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# HOW CORRUPTION AND RACISM AGGRAVATE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE EARTHQUAKE



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# INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. TURKEY'S CONSTRUCTION AMNESTY: A TICKING TIMEBOMB .....	1
3. A SPECIAL TAX FOR EARTHQUAKE RELIEF AND OPEN QUESTIONS .....	3
4. AFAD – CENTRALIZATION & UNQUALIFIED CRISIS COORDINATORS .....	4
5. TURKISH RED CRESCENT .....	5
6. STATE'S REACTIONS: LATE RESPONSE, CRACK DOWN OF NON-STATE AID & REPRESSION .....	6
7. CONCLUSION .....	7
8. SOURCES .....	8

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding and disentangling human and political responsibilities in disasters of the magnitude of the earthquake that struck tens of thousands of people on February 6 is as complex as it is necessary. It has been proven for a long time that for similar natural events the human consequences vary. This is, of course, due to socio-economic contexts (countries like Haiti or Japan are extreme examples) but also to the degree of corruption and inequalities within the territory<sup>1</sup>. Most of the media reporting on the suffering of the people inside the Syrian and Turkish state borders have failed (either intentionally or out of ignorance) to point out that the majority of the people in the region are Kurds. But it is also home to Alevi and Arabs and is known to be a democratic stronghold. This is anything but a detail when one knows the history of repression of these people and their efforts at self-organization, which are constantly undermined by governments convinced that unity is achieved through centralization, uniformity and control.

Alarmed by the testimonies of many victims, we have made inquiries that reveal old and new abuses in the Southeast of Turkey (depending on the government in Ankara). Some elements related to the different Turkish administrations seem important to us and are the subject of this text.

## 2. TURKEY'S CONSTRUCTION AMNESTY: A TICKING TIMEBOMB

Urban planning "amnesty zones" regulate the enforcement and ownership of slums and buildings that have not been built according to zoning laws. Although the termination dates from 1984, its use dates back to the post-war period. Thus a very large number of substandard buildings are in a way pardoned, thus escaping in some cases a planned destruction. These relaxation measures have brought considerable amounts of money to the state coffers (a sum of money allowing indeed to wipe the slate clean) with the dramatic consequences that we know. The latest land amnesty in Turkey came into effect under the name "Peace for Reconstruction" in early June 2018, just before the parliamentary elections. *"Thanks to the amnesty, which received almost 10 million applications, 26 billion liras were collected"*<sup>2</sup>, specifies Deputy İBB Secretary General Dr. Buğra Gökçe.

Throughout the country it is estimated that nearly 8 million buildings have benefited from these measures.

<sup>1</sup> **Source: [Corruptionwatch.org](https://www.corruptionwatch.org)**

<sup>2</sup> That is nearly 1,300 million euros.

This makes Selim Tulumtaş say, Chairman of the Chamber of Civil Engineers, Ankara Branch: *"At least 2.7m people are sitting on a bomb"*. In the regions hardest hit by the earthquake these are no exception<sup>3</sup>. However, it seems obvious that to be lax in this matter in a country so at risk in terms of earthquakes is unconscious and even criminal. "The true culprits are the current government and the previous governments that kept the system as it is", said Taner Yuzgec, a former president of the Chamber of Construction Engineers, a professional organization<sup>4</sup>.

In the small town of Erzin, in the province of Hatay, the region of southern Turkey most affected by earthquake, the population of 42,000 and their small houses were all standing. In the surrounding area, entire districts of Antakya or Dörtyol, were flattened like sheets of paper, with scenes of desolation and death. With the exception of a few houses and mosques minarets, Erzin did not record any damage, casualties or injuries. When asked, the young mayor of the municipality, Okkes Elmasoglu, said he had never authorized any illegal construction. *"Some tried"*, he said. *"We then reported them to the prosecutor's office and took the decision to demolish the buildings. We all need to change our mentality radically"*, the official added. *"The state should not grant privileges and the citizen should not seek a pass either."*



Men search for people among the debris in a destroyed building in Adana, Turkey (AP Photo/Khalil Hamra)

<sup>3</sup> In the provinces affected 294,000 building registration documents were issued. 59,000 building registration certificates were issued in Adana, 56,000 in Hatay, 40,000 in Gaziantep and 39,000 in Kahramanmaraş.

<sup>4</sup> **Source: New-YorkTimes**

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## 3. A SPECIAL TAX FOR EARTHQUAKE RELIEF AND OPEN QUESTIONS

Turkey, due to its location at the intersection of three seismic faults, is a country used to earthquakes. After the devastating 1999 Marmara earthquake, the current government introduced a special tax, commonly known as the "earthquake tax", on, among other things, cell phone calls. According to journalist Bülent Mumay, a critic of the government, the Turkish state has received only 31 billion from this tax until 2020<sup>5</sup>. The means for structural measures to protect against earthquakes were therefore clearly available.

However, a considerable part of the funds raised by the "earthquake tax" flowed into completely different purposes. Even those responsible make no secret of this: Mehmet Şimşek, long-time finance minister under Erdogan, stated in 2011 that the funds had been used for the construction of expressways, as well as in the health and education sector, instead of, as intended, for the aid of those affected by the earthquake and the reconstruction of buildings<sup>6</sup>. Already after a 2020 earthquake in Elazig in southeastern Turkey, public outrage was raised and a campaign titled: #DepremVergisiNerede (#WhereIsTheEarthquakeTax) demanded accountability from Erdogan's AKP-MHP regime. Faced with these criticisms Recep Erdogan was content to declare: "We have used the funds where necessary! We also have no more time to account for such things!"<sup>7</sup>



***We have used the funds where necessary! We also have no more time to account for such things!***

**Recep Tayyip Erdogan**



<sup>5</sup> Source: [www.faz.net](http://www.faz.net)

<sup>6</sup> Source: [ahvalnews.com](http://ahvalnews.com)

Turkish politician explains that : "This money goes to double roads, goes to airports, goes to education..."

<sup>7</sup> Source: [www.msn.com](http://www.msn.com)

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## 4. AFAD – CENTRALIZATION & UNQUALIFIED CRISIS COORDINATORS

The AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate) is a public administration that tragically illustrates the clientelism of the Erdogan government that uses these structures for its own interests. No one has taken office on merit, every office is derived from people loyal to the AKP, who will hardly be able to question the terrible management derived from a total lack of disaster management, organisation of rescue teams, operation of ambulances or medical teams and a long etcetera that transcends in thousands and thousands of dead people waiting for some kind of rescue that never came.

Its director, Yunus Sezer, who was appointed by the president in March 2018, is a perfect example of this, as he is not qualified for the position at all and already held other positions in the Ministry of Interior, to which AFAD reports. İsmail Palakoğlu, the general manager of disaster response subdivision of AFAD is a theologian who previously held a position at the Directorate of Religious Affairs<sup>8</sup>.

This highly centralized institution claims to control all aid itself to the detriment of any efficiency as explain Hevat Rojan, a security advisor to the Danish government. To be effective, the focus should be on meeting local needs through local administration. One nurse asked not to be named for fear of reprisals. Being prepared to arrive in the disaster areas, she depended on the order from AFAD, which did not arrive until 40 hours later. After arriving in Hatay, the worst affected region, she found a field hospital with no water or electricity and hardly any supplies, and located at a distance that made it very difficult for victims to reach the worst affected area. She concludes by arguing the shortcomings in comparison with the earthquake 24 years earlier<sup>9</sup>.

What's more, having already been singled out in the past for numerous failures, AFAD goes so far as to confiscate the means deployed by other structures and to put obstacles in the way of solidarity that is self-organized with the help of the forces of order<sup>10</sup>. Knowing that it is being criticized for its numerous delays, it is careful about its communication, not hesitating to show off in front of the cameras without providing any real help, as several indignant witnesses have reported. Contrary to the Turkish president's statements about the impossibility of preparing for such events, there is no doubt that the main institution in charge has not learned from the past and that its lack of independence leads to a lack of transparency and accountability.

<sup>8</sup> [Source Duvarenglish.com](https://www.duvarenglish.com)

<sup>9</sup> [Source news.yahoo.com](https://news.yahoo.com)

<sup>10</sup> [Source HDP Europe](https://www.hdp-europe.com)

## 5. TURKISH RED CRESCENT

The motto of the International Red Cross is based on three principles: neutrality, independence and impartiality supposed to be able to provide assistance to populations beyond ideological and partisan borders. Unfortunately, the case of the Turkish Red Crescent illustrates that the reality is quite different, not escaping influences and corruption.

Several corruption scandals, donations to an organization involved in reported child abuse, failed missions, and several highly contradictory episodes mark its career. In one of these scandals, in 2019, Turkish Red Crescent management bought 10 luxury vehicles with the 643,000 dollars donated by the UN World Food Program to "aid foreigners" residing in the country. Another reported episode was the close connection with the Ensar Foundation, an organization that was already reported in 2016 for sexual abuse of 45 children & has close ties to the Erdogan family.

In 2020, documents showed that Turkish Red Crescent reportedly donated around \$7.9 million to the Ensar Foundation. The organization in 2017 was still involved in a failed mission that generated a cost of \$250,000. On a mission to take 10 tons of food and 46 tons of medicine to Yemen, with a cargo plane rented and ready to take off, the organization failed in the task of obtaining permission to fly, losing all the money that had been allocated for this mission in Yemen.

ZAMAN  
AUSTRALIA

### Turkish Red Crescent makes \$ 8 million donation to organisation embroiled in child abuse scandal

soLinternationa

ARAB NEWS

#### Turkish Red Crescent purchases luxury cars with subventions

#### Turkish Red Crescent caught in corruption scandal

duvaR.english  
Turkey's own independent gazette

Turkish Red Crescent administration purchased luxury 4x4 vehicles with 3 million 700 thousand TL (\$643 thousand) donated by the UN World Food Programme for "aid to foreigners" living in the country

#### Turkish Red Crescent criticized for sending gifts using public funds

The Turkish Red Crescent was the target of widespread criticism after it sent gift boxes to journalists, indicating that they were using public and state funds to send out promotional materials.

duvaR.english  
Turkey's own independent gazette

#### Turkish Red Crescent wastes over \$250,000 on failed aid mission

The Turkish Red Crescent spent more than \$250,000 on a failed aid mission in 2017, the daily BirGün reported on June 20. The organization reportedly paid \$245,000 for a rental cargo plane that was supposed to deliver food and medication to Yemen, failed to get a flight permit, and became liable for the litigation costs of over 72,000 liras.

## 6. STATE'S REACTIONS: LATE RESPONSE, CRACK DOWN OF NON-STATE AID & REPRESSION

Facing criticism from the first hours after the disaster for the slowness of the rescue efforts<sup>11</sup>, one of the first public interventions on the ground by the Turkish president was particularly symptomatic of a regime that has long been committed to the repression of any critical voice.

Thus, Erdogan did not hesitate to openly threaten any voice critical of government measures measurewith prosecution:

**"We are keeping track of those who intended to use fake news and distortions to turn our people against each other. Today's not the day to argue, but one day we will return to the records we're keeping today".**

At the same time, social networks such as twitter were cut off in the country. In recent days, dozens of people have been arrested by the police for posting 'provocative' messages that would "spread fear and panic among the population"<sup>12</sup>.

Spontaneously, many groups and individuals mobilized to counter the lack of support from the state. The society in Southeastern Turkey profited from a rich experience of self organization & grass-roots democratic structures. Groups of civilians mobilized to collect donations, or to distribute bread and food. However, the authorities quickly put a stop to these activities, which were considered as anti-Erdogan propaganda. Many volunteers from all over the region and from neighboring countries came to help. However, here too the state has made a distinction between those authorized to help and those it considers undesirable. Turkish and Greek volunteers have been arrested for belonging to left political groups that opposed the government<sup>13</sup>. Among the people arrested, there is a renowned<sup>14</sup> scientist who allowed himself to criticize the inefficiency of the rescue and a lawyer who had the audacity to tweet: "- Where is the state?" While he was desperately waiting for help<sup>15</sup>.

The degree of intentionality in these governmental failures remains difficult to prove, but to think that the fact that the affected regions are unfavorable to him and that they have been historically harshly repressed does not play a role today would be at best naive and at worst complacent.

<sup>11</sup> [The mayor of Hatay, one of the hardest hit cities, was outraged by these shortcomings in a local media](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Source: Time.com](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Source: Greekreporter.com](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Source: Duvarenglish.com](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Source: Duvarenglish.com](#)



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## 7. CONCLUSION

In light of the corruption, the centralization of emergency management, the misappropriation and misuse of tax, a relatively clear picture emerges: the catastrophe triggered by the earthquake was terrible, but the scale of the damage, the tens of thousands of deaths, personal fates and destroyed livelihoods were largely avoidable. Considering the countless corruption scandals mentioned, we strongly advise against donations to certain organizations who have proven their collusion and inefficiency. In order to ensure that aid really reaches its destination, we recommend donating to the Kurdish Red Crescent, which is active in the affected regions and works closely with local organizations, neighborhoods and democratic institutions.

Many of the crimes of the Erdogan regime listed above require further research. For example, the construction sector in Turkey has been involved in corruption scandals for decades, enriching many companies in which Erdogan's cronies have many interests. The question of whether and to what extent foreign construction companies were involved in the construction of unfit buildings also requires further investigation. In view of all these responsibilities, we call for vigilance. The AKP regime is trying to take advantage of the situation and may carry out demographic changes in areas where the majority of the population is hostile to it. In view of the May 15 elections in Turkey, we call on the citizens of Turkey to be aware of what is at stake and of the manipulations of a government that seeks and will seek by all means to remain in power.

At a time when many Western media are calling for the de-politicization of humanitarian aid, it is clear that this is a pious hope far removed from the realities on the ground. This is not new: in terms of aid, whether national or international, everything is political. The Earthquake and the humanitarian catastrophe it caused shows that the AKP regime makes distinctions based on ethnicity and religion in such a natural disaster (where humanity should be the highest priority) which cannot be separated from the fact that the east of Turkey is historically a colony. The region, also known as Northern Kurdistan, has been fighting for centuries against the very anti-democratic centralism that has now caused enormous damage.

As for the voices calling for solidarity and humanism, these noble sentiments can only have meaning if we give a voice to the people concerned and take into account the context in which this catastrophe is taking place. These tragedies cannot be considered in isolation from a political context marked by corruption, racism and violence, which exacerbates the consequences of the natural disaster. The people of the region; Kurds, Turks, Alevi & Arabs have a long experience of struggle and self-organization which is the real solution to lead a dignified life and to face such disasters. This tragedy of considerable magnitude must serve to rethink the way we want to organize life in society. This is true in Kurdistan as elsewhere. Let us not allow all these victims to be forgotten and no lessons to be learned from this suffering.

## 8. SOURCES

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- <sup>10</sup> <https://hdpeurope.eu/2023/02/turkish-government-obstructs-and-confiscates-humanitarian-aid-for-earthquake-victims/>
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