

Disaster Dynamics:

Assessing Middle East Responses to the Turkey-Syria Earthquake and Other Destructive Events

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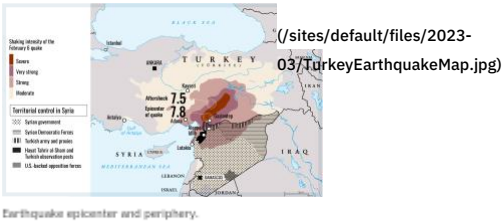
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 In-Depth Reports

Regional generosity was on display after the February 6 temblor, but aid decisions do appear to be driven by political considerations.

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The massive earthquake that killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey and Syria as of February 28—one of the worst Middle East natural disasters in recent memory—has touched the hearts of leaders and peoples across the world, triggering a flow of urgently needed humanitarian support. Regional states, too, have provided rescue and relief assistance. From the outset, however, politics has played an important role in shaping the scope and direction of such aid. In fact, the politics of humanitarian aid follows a pattern discernible based on previous regional responses to crises, including the 2020 Beirut port explosion and—before it—the 2014 Gaza war.



Aid to Turkey

After the earthquake struck on February 6, countries across the Middle East immediately sent financial aid, dispatched search-and-rescue teams, and provided emergency housing, food, and medical assistance to Turkey, which was at the epicenter of the quake. Politics did not impede this humanitarian support, particularly because of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s recent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. Highlights of regional assistance to Turkey include the following:

- Qatar.** Doha is—by far—Ankara’s closest regional ally. Qatar’s Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani visited Erdogan on February 13, making him the first world leader to meet the Turkish president after the earthquake. According to the Qatar News Agency, the country has sent a total of forty aircraft to Turkey and Syria. Qatar (<https://time.com/6255679/qatar-donates-world-cup-fan-cabins-to-survivors-of-turkish-earthquakes/>) pledged 10,000 cabin housing units and so far has sent five ships carrying 1,388 of these. Qatar’s Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities is (<https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/arab-countries-mobilize-to-help-quake-victims-in-turkiye-syria/news>) coordinating a public donation campaign that raised \$46 million, including \$14 million from Sheikh Tamim himself, for use in both Turkey and Syria. The Qatar Red Crescent has also played an active role, allocating \$1 million from its Disaster Response Fund for aid and pledging to raise at least \$10 million more.
- UAE.** According to the Emirati government, the Gulf country allocated \$100 million in aid to Turkey and facilitated forty-two flights carrying 840 tons of aid. The government also set up two field hospitals and dispatched search-and-rescue teams.
- Kuwait.** According to Turkish media, Kuwait has pledged \$30 million in support to both Turkey and northwest Syria. As of February 23, eleven cargo aircraft have delivered five hundred tons of aid to Turkey. The Kuwaiti Ministries of Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Interior also organized the “Kuwait by your side” popular campaign for donations to Turkey and Syria, which reportedly has raised more than \$67.5 million to support victims.
- Bahrain.** Bahrain’s Royal Humanitarian Foundation and the Bahrain Radio and TV Corporation organized a \$3.7 million public donation campaign for Turkey and Syria. Bahrain sent its first aid shipment on February 15 and its first aircraft to Turkey on February 21, carrying 55.7 tons of aid. A second shipment went to Turkey on February 26.
- Saudi Arabia.** According to the Saudi Press Agency, as of February 24, Saudi Arabia had flown ten aid aircraft carrying more than 550 tons of relief items to Turkey and had sent at least two teams of relief workers to assist on the ground. Saudi Arabia has also committed to building three thousand temporary housing units for the displaced. As of February 23, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center had raised more than \$122 million from a public campaign for victims in Turkey and Syria; it has not yet been delivered.
- Egypt.** Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi pledged five military cargo planes’ worth of aid. The Egyptian government has delivered at least (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/egyptian-aid-ship-arrives-at-mersin-port-for-quake-victims-in-turkiye/2828161>) 650 tons of aid, including tents, blankets, mattresses, and heaters via a cargo ship that arrived at the Mersin port on February 22. That same day, the Egyptian Armed Forces sent two military jets carrying medical aid.
- Iraq.** The Iraqi government stated that it sent twenty-six planes with 136.5 tons of aid to Turkey, in addition to a search-and-rescue team.
- Jordan.** In total, the Jordanian government has sent twelve aid planes, twenty-eight relief trucks, and ten thousand tents to Turkey and Syria.
- Israel.** Israel sent fifteen air force cargo planes carrying “hundreds of tons of equipment” and 230 volunteers to Gaziantep on February 7 to establish a field hospital. Before that, the Israel

Defense Forces had already deployed 150 search-and-rescue experts to Turkey. In total, the Israeli team was the second largest sent to the country, after an Azerbaijani delegation.

- **Iran.** Since February 7, Iran has sent at least twelve cargo planes carrying humanitarian supplies and 126 individuals for search-and-rescue, medical, and emergency purposes. Furthermore, Iran has constructed two field hospitals in southern Turkey.



(/sites/default/files/2023-03/QatarContainersEarthquakeRelief.JPG)

A mobile home cabin en route from Qatar's Hamad Port to Turkey.

Aid to Syria

In contrast to disaster response in Turkey, regional support to assist victims in Syria—in both regime- and opposition-controlled areas—has been shaped by regional political dynamics. Some Arab states used the crisis as an opportunity to rebuild communication and political channels with the Bashar al-Assad regime, which is still under stiff international sanctions. Others maintained their longstanding opposition to Assad, focusing their rescue and relief support solely on opposition-controlled areas.

Regime-Controlled Syria

Foreign aid to Assad-controlled areas of Syria has broken down as follows:

- **UAE.** According to a dashboard developed by researchers Suhail al-Ghazi, Noor Abdulfattah, and Tarek Hamdan, as of March 2, the Emiratis had flown 134 aircraft carrying 4,413 tons of aid to Syria. Emirati foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan visited Assad on February 12 in Damascus, marking the Syrian leader's first meeting with a regional official since the earthquake struck. According to the UAE government, the Emiratis have pledged \$100 million in assistance and have deployed search-and-rescue teams on the ground. Additionally, the UAE pledged to provide a health delegation to aid Syrian hospitals and ten ambulances.
- **Iran.** Iran had flown in fourteen aid aircraft as of February 28. Additionally, Iran helped set up 172 relief centers in and near Aleppo and initiated food delivery efforts. Esmail Qaani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force, was dispatched to oversee Iranian aid efforts in Aleppo. He then traveled to Latakia, where he surveyed aid efforts and met with local officials including the provincial governor. Iran-backed organizations such as Hezbollah and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces have also sent assistance to Syria.
- **Egypt.** Egypt delivered a ship carrying five hundred tons of aid to Latakia on February 21. Two weeks earlier, on February 7, Egypt sent three aid aircraft, landing in Damascus. According to Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Egypt has delivered 1,500 tons of aid to Syria as of February 27.
- **Iraq.** The Iraqi Red Crescent Society and the Iraqi government flew approximately twenty-four aid flights into Syria carrying at least sixty-eight tons of aid, and sent a humanitarian aid convoy carrying 170 tons of supplies to Aleppo and Latakia.
- **Bahrain.** Bahrain has utilized the Nasib border crossing with Jordan to get aid into Syria, including forty-two tons of supplies delivered to the Deraa branch of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent on February 21. Bahrain also sent forty tons of aid via an aircraft that landed at Damascus International Airport on February 23. On February 27, Bahrain's Royal Humanitarian Foundation and Syria's Doctors Syndicate signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at providing medical treatment in Syria. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the Royal Humanitarian Foundation and Bahrain TV organized a \$3.7 million donation campaign for both Syria and Turkey.
- **Jordan.** The Hashemite Kingdom sent aid convoys to Syria on February 9, February 18, February 20, February 27, and March 2. As of February 27, Jordan had flown three aid aircraft to regime-held areas of Syria.
- **Saudi Arabia.** Riyadh delivered three cargo planes of relief aid over February 14–16, carrying more than seventy tons of supplies to regime-controlled areas.

Opposition-Controlled Syria

In opposition-held areas, run either by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army, aid has arrived as follows:

- **Qatar.** Qatari assistance has been bused in via Turkey. According to the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), the aid arrived as early as the second day after the earthquake, in the form of food baskets and five hundred tents. Later, the QRCS approved the construction of three hundred housing units and deployed doctors to Idlib. The state-run Qatar Fund for Development has said it will support the Syrian Civil Defense organization, known as the White Helmets, by providing logistical and rescue operations, ambulance repairs, and fuel. And in late February, Qatar announced plans to create an "integrated city" in northwest Syria to house some 70,000 people displaced by the quake.
- **KRG.** Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government sent thirteen humanitarian aid trucks to Jindires, a town in Aleppo governorate hard-hit by the earthquake.
- **Egypt.** The White Helmets publicly thanked Egypt for providing rescue specialists and medical personnel in the earthquake's aftermath.
- **Saudi Arabia.** On February 11, Saudi Arabia sent eleven trucks carrying 104 tons of aid through the Syrian border crossing at Khush al-Zaitoun. Similarly, on February 17, Saudi Arabia sent ten relief trucks carrying seventy-six tons of aid through the Bab al-Salameh crossing with Turkey. The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center has distributed aid to victims in Jindires, Afrin, and Azaz, some of the worst-hit areas. Finally, on February 28, the King Salman Center sent twenty-two trucks through the Bab al-Hawa crossing and twenty-two trucks through the Bab al-Salameh crossing.
- **Kuwait.** The Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) is using more than \$67.5 million crowdsourced from Kuwaiti businesses and residents to deliver aid, with logistical assistance from Kuwait's government ministries. The KRCS has been delivering aid to northwest Syria since February 11, providing humanitarian supplies directly to victims. On February 22, the KRCS announced the dispatching of twelve aid trucks to both Turkey and northwest Syria. On February 26, the KRCS sent 120 tons of aid loaded in nine trucks to Syria.
- **AANES.** The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria facilitated the transit of 145 aid trucks into rebel-held areas. Additionally, two humanitarian aid convoys were provided by nongovernmental entities within AANES territory.



(/sites/default/files/2023-03/AANESTrucksSyriaEarthquakeAid.jpeg)

Trucks from Syria's Autonomous Region in the northeast deliver aid.

Response to the Earthquake vs. Earlier Humanitarian Crises

While not on par with the February 6 earthquake in terms of casualty figures or physical destruction, other recent humanitarian crises in the region have produced their own politically weighted patterns of humanitarian support.

Beirut Port Explosion of 2020

After the August 4, 2020, explosion in Beirut killed more than 200 people, injured more than 6,500, and damaged tens of thousands of structures, regional states rallied to provide financial assistance and humanitarian supplies to the Lebanese government and the Lebanese Red Crescent.

Qatar took the lead, providing \$10 million to the UN-sponsored Flash Appeal for aid directly related to the explosion. According to the Financial Tracking Service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Kuwait supplied (https://fts.unocha.org/countries/124/flows/2020?f%5B0%5D=sourceOrganizationIdName%3A4849%3AKuwait%2C%20Government%20of&f%5B2%5D=destinationEmergencyIdName%3A944%3ABeirut%20Port%20Explosion%20-%20August%202020) more than \$4.5 million for a variety of humanitarian aid and reconstruction projects outside the 2020 Flash Appeal. The tracking service reported that the UAE gave in excess of (https://fts.unocha.org/countries/124/flows/2020?f%5B2%5D=destinationEmergencyIdName%3A944%3ABeirut%20Port%20Explosion%20-%20August%202020&f%5B3%5D=sourceOrganizationIdName%3A3197%3ARed%20Crescent%20Society%20of%20the%20United%20Arab%20Emirates&f%5B4%5D=sourceOrganiz \$4.1 million to explosion-related relief, with \$312,189 going to the Flash Appeal and the rest benefiting the Lebanese Red Cross and Lebanese government. Meanwhile, the Saudi government provided at least \$1.5 million to the 2020 UN Flash Appeal and \$1.7 million outside this pipeline , using both state funds and the resources of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center.

Other countries provided in-kind aid by air and land convoy. Iranian media outlets claimed Iranian sources had sent 155 tons of humanitarian aid, including food and medicine , and that the Iranian Red Crescent Society had established a field hospital in southern Beirut just four days after the blast. Iraq's oil minister pledged to send thirty tankers containing one million liters of oil, after the country sent 800,000 liters in the immediate days after the blast. Egypt sent at least eleven aid flights to Beirut and opened a field hospital , as did Jordan. Turkey sent a search-and-rescue team, equipment, and tents just a day after the blast. Even Israel, whose army had been clashing with Hezbollah days before the blast, offered medical and other unspecified aid.

2014 Gaza War

Another episode that triggered a swift outpouring of humanitarian support was the Hamas-Israel conflict in July–August 2014, which—according to UN statistics—killed 2,251 Palestinians, injured more than 11,000, and damaged or destroyed some 18,000 housing units. In this instance, the largest Arab donor was Saudi Arabia, which—according to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service—pledged \$83 million in immediate support. Others sent much smaller sums: Kuwait, \$13.1 million; Qatar, \$6.5 million; and Bahrain, \$5.2 million.

Additional aid, especially in-kind assistance, came outside UN channels. For example, Iran reportedly sent ninety-five tons of humanitarian aid to Gaza through Egypt, after the Egyptian government issued visas to an Iranian medical team to enter the area. For its part, the Egyptian military sent five hundred tons of aid via trucks that passed through the Rafah border crossing. Turkey also sent at least \$1.5 million in medical supplies and food packages, in addition to bringing at least eighty Gazans to Turkey for medical treatment. Similarly, Jordan transferred at least 180 truckloads of relief to Gaza and the West Bank. During the same time period, Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories unit facilitated the transfer of humanitarian aid from American and Italian planes that landed in Israel and also the crossing of more than five thousand trucks into Gaza through the Kerem Shalom checkpoint.

In October 2014, two months after the conflict ended, Arab states made substantial pledges to rebuild Gaza during a donor conference in Cairo. Out of a total of \$5.4 billion committed, Qatar pledged \$1 billion, Saudi Arabia pledged \$500 million, the UAE and Kuwait pledged \$200 million each, and Bahrain pledged \$6.5 million. But according to a Brookings Institution study that cited World Bank figures, only 22 percent of pledged aid, or \$419 million, was actually distributed to Gaza.

Conclusion

During the 2020 Beirut port blast and the 2014 Gaza war, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia were the top three regional providers of aid, although war costs were far greater than those associated with the port blast, as reflected in aid amounts. For example, the Emirates gave \$200 million for Gaza support in 2014, vis-à-vis \$2.5 million to Lebanon in 2020. For the earthquake, UAE donations to Turkey and Syria have already reached the \$200 million mark, with more to come. (For a full breakdown of aid commitments by country and crisis, see figure 1, at the end of this study.)

Donations in the quake's aftermath, however, have not always met the need. For example, Qatar provided more than \$200 million to Gaza in 2014 but has given only \$14 million to Turkey thus far and none to Syria. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's contributions have not been equal to its past crisis responses; in Syria, it has provided limited aid to both regime- and opposition-held areas.

Provision of aid can shed light on trends in regional politics. In Turkey, the Emirates and Qatar have been the largest providers of pledged assistance among regional states. In recent years, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have all experienced rifts of varying degrees with Turkey, yet each of these states has provided aid to Ankara. Their earthquake assistance fits the mood of rapprochement. Similarly, the large Israeli delegation of engineers, rescue specialists, medical professionals, and aid personnel reflects the recent turnaround in Israel-Turkey relations.

In Syria, the UAE leads regional states regarding assistance to Assad-regime-controlled areas. The Emirates likely seeks to elevate its position as a regional power broker, using aid as a tool to support Assad and his disaster recovery efforts. Moreover, the UAE is leading the regional push toward full normalization with the Syrian regime; UAE foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed has already met twice with the Syrian president in 2023, including in the latter's first post-earthquake (https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-president-assad-meets-uae-fm-state-media-2023-02-12/) meeting with a high-level Arab official, as previously noted.

Other historic backers of the Syrian opposition, such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, have taken different approaches. Qatar and Kuwait have provided assistance only to opposition-held areas. Saudi Arabia has taken a middle approach by supplying aid to both regime-held and opposition areas but providing more assistance overall to the latter.

Ultimately, while Middle East states have been important sources of aid following regional disasters, with the earthquake serving as an important case, politics does appear to play a role in determining the amount and the target of humanitarian assistance. The flow of aid reflects various shades of friendship, warming, and conflict, and also casts light on emerging changes in interstate dynamics.

Figure 1. AID Flows and Impact 2020

Country	2014 Gaza	2014 Lebanon	2014 Turkey	2020 Beirut
Qatar	\$1.0 billion	\$1.0 billion	\$1.0 billion	\$1.0 billion
Saudi Arabia	\$500 million	\$500 million	\$500 million	\$500 million
UAE	\$200 million	\$200 million	\$200 million	\$200 million
Kuwait	\$13.1 million	\$13.1 million	\$13.1 million	\$13.1 million
Bahrain	\$5.2 million	\$5.2 million	\$5.2 million	\$5.2 million
Iran	\$155 million	\$155 million	\$155 million	\$155 million
Iraq	\$30 million	\$30 million	\$30 million	\$30 million
Egypt	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million
Jordan	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million
Israel	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million
Turkey	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million
Lebanon	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million
Syria	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million
Gaza	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million	\$2.5 million

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