

Disasters of State: On the Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria

CrimethInc.

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On February 6, 2023, two earthquakes of magnitude 7.8 and 7.7 hit southern Turkey and Northern and Western Syria, inflicting tremendous damage. The death tolls are currently estimated at over 48,400 in Turkey and 7200 in Syria. The following texts offer two different vantage points on the ways that the Turkish and Syrian governments not only failed to protect their subjects but used this catastrophe as an opportunity to consolidate power and target their adversaries via neglect, blockading, and even bombing.

This story is familiar throughout the region. In Greece, on February 28, a northbound passenger train full of students returning from Greek carnival collided head-on with a southbound cargo freight train traveling on the same track, killing at least 57 people. Though the scale of these tragedies bears no comparison, both events underscored the ways that these regimes have accumulated resources for themselves rather than taking steps to preserve public safety. At the same time, both Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis have used these disasters as a pretext to seek to delay elections in hopes of holding on to power. *There is no other pill to take, so swallow the one that made you ill.*

As our world lurches further into crisis, we are likely to see this story play out on a wider and wider stage. Natural disasters will not free us from oppressive state power; rather, authoritarian governments and natural disasters will function in concert with each other to immiserate us unless we develop interconnected ways of responding to both at the same time.

Against the opportunism and violence of the state, we are inspired by the international grassroots mobilization with which communities around the world have responded to the earthquake. This models the sort of horizontality and solidarity that will be necessary if we are to survive what is shaping up to be a century of cataclysms. But in order for our efforts to succeed, we have to understand both the earthquakes and the state as aspects of the same catastrophe and take action against both of them.

Towards that end, we present two analyses of the situation in Turkey and Syria: the first from supporters of the movements for liberation in the regions of Bakur and Rojava, the second from supporters of the revolution in western Syria.



Statement about the Earthquakes from the Bay Area Mesopotamia Solidarity Committee

Less than a month into the disastrous earthquakes of February 6, 2023, it is obvious to all the peoples of Turkey that the Turkish state is a state of neglect. Neglect of proper measures for disaster control, of building codes and regulations, legal and administrative oversight; neglect of Syrian refugees, Kurds, Alevis, Christians, workers, children who remain buried under crumbled cement; neglect of emergency infrastructure; neglect of the right to live safely and with dignity. We call for accountability to all those who have pursued a fetish for profit at the expense of this deep suffering.

We know that this is not a natural disaster, but a man-made one, and therefore a political one. For the last two decades, the peoples of Turkey were promised safe and earthquake-proof houses and effective emergency and disaster-prevention services. In the first 48 hours after the earthquakes, we were confronted with the vast emptiness of these promises. The state had promised a coordinated relief effort through the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency and the Red Crescent, but after years of putting money into private charities and corporations rather than public institutions, that help was nowhere to be found. In the years of bigoted civil war against the Kurdish population, the areas where the earthquake happened hosted two of the largest military bases in the country. Yet the military—the only organized force that could reach places which suddenly became inaccessible due to collapsed roads and infrastructure—was conspicuously absent in relief efforts. Less than a week after the earthquake, the Turkish military resumed airstrikes against Rojava and Êzidis in Sinjar.

As we write this, thousands are drawing fragile breaths, fighting cold weather and hypothermia under the debris. They have learned the bitter lesson that the military is not there to protect, but to join in the coordinated ritual of killing the poor. The state, the contractors, the military, the capitalist class are all executioners.

We have seen this all before. The state was conspicuously absent in the 1999 İzmit Earthquake as well. It had financially impoverished its citizens through years of IMF structural adjustment programs, weakened the civil society through military rule and neoliberal anti-unionism, and left them to fend for themselves. In the 2011 Wan Earthquakes, the already war-torn, impoverished, and displaced Kurdish population was abandoned under enormous blocks of concrete.

The areas where the two earthquakes hit on February 6—the Western Euphrates Region of Northern Kurdistan, the large agricultural plains of Hatay, the Amik Valley, and Çukurova, Efrîn in Rojava, Aleppo in Syria—are marked with the wounds of endless wars. Cities like Adıyaman, Antep, Urfa, and Hatay are crowded with Syrian refugees living and working alongside Kurdish women and children in crumbling, ramshackle apartment blocks and illegal basement sweatshops.

Amed (Diyarbakır), the capital of Northern Kurdistan, has been under police and military blockade while the state's puppet mayors and governors have siphoned away the wealth of the people for their own comfort and luxury; now hundreds lie buried under shoddy apartment blocks built by treacherous contractors. In Rojava and Syria, buildings and infrastructure which were already worn out by war, already the objects of fear and reprisal, once again became a burial ground. For the peoples of Mesopotamia, concrete blocks have never been homes, but

living embodiments of fear. Neither life nor death: the surface of the earth has become a haunted purgatory.

Despite the vastness of this human tragedy, the state continues to flaunt its punishing bravado. Mouthpieces of government media hum, “There is no help, there needs to be help,” but censor citizens when they utter the same words. The state and its media are criminalizing citizens as agents of misinformation. They are invisibilizing the heroic solidarity and mutual aid efforts undertaken by the people. In mixed cities such as Gaziantep, the part of the police and the gendarmerie affiliated with the neo-fascist Grey Wolves are mobilized in the city, and the organization’s aid units are being situated at critical points, escalating tensions. The state is preventing Iraqi Kurdish emergency and aid workers from entering cities like Hatay solely because of their ethnicity. The police have beaten, detained, harassed, tortured, and killed citizens who were targeted by neo-fascist agitators as looters. Those who are at the top of the chain of responsibility are washing the blood off their hands by incriminating contractors. The poor and the dispossessed are getting devoured by the greedy machinery of the religious-capitalist-construction complex. In this concerted effort of collective gaslighting, a state, a regime, is casting its own people as enemies.

We see a similar hypocrisy in mainstream Western media as well, which is projecting the destruction in Syria as a sad humanitarian crisis, onset by the bloody dictator Bashar al-Asad, while condemning the Syrian population to an even more merciless death through political sanctions. With its silence on both Erdoğan’s war on Rojava and his Islamist mercenaries’ theft of aid from the hands of the peoples of the land, it obscures who is culpable and accountable in this bloody catastrophe.

It is clear that the months that unfold will be filled with political opportunism. We should expect rising xenophobia against Syrian refugees, attempts to deport Syrian Arabs back to Kurdish-populated areas as part of Erdoğan’s imperial social engineering, Bonapartist efforts to postpone the upcoming elections and thwart democratic accountability, and more attempts by the war criminal Bashar al-Asad to regain international legitimacy.

For the peoples of Turkey, Kurdistan, and Syria, the rumblings of the state’s war machine and the quakes of the earth are the same. In the fight for collective liberation and justice, the first thing we should do is to name those who are accountable: the treacherous contractors and employers; the media, the state, and its military; the mainstream parliamentary opposition bloc, which has tempered itself to moderation, while lionizing the state and its ideological apparatus; the bourgeoisie, its crocodile tears and uninvolved gestures of charity; the neofascist militants who police and penalize survivors, refugees, and internally displaced persons in the name of “public order”; all who have sacrificed the safety and dignity of citizens for the sake of greed and a fetish for profit.

The solidarity networks that have risen from the state’s ruins portend the possibility of a hopeful future. For us, the vast amount of aid and aid workers that have arrived in Turkey’s earthquake zones validates this hope. However, the peoples of Northwest Syria, who have been affected just as much by the earthquake, have not been able to receive a fraction of this support. The Kurdish Red Crescent [Heyva Sor] is working to help people in the earthquake-affected regions of Northwest Syria and Rojava.

To support the Kurdish Red Crescent, send donations here. You can keep up with the the Bay Area Mesopotamia Solidarity Committee here.



Photograph by Tolga Ildun/ZUMA Press.

In Syria, the Sieve of an Earthquake

This is an abridged translation of a text by Hamza Esmili and Montassir Sakhi, courtesy of some of our comrades from the Syrian Cantina in Montreuil.

The earthquakes that took place near the towns of Gaziantep and Ekinözü inflicted a catastrophe of rare magnitude. Both Turkey and neighboring Syria lament tens of thousands of dead, many more wounded, and considerable material devastation. Some cities, such as Antakya and Kahramanmaraş, were destroyed on a large scale. As for Syria, a country singularly devastated by a decade of government and Russian bombardments, more than five million people have lost their homes following the succession of earthquakes.

The disaster occurred in one of the most high-conflict geographical areas in the world. Far from rendering a truce possible, it intensifies the polarizations throughout the region. In its own way, the tragedy offers a sort of sieve [frame] to reveal the issues that are at stake in the region. [...]

Unsurprisingly, the Ba'ath state—the pan-Arab party that has governed Syria since 1963—is using the disaster to call for an end to its international ban, decreed following its ruthless repression of the popular uprising of 2011. The argument seems simple enough: this measure is necessary to ease the burden of the Syrians, removing the legal obstacles that hinder international solidarity in the midst of tragedy. Apart from this generous and humanitarian reason, any politicization of the event seems both unwelcome and irrelevant.

This was an effective narrative. A few days after the earthquake, it was taken up in unison by the anti-imperialist left, throughout the full range of its national variants¹; the European far right,² historically supportive of the Assad dynasty³; the decolonial movement⁴; the remnants of Arab nationalism⁵; and many international organizations. As it has for a decade, the Syrian tragedy thus continues to serve as a screen for the projections—a psychoanalyst would say of the *sublimations*—of a variety of very different political forms.

Even if it is repeated over and over, the mystification that they all make remains deceptive. Whether euphemistic—“The sanctions must be lifted for humanitarian reasons”—or explicit—“They were inappropriate from the start”—the support for Bashar al-Assad expressed during this catastrophe is based on a lack of knowledge of the Syrian historical situation and a long series of lies that his supporters have spread in public discourse in the course of promoting the normalization of the Ba'ath regime. At the same time, the reality is that the areas liberated from the regime's grasp—which were severely affected by the earthquake—are completely deprived of international aid and ignored by the proxies of the Syrian regime. This shows that those who called

¹ Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, *Die Linke* in Germany, and the Workers' Party of Belgium are united in favor of lifting the sanctions. [Footnote from the original text.]

² SOS Chrétiens d'Orient, which acts as a bridge between all the varieties of the French right and the regime of Bashar al-Assad, immediately began its advocacy as soon as the regime came into being. [Footnote from the original text.]

³ The Ba'ath regime has thus welcomed many prominent Nazis. One of them—Alois Brunner, former commander of the Drancy camp [a detention camp for Jews who were later deported to the death camps during the German occupation of France during World War II]—played a major role in the structuring of the Syrian secret service alongside Hafez al-Assad. [Footnote from the original text.]

⁴ See, for example, the editorial of the Decolonial HQ (France). [Footnote from the original text.]

⁵ See the open letter signed by a number of Marxist and pan-Arab organizations. [Footnote from the original text.]

for the end of sanctions as soon as the earthquake occurred were hardly guided by humanitarian motives.

It is therefore necessary to trace the thread of the reasoning that seems to lead from the catastrophe to the demand for the return of Bashar al-Assad’s regime to the ranks of the *respectable nations*.⁶ Likewise, this means questioning the possibilities of humanitarian aid at the time of the earthquake, which cannot be untied from the political fabric that it strengthens.

Back to a Revolution

Clearly, the Syrian regime has an interest in getting its international ban lifted. This ban is the consequence of the systematic repression it carried out against the uprising of 2011. At the time of the Arab revolutions, the Ba’ath state responded with a frighteningly explicit credo: “Assad, or we burn the country” (Assad, or we burn the country). (Assad, or we burn the country) The wave of protest did not weaken, however: it quickly led to the formation of *liberated zones* (liberated zones), (liberated zones) from which the regime withdrew before starting the constant bombardment, in particular by the use of barrel bombs.⁷ Within the liberated zones, which covered almost half of the country in 2013, central authority was not reestablished. Consequently, the revolutionary order was composite: beyond the popular slogan “One, one, one, the Syrian people are one” (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one) (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one), (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one) which affirms the existence of collective agreements more sacred than the sectarian abyss into which Bashar’s regime precipitated the country, the liberated zones were discontinuous both territorially and politically. Their reality was determined by the localized collectives that composed them. However, the existential aspiration for collective solidarity and justice in the face of an extraordinarily violent regime⁸ remained permanent in Homs, Hama, Deraa, Aleppo, Idlib, and Eastern Ghouta—some of the chief liberated zones of the country. This unanimity around the imperative to *unmake* the regime is represented by the constitution of the Free Army. Mirroring the decentralized nature of the revolution, it was formed by the heterogeneous alliance of mutinous soldiers and officers and brigades located in the various liberated zones. [...]

Initially failing—it was on the verge of collapse in 2013—Bashar al-Assad’s regime nonetheless gave the policy of destroying the country a new meaning as it called on the military support of foreign states. As early as 2012, militias linked to Iran were fighting in Syria, including Lebanese and Iraqi Hezbollah and Hazara Afghans forcibly recruited into the paramilitary structure of the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Then Russia committed its air force and troops to supporting the Syrian regime. Enabled by a succession of massacres regarding which future historians will have to decide whether they were indeed genocidal—for example, the blockade and subsequent famine of the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk,⁹ the chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta,¹⁰ or the

⁶ The French state is also following this trend towards normalizing the al-Assad regime. [Footnote from the original text.]

⁷ Weakened, the Syrian regime took recourse to dropping barrel bombs without remote guidance on the liberated zones. This particularly lethal bomb is filled with TNT, potassium, and scrap metal. The explosion disperses both lethal gases and micro-shells likely to cause many injuries. [Footnote from the original text.]

⁸ Catherine Coquio (and others), *Syria, the Burnt Country (1970-2021). The Black Book of Assad*, Paris, Seuil, 2021. [Footnote from the original text.]

⁹ Knowing the link between the “anti-imperialist” position and the façade of solidarity with the Palestinians, the denial of this crime is particularly striking. See Amnesty International’s 2014 report. [Footnote from the original text.]

¹⁰ The chemical weapons massacre in Eastern Ghouta left more than 2000 dead. [Footnote from the original text.]

policy of intensive bombardments of the liberated zones,¹¹ in particular hospitals—the regime has continuously regained control of the country since 2014. At the same time, the regions that are brought back under the authority of the regime were violently punished; their populations face purges and renewed authoritarianism from the Ba’ath and its Russian sponsor.

¹¹ Aleppo, for example, was completely wrecked by Russian bombing. [Footnote from the original text.]



Immediately after the earthquake, the al-Assad regime resumed bombing parts of Syria that remain beyond its control.

The Denial of Politics

In parallel with the military successes of the Russian imperial regime—whose intervention has become more and more colonial¹²—the Assad regime gradually renewed its diplomatic relations with many countries: Algeria, the United Arab Emirates, India, Bangladesh, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Austria, Jordan, Hamas,¹³ and so on. [...]

Faced with the Russian-Syrian expansion, which runs parallel to the normalization of Bashar al-Assad's regime on the international playing field, however, there remain the liberated areas of the Idlib region and the northwest of the country, in addition to the territories under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.¹⁴¹⁵ But the argument of state sovereignty comes into full play: international relations can only bind states together. This is the logical meaning of the readmission of the Ba'ath State into the company of the other respected nations: regardless of the fact that it is permanently weakened and administers less than a third of the original Syrian population, the regime of Bashar al-Assad remains the only legitimate interlocutor for the supporters of state sovereignty at all costs, whether anti-imperialist or conservative.

This is the context in which the earthquake occurred. In Syria, it affected both the areas under government control and others that remained liberated. As soon as the catastrophe occurred, it enabled Bashar al-Assad's regime to demand an end to the sanctions decreed against it following the repression of the popular uprising of 2011. In turn, anti-imperialist critics decried the "embargo" supposedly imposed on Syria. Regardless of the fact that this measure—which Syrian revolutionaries had demanded to stop the Russian bombing—was never actually granted, this verbiage makes it possible to evoke the sanctions decreed against neighboring Iraq throughout the 1990s—adhering to a well-known pattern of anti-imperialist discourse, according to which one historical situation necessarily justifies another.

They particularly focus on the Caesar Act¹⁶ adopted by the US administration in 2019. Never mind that it explicitly excluded humanitarian aid from its spectrum of restrictions—the earthquake allows the Ba'ath state and its supporters to see that as the original cause of the country's destruction, rather than the relentless war the regime waged on its own people and the predatory economy implemented by Ba'ath dignitaries. Bashar al-Assad's regime is notorious for plundering humanitarian aid, and yet his dignitaries and supporters assert in unison that the return of his sovereignty is a precondition for receiving international assistance. Any rescue operation, whether in the government zone or in the liberated areas, must therefore be conducted under the strict authority of the Ba'ath State.

¹² As the regime Syria became a puppet state, Russia granted itself large concessions within the country, within the historic stronghold of the Assad family of Latakia and Tartous. [Footnote from the original text.]

¹³ In 2022, Hamas renewed its ties with the regime of Bashar al-Assad after having severed them in 2011. [Footnote from the original text.]

¹⁴ These territories were conquered through the fight against the Islamic State, a counter-revolutionary organization largely spared by Bashar al-Assad and his Russian sponsors. [Footnote from the original text.]

¹⁵ The original version of this text reads "the territories under administration of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in the east of the country"—a tendentious phrasing, since that party, the PKK, is technically distinct from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

¹⁶ Enacted by the United States government in 2019—which is to say, long after the outbreak of the revolution and the ruin of the country by the al-Assad regime—the Caesar Act imposed a series of restrictions on the import and export for the Syrian state. The name is derived from the "Caesar photos," the images of several thousand Syrian detainees tortured to death in the Saednaya jails. Bashar al-Assad's anti-imperialist supporters never mention what gave the sanctions their name. [Footnote from the original text.]

Beyond their sovereignist position, the supporters of the Syrian regime—whether anti-imperialist, decolonial, white nationalist, or Arab—hardly answer the pressing question that their policy inevitably raises: how is it possible to channel aid through a regime as singularly violent towards its own people as that of Assad? The question is especially important in view of the well-known plundering of international aid that the Ba’ath state has engaged in over the past decade. Any resources sent to Assad will be systematically diverted from their purpose to strengthen the regime’s authority and expand its control at the expense of the remaining liberated areas.

But the narrative works. Dozens of convoys of humanitarian aid are pouring into government zones, dispatched by the European Union, the United Nations, and many other countries. The United Nations Secretary General greeted Bashar al-Assad; his counterpart from the World Health Organization went to Aleppo himself under the benevolent gaze of Ba’ath dignitaries. Contrary to the anti-imperialist narrative, which is based on the geopolitical division of the world into rival blocs, the list of those sending humanitarian aid to the Russian-Syrian regime is genuinely non-denominational. No ideological or strategic divisions can be seen.



The consequences of the earthquake in Idlib.

Confronting the Ba'ath Regime and Its Supporters

While Bashar al-Assad's regime and his international supporters are already showing their satisfaction over his return to international legitimacy, thanks to the earthquake, the liberated zones—which are among the closest to the epicenter—remain completely deprived of aid. Six million people are concentrated there, having been displaced after the Ba'ath State and its Russian guardians recaptured the other liberated areas. The overpopulation of this last region remaining outside the control of Bashar al-Assad's regime is directly linked to the latter's reconquest of the rest of the country. In Jindires, for example, in the northwest of Aleppo, 230 Syrians died in the earthquake who had relocated there from the Damascus region.

Nearly a week after the earthquake, however, no food aid convoy was able to enter the liberated zone. The Syrian regime's refusal to open border crossings to this area¹⁷ and the Russian state's refusal to open the crossing points controlled by the Turkish state effectively prevented any emergency humanitarian deployment there during the first week, when it would have been crucial to finding survivors under the rubble. The agreement of Bashar al-Assad's regime to open border crossings—which international dignitaries mysteriously celebrated—was only granted after the tragedy was complete. [...]

The denial of solidarity in face of disaster builds on the massacre conducted over the past decade by the Ba'ath state and its Russian guardians, and on the internal and external displacement that it caused. Symbolically speaking, it is not surprising that the buildings that were already damaged by the bombs of the Russian and al-Assad governments were the ones that collapsed most easily when the earthquake struck, even in areas relatively far from the epicenter.

Facing the cynicism of the Russian-Syrian regime and its international supporters, how do we imagine solidarity in a time of catastrophe? The Ba'ath's exterminatory policy is also its stumbling block. As it has violated every norm, every form of collective morality in Syrian society, no return to the previous historical situation is conceivable—neither in the liberated areas nor in those that the Bashar al-Assad regime and the Russian colonial power have reconquered.

Conversely, solidarity within Syrian society, largely autonomous of the Ba'ath state, has saved lives. By underscoring the importance of defending the collective and its members, the Syrian response to the earthquake shows the irreversible distance that separates society from Bashar al-Assad's regime. [...]

Contrary to the anti-imperialist narrative, it is necessary to recall tirelessly the historical context that this earthquake takes place in. Beyond historical revisionism, the supporters of Bashar al-Assad cannot offer an answer to the paradox of why we should set him up as the guarantor of the humanitarian response to the catastrophe when his regime is responsible for one of the worst wars of extermination a state has waged against its own people in our time.

Associations to support:

- The White Helmets
- Molham Volunteering Team
- Revivre

¹⁷ The regime of Bashar al-Assad only agreed to the delivery of international aid to the liberated areas more than a week after the earthquake, when the chances of finding survivors had dropped to almost zero. [Footnote from the original text.]

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