

Turkey-Syria earthquake : Assad blames west as agencies struggle to get aid to his desperate people

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Damascus is putting politics above its people as it hinders the international aid response.

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It didn't take long for Syria's Assad regime to seek political and economic benefit from the devastation of an earthquake. As emergency services were reaching victims of the 7.8-magnitude tremor on February 6, [regime-linked organisations demanded](#) governments "immediately end the siege and unilateral coercive economic sanctions imposed on Syria and its people for 12 years".

Long-time supporters of the Assad line were just as prompt. Rania Khalek, a commentator on pro-Assad and Russian state-linked outlets, [tweeted](#) : "Syria has to deal with this horrific disaster while under US sanctions that have ruined its medical sector and capacity to respond, these sanctions are criminal."

Meanwhile, the regime threatened to block any assistance to opposition-held areas of northwest Syria, with its UN ambassador, Bassam Sabbagh insisting that [Damascus must oversee](#) all deliveries into Syria.

The UN's resident Syria coordinator, El-Mostafa Benlamlih, [appealed](#) : "Put politics aside and let us do our humanitarian work. We can't afford to wait and negotiate. By the time we negotiate, it's done, it's finished."

Assad's sanctions manipulation

The sanctions over the regime's deadly 12-year repression of its citizens date to [April 29 2011](#), six weeks after authorities detained and abused teenage boys [daubing graffiti in Daraa](#) in southern Syria, sparking a popular uprising. Then US president, Barack Obama, ordered a block on the property of those involved in human rights violations.

The [European Union](#) and [Canada](#) followed in May, with travel bans and asset freezes on individuals and prohibition of the export of goods and technology that could be used by the regime's armed forces. In August, [Washington expanded sanctions](#) to cover the oil sector and to prohibit any export of goods from the US to Syria.

The US [blacklisted regime figures](#) connected with Assad's chemical weapons program after sarin

and chlorine attacks that killed or wounded thousands of civilians. In 2019, Washington toughened the measures with the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#). Prompted by photographs of 6,785 detainees, most of them tortured to death in the regime's prisons, the Act aimed at industries related to infrastructure, military maintenance, and energy production.

But the US, European, and international sanctions included exemptions for humanitarian aid. In November 2021, after [reports from NGOs](#) about obstacles to their operations, the US Treasury [expanded its general license](#) to "facilitate legitimate humanitarian activity while continuing to deny support to malicious actors".

As the European Union [extended its measures in May 2022](#), it reiterated that "the export of food, medicines or medical equipment are not subject to EU sanctions, and a number of specific exceptions are foreseen for humanitarian purposes".

Aid has been delivered to Damascus throughout the uprising despite the ongoing repression, but much of it has wound up in the pockets [of the Assad regime](#) and its cronies. A review of [779 UN procurement entries](#) for 2019-2020 found that, with manipulation of exchange rates, the regime diverted US\$100 million (£83 million). Other funds were taken from NGOs operating in regime-controlled areas.

Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Legal Development Programme [summarised](#) that the Syria case showed how UN agencies were exposed "to significant reputational and actual risk of financing abusive actors and/or actors that operate in high-risk sectors without sufficient safeguards".

Despite this, the European Union accepted the request of the regime for assistance under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. An initial [€3.5 million \(£3.1 million\) was allocated](#) for access to "shelter, water and sanitation, and health various items" as well as support of search-and-rescue operations.

Germany followed with the announcement of an additional €26 million in humanitarian assistance, and the UK with £3 million.

On Thursday, the US Treasury announced an [extension of the licence](#) for humanitarian aid "to make very clear that US sanctions in Syria will not stand in the way of lifesaving efforts for the Syrian people".

Cutting off opposition areas

The most daunting barrier to international aid has long been erected around the opposition-controlled areas in northwest Syria. In 2014, the UN [authorised four cross-border posts](#) for aid operations, two from Turkey into northwest Syria and two from Iraq into the northeast.

By 2022, Russia's veto in the UN security council had reduced the [four posts to one](#), the Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey into Idlib province. Had it not been for the politics around Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the Russians might have [shut down that last post](#) in January, cutting off 4 million people from any access to assistance.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the route from Turkey to Bab al-Hawa was badly damaged. Turkish authorities had to grant permission but were "[completely overwhelmed with dealing and helping their own people](#)". The UN hesitated to use other crossings amid the past objections of the Assad regime and Russia.

As a result, the first movement of aid – six trucks with tents and hygiene products – only reached northwest Syria on [Thursday morning](#), more than 72 hours after the earthquake.

With rescuers relying on old cranes, pickaxes, and shovels, the head of the White Helmets civil defence organisation, [Raed al-Saleh, said](#) : “The UN are not delivering the aid that we are in most need of to help us save lives, with time running out.”

Political economist [Karam Shaar](#) of the Middle East Institute summarised on Twitter : “The groaning of the thousands trapped under the rubble has ceased over the past few hours. Why didn’t the UN drop aid ? Because they need permission from Damascus : the same Damascus that has been bombing them day and night.”

Meanwhile, as the death toll climbs in both Assad and opposition-controlled areas of Syria, the political drumbeat from Damascus goes on. The regime’s foreign minister, Feisal Mikdad, meeting a senior UN official on Thursday, [proclaimed without any apparent irony](#) : “The western politicisation of the humanitarian assistance is unacceptable.” < !—>
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