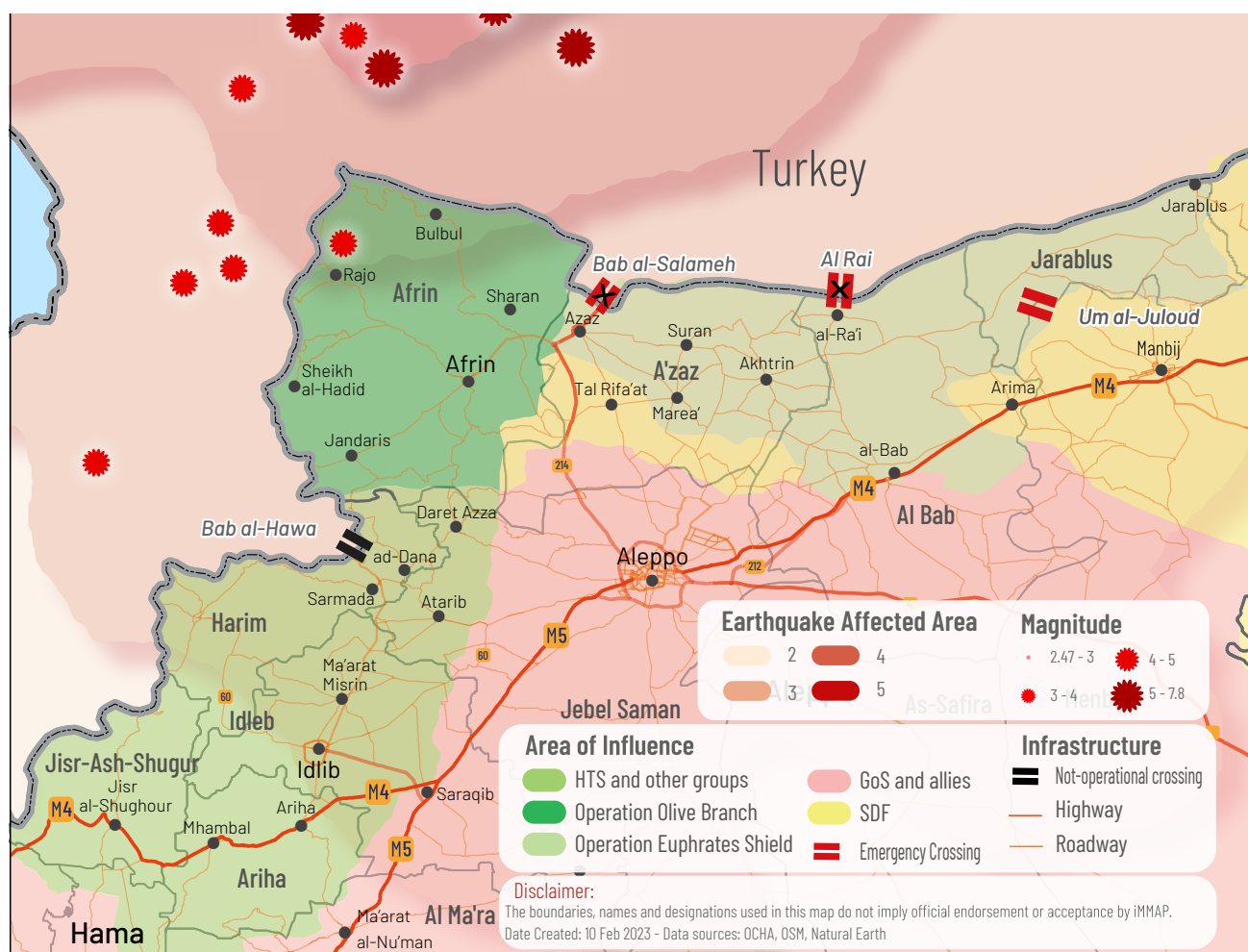


## Executive Summary

In the morning of February 6, southeast Turkey and northwest Syria (NWS) experienced the strongest earthquakes seen in the region since 1939, with magnitudes of 7.8 causing extensive damage and an immediate humanitarian crisis. More than 20,000 deaths have been recorded across Turkey and Syria<sup>1</sup>, with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reporting more than 3,700 casualties across Syria<sup>2</sup>. Substantial damage to roads to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing is inhibiting the access of aid and emergency search and rescue services to NWS, while the continued politicization of aid delivery is further jeopardizing efforts of local humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of millions of vulnerable people. Although actors have pledged to mobilize resources to support relief efforts in NWS, no cross-border specialized

earthquake assistance has reached the region at the time of writing this report on 9 February.<sup>3</sup> The administrative governing body of Turkish-backed areas in NWS, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), has repeatedly expressed readiness to receive and facilitate the delivery of aid. However, geopolitical difficulties of transporting UN-aid via other border crossings persist, while cross-line assistance from regime- and Self-Administration of Northeastern Syria (SANES)-held areas remains unacceptable for key international stakeholders. Although critically undermining the humanitarian assistance available to those in NWS, this has highlighted for observers how unsustainable current aid modalities are for the region and will renew discussions over politicization of aid.



<sup>1</sup> Reuters, "Hope fades for survivors as Turkey-Syria earthquake toll passes 20,000", February 10, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> SOHR, "Syria's violent earthquake leaves 3,773 people dead", February 9, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Twitter, "SIG President Abdurrahman Mustafa", February 9, 2023.

# Current Context

The primary delivery mechanism for UN-provided aid to NWS is through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. Although other entry points including al-Salameh and al-Rai have previously been used, access via these routes has been persistently reduced over the course of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution votes since 2017, with Bab al-Hawa access questioned every six months. Members including Russia and China have vetoed the use of alternative border crossings, arguing that aid to Syria should be administrated via Damascus, fundamentally politicizing aid provision to NWS. The delivery of UN-aid for earthquake response via alternative border crossings would therefore require a mandate approved through an UNSC vote. Observers have noted that, to do so, historically politicized aid in Syria would need to “look like an apolitical humanitarian decision”.<sup>4</sup> The high difficulty of convincing parties of such neutrality will therefore likely restrict any ongoing UN-earthquake response to the Bab al-Hawa crossing, but more so with regards to alternative crossings that had been closed in the past few years.

There have been significant interruptions to the flow of humanitarian aid via Bab al-Hawa since the first earthquake caused substantial damage to the road between Gaziantep and the UN transshipment hub in Hatay. Only one routine shelter and non-food UN-aid shipment has managed to reach NWS via the crossing on February 9, containing no specialized search and rescue equipment. This has caused some parties to push to open alternative crossings, particularly the German Foreign Ministry.<sup>5</sup> Turkey and opposition forces agreed to open al-Salameh and al-Rai on February 9.<sup>6</sup> Although critical UN-aid remains unable to cross via these points, field reports suggest that al-Salameh is operational for commercial activities and that it has been used to transport Syrian casualties back to their homes in NWS. Local organizations could receive aid shipments through these routes, but effective coordination via these modalities presents new and substantial challenges for a humanitarian sector who has itself been incapacitated by the earthquake. Furthermore, operationalization of other crossings would entail a vote from UNSC members to reopen them.

Russia and other Assad-aligned states continue to push for reduced reliance on cross-border assistance in favor of cross-line aid provision channeled through the regime. The Syrian ambassador to the UN, Bassam Sabbagh, has said the Syrian government should be responsible for the delivery of all aid into Syria, including areas not under their control. Cross-line aid to bolster Damascus’ sovereignty over the whole of Syrian territory, increase its international legitimacy, and effectively give Assad control over vital lifelines for opposition forces. International actors such as Turkey and the US have therefore been reluctant to adopt cross-line modalities due to numerous reports of aid failing to reach areas outside of GoS control, with the economy of humanitarian aid instead being used to finance the regime or to support solely organizations close to Damascus. The high public profile of aid access in the context of the earthquake is also increasingly used strategically by Damascus as political capital to argue against sanctions on the Syrian regime, with misinformation on the issue spreading across social media.

Reports have started to emerge of a divergence in the appetite of international actors to explore aid modalities via Damascus. The European Union (EU) has reportedly told member states to “respond favourably” to a request for aid from the GoS, noting sanctions do not prohibit delivery of food and medicines.<sup>7</sup> It nevertheless signals a notable shift in the bloc’s attitude to Damascus. Aid from other countries including Iran, Iraq, Jordan, the UAE, Oman, Egypt, India and Venezuela has already reached government-controlled areas via air access. However, a US secretary of state spokesperson has ruled out the possibility, noting the GoS’s record of brutality against those in opposition areas as fundamentally undermining their humanitarian credibility.<sup>8</sup>

US CENTCOM has instead stated that it is preparing to send support in coordination with their Kurdish partners in Northeast Syria (NES), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>9</sup> The governing body of the SDF, the Self-Administration of Northeastern Syria (SANES), has already indicated willingness to provide cross-line assistance to opposition forces in NWS, announcing that they had prepared a convoy of approximately 3 trucks loaded with NFIs and food assistance and 25 fuel tankers. The convoy is reportedly at Um al-Juloud crossing in Manbij and awaiting permission to enter NWS.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Al-Monitor, [“Syria’s neglected northwest pleads for earthquake aid”](#), February 8, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> DW, [“Earthquake victims in Syria: Politics first, aid second?”](#), February 8, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Twitter, [Bader Jamous](#), February 8, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Middle East Eye, [“Syria earthquake: EU signals it is ready to work with Assad government on aid”](#), February 8, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, [“Syria accused of playing politics with aid in aftermath of earthquake”](#), February 7, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> US CENTCOM, [“CENTCOM Prepares to Support Earthquake Relief Efforts”](#), February 8, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Facebook, [SANES](#), February 9, 2023.

The SIG and the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) have both expressed preparedness to facilitate receipt of aid, particularly regarding cross-border assistance. There have been reports, however, of disputes within the SIG regarding cross-line aid, as the Turkish-backed administration has faced pressure against receiving assistance from the Kurdish authority in NES. SIG's President Abdurrahman Mustafa noted that an increased reliance on cross-line aid could be understood as "pressure to force them to

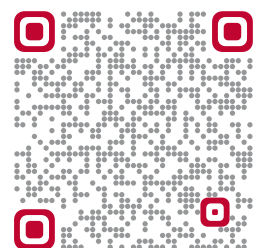
accept receiving it from the areas controlled by SDF militia, which cannot be accepted"<sup>11</sup>. As such, it seems that aid coordinated by the SIG for distribution in NWS only remains viable through the cross-border mechanism with Turkey.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

Damascus' politicization of aid both on the international stage and domestically has ensured that border crossings continue to be used as bargaining chips by different stakeholders for their political aspirations in the Syrian crisis. Given that the areas worst-affected by the earthquake inside Syria fall under the Turkish-controlled opposition, humanitarian actors in NWS remain wedded to modalities that are deemed acceptable by Turkey, likely rendering cross-line assistance, particularly from NES, unfeasible. However, Turkey itself faces diminished capacity in its southeast to act as a humanitarian corridor, as well as additional political sensitivities from Russian insistence for Damascus aid delivery during a delicate Ankara-Damascus normalization process.

The reopening of al-Salameh and al-Rai crossings may go some way to shine a light on the politicization of UN-aid via Bab al-Hawa, and subsequent limitations to general aid provision in NWS. A coordinated, necessary response to this natural crisis through these routes from humanitarian and international actors will provide increased rationale for alternative aid modalities to those approved by the UNSC and demonstrate the unsustainability and insufficiency of a reliance on a single border-crossing. Advocacy regarding earthquake response should therefore highlight how existing political and humanitarian policies in Syria are restricted to the short-sightedness of UNSC cross-border resolutions. Parties should seek to use increased awareness around the crisis to drive an international shift from emergency aid provision to increasing the resilience of communities in NWS via alternative aid mechanisms, based on priorities of need outside of international political restraints. Funding efforts should highlight the political complexity of aid in the Syrian context to overcome a lack knowledge and misinformation around why entities and donors are reluctant to provide assistance through the GoS.

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<sup>11</sup> Twitter, [SIG President Abdurrahman Mustafa](#), February 9, 2023.