wife in the al-Bab city, in Aleppo’s countryside, in October 2022. The HTS used the assassination as a pretext to control the entirety of Aleppo’s northern countryside. However, it stopped its expansion in Afrin after Türkiye broke off its clashes with other factions and ordered all to restore the status quo ante. The armed groups ended fighting but did not return to their pre-dispute positions.

Notably, several of the reports’ testimonies were consistent regarding the spread of thefts. Some of the witnesses were victims of the robberies themselves. In an additional segment of her testimony, Manal al-Taher narrated:

“On the second day after the quake, an armed group robbed my house before my eyes. I asked them why they were looting it. They said that I did not stay there. I reacted by saying that I had three kids and was scared for them. I added that I was residing with neighbors in a tent near the house. They told me to shut up, or else they would turn me into a lifeless pile. They stole a gas cylinder and a cooking oil tin.”





Activist Zinar Suleiman also addressed the thefts in his testimony:

“After word got out that a faction member had found some jewellery that a woman who perished under the debris was wearing, there were a few thefts. Members from several factions arrived to assist with rescues during the early days [after the earthquake]. However, all they cared about was robbing, looting, and digging for cash and gold. Al-Nusra Front [HTS] intervened as news of this spread, took control of the town, and forced all factions to leave.”

For his part, the volunteer rescuer Muhammad Hussain recounted:

“Since the first day, dozens of individuals have come to Jindires city looking for smartphones, power inverters, food, and money. The rescue efforts did not worry these people. Then, the HTS entered Jindires. The al-Amshat and al-Hmazat armed groups facilitated its access to the city. The HTS started using force to stabilize the situation, investigated any group that did rescues, and expelled those it suspected from Jindires. I saw frantic shooting by the HTS at a group of thieves. They were injured and arrested.”

For a comment on the HTS's interference in the security affairs of Jindires city, STJ reached out to an HTS senior officer nicknamed Abu Mujahid al-Souri. He recounted:

“The al-Amshat armed group asked for our assistance to restore security in Jindires due to the prevalence of thefts. We helped. Individuals arrested for theft were relocated to Idlib to be tried by the SG courts.”

The officer also explained the reasons behind the HTS's intervention in Jindires:

“The HTS sent machinery, fuel, and aid to Jindires under its security agreement with the al-Hamzat and al-Amshat armed groups. The purpose of sending those supplies was to promote the SG as a government capable of managing crises successfully. Several [videos](#) were shot of the SG's activities in Jindires.”

He added that the interference in Jindires presented the HTS with various challenges in Idlib:

“On the other side, poor response and machinery, fuel, and aid shortages in Idlib caused resentment among the HTS's fighters and scrutiny of the SG's performance. [The argument] was that Idlib was more deserving of the machinery than Jindires and Kurdish areas. Even though the HTS's machinery moved towards the houses and headquarters of its affected fighters since the early hours, the machinery was insufficient due to the massive number of fighters and high-ranking officers impacted by the tremors.”

On the shares the HTS took from aid provisions dedicated to Jindires, he said:

“The HTS, like the rest of the factions, received a share of aid from organizations operating in Jindires. The HTS is entitled to this because it partook in rescues and rubble removals. It was difficult to [ask for] a specific percentage of the provisions



because al-Hamzat, al-Amshat, and the Liberation and Building Movement (LBM)⁵² were also in the area.”

Property Seizures and Fears of Demographic Change

The SNA groups made living in the camps and housing centers built after the earthquake a [condition](#) for receiving aid. Because some sought shelter at relatives’ homes in the villages outside of Jindires city and others chose to live in tents they set up next to their destroyed homes, the bulk of the affected Kurdish families were denied relief. The latter group declined to move into the camps out of fear that after rubble was removed, the factions in power would confiscate their homes or the lands on which they were built.

Several of the sources interviewed for the report worry about property seizures. Kurdish IDPs and survivors who sought safety in other Syrian regions were paralyzed by these worries. They fear that once the remnants of their homes were removed, SNA factions may grab the plots on which they were built. Kurds are concerned that these illegal property seizures would exacerbate the demographic shift already underway and convert it into a de facto situation.

Similar concerns were voiced by Ahmad Ezz El-Din in another section of his testimony:

“I am staying in a tent that I set up on the street after my house was wrecked. I cannot live in my house because I am afraid of the aftershocks. My residence is a first-floor apartment. We went to the local council, who determined that the house should be demolished. Concerned that a faction would take possession of the building’s land following the demolition process, I established my ownership over the residence at the local council. We are also wary of settling in the camps for fear that other faction members may build tents where any homes formerly stood and eventually claim ownership of the property. The vast majority of Kurds share these concerns.”

Notably, these anxieties are well-founded and stem from various previous incidents. After the SNA took over the region in March 2018, both SNA factions and members seized homes and other properties. [Local](#), [Syrian](#), and [international](#) groups have documentation of the confiscations.

Ezz El-Din’s brother went through the painful experience of property confiscation after an armed group expropriated his home. Ezz El-Din narrated the story:

“In 2018, my brother and his family fled Jindires during the war. A member of the factions seized his house. We tried to get him out of the house several times, but he did not leave until the house was destroyed in the quake. These violations occurred before the quake and are ongoing.”

⁵² LBM, established in February 2022. It encompasses Jaysh al-Sharqiya/Army of Sharqiya, Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, 20th Division, and Suqour al-Sham Brigades/Levant Hawks Brigade-Northern Sector. In terms of command, the LBM has Major Hussein Hammadi as its General Commander and Abu Hatim Shaqra, Commander of Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, as his deputy.



Notably, after the quake, several camps and housing centers were established on lands belonging to civilian Kurds. According to the Legal Department of the Afrin Local Council, “landowners [filed complaints](#) to the department due to property damages, especially trees.”

Muhammad Othman (pseudonym),⁵³ a survivor from Jindires city, commented on the subject of unjustified land seizures:

“Nearly 47 housing centers were created. These are in fact informal camps built without the consent of the landowners on their lands, not on State property. IDPs who previously resided in Jindires are housed in these camps. IDPs from a camp in nearby Atmeh town, connected to the province of Idlib, also sought refuge at these centers under the guise of being Jindires inhabitants in order to get aid.”

For his part, Jaber Muhammad narrated how an armed group seized a piece of land from a civilian owner,⁵⁴ alleging it will be used for building a camp. He recounted:

“In the old neighborhood south of Jindires city, the land of civilian Kurd A. Ma’mo was taken by the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham. The faction established a camp in the area and housed residents from Idlib and its suburbs, including from Atmeh village. When the man requested his land, [faction members] beat him in front of his family and referred to him as heartless because he demanded it while people slept in open air. The legion had previously attempted to take the victim’s land several times, and in the end utilized the earthquake to succeed.”

Since a number of housing settlements were announced in the area days after the quake, the partner organizations are worried that the devastating earthquake and humanitarian aid devoted to reconstruction will be later used to bring about demographic change in the region and perpetuate prior forced displacements. A humanitarian organization [declared](#) laying the ground for a new residential village in the Jabal al-Ahlam area, south of the Afrin region, almost 20 days after the tremors, saying it would be allocated to those who survived and were impacted by the recent earthquake that struck northern Syria and southern Türkiye. Qatar Charity also [announced](#) the start of the first phase of the [Madinat al-Karamah](#) (City of Dignity) project, as part of the rebuilding plan in northern Syria, without indicating the city’s location. However, press [reports](#) suggested that the city site would likely be in the Afrin region.

It is worth noting that [Kuwait al-Rahma](#) housing village has already been established in the [Jabal al-Ahlam](#) in the region of Afrin, which has historically identified as a Syrian Kurdish-majority region. The village is one of the largest human settlements in the region, and 75% of its buildings are allocated to SNA fighters and their families. In a June 2022 [investigation](#), STJ revealed that [Rahmi Doğan](#), governor of the Turkish state of Hatay, is one of the officials responsible for the construction of the housing village. The settlement construction was done with the support of the [Rahma International Society](#) and donors from Kuwait, its plans were put in place in early 2021, and it is intended to cover the complete area of Jabal al-Ahlam.

⁵³ PÉL – Civil Waves carried out the interview on 23 February 2023.

⁵⁴ Synergy Association for Victims carried out the interview online on 6 March 2023.





The partner organizations believe that the establishment of such settlements is likely to be a part of a systematic process to [change the demographic makeup](#) of Afrin. The demographic fabric of the Afrin region is evidently changing. IDPs from other Syrian areas were made to settle in the region following the displacement of its predominantly Kurdish population amid widespread [suppression](#) of Kurdish culture.

Riots in Faction Prisons

The quake and aftershocks on 6 February 2023 sparked riots and breaks in SNA prison facilities in Aleppo's northern countryside. In two separate incidents, inmates succeeded in controlling the entirety of one of the detention facilities in the area and large parts of another. While the SNA factions were headless of the inmates' demands of relocation to areas safer than vulnerable structures they are in, several injuries occurred as these factions re-controlled the facilities.

On the riots and accompanying violations the inmates suffered, Abu Ghaith (pseudonym),⁵⁵ Major with the Military Police in Afrin, said:

“The quake hit nearly at dawn. A wave of terror gripped *al-Aswad* (black) prison, located outside Afrin city and near Rajo district. The prison officers and personnel left the facilities, fearing they would collapse on them. The inmates could be heard screaming at the top of their lungs from the first moment and then shattered objects around and unhinged doors. The inmates were hysterical. By 10 a.m. on 6 February, the inmates had complete control over the prison, including weapons and equipment. They began to unlock rooms and solitary cells. They attempted to escape the prison. However, the facilities are tightly fortified, enclosed, and surrounded by guards on the outside.”

He added:

“Following [the initial unrest], the prison director and inmates engaged in negotiations. The detainees wanted to be released, among other things. That was quickly rejected by [the director]. They then requested to be moved to tents in the [prison's yard] or another secure area because they were afraid of another earthquake and needed protection from the bitter cold. These demands were legitimate, yet beyond capacity. They then made more requests. They asked for a fresh pardon, sufficient nutrition, informing their families that they were in custody, and allowing them family visits.”

He added:

“The prison director engaged in these negotiations to win time until reinforcements came. He had already spoken with the Military Police and SNA commands. The Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East backup force arrived and took up position all around the jail complex. The unit brought numerous machine guns as well as powerful ZU 23 anti-aircraft guns. The Turkish Special Forces sent another unit from their base in Rajo. The Turkish unit had the Cobra armored vehicles with them. The Turkish forces used tear gas and the armored vehicles to storm the building.”

⁵⁵ STJ carried out the interview online in February 2023.





He added:

“The prisoners fought back and made advantage of the guns and ammo they had controlled. But the only firearms available were Kalashnikov rifles. The prisoner’s resistance continued for about two hours. By evening on the same day, the prison was completely under control. A total of over 20 people were hurt by the gunfire and tear gas. They received care. For added security, a small contingent of Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East stayed in the area around the prison.”

The Military Police-run A'zaz jail also experienced similar riots, according to Major Abu Ghaith:

“Following the second earthquake on February 20, 2023, the inmates rioted and managed to take control over a sizable portion of the facility. Large-scale violence occurred. The Military Police consequently requested assistance from the Northern Storm Brigade. The Brigade sent out massive convoys. They cordoned the prison, showered it with bullets, stormed it and established control.”

In A'zaz prison, the inmates mostly wanted relocation to safer areas afraid of probable collapse of the prison buildings, the major continued. They asked to be put in tents in a secure location. The Military Police declined their request since it was beyond their resources. The prisoners also requested updates on their relatives. That was also rejected by the police. Additionally, because medical professionals were busy in the massive reaction activities, injured prisoners were not treated for two days.

The major stressed that most of the prisons across the region witnessed violent disturbances and demands, but only the al-Aswad Prison went out of control for a few hours. He also pointed out that the condition of the Afrin prisons after the earthquake is not at all reassuring because they were originally old structures and are in danger of collapsing, adding that the Military Police prison was cracked during the tremors.

Partner organizations call on the United Nations and the International Red Cross to urgently send a field inspection team to assess the status of prisoners across the Afrin region.

Türkiye Delegates Response to SNA Factions

The partner organizations interviewed two high-ranking SNA officers, particularly from the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) and the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. The officers disclosed details from the Turkish emergency response plan, for which Türkiye relied on the SNA factions, and highlighted the violations and abuses that accompanied the response.

Abu Muhammad Idarah (pseudonym),⁵⁶ a senior officer with the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), narrated:

⁵⁶ STJ carried out the interview online in March 2023.





“Following the quake, at noon on 6 February, the Turkish Intelligence Service assigned the administration of Jindires city to Muhammad al-Jasim (Abu Amsha), Commander of al-Amshat. The service also formed a joint force to oversee relief efforts. The force included the al-Amshat and al-Hamzat. Additionally, the service delegated Abu Amsha the task of directing rescues and all the humanitarian and relief organizations [in the city]. As a result, the machinery of both groups immediately headed to the rescue of nearly 200 families of fighters of the Jaysh al-Sharqiya/al-Sharqiya Army, who were affected in the quake in Jindires.”

On the aid shares the factions obtained, he said:

“The Turkish authorities assigned a third of [the city's] aid to the SNA factions—arguing that families of several fighters were impacted by the tremors. This arrangement applied to relief supplies provided by all operative organizations, including Qatari, Kuwaiti, and Turkish ones. The Turkish AFAD and iHH handed over a third of their supplies to Abu Amsha, who also tried to interfere in the distribution of the remaining two-thirds in Jindires.”

Abu Muhammad Also spoke about the camps and housing centers established after the quake:

“The organizations relinquished the management of camps they established around Jindires to the LBM, led by Major Hussein Hammadi, Commander of Jaysh al-Sharqiya/Eastern Army. They also abandoned the administration of camps they constructed around Swaran town to the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya.”

He added that tension and factional disputes happened over aid:

“Smaller factions had disputes over aid distribution, and members of the Military Police engaged in clashes. Additionally, the Military Police arrested supervisors from humanitarian organizations on various charges. However, the real reason for the arrests was that its members did not receive aid baskets.”

Abu Muhammad also approached the rampant chaos:

“Several viral videos captured overwhelming chaos in [aid] distributions. Others documented cases of arrest and shootings due to chaos. However, the disorder has likely been deliberate by the al-Amshat and al-Hamzat, probably to force the organizations that refused their intervention [into cooperation] and convince them that they could protect them from the other factions and secure the distributions.”

On claims of aid supplies trade, he said:

“A third of the aid supplies the factions obtained was sold on the markets. Kurdish people affected by the quake had to purchase these supplies from the factions. Additionally, merchants linked to the factions sold food baskets in Afrin city, most of which were originally distributed by the Qatar Charity.”

Also uncovering the intricacies of the quake response in the Afrin region, Khalid (pseudonym),⁵⁷ a high-ranking officer from the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, said:

⁵⁷ STJ carried out the interview online in March 2023.



“The Turkish authorities assigned the joint force—comprising al-Hamzat and al-Amshat—to protect the aid convoys entering the Afrin region. They made the decision during a meeting on the third day after the quake. The meeting brought together Abu Amsha, Seif Abu Bakr, and Abu Said, a Turkish Intelligence officer designated to Syria and Iraq.”

He also addressed the aid shares designated to the SNA:

“The al-Amshat, al-Hamzat, Sultan Murad, and HTS were allocated a four-car load of aid from one of the convoys. They took the contents of one car each. This share amounted to a third of the total 12 cars. This happened under the agreement with the Turkish side. In exchange for the protection of convoys and [workers] and to keep them safe from harassment, a number of humanitarian and relief groups have committed to this arrangement.”

The officer cited the justifications for the agreement. He claimed that because the fighters in these factions receive their salary only every 60 days, a third of the relief provisions were given to them. In addition, he said that the fighter wages in northern Syria, which vary from 400 to 700 Turkish Liras, hardly support them for a week.

Khalid also addressed the influx of unaffected civilians into the makeshift relief camps that had been set up outside of Jindires:

“After the humanitarian aid arrived in the city and some of the factions’ units found themselves without any, they became frustrated. As a result, several commanders suggested that they seek the camps or construct small assemblies, while they also saw to guiding associations and organizations to these gathering locations. In fact, a number of fighters abandoned their houses in Afrin and went to the camps with their families to obtain aid and tents. The majority of these combatants settled in the camps at Jindires.”

The officer also disclosed information regarding the attack on the Barzani Charity Foundation's relief vehicle in Jindires, which was documented on video:

“When the convoy arrived in Jindires, al-Amshat-affiliated units informed their fighters that the foundation will distribute aid near the local council. Once the distribution started, several Kurds complained to the foundation. They said that the majority of the people gathered around the aid truck were unaffected by the quake or are fighters’ families. Then, the officers in charge of the convey met with the council’s director and ordered the stop of distributions. Then, the convoy trucks were attacked, and some of their contents were robbed. Strangely, despite being tasked with protecting the convoy, the al-Amshat and al-Hamzat did nothing. The director of the council consequently requested assistance from the Military Police in Afrin. A sizable force was sent into action, and it began shooting in the air to scatter civilians.”

Al-Amshat and al-Hamzat Expel IDPs from the Afrin Region

The Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) and the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division took advantage of the powers granted to them by the Turkish authorities, as well as the extraordinary circumstances that prevailed in the Afrin region in the wake of the earthquake. The two groups expelled dozens of IDP families—who fled Rif Dimashq to the region in previous years—and sent them to the control areas of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya.



With these expulsions, the groups intended to seize new homes to house affected fighters or to settle accounts with the Front.

Commenting on the forced displacement the two groups perpetrated, Abu al-Ezz, a dignitary from al-Qalamoun region in Rif Dimashq,⁵⁸ said:

“On 17 February 2023, the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) members began an arrest campaign against young men from Western Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta. The arrests were carried out at checkpoints operated by the Brigade in Jindires and nearby villages and based on the individuals’ geographical ties. The [Brigades’ members] severely hit with their Kalashnikov rifles’ butts all people whose identification cards indicated they were from Rif Dimashq. They arrested these individuals and transported them to al-Amshat jail in Jindires.”

Abu al-Ezz added:

“Then IDPs in Anqala and Senara villages, affiliated with the Shaykh al-Hadid district, were surprised by a very large military convoy of over a hundred vehicles and nearly 500 members of the al-Amshat Brigade. The convoy stormed the two villages, raided homes without permission, and arrested all young men aged over 16 years. They arrested 48 young men, besides the 13 others they apprehended at the checkpoints.”

According to Abu al-Ezz’s statement, the al-Amshat members conveyed a message from Seif al-Jasim, Abu Amsha’s brother, to the people. It stated: **“Leave your homes and Jindires if you want your children back.”**

Abu al-Ezz added:

“Civilians made up the vast bulk of those detained. They worked as merchants or teachers. A few of the captives were former members of the al-Amshat Brigade who had defected from the group during recent battles with the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Others were former members of Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam, who also disbanded during the said clashes with the Front. All of the detainees had one thing in common: they all resided in Jinidres homes that were unaffected by the earthquake.”

Abu al-Ezz said the first batch of families left Jindires on 17 February. It consisted of 20 families. An additional 50 families left the next day, on 18 February. The third batch, comprised of over 150 families, left their homes on 19 February. Following this, we noticed that al-Amshat Brigade and al-Hamzat Division started a clampdown campaign against the people of Rif Dimashq across Afrin. For instance, in Rajo, al-Hamzat expelled five families. Several parties intervened to stop the actions of the Joint Force, but the two groups’ decision to expel the families was irreversible. They both displaced 200 families.

He continued by saying that the homes the al-Amshat Brigade seized in the villages of Anqala and Senara were utilized to accommodate the families of its fighters. These families were affected by the quake in Jindires and originally hail from Hama’s countryside and the al-Ghab Plain. According to Abu al-Ezz, there are two reasons for the displacements:

⁵⁸ STJ carried out the interview online in March 2023.



“The first is that [the two groups'] wanted to house their earthquake-affected families. The second is that they label Rif Dimashq residents who do not belong to them as affiliates of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam.”

Notably, the displacements and forced evacuations were reported by the media. On 20 February 2023, *Halab Today* posted a [video](#), saying that the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) expelled 35 IDP families from camps in Anqala and Senara villages in Afrin’s suburbs, north of Aleppo.

Response in Sawran A’zaz

The SNA Detonates Cracked Houses

SNA factions in [Sawran](#) town—in the A’zaz district in Aleppo’s northern countryside—used explosives to demolish houses rendered vulnerable by the quake. The detonations caused material loss and psychological harm to the families affected by the earthquake.

Mahmoud Soran (pseudonym),⁵⁹ a civilian from Sawran town, addressed the detonation claims:

“We woke up to a huge explosion, similar to the detonation of car bombs. My kids and I were both terrified by the blast’s sound. My kids began screaming and crying after my cracked house shook and dust scattered everywhere.”

About the source of the explosive sound they heard, he added:

“When I got out into the street, there was a dense cloud of dust. I thought it was caused by a booby-trap explosion. However, once everything cleared, I saw members of Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam and the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya. They informed me that they were blowing up the damaged houses. I told them the explosion terrified my family and children, but they ignored me. When I asked them why they opted for this method, they said it was because explosives are readily available and are simpler and faster than demolitions, which require currently unavailable heavy machinery, upkeep, and massive labor.”

He added:

“The sounds of explosions continued for several days. From an explosives specialist, I learned that detonating a building requires from 200 to 1000 kg of organic fertilizers. That is nearly a ton of explosives to blow up a three-story building. This is the quantity used in car bombs, according to [the specialist], which explains why the sound was so terrifying.”

He pointed out that dust from the blasts engulfed homes and shops. Even worse, the explosions shattered the windows and unhinged the doors of nearby homes in the neighborhood, while they also turned the entire windows of several shops into fragments. He

⁵⁹ STJ carried out the interview online in March 2023.



stressed that people who were not affected by the quake were definitely impacted by the horrifying detonations.

Discriminatory Rescues and Aid Distributions

The situation in Sawran town, held by the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, did not differ from that in the adjacent region of Afrin since the townspeople suffered similar rescue- and aid-related violations. The town also was a stage for such breaches because Türkiye entrusted the response management to the SNA factions.

In an additional segment of his testimony, high-ranking officer Abu Muhammad talked about the response agreements in the town:

“In Sawran, in A'zaz, the Turkish authorities delegated the [response] file to the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya. The Front formed a joint force with the rest of the [SNA's] Third Corps factions, especially Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam. The organizations that entered Sawran also handed over a third of their relief provisions to the front.”

On the discriminatory trends that dominated rescues in the town, Abu Muhammad Mahalli (pseudonym),⁶⁰ a member of the Sawran Local Council, said:

“As the faction in control of Sawran, the al-Jabha al-Shamiya used its machinery to initiate rescues. Since they began the rescues, an hour after the quake, we observed that the Front prioritized its decimated centers and homes of its members. Front high-ranking officers said the SNA machinery and humanitarian organizations headed to Jandires, the worst-hit city in Aleppo's northern countryside. They also claimed that because the Civil Defense team had [only] limited equipment, they could not ignore their centers or the residences of Front members without risking the members' uncontrollable behavior. They advised us to have patience. Due to our limited window of time, this cost us a significant opportunity to save a number of civilians.”

On the aid shares the Front received, he said:

“Al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front received a significant portion of the aid that entered Sawran town on the orders of the Turkish [authorities], who alleged that the Front was the most affected in the town and because it was involved in rescues and rubble removal. Distributions of relief were chaotic during the initial days. Near the local council, crowds of people gathered around humanitarian vehicles. However, members of the Front forbade civilians from approaching relief cars, allowing only other members and their families access to supplies after they robbed the contents of two vehicles while everyone watched. Some of the Front's members even arrived from A'zaz, took some supplies, and then departed. The provisions were put up for sale on A'zaz's market within two days. The amount of aid dispersed was therefore minimal. There was a protest against the absence of humanitarian supplies, particularly tents, on February 21. Notably, the Front also occupied a camp that contained close to 60 tents. The camp was established on the outskirts of Sawran.

⁶⁰ STJ carried out the interview online in April 2023.



The Front forbade entry to the camp and only permitted families of its members to live there.”



Image 23- Protest by Sawran locals. Source: *Halab Today*.

On rampant insecurity and the proliferation of thefts in the town, he added:

“There have been instances of theft from the homes of individuals impacted. Despite the fact that the al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front is in charge of maintaining the town's security because its troops are stationed there, several of the thefts' suspects were Front members. When we brought up the matter in a meeting with the Front's top officials, they denied any wrongdoing and said that their men were busy with rescues, clearing wreckage, and distributing aid to residents.”

Response in the HTS-Held Areas

During the response, HTS-held areas witnessed numerous violations, notably the HTS's seizure of no less than an estimated 30% of the humanitarian organizations' aid and its attempt to meddle with the distribution of the remaining percentage. However, compared to SNA-held areas, where disorder and theft were rampant, the HTS's territories were more



tightly controlled. Security and stability were used by the HTS to polish its public image and improve its media representation.

Badi' (pseudonym) is an officer within an Idlib-based relief organization.⁶¹ He spoke about the HTS's administration of the quake response and the violations that accompanied its activities in the area:

"The SG Ministry of Development is in charge of licensing organizations and negotiating the working arrangements with them. Additionally, the HTS constituted the so-called Emergency Response Committee. The committee decided the responsibilities of the organizations after learning about their capacities. For instance, on the grounds that certain places were more in need, organizations with heavy machinery were sent there rather than elsewhere. There are several known instances where [such organizations] were dispatched to the HTS's family homes and headquarters. In addition, the relatives and widows of HTS fighters were also accommodated in the camps and residential areas where food supplies were sent."

He added:

"The HTS collected its food basket shares, awnings, and tents in the Babisqa warehouses on the Syrian-Turkish border, previously strategic storage centers for Jaysh al-Islam/Army of Islam. No organization can refuse to cooperate with the HTS or handed it over the required rations, because the HTS will take over its warehouses, confiscate its vehicles and equipment, and arrest its workers. No organization may also claim that it struggles with restrictions fearing the worst. Furthermore, no organization can openly state that it gives the HTS an estimated 40% of its [aid provisions] since doing so would result in funding loss and the possibility of being accused of sponsoring terrorism. The majority of the organizations functioning in Idlib are Europe and U.S. licensed. Therefore, if they were to state relinquishing aid portions to the HTS, they might be sanctioned or designated on terrorism lists, and their licenses revoked."

He added:

"The huge aid percentage we hand over to the HTS, purportedly to support development in HTS's areas, spare us attacks from armed individuals and groups, because the SG-affiliated police protect our activities. Additionally, the HTS is making more and more attempts to get involved with the remaining percentage. Furthermore, the construction of camps and housing centers, as well as their support, are also liable to HTS's directives and decisions. An organization's role is only limited to execution commensurate with its resources. Moreover, our records and warehouses are all monitored and searched by the HTS."

He added:

"[The HTS's influence] extends to aid recipients. We are provided with the names of the beneficiaries we must help. Along with earthquake victims, relatives of HTS members are undoubtedly listed among these names."

He added:

"In the HTS-held areas, we only deal with one side, compared to the dozens of entities we have to engage with in the SNA-held areas. Additionally, we have a set

⁶¹ STJ carried out the interview online in April 2023.



share imposed by the HTS, unlike the numerous percentages we are compelled to give up on to several parties in the SNA's territory. Moreover, the portion we hand over to the HTS spares us attacks. However, in the SNA-held areas, we are open to assaults from any individual with a gun. Furthermore, unlike places under SNA's control, most of the remaining shares go to civilians, which lessens agitation against organizations in Idlib. Despite the limitations in HTS-held areas, there is order, and our efforts reach fruition. Nevertheless, in the SNA's areas, our efforts are invisible due to the significant aid portions confiscated."

In another segment of his testimony, Abu Mujahid al-Souri commented on preferential treatment in aid distribution, whereby the HTS prioritized relatives of fighters over other civilian quake survivors:

"The HTS was accused of having delivered aid to its members twice. This stemmed from the fact that the members received provisions from both humanitarian organizations and the HTS. I think this is a natural privilege for the HTS's members because they are defending Idlib and thwarting an invasion by the Assad regime and Russia. Additionally, we do not dispute that we prioritized homes of our members and officers while sending machinery."

Response in the GOS-Held Areas

The GOS failed to meet its obligations throughout the earthquake response. Intersected information and testimonies demonstrate that the GOS's political investment in the humanitarian aid file directed its practices during the disaster. The GOS either interfered with the operation of civic volunteer teams, which primarily relied on youth-led initiatives, or blocked assistance convoys to those impacted in its regions while failing to offer alternatives.

Slow Governmental Response

Ahmad Salameh (pseudonym) is a quake survivor and second-hand cloth shopkeeper.⁶² He used to reside in an eastern Aleppo neighborhood. He narrated the painful experience his family went through following the tremors:

"The flat I lived in with my family suffered significant damage in the clashes between the Syrian government and the armed opposition groups, which left the neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo in 2016. Originally, the apartment belonged to my parents. I renovated it after the authorities let us return. I had previously resided in a leased home in Homs. Returning was a dream realized because it gave us stability and spared us the rent. Fortunately, we had remained up late the day of the earthquake. Because we were on the first floor, we were able to exit the building quickly. Government institutions were completely absent in the early hours following the quake. However, the police and a civil defense vehicle showed up at around 9 a.m. and started to inspect the neighborhoods. By 10 a.m. only few machineries were at work. The lack of fuel for their vehicles and the enormous number of collapsed buildings that had previously sustained war damage obviously distressed the workers.

⁶² STJ carried out the interview online in late February 2023.

I went to the mosque with my family, and we stayed there for about three days. We were only offered some sandwiches and blankets by the neighborhood residents. A week after the earthquake, we received some food and blankets from a Syrian Red Crescent crew. After a group of young volunteers gave us the money to rent a car and paid the rent of a residence for a month, we made the decision to go back to Homs due to the poor living conditions. A local young team also assisted us in obtaining some home goods.”

On the role of the volunteer teams, he said:

“If it were not for the efforts of the youth, I would not have been able to rent a home in Homs. They informed us that philanthropists inside Syria and abroad contributed to the relief they offered. Even though I registered my name with the Red Crescent, the municipality, and the Society for Social Development, I only ever received blankets and a food basket. We were unable to use the contents of the basket to cook because we lost all our kitchen utensils. There was no sign of the GOS. The Civil Defense teams were also not returning our calls. If you run into one of these teams, they will claim there is no fuel and very little equipment.”

GOS Intervenes in Volunteer Teams’ Work

Suffering in GOS-held areas was not limited to the quake survivors, who lacked sufficient aid and struggled with the GOS’s negligence of its duties. Volunteer teams also had difficulties as they attempted to alleviate the woes of the affected families, relying on donations from Syrians in the country and abroad.

On the challenges that faced these teams, Hassan Issa (pseudonym),⁶³ a relief volunteer in GOS-held areas, said:

“I am familiar with a group of young volunteers. They assisted the earthquake survivors and took part in relief efforts. They coordinated their work with a volunteer group made up of students from Latakia University. They distributed donations made by Syrians both at home and abroad to those in need. However, the Latakia Political Security Branch detained the students, including young women, a week after the earthquakes. Because they had received a money transfer worth several thousand dollars, [the branch] kept them. Several hours after the interrogations, the [branch] released the female students. After three days of beatings and mistreatment, the other students were finally freed. Local mediators intervened on their behalf. The members of the group were instructed to visit the Political Security Branch on a regular basis, and the group's activities were stopped and funds seized. Later, we discovered that the branch had informed the students that their team lacked a license and that they would have ignored their actions if they had stayed with providing in-kind aid because in order to provide monetary aid, they needed security permits and to maintain official receipts of the donations.”

⁶³ STJ carried out the interview online in late February 2023.

About partners:



Syrians for Truth and Justice: is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor, corroborate, and report human rights violations occurring on the ground throughout the country, with a special focus on its northern parts.

Lêlûn Association for the Victims of Violations in Afrin: Lêlûn works to advocate for Afrin; support all the victims; seek redress; ensure all displaced persons and refugees can return to their original places of residence in a safe, dignified, and voluntary manner; and guarantee they can recover their property by shedding light on their enduring tragedy, documenting the numerous violations they are suffering.



PÊL - Civil Waves: PEL Organization was established to activate the role of different societal groups (youth and women in particular) in political, social and economic life, to launch initiatives and projects that seek to consolidate coexistence and peace, and to provide an appropriate climate to activate civil life in society.

Synergy Association for Victims is a non-governmental, non-profit association which aims to provide a platform and a space for the victims to represent themselves and claim their rights. Synergy was founded on 11 March 2021 to seek justice for the victims of conflict in North and Northeastern Syria.

