

UN Aid in Northwest Syria—Or Lack Thereof

by [Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](#)

Rena Netjes is an Arabist and independent researcher. She focuses mainly on northern Syria, SDF-held northeast Syria and opposition-held northwest Syria. She has been to the different parts of northern Syria three times in recent years for field research.



Brief Analysis

In the direct aftermath of the devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria, EU-funded UN aid was delivered to Damascus despite the Assad regime's disastrous track record, which includes stealing aid from international institutions. On the ground in Northwest Syria, frustration with the UN is rising, especially as aid from neighboring countries entered quickly.

On the day of the earthquake, the EU Delegation head to Syria, Dan Stoenescu, [tweeted](#) ([video](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bUVVfHDcqy_kknbtMwZYba0-v1lg5_05w7MHYqumc1-7UcAhabc-9r7ckaesGEhJd4dW0bPb8t4Jkh1c7T-_-bxDKyys59dTfnc7H5FPzcbGekiB1ghywfaUevdgvWHbQQ18jkNmnFb5wRhzkRSOVgSisncmZtYUmXOLvtObcsbM~) that: “Following the devastating earthquake that affected Syria, ECHO_Middle (EU Humanitarian Aid Middle East & North Africa) and our humanitarian partners are already activating the emergency crisis response providing water and sanitation support, non-food items and undertaking search and rescue operations in affected areas across Syria.” He added that “We need to make sure help can continue to arrive to the people in need through all modalities, cross-line and cross-border, in a timely manner! Now is the time to support all Syrians affected by the disaster, in all areas of Syria! EU is ready to help.” ECHO subsequently posted an Arabic-captioned <a href=) (https://twitter.com/ECHO_MiddleEast/status/1630116524429045765?s=20) of planes arriving at Damascus airport to be “distributed across the country as soon as possible...humanitarian assistance is neutral and impartial.”

Weeks after the disaster, however, Syrian communities in the worst hit areas outside of regime control reported that they were still waiting for the promised UN and EU assistance to reach them. After traveling to some of the worst hit areas and meeting those affected, the [perception on the ground](#) (https://renanetjes.substack.com/p/the-un-is-not-sanctioning-assad-its?utm_source=twitter&sd=pf) as I observed it is that the UN's decision to hold to the parameters of [UN resolution 2672](#) (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132282>) has meant that political considerations have trumped humanitarian ones when it has come to UN and EU aid.

Especially notable is the case of Jindires, a town in southern Afrin near Idlib and one of the sites of the heaviest

damage. Mahmoud Hafar, the head of the Jindires local council, described the town as having a population of 50,000 persons, both original inhabitants and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled the Assad regime. “More than 1,200 people died in Jindires and the countryside, about 1,000 in the city, and 200 in the countryside. The number of inhabitants of the city and the countryside is about 115,000. About 840 got seriously injured, but all the injured are more than 4,000,” Hafar said. This town was one of the most heavily impacted in Northwest Syria, and emergency aid is sorely needed here and in the immediate surrounding areas.

But UN and EU aid was initially bottlenecked due to wrangling over access, as the UN’s approved access points to this section of Northwest Syria has narrowed over time to just one crossing. The Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey is the main—and until just recently—the only UN-approved entry point for aid to the northwest area of the country under control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, and through Idlib to Northern Aleppo province, under control of the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian National Army (SNA).

This is not because there are no other suitable crossings, but rather because Russia used its veto in 2021 at the Security Council to block continued use of the nearby Bab al-Salama crossing and other entry points, helping its ally Bashar Assad monopolize the distribution of aid. The other four crossings to this area, Bab al-Salama to Azaz, Bab al-Hamam to Jindires, and al-Ra’ee and Jarabulus, are under control of the SNA.

On the day of the earthquake, one road in Hatay province leading to Bab al-Hawa was damaged, and repairs stalled in the immediate aftermath while local Turkish authorities scrambled to deal with the massive damage and loss of life in nearby Antakya and Iskenderun. But another one was still serviceable, and corpses of Syrians who died in Turkey were transported from Turkey through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

And in contrast, roads to other border crossings such as Bab al-Salama, al-Ra’ee, and [al-Hamam](https://twitter.com/RenaNetjes/status/1629125417079644162?s=20) (<https://twitter.com/RenaNetjes/status/1629125417079644162?s=20>)—the latter just 5 kilometers (3 miles) from Jindires—were in a more serviceable condition and remained open 24/7 to receive assistance. The local authorities in these areas reported the lack of UN aid. Though some documents reported UN aid arriving in Azaz, it was not visible on the ground in Jindires when the author visited.

But aid from other quarters had arrived. On the morning of February 8, the border crossing director in Tell Abyad, Fayez al-Qatea, showed us that he had received a memo from the Prime Minister of the opposition Syrian Interim Government (SIG) the prior evening to open all border crossings 24/7 to facilitate aid and enable injured people to cross for medical help. One of the first aid convoys to arrive in Afrin, where the town of Jindires is located, was aid that included drilling machines and excavators, gathered by the people of Tell Abyad. This campaign from nearby was organized by the tribal council—representing the vast majority of Tell Abyad residents with tribal affiliations.

Donors such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) used these open border crossings to quickly and efficiently deliver aid to the worst affected areas. On Saturday February 18, we took a tour through Jindires to see what kind of aid had arrived. Two trucks of Turkish aid provided by the Turkish aid organization AFAD were clearly visible, alongside the Syrian NGO Shafak, Saudi tents, and boxes delivered by the convoy from the Eastern provinces of Deir al-Zour, Raqqa, and Hasaka. Also visible were blankets delivered by the Barzani Charity Foundation, and field clinics from the Molham Team, the SIG, and Shafak. We saw a car of the Bahar Organization, a convoy from a Palestinian organization, and White Helmets—although the latter operated in much larger numbers in nearby Idlib.

The Barzani Charity Foundation team leader for Syria, Rawaj Haji, told us on Friday, February 17 that they had left from Erbil twenty-four hours after the earthquake, first delivering aid in southeastern parts of Turkey and then entering Syria through the Bab al-Salama border crossing on February 10. By the time of the interview, their fifth convoy had entered and they were then in the area with 37 trucks and 5 ambulances, having handed out 600 tents by February 16 throughout Jindires and twenty-eight small villages in the surrounding countryside.

Aid from multiple Gulf countries was also visible: local military SNA leaders told us that a Qatari organization delivered

at least 5,000 blankets on the first evening of the earthquake and subsequently provided many tents and food supplies for the newly set up camps—additions to the extant Madrasa camp just outside Jindires and a new camp in Hekice, a village in the countryside of Afrin. A Kuwaiti delegation visited the area yesterday to provide aid, and both Kuwaiti and Saudi aid was being delivered. One of the few positives to emerge out of the earthquake was to bring Arabs and Kurds together. In the village of lower Kokar, several Kurdish inhabitants told us they now stay the night in tents with Arab IDPs who had fled to their village years ago. “Some IDPs, not all, have tents, because they have fled already several times further North. We don’t have tents and we can stay the night in the tents with them.” Notably absent at this point, however, were any visible signs in Jindires of UN or EU branded supplies or teams, including the tents and teams initially promised.

Complicating matters further are the conflicting claims from inside and outside of Northwest Syria as to what delayed UN aid. While the UN [stated \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-quake-aid-held-up-by-hts-approval-issues-says-un-spokesperson-2023-02-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-quake-aid-held-up-by-hts-approval-issues-says-un-spokesperson-2023-02-12/) in the days after the earthquake that aid from regime-held territories to Idlib was being held up by “approval issues” from HTS, Minister of Health Husein Bazar in Idlib’s Salvation Government—the civilian governmental arm of HTS—stated in an interview with the author that the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey to Idlib had been opened within twenty-four hours of the earthquake for any aid.

Bazar emphasizes that “The border was open from the second day, totally open.” He pointed to the poignant images of Syrians who had died under the rubble in Turkey brought back into Northwest Syria via the Bab al-Hawa crossing—“but unfortunately not aid.” The Syrian media organization Eekad likewise published a [video](https://url.emailprotection.link/?byp514u5uTZyQnmsVhLE6xo02owQYulHYoKS3Cazm4_cP9LawNDtzlKlPobgUJF9-r8iWhc-2Q4Mehbl5joHd5gy5RbDL7DKSdo14ITIdIwuHjkgyupeZFT3EGOn49Y0)

[byp514u5uTZyQnmsVhLE6xo02owQYulHYoKS3Cazm4_cP9LawNDtzlKlPobgUJF9-r8iWhc-](https://url.emailprotection.link/?byp514u5uTZyQnmsVhLE6xo02owQYulHYoKS3Cazm4_cP9LawNDtzlKlPobgUJF9-r8iWhc-2Q4Mehbl5joHd5gy5RbDL7DKSdo14ITIdIwuHjkgyupeZFT3EGOn49Y0)

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challenging the UN’s claims, which now has approximately three million views.

Bazar also emphasized that a hospital and helicopter landing pad exist at Bab al-Hawa, so alternate aid delivery mechanisms were possible. Bazar stated that he had not received any of the 500 tents promised by the EU, despite the need for an additional estimated 3,000-5,000 tents over the thousands already received from other organizations.

In nearby Idlib, scenes were also grim, especially in the three most affected towns of Harem, Bsaniya, and Salqin. Some districts in these towns have totally collapsed, leaving a scene of utter devastation along entire rows of what used to be people’s homes. Bazar contrasted the image in Idlib with that of the regime-held areas: “The number of casualties in regime areas is about ten percent of the total number of casualties if you take Northwest Syria into account. Despite that, from the first moment, the first hours and first days, planes arrived carrying aid, and even visits of UN officials, and Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director of the World Health Organization. They gave statements, but here we didn’t see anything.” Minister of Development Mohamed al-Bashir reiterated this message in an interview on February 16: “From the first day we sent an official message to the UN, to the OCHA office in Gaziantep. We didn’t get any response, only until two days ago a meeting took place, a full week after the earthquake. They blamed it on logistic matters since their office is in Gaziantep. But the UN are responsible in emergency situations, people are dying under the rubble.”

Aside from Salvation Government officials, the vice head of the White Helmets, Munir Mustafa, confirmed the limited aspect of UN aid in Idlib and noted that “Among the aid the UN sent us was cleaning stuff to clean houses, but people have no houses.” Meanwhile, aid is arriving to Idlib in major numbers from the eastern provinces, especially from Arab tribes and clans from Deir al-Zour, Raqqqa, and Hasaka provinces under Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control through the Oun al-Dadat crossing near Manbij, and from SDF areas to SNA areas, with the convoy coordinator in Salqin reporting that 105 trucks have arrived. Originally from al-Shadadi in the Hasaka province and now an IDP in Idlib, he emphasized that while there are many IDPs living here, the aid is being provided to everyone.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Assad regime announced the decision to open the border crossings of Bab al-

Salama and al-Ra'ee, a move that UN Secretary-General António Guterres welcomed (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-02-13/statement-the-secretary-general-opening-of-crossing-points>) in a subsequent statement. Immediately afterward, the UN reported (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/first-un-aid-convoy-passes-into-northwest-syria-newly-opened-crossing-2023-02-14/>) that the first convoy arrived through the Bab al-Salama crossing. The reality, however, is that these crossings had already been open to aid for those willing to ignore the statements of Damascus. The UN unwillingness to use them before obtaining approval from Damascus raises questions about its prioritization of humanitarian need over political expediency.

And even as regional powers seem to be using the earthquake as an opportunity to normalize relations with the Assad regime, the regime has busied itself post-earthquake with attacking Northwest Syria at least five times—including reports (<https://twitter.com/amrorefai/status/1630212152752500736>) of pro-Assad forces shelling the highway in Idlib from the Bab al-Hawa crossing. At this point, the people in Northwest Syria I spoke to do not trust or want aid that is facilitated through the Assad regime. As one SNA soldier put it: “Assad [has] caused 1000 earthquakes, I will burn any aid that comes from him.” ❖

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