

Earthquake hits Kurdish regions in Turkiye/Syria

The earthquake that hit parts of the Turkish and Syrian states on Monday is a tragic disaster for millions of people in the region, *writes Mike Picken*. Tens of thousands are already known to have died and the scale of human disaster is unfolding every hour.

Many of the worst affected populations are in towns, cities and villages with large Kurdish populations. Aid is being mobilised by states and governments around the world, but there is a big issue about the Turkish state government and the officially recognised Syrian state governments being used to coordinate emergency support.

The Turkish government of President Erdogan has sought to repress its Kurdish population for decades and with an election originally scheduled for May has increasingly been attempting political attacks and bans on Kurdish-supporting parties and taking military action in Kurdish areas, including invading and attacking Kurdish communities within the neighbouring states of Iraq and Syria prior to the earthquake. The declaration of a state of emergency gives the Turkish state massive military powers in the affected regions (the Turkish state has the second largest army in NATO after the USA).

The Syrian dictatorship of Assad, backed by the Russian state, has waged a brutal war for a decade with the help of Russian forces against all opposition to the despotic regime, including the Kurdish liberated zone of [Rojava](#) that stands as a beacon of hope.

The Turkish state also has an appalling record of mismanagement of funds for emergencies and is now apparently

blocking independent aid entering Turkey. The progressive Turkish party, the pro-Kurdish HDP under threat of being banned, has issued a briefing to Members of the European Parliament that we are publishing below that warns of the role of the Turkish government and the steps European powers need to take to ensure aid goes to those who need it.

Kurdish fighters were the key element of the resistance to Daesh/ISIS in the region in recent years, but the progressive Kurdish movement is under attack by governments around the world who accept the Turkish and Syrian states' repressive behaviours.

Aid must be independent of the Turkish and Syrian states

The Kurdish community in the region cannot rely on the Turkish or Syrian states to come to their aid in this disaster. It is therefore urging that solidarity and aid pass through appropriate NGO bodies, particularly Heyva Sor (the Kurdish 'Red Crescent/Moon' humanitarian group). Getting funds to Heyva Sor, which is repressed by the Turkish state, is difficult. We don't yet know whether the Disasters Emergency Committee of 14 UK charities is prepared to work with independent Kurdish organisations or whether it will accept the veto of the Turkish state.

So, we are therefore calling for fundraising efforts in Scotland and the rest of Britain to support the efforts of the London-based registered charity the Refugee and Workers Cultural Association which has launched an appeal for fundraising via gofundme as the quickest way of getting monies to support Kurdish and other communities on the ground. It is also possible to donate from the UK directly to Heyva Sor via its German account. Links for both these appeals are below.

The main organisations in Britain coordinating solidarity and aid in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake are [Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan](#) and the [Kurdistan Solidarity Network](#) covering England and Wales. We urge readers to support these two organisations. You can also follow developments on the independent news channel [MedyaNews](#). We also publish below the statement of the **Workers Party of Turkey** on the disaster (Workers Party of Turkey is a left wing extra-parliamentary party [supported by members of the Fourth International in Turkey](#)).

Supporting victims of devastating Earthquake

FERHAT AKGUL is organising this fundraiser on behalf of REFUGEE WORKERS' CULTURAL ASSOCIATION.

At Gik-Der we are dismayed and heartbroken to hear of the terrible earthquakes that have affected various cities in Turkey, in which thousands of people have tragically lost their lives. Many of our members and wider community in the UK are from areas where the devastation has been worst, and we note with a solemn heart that relatives and those dear to us are among those who have been killed. As we come to terms with this grief and loss, we are equally outraged at the government's failure to act with any degree of care and decisiveness in preparation for such events, despite continued warnings from the community. Natural disasters like this are not simply acts of God – the devastation and destruction, the loss of life and limb, are unforgivable failures of a state which places no value on lives.

The first and most important foundation for any such struggle is solidarity, and for this reason, we are immediately starting a campaign to fundraise for relief for those effected by this tragedy.

Funds will be sent directly to organisations working on the ground to support the victims.

Update by FERHAT AKGUL, Organiser

Donations are reaching out to those effected. Teams we work with our working tirelessly day and night supporting the victims of the earthquake, even clearing snowy roads to reach the aid to those in need.

GOFUNDME Appeal by Refugee and Workers Cultural Association
<https://gofund.me/f9db8b43>

HDP Briefing to Members of the European Parliament

Instead of monopolising aid, which given the Erdoğan government's track record of financial mismanagement will simply generate more chaos and bureaucracy, we recommend the following seven-point plan to Brussels:

The European Parliament and the EEAS should, through resolutions, delegations and diplomatic notes, call on the Turkish government to allow all civil society and political actors to participate in humanitarian relief efforts without facing politically-motivated obstruction;

The member states of the European Council should establish and facilitate a joint crisis and recovery group to coordinate relief and rescue operations. The group should include Turkish state and civil society actors such as HD, TTB, KESK, DISK and Egitim-Sen, as well as international institutions.

Grants made to the Turkish state in the context of the crisis

should be subject to constant scrutiny to prevent nepotism, embezzlement, and misuse of aid funds.

It should be made easier for aid organised by European charitable initiatives or smaller aid organisations to cross Turkey's borders.

On 8 February, President Erdoğan declared a three-month state of emergency in ten provinces affected by the earthquake. The government is seeking parliamentary approval for this unprecedented measure. This is unnecessary and will most likely serve to further weaken the opposition in the country, which already faces liquidation in the form of ongoing legal efforts to ban the HDP. The EU and international organisations, should strongly emphasise that it is not necessary to declare a state of emergency and concomitant rule of law, while pointing out that this difficult transition can be managed through alternative legislative mechanisms.

In addition to the political and humanitarian crisis resulting from ten years of war, Syria has suffered major damage in the recent earthquake. Due to Damascus' obstruction of aid to opposition-held areas, the main routes for aid to enter Syria are via neighboring states. Therefore, it is recommended that all border crossings to Syria be opened so that humanitarian aid can also reach Syria via neighboring states, reaching all regions of Syria including those out of Syrian Government control.

The consequences of this earthquake are long-reaching in nature. Millions of people are affected, not only because of the earthquake, but more generally because Turkish society is in a severe economic crisis. Therefore, longer-term support is needed to help people rebuild their communities and homes. Planning longer-term reconstruction assistance for Turkey should be an crucial issue for the EU and international institutions not only in the present crisis, but also in the

months and years ahead.

If you have any further questions about the situation after the earthquake in Turkey or Syria, please do not hesitate to contact the crisis coordination office of the HDP

Earthquake Appeal – Kurdistan Solidarity Network (England/Wales)

Thousands in Turkey and Syria are still trapped from the earthquake and are sending messages to loved ones from under the rubble. The region affected is largely Kurdish. Please donate to Heyva Sor (the Kurdish Red Crescent). They are the main Kurdish charity on the ground carrying out rescue operations right now.

“Today, 6 February, an earthquake of magnitude 7.8 occurred in the Pazarcik district of Maraş city in Northern Kurdistan. After that, there was a second earthquake with a magnitude of 6.4 in Nurdagi district of Dilok and a third earthquake with a magnitude of 6.5 in Islahiye district of Dilok.

These strong earthquakes mainly affected the cities of Amed, Malatya, Urfa, Semsur, Dilok and many other areas in northern Kurdistan, the cities of Adana, Hatay, Kilis, Osmaniye and Kayseri in Turkey, and the areas of Cizre, Euphrates and Shehba in northern and eastern Syria. The earthquake also affected the surrounding countries. As a result of the earthquake, hundreds of citizens have lost their lives and thousands are injured. Thousands of people are still under the rubble. Many houses and buildings have been destroyed, with winter conditions making rescue operations difficult.” – Heyva Sor

More from Heyva Sor and a link to a Direct Paypal donation, or the bank transfer details to their European branch in

Germany:

<https://www.heyvasor.com/en/banga-alikariya-lezgin-ji-bo-mexduren-erdheje/>

The Direct Paypal donate button link:

https://www.paypal.com/donate/?hosted_button_id=ST5BWWFB7FPGS

As of today, Monday 7th, the day after the earthquakes the death toll has reached 6,000 with the search for survivors ongoing. With at least 8,000 people rescued from debris in Turkey with 380,000 taking refuge in shelters.

Please donate what you can to the ongoing rescue efforts, and share this appeal as wide as you can.

Thank you.

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<https://kurdistansolidarity.net/2023/02/07/earthquake-appeal/>

“Our country does not deserve this cruelty – we stand in solidarity with our people with all our strength”

Statement by the Workers Party of Turkey

Upon receiving the news of the earthquake that shook our country this morning, we in the Workers’ Party of Turkey took immediate action, and rapidly established a Disaster Coordination Center. Since then, we reached out to many compatriots in the earthquake zone and coordinated humanitarian aid coming from citizens in other provinces.

So far, the TİP Disaster Coordination Center has received more than 1500 calls for help. The number of calls reveal the severity of the situation we are facing.

– > In many neighborhoods of the Hatay province, especially in Defne and Samandağ, as well as in provinces Kahramanmaraş, Gaziantep and Adıyaman, people have been left to their fate in the harsh winter conditions.

– > In these areas, many buildings, old and new, subcontracted via state tenders under the AKP government - public institutions such as hospitals, dormitories, hotels, AFAD and municipality buildings- collapsed. The pro-government construction companies, and the ministries and directorates which awarded these tenders to them are responsible for the death of the young, the children, and the patients. We demand the prosecution of those who caused the death and suffering of thousands of citizens.

– > Against all the protests of Hatay residents, experts, and environmental activists, Hatay Airport was built on the Amik Plain, and is now unusable. With the cities' highways and viaducts damaged, it is now impossible to reach Hatay, and tens of thousands of people cannot receive aid.

– > Institutions such as the Turkish Armed Forces and AFAD are tasked with search and rescue and providing food during emergencies. However, under the AKP rule, they have been systematically disempowered, their staff and personnel reduced, and thus they have been rendered useless in search and rescue operations. Besides, many specialized, volunteer search and rescue groups were not allowed to get involved because they couldn't get the necessary certification issued by the pro-AKP bureaucracy.

– > In the aftermath of the massive earthquake of 17 August 1999 in northwestern Turkey almost 25 years ago, the "earthquake taxes" collected nationwide were not spent on

preparing for earthquakes and ensuring the safety of the citizens, but on roads and bridges that the AKP has built in order to generate political gains and enrich pro-government contractors.

– > Our country was hit by two very severe earthquakes during the coldest days of winter. Effective search and rescue in the earthquake region, especially in Hatay, Kahramanmaraş and Adıyaman, is virtually impossible. Besides, there is a lack of food and water supply. Our citizens are trying to rescue their relatives from the rubble by digging with their hands, while those who survived struggle in the freezing cold.

– > Our country has been facing a great challenge for hours since the two devastating earthquakes. But the state, the government institutions, specialized experts, means for transportation and sustenance are nowhere to be seen.

The people of our country do not deserve to be abandoned to such despair, nor do they deserve the remorselessness of the government.

We will never forget and never forgive those who abandoned our people to this fate.

We have mobilized with all our power to stand with our fellow citizens who have been left to fend for themselves in these harsh winter conditions.

Our people will heal their wounds through solidarity.

Our fellow citizens will never be alone and helpless.

7 February 2023

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Earthquake in Turkey: the state versus the people

What do you do when you are thousands of miles from your family, writes [Sarah Glynn](#) on [Bella Caledonia](#), and their phone stops ringing and you don't know if they are lacking a signal or buried under rubble? This is the situation facing very many diaspora families with roots in the extensive region devastated by Monday morning's earthquake. Ugur Cagritekin, from Edinburgh's Kurdish community, told me that around a dozen of his close friends had already flown back to Turkey to try and find their relatives. Many members of his sister in law's family are beneath the ruins.

Those remaining in Scotland, and in other parts of the Kurdish and Turkish diaspora, are working frantically to try and organise aid deliveries to the worst affected regions. Besides damaged roads and severe winter weather, this task is made much more difficult by the Turkish authorities who insist that all aid must be delivered through AFAD, the government's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority. AFAD has been shown to be woefully inadequate for the task it faces, and there are also well-founded concerns over its priorities. Government bodies are known to favour government supporters, and there is no confidence that AFAD will distribute aid where it is most needed. Rather than allow the evolution of local support networks, this top-down approach is designed to make people dependent on, and grateful to, President Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). A record of government corruption makes many wary that aid distribution will be co-opted to boost the image of the government.

Hatice (not her real name), another Edinburgh resident, told

me that she has been working with contacts in Turkey to try and organise the delivery of essential equipment that can help some of the hundreds of thousands of people who have had to leave their homes and are struggling to survive in the bitter cold. They are looking for vehicles that can travel through the snow, and for routes where they can avoid having their supplies confiscated by AFAD. Hatice, in common with a very high proportion of Edinburgh's Kurds, hales from Elbistan. Their hometown, which was very close to the epicentre of the second earthquake that followed eight hours after the first one, has suffered severe damage. Buildings that had cracked with the first quake were brought down completely by the second. Hatice's mother-in-law is lost in her collapsed home, as are many of her cousins and friends.

Monday's earthquakes have devastated ten Turkish provinces that are home to around thirteen million people: well over twice the population of Scotland. They have also caused massive destruction in Syria, especially in government-controlled areas and areas controlled by Turkey (including occupied Afrîn). Autonomous North and East Syria is less badly affected, and their Syrian Democratic forces have offered to provide help to all other parts of Syria – however I only have space to look at Turkey here. The scale of the disaster is terrifying. Thousands are already confirmed dead, but with so many more trapped in the destroyed buildings, and the vast majority of these buildings yet to see any rescue equipment, the number is expected to rise into the tens of thousands. Some fear the final figure may be over 100,000.

Three days after the initial earthquake, which caught people asleep in their beds, many places, and especially smaller towns and villages, have yet to see any sign of official help. Local people are trying to remove the rubble that is burying their families and neighbours with their bare hands, but without the equipment to cut and lift concrete this is often impossible. Chances of survival in the sub-zero temperatures

are eking away with every passing minute.

Even for those who have escaped the initial destruction, conditions are extremely difficult. The risks from the many aftershocks, as well as dangerous structural damage, makes it unsafe for people to stay in their homes, but AFAD has done very little to supply them with the basic shelter, warmth, and sustenance that they need to survive. Many places are without water and electricity. Checking that surviving buildings are safe for people to return to will be a massive task in itself.

Social media is full of desperate pleas for help, and anger at the absence of the authorities that should be providing it. The response from the government has been to clamp down on people sharing news of what is happening. In an angry television message on Tuesday, President Erdoğan announced a State of Emergency in the affected provinces. The main effect of this, like the national emergency following the 2016 coup attempt, will be to allow much greater government control and suppression of criticism. Erdoğan told viewers that he is keeping a note of all the 'lies and distortions' and will open his notebook 'when the time comes'. Already, twitter has been restricted – although it was being used to provide vital information for search and rescue. Journalists have been detained while reporting from the rubble in Diyarbakir, and investigations are being opened against TV commentators and social media users.

The one organisation that has the equipment, skills, and competence to make a serious impact on the rescue efforts, the Turkish army, remains in readiness to invade Syria, but only a relatively small force has been deputed to help the rescue operation.

Prospects are grim and hopes are fading for the tens of thousands still buried.

A natural disaster in a political context

Before looking at the huge mobilisation by local people in Turkey, and at what people in Scotland can do to help, I want to examine the political context that has massively amplified the horror of this natural disaster. Of course, the focus must be on humanity, but we do need to understand the politics that makes humanity so difficult to achieve, and the political forces that are seeking to exploit the situation for their own, very inhumane, ends.

This natural disaster has taken place in the context of a lethal cocktail of ruthless neoliberal crony capitalism, political corruption, anti-Kurdish racism (which has left infrastructure underdeveloped and attacked political and civic organisation), and an increasingly dictatorial authoritarian regime that will not work with others and will not broach criticism.

Across the affected region, blocks of flats have collapsed like houses of cards. Much of Turkey's recent economic development was based on a building boom, with contracts awarded to government supporters. Turkey is crossed by major geological fault lines, but in the rush for profits, there was no room for such niceties as observing earthquake design regulations. As a friend who works in disaster planning put it to me, you can have a lot of good regulations and codes, but 'the snag is in the governance' and politicians feel that enforcing regulations is not a vote-winning priority and that nothing will happen on their watch.

The neglect of earthquake preparedness has come from the top. After the 1999 Istanbul earthquake, the government of the time brought in what was commonly known as the 'Earthquake Tax', which was supposed to pay for disaster preparation. This is estimated to have brought in £3.8 billion pounds, but there is

no evidence that this has been spent on making anything safer.

It was not as if the government had lacked warnings. The Chairman of the Chamber of Geological Engineers has stated that they had not only expected an earthquake of this kind but had also submitted a report to the president and government on what should be done in preparation, which had received no response. He described the policies of uncontrolled development as 'rent and plunder'.

Despite the palpable and massive failure of the government's disaster response, Erdoğan shows no sense of responsibility, let alone contrition. On Wednesday, when he finally visited Maraş, at the centre of the first earthquake, he told a survivor, 'The damage is done. These things are part of destiny's plan.'

We have seen plenty of evidence of this disregard of safety planning before – notably in the lack of vital planes to fight 2021's forest fires, when, too, Erdoğan seemed more concerned to stamp out negative publicity than extinguish the flames; and also in the mining disasters at Soma in 2014 and Bartın last October, when warnings of dangerous conditions were not heeded, and Erdoğan also provoked anger by putting the blame on 'destiny'.

The abject inadequacy of both preparedness and response has not spared any of the cities hit, whatever their ethnic makeup or political leanings, but it is also significant that the predominantly Kurdish southeast of Turkey, where much of the damage occurred, has been purposefully left behind in infrastructural development by successive governments. And, in the places where the population voted for the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), they have had their elected mayors removed – and often imprisoned – and civic structures that the mayors supported closed down.

When people most need to work together and combine resources,

Erdoğan is terrified of allowing any involvement from other political parties in case it earns them support. Again, this is not a new phenomenon. The central government confiscated aid for Covid victims collected by the Peoples' Republican Party (CHP) mayors of Istanbul and Ankara. An openly HDP delivery of aid to the earthquake areas was seized by the government.

Faced with a disaster of this scale and a response organisation that is clearly unable to cope, most people would have expected the government to turn to the military – the second biggest army in NATO: all the more so as Erdoğan is looking for a popular victory, and what could be more universally popular than an effective response to a major disaster? That he has opted for only a very limited deployment may also be a consequence of his fear of being upstaged. Despite major purges, many in the army do not endorse his turn against Turkish secularism.

The dreadful failures in the government response can also be seen as a product of the arrogance of dictatorship, where one man cannot oversee everything, but others are afraid to criticise: the emperor's new clothes syndrome.

Erdoğan's desperation to hold onto power at all costs makes him prioritise perception over reality. The Turkish government has increasingly resorted to stifling freedom of speech, and last year's Disinformation Law has been widely condemned as a vehicle for censorship and the criminalisation of journalism. Although making political predictions for Turkey has become even more difficult, many must be worrying that if he sees his support falling, Erdoğan might use the emergency situation to postpone the forthcoming election.

The scale of the Turkish Governments failures and of their impacts is staggering, but in trying to understand what could have gone so wrong, I found myself thinking of the Grenfell fire. Turkey's disaster may be a thousand times bigger, but

there are many similarities in the underlying forces and in the attempt to manage perceptions rather than face responsibility.

Inevitably, the lack of effective response – and in many places any response at all – has produced a swell of anger, especially among those who have waited in vain for help to rescue family members trapped beneath the debris. On Wednesday in Adiyaman, where no help had arrived more than two days after the earthquake, the Minister of Transport, and the local governor fled in their cars rather than face the angry crowd. The AKP mayor of Kirikhan has damned his party's government in front of the collapsed building that buried his children. There is a new axiom being shared round Turkey: It is not earthquakes that kill people, it is states that kill people.

Solidarity from the grassroots

In contrast to the state's failures, organisations across Turkey have sprung into action, from political parties to community groups. Cars and trucks are bringing aid supplies from all over the country, organised by local groups or even private individuals.

The big municipalities run by the main opposition Republican People's Party have been coordinating large collections and deliveries of basic aid, with the CHP leader announcing that they will not accept bureaucratic obstacles even if they 'have to be arrested for finding bread and blankets'. And the HDP, which has fewer financial resources and has been deprived of municipal power, is also managing to get deliveries through despite government obstruction. (The scale of the relief effort is going to make government control increasingly difficult to implement.) 93 trucks of supplies organised by the HDP had reached the earthquake area by Wednesday morning, and Ugur Cagritekin told me that they had received news that five trucks had reached Elbistan where supplies were being

delivered to people in need through the coordination of the HDP and the local Alevi centre. They want to take aid to villages as well as the town centre. Some people in the villages have moved from their homes into the relative safety of their more lightly constructed stables, where they can also benefit from the warmth of the animals, but there has been no help from outside.

The HDP's strength lies in its ability to mobilise and organise its large network of supporters and sympathisers and like-minded community organisations. As soon as they heard about the earthquake, the party dropped all other plans, set up a central coordination centre, and dispatched leading members to the affected area. Local election centres were transformed into coordination centres, while the youth organisation concentrated on rescue work. They put out calls for solidarity and for people with shelter and food to share with those without, and they helped create a framework to allow people's natural solidarity to find direction.

I spoke with a volunteer at Rosa Women's Association in Diyarbakir as she took a break from preparing soup and tea for 200 people taking shelter from the dangers of damaged buildings. She told me that their city (the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan) benefitted from being left wing and thus easy to organise. Even in relatively accessible Diyarbakir, where the devastation is patchy, official relief efforts are seriously inadequate; however, although the HDP mayor and council have been removed (and the mayor imprisoned), HDP organisation remains extremely strong.

Their earthquake relief coordination is the HDP's philosophy of grassroots organisation and control put into action. When Ertuğrul Kürkçü, the HDP's honorary president, writes about 'transforming earthquake solidarity into a social movement', he is not talking about an abstract idea but a political practice.

Kurdish communities outside Turkey have wanted to send essential supplies too, but there are reports of deliveries being turned back for lack of documentation, or being taken over by AFAD at the border. The consensus, across the Kurdish diaspora, is to call for financial donations to the Kurdish Red Crescent, Hevya Sor, which operates throughout the affected areas – and of course helps everyone regardless of background. Hevya Sor have the contacts on the ground that enable them to get the aid through to where it is needed, independent of government meddling. So far, this fundraising has been focused on Kurdish communities, but the many other people who want to help and are uncertain who to trust, should be reassured that this is an organisation supported by those with most reason to be concerned.

To donate in from the UK please send to Hevya Sor's German bank account or donate via Paypal:

Account details:

IBAN: DE49 3705 0299 0004 0104 81

BIC/SWIFT: COKSDE33XXX

<https://www.heyvasor.com>

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