

# Regional Crisis and Regional Cooperation: Israeli Response to the Earthquake in Syria and Turkey

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Brief Analysis

## Israeli aid efforts to Turkey and Syria have been multifaceted after the earthquake, despite the difficult political circumstances.

On February 6th, the devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria prompted an outpouring of international aid to the affected areas. Although the crisis coincided with a complex political situation in Israel—including ongoing domestic protests, escalating tensions with the Palestinians, and a newly formed government working to establish its position—Israeli aid organizations became one of the first foreign aid responders on the ground. As is sometimes the case in the Middle East, crises become a moment for countries to demonstrate a different side and even perhaps a show of unity.

While Israel has long been active in emergency disaster relief missions in various countries around the world, four aspects of these current efforts are especially noteworthy. First, they involve both official teams from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and a range of relevant Israeli NGOs working in parallel. Second, some of those NGOs are actively partnering with NGOs from other regional countries, both Turkish and Arab. Third, several of these NGOs have committed to ongoing aid efforts past the immediate rescue and relief period to facilitate long-term reconstruction. And fourth, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's public announcement that part of Israel's humanitarian aid would be delivered inside Syria marked a new development in its relationship with its northern neighbor—although the Assad regime refused such aid, and it is consequently being provided without publicity.

### Humanitarian Response in Turkey

Drawing on past experiences in countries such as Turkey, Haiti, the United States, Cyprus, and most recently

Ukraine, official IDF search and rescue teams were swiftly deployed to the city of Kahramanmaraş, Turkey to begin operations shortly after the earthquake. Working across thirty sites of destruction, the Israeli delegation was able to save nineteen people from the rubble, including a two-year-old baby, thanks in part to the use of a cutting-edge radar camera that can detect the presence of individuals beyond walls. This mission, known as “Operation Olive Branch,” marks the Israeli army’s 30th rescue and recovery operation since 1982. In the week following the earthquake, the IDF likewise deployed (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-15-cargo-planes-idf-begins-setting-up-field-hospital-in-quake-stricken-turkey/>) fifteen Air Force cargo planes carrying hundreds of tons of equipment and an additional 200 personnel to establish a field hospital in Turkey.

However, the more noteworthy aspect of the Israeli response has been the efforts of Israeli civil society, who quickly organized themselves and, for the first time, collaborated with new partners in the region. The mobilization of these groups suggests a potential framework for future collaboration, especially as rebuilding efforts will extend into the months ahead.

Israeli humanitarian organizations swiftly responded to the crisis, both remotely and on the ground. Thirteen NGOs have been operating in various locations across Turkey including Gaziantep, Anatakya, Kilis, Adiyaman, and Kahramanmaraş. With the help of Turkish Airlines, which provided free shipment of aid and equipment donations from Israel, the Israeli teams have joined forces with their Turkish counterparts in life-saving missions.

These efforts have included United Hatzalah, which sent a plane carrying twenty-five emergency response personnel and over ten tons of humanitarian and medical equipment to Turkey. IsraAID also dispatched a team of trauma specialists to Gaziantep on the United Hatzalah flight to deliver water purification systems. NATAN Worldwide Disaster Relief’s medical and relief team has been dispatched to Adiyaman. Zaka, an Israeli organization that specializes in tracing body parts, worked hand-in-hand with the IDF mission and played a key role in saving nineteen people from the rubble. Additionally, Magen David Adom, the Israeli Red Cross, is preparing to establish a dedicated field hospital to provide crucial humanitarian and medical assistance. Led by Nimrod Arad of the Israeli-Turkish business council, Latet and SID Israel have contributed over 200 tons of equipment, which was transported by Turkish Airlines and distributed by the Turkish National Emergency Relief Organization (AFAD).

The Joint Distribution Committee disaster response team and World Jewish Relief are providing immediate aid by supplying heated tents, thermal clothes, hot soup, and ready-to-eat meals, as well as medical support, to those in need in Turkey and Syria. In collaboration with Latet, SmartAID initially sent a team of twenty-five search and rescue experts to Gaziantep equipped with specialized equipment to rescue people trapped beneath collapsed buildings. They have now entered the second phase, in which they plan to send another relief team with fifty pallets of hygiene items, blankets, warm clothing, and other necessities. There have also been citizen-led initiatives, such as the one by Keidar Grossman, who collected and sent over 750 boxes of supplies to support those in Turkey and Syria.

### **Humanitarian Response in Syria**

In contrast to Turkey, Syria is still classified as an enemy state to Israel. In recent years, Israel's main official engagement with Syria has been via the bombardment of Iranian targets. Despite this, Prime Minister Netanyahu quickly announced that Israel would provide humanitarian assistance to Syria in the aftermath of the earthquake in response to a request made through an official channel, later attributed to Russia. Although Russia declined to comment—and although Syrian President Bashar al-Assad rejected the offer—Israeli response teams continued to mobilize in Syria.

Israeli humanitarian organizations have gained significant experience working in Syria in recent years through Israel’s “Good Neighbors” program, which has found innovative ways to offer aid in the Syrian arena. This approach is particularly noteworthy given the absence of diplomatic relations and the need to operate covertly, often through

like-minded NGOs that do not operate under an Israeli banner. While being mindful of the difficult realities in Syria and maintaining close contact with Syrians on the ground, Israeli teams were able to provide aid to those in need.

### **A new model of collaborative work**

The devastating earthquakes in Syria and Turkey serve as a reminder that our region cannot always be separated by borders, ethnicity, race, or other demarcations. The enormity of this disaster has allowed a group of partners from across the region to come together to support the people of Syria and Turkey. This combined effort has utilized existing networks to create a new organization, Partnership for MENA Aid. Led by a joint team of Israelis, Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, and others from the Gulf, this group has been working together to provide support on the ground in both countries.

Right now, Partnership for MENA Aid is focused on supporting the joint initiative of the Israeli organization Hatzalah and the Jordanian organization Jordan Health Aid Society, with a team of Israelis, Palestinian, Syrians, Turks, and Emiratis working together to raise funds and bring equipment to both Syria and Turkey. Beyond fundraising, the campaign is focused on the collection of critical second hand equipment. Sarah Aweidah, the coordinator of this effort, said, “this is the exact time when we need to work together, and I am proud to help lead a team of partners and friends from around the region who stand up for each other.”

Despite some remarkable stories of people being rescued ten days after the earthquake, search and rescue efforts have largely ended. However, the recovery and rebuilding process in both countries has only just begun. To date, hundreds of thousands of people have been left homeless, including many refugees whose lives have already been torn apart and now face yet another disaster.

While both Turkey and Syria have received significant aid in the direct aftermath of the earthquake, it is likely that the attention of the world will soon turn elsewhere. However, some Israeli organizations have committed to long-term missions and understand that help is still needed—they remain in the field and continue their donation efforts. Now, with new relationships founded on these aid efforts, they hope to not only provide aid but also demonstrate a rare moment of unity that can be replicated not just in times of crisis but also in times of peace. ❖

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