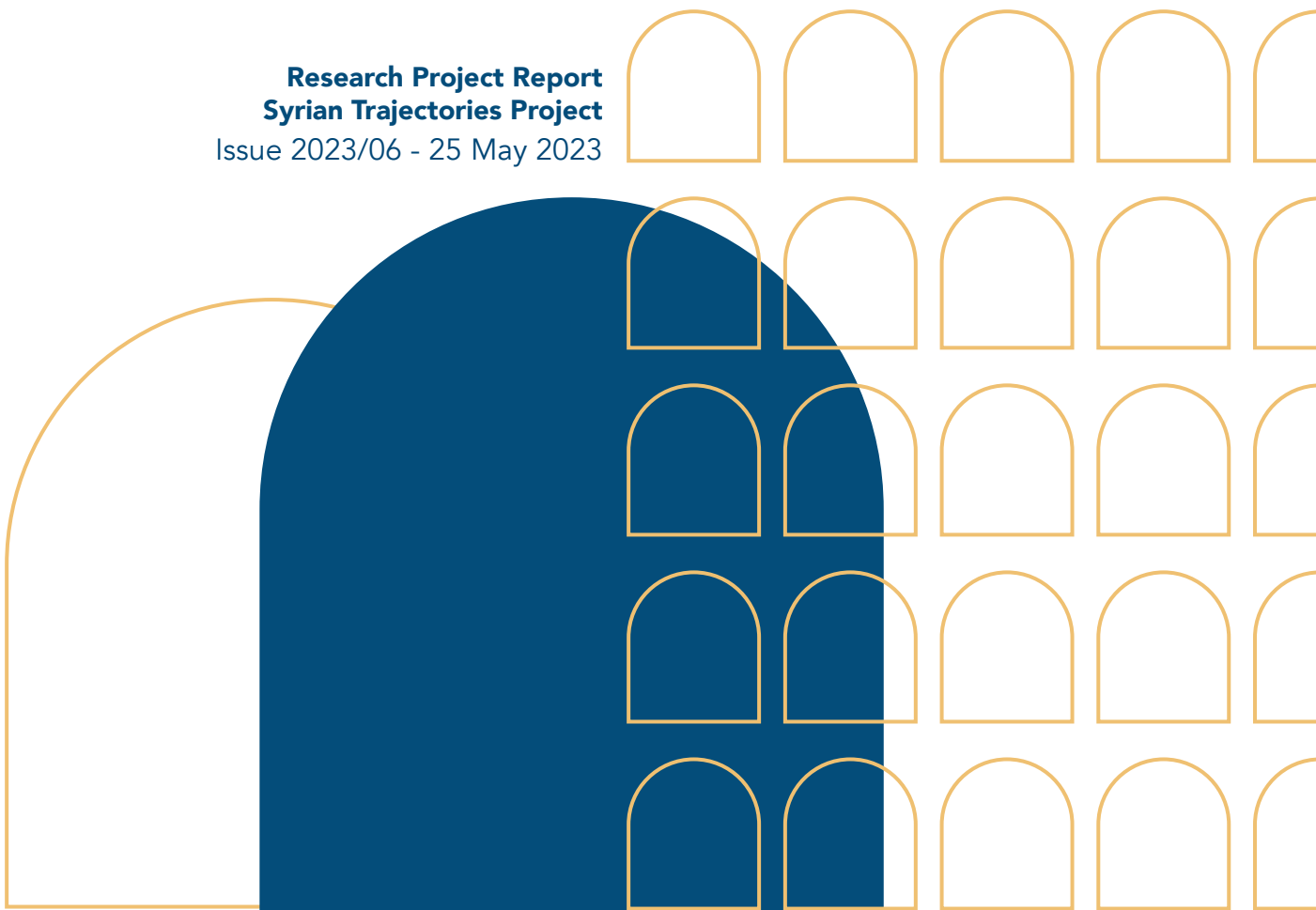


# Local Governance Structures and Humanitarian Responses to the Earthquake in North-West Syria

Sinan Hatahet

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Syrian Trajectories Project  
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# Local Governance Structures and Humanitarian Responses to the Earthquake in North-West Syria

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## Executive Summary

The aid sector in opposition-held areas of northern Aleppo and Idlib in Syria is complex and challenging, with numerous actors assisting millions of people in need in a context of shifting control dynamics between different armed actors. The opposition Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and the Salvation Government (SSG) have established various committees to control aid distribution. However, both struggle with limited financial resources, weak governance and a lack of international recognition, resulting in fragmented and inefficient aid delivery.

The effectiveness of early response efforts in these regions is significantly impacted by factors such as fragmentation of governance structures, overlapping mandates, frequent leadership changes, an absence of regulations, politicisation of aid and the influence of armed factions. There is a notable difference between the approaches of the SSG and the SIG to dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake, with the SSG focusing on image and control while the SIG struggles with coordination and authority concerns. The SSG has adopted a hands-off strategy toward humanitarian organisations, emphasising leadership, centralising response measures and striving to overcome international isolation. The SIG has encountered problems like insufficient supervision of subordinates, poor coordination among local councils and a failed presence on the field.

Non-governmental organisations have played a vital role in responding to the earthquake crisis in conflict-affected areas, carrying out rescue operations and providing emergency assistance and damage evaluation while collaborating with local communities and external aid providers. Syrian NGOs have been confronted with obstacles such as the vast area impacted by the earthquake and a need for additional equipment and machinery to handle the extent of the damage. The response of international assistance was slow and was plagued by bureaucratic and political complications. The UN's preference for crossline aid delivery was perceived as a pretext to conceal its inability to respond quickly in the early hours after the earthquake. The current situation demonstrates the importance of improved readiness and collaboration between international organisations and local actors to guarantee prompt and effective responses to future catastrophes.

## Introduction

On the fateful morning of 6 February 2023, a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, causing 4,540 deaths and injuring 8,786 in north-western Syria alone.<sup>1</sup> The disaster affected 148 cities and towns in the region, including seven major cities with a combined population of 374,514.<sup>2</sup> The quake left a lasting impact on nearly one in four civilians in the form of loss of either shelter or means of livelihood. The Syrian Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) Information Unit has estimated that approximately 1,869 buildings were destroyed and another 8,731 suffered partial damage.<sup>3</sup> In opposition-held areas, where state institutions are non-existent, the early response to the disaster relied mainly on local and international NGOs supported by UN agencies and theoretically coordinated by local administrations. The immense scale of the destruction brought by the earthquake exposed the strengths and weaknesses of this makeshift response system, stretching it to its limits.

Previous research has examined the legal and political frameworks surrounding cross-border aid delivery,<sup>4</sup> how the earthquake in north-western Syria amplified existing political fault lines rather than reinvigorating the stalled peace process,<sup>5</sup> the response of Syrian actors and attempts by the regime to exploit the natural disaster to rehabilitate itself by coordinating the international response.<sup>6</sup> The extensive reach of the earthquake across a vast expanse of land encompassing multiple territories gave researchers and experts a unique opportunity to evaluate the performance and modes of intervention of various actors. Although the Salvation Government (SSG) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) are geographically close, they control similar host populations and they share almost identical environments and infrastructure, their responses to the disaster revealed a stark contrast between their *modi operandi*.

This research paper investigates the performance of local governance structures, namely the SSG, the SIG and NGOs, in addressing the emergency response to the Turkey-Syria earthquake in the two months following the natural disaster. The paper is structured as follows. First, it provides an overview of the actors and governance involved in the aid and early response sectors in northern Syria. Second, it juxtaposes the interventions of the two governments in their respective territories, public perceptions of their authority and their collaboration with civil society organisations, which played a crucial role in the early response to the earthquake. By shedding light on the shortcomings of the local response and resilience factors, I aim to establish a foundation for devising improved strategies and policies to bolster early responses to humanitarian and natural disasters in northern Syria.

The paper uses a mixed-methods approach, utilising both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The primary sources used include public data released by the ACU, public reports and interviews with humanitarian actors working in northern Syria. Qualitative data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews conducted between 8 February and 17 March 2023 with key stakeholders, such as representatives of local governance structures, humanitarian organisations and the international community.

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1 Assistance Coordination Unit, "Humanitarian Situation in North-West Syria Following the Devastating Earthquake," 20 March 2023, <https://bit.ly/3luAcjx>

2 Ibid.

3 Assistance Coordination Unit, "Syria Earthquake Map," <https://bit.ly/3JXhBWx>

4 Leen Fouad, "Syria after the Earthquakes: Challenges to Post-Disaster Recovery Following the Catastrophic Humanitarian Response," *ODI*, 17 February 2023. <https://bit.ly/3LgELIf>

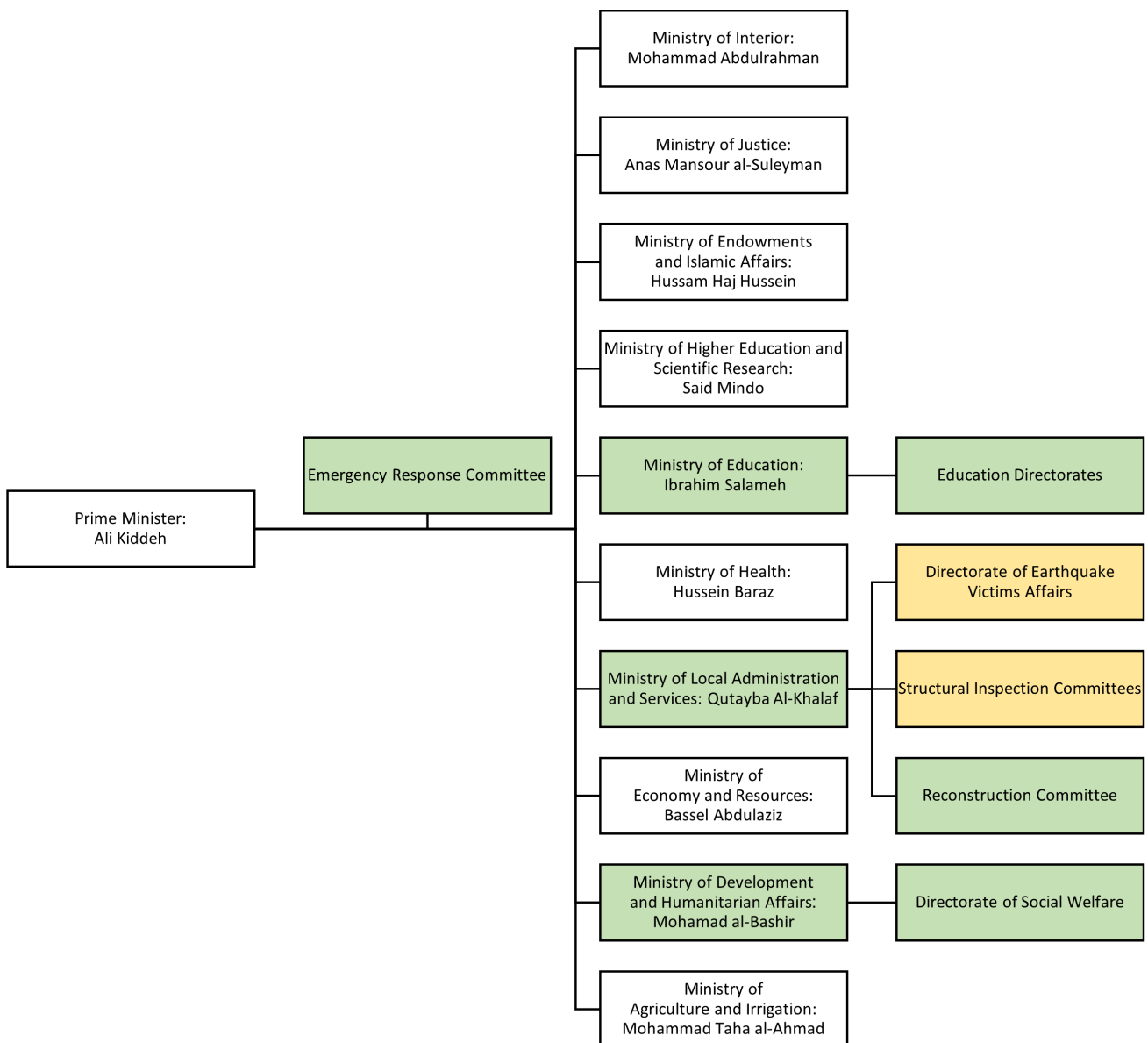
5 Lina Khatib, "Earthquakes Drag Syria's Warring Sides Away from Peace," *Chatham House*, 13 February 2023. <https://bit.ly/41kn2oK>.

6 Maen Talaa, ed., *The Repercussions of the February 2023 Earthquake on the Syrian Scene* (in Arabic), (Omran for Strategic Studies, 31 March 2023), <https://bit.ly/3UVrRIZ>.

# 1. The Salvation Government: Seeking Hegemony

In rebel-held areas in Idlib and western Aleppo, the Salvation Government (SSG) operates through various ministries and sub-entities and deals with numerous early response and aid organisations. The SSG exercises its mandate through three central ministries: the Ministry of Health, which manages healthcare services in collaboration with local NGOs and medical unions; the Ministry of Education, which oversees education services, working closely with independent directorates and education-focused NGOs; and the Ministry of Local Administration and Services, which governs affiliated local councils, coordinates early responses and liaises with humanitarian actors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: SSG Organisational Chart

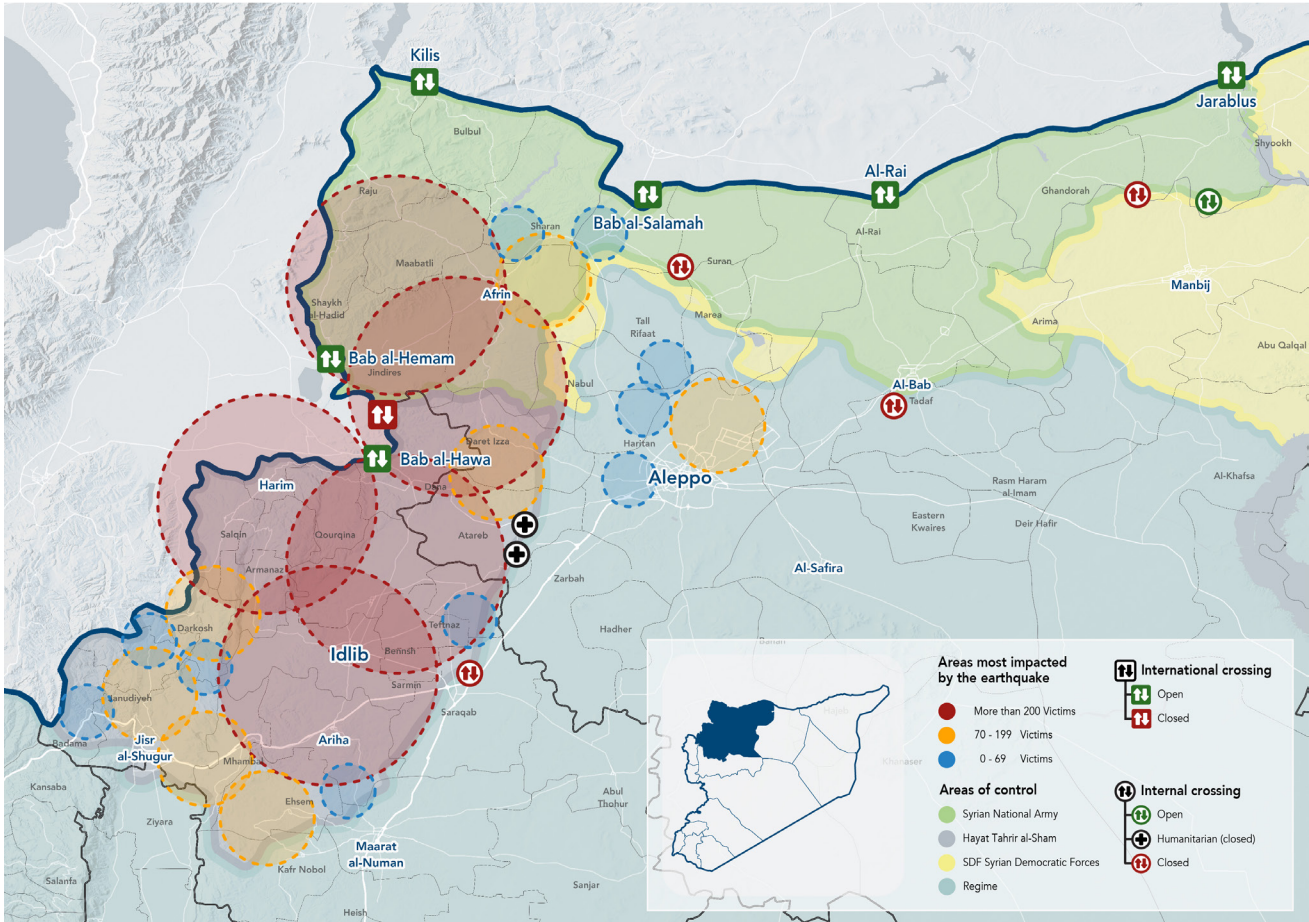


Despite the backing of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the SSG primarily relies on external aid for its activities as it has limited financial resources. It has established committees and directorates, such as the Emergency Response Committee, the Directorate of Social Welfare and the Directorate of Housing and Reconstruction, to manage aid distribution. These bodies aim to impose mandatory coordination and reporting on humanitarian organisations in order to achieve efficient aid delivery. However, the SSG’s efforts to control aid distribution have been largely ineffective due to constraints such as limited resources and capacity and a lack of recognition by some international actors leading to funding cuts. Furthermore, extremists operating under the HTS mandate in Idlib create concerns about the safety and security of aid workers, which in turn impedes aid delivery.

### 1.1. The Response to the Earthquake: A Public Relations Campaign

Situated on fault lines extending from south-eastern to central Hatay, northern Idlib bore the brunt of the earthquake in Syria. In recent years, cities near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing have experienced rapid growth, accommodated significant numbers of internally displaced persons (IDP) and hosted businesses dependent on imports from Turkey. The most affected sub-districts, Atmeh, Harem, Rahma, Salqin and Sarmada, are home to 56 clusters of makeshift IDP camps (see Map 1).<sup>7</sup> These cities have witnessed the construction of residential and commercial buildings fuelled by income generated from trade with Turkey. Tragically, nearly 56% of north-west Syria’s victims perished in this area.<sup>8</sup>

Map 1: Earthquake Impacted Cities and Towns in North-west Syria



7 Information Management Unit (IMU), “Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria Edition 01,” Assistance Coordination Unit, 2022, 3.

8 Assistance Coordination Unit, “Syria Earthquake Map.”



In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, a laissez-faire policy was implemented, which allowed humanitarian actors to intervene without restrictions or specific authorisation. The HTS's decision to remove all restrictions on the movements of humanitarian actors was undoubtedly a result of its lack of resources and expertise in handling a natural disaster of this magnitude. Indeed, HTS's Checkpoint Directorate facilitated access by NGOs to affected areas inside and outside Idlib.<sup>9</sup> The HTS and the SSG simultaneously made two crucial decisions. The SSG mandated all construction companies to give their equipment to the Civil Defence Organisation commonly referred to as the White Helmets.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, with the assistance of the HTS's Public Security Agency, local councils under the SSG's authority deployed 2,600 security agents to block civilian access to rescue operations and to guard the debris.<sup>11</sup> This decision proved to be life-saving as it allowed the White Helmet early responders to intervene without the distraction of untrained civilians attempting to assist them, enabling them to carry out their duties more effectively.

During the critical first hours and days of the disaster, neither the SSG nor the HTS provided direct funds or technical assistance. However, the SSG's Emergency Response Committee launched a public donation campaign, and claimed it had established 72 shelter centres hosting 10,000 families.<sup>12</sup> The authenticity of this claim remains unverified as it is unclear whether the activities reported were its own or those of NGOs operating in HTS territory.

From a communication point of view, the earthquake provided HTS with an opportunity to change its image in the eyes of the public and the international community. The group sought to project an image of leadership. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the HTS leader, quickly visited almost all the impacted areas, made public appearances and engaged with the local population.<sup>13</sup> SSG ministers made similar appearances. HTS also facilitated access by the foreign press, which returned to the region for the first time in years. Additionally, al-Jolani gave interviews to the local and international press, conveying urgent pleas for humanitarian intervention and criticising the slow response of the UN.<sup>14</sup> The earthquake was used as an opportunity to challenge the international community's perception of HTS as a terrorist organisation and to end its isolation.

## 1.2. The Aftermath of the Earthquake: Centralisation and Control

Following HTS's efforts to exploit the humanitarian crisis to improve its credentials, the organisation shifted its focus to institutionalisation and coordination. On 12 February 2023, the Directorate of Earthquake Victim Affairs was established to oversee aid distribution, build a database of beneficiaries, assess immediate needs and create a mechanism providing orphans and invalids left by the quake with care.<sup>15</sup> On 14 February 2023, structural inspection committees were formed to evaluate damage to buildings and block access to unsafe structures. By 14 February, 25 committees had been created.<sup>16</sup>

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9 Interview with a humanitarian aid worker with the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). Also observed by the author on a field trip on 8 February 2023.

10 Interview with Raed al-Saleh, director of the White Helmets, Sarmada Headquarters, Idlib, 9 February 2023.

11 Jana al-Issa, Hossam al-Mahmoud, and Hassan Ibrahim, "Who Will Rescue Northern Syria From Under the Rubble?" (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 14 March 2023, <http://bit.ly/3FJYhtc>

12 Syrian Salvation Government, "Minister of Development and Humanitarian Affairs Discusses the Work of His Ministry After the Earthquake Disaster" (in Arabic), 28 February 2023, <https://bit.ly/3BMshm1>

13 Azzam al-Kasir, "Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and the Aftershocks of the Earthquake," *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies*, 24 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3lx75vV>

14 Ruth Michaelson and Lorenzo Tondo, "Syrian Rebel Leader Pleads for Outside Help a Week on from Earthquakes," *The Guardian*, 13 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3ZalNWN>

15 Syrian Salvation Government, "Decision to Establish an Earthquake-Affected Directorate in the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, to Count the Families Affected by Earthquakes and Follow Up on their Affairs" (in Arabic), 12 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/40anTHW>

16 Syrian Salvation Government, "Decision to Form Structural Safety Committees to Inspect Buildings Damaged by the Earthquake" (in Arabic), 14 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/407Lw43>

These committees are responsible for identifying potential risks and recommending necessary repairs or evacuations to ensure the safety of occupants and the public.

Through their newly founded directorates and committees, the SSG's Ministry of Development and Ministry of Humanitarian and Local Administration and Services imposed a centralised response mechanism on humanitarian actors, including the pre-earthquake Emergency Response Committee. However, their ability to organise non-coordinated aid, especially from small private donors and community-based initiatives, remained relatively low. Additionally, the healthcare sector remained an area of influence disputed between the SSG's Ministry of Health, which has been gaining influence in the last two years, and the Idlib Health Directorate, which is clinging to its autonomy and enjoys the support of local and international organisations.

After the initial week following the earthquake, the HTS began to assert firmer control over the response efforts. It reorganised temporary shelters into 46 clusters and relocated scattered tents in better organised larger camps.<sup>17</sup> It appointed one local organisation among those working in each cluster as coordinator and required assistance to only be delivered according to the plans and needs assessment of the coordinator. Between 6 February and 10 March nearly 63,000 refugees crossed the border, benefiting from a special Turkish decree allowing them to stay in Syria for 90-180 days without losing their status.<sup>18</sup> The SSG's Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs established an office at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to assist Syrian refugees returning from Turkey and provide them with information.

It is important to note that most of the buildings damaged by the quake were built in the last decade by private contractors. The HTS and the SSG had previously boasted about their ability to impose building codes, control the sector, conduct regular inspections and demand regular tests. The extent of the destruction these buildings experienced suggests a self-projected image of confidence rather than technical expertise or know-how. The Public Security Agency has arrested several contractors whose projects and buildings collapsed due to lack of compliance with the building code. While the SSG may appear to behave like a rational government entity, its track record needs to demonstrate more concrete proof of this.

## 2. The Syrian Interim Government: A Failed Test of Leadership

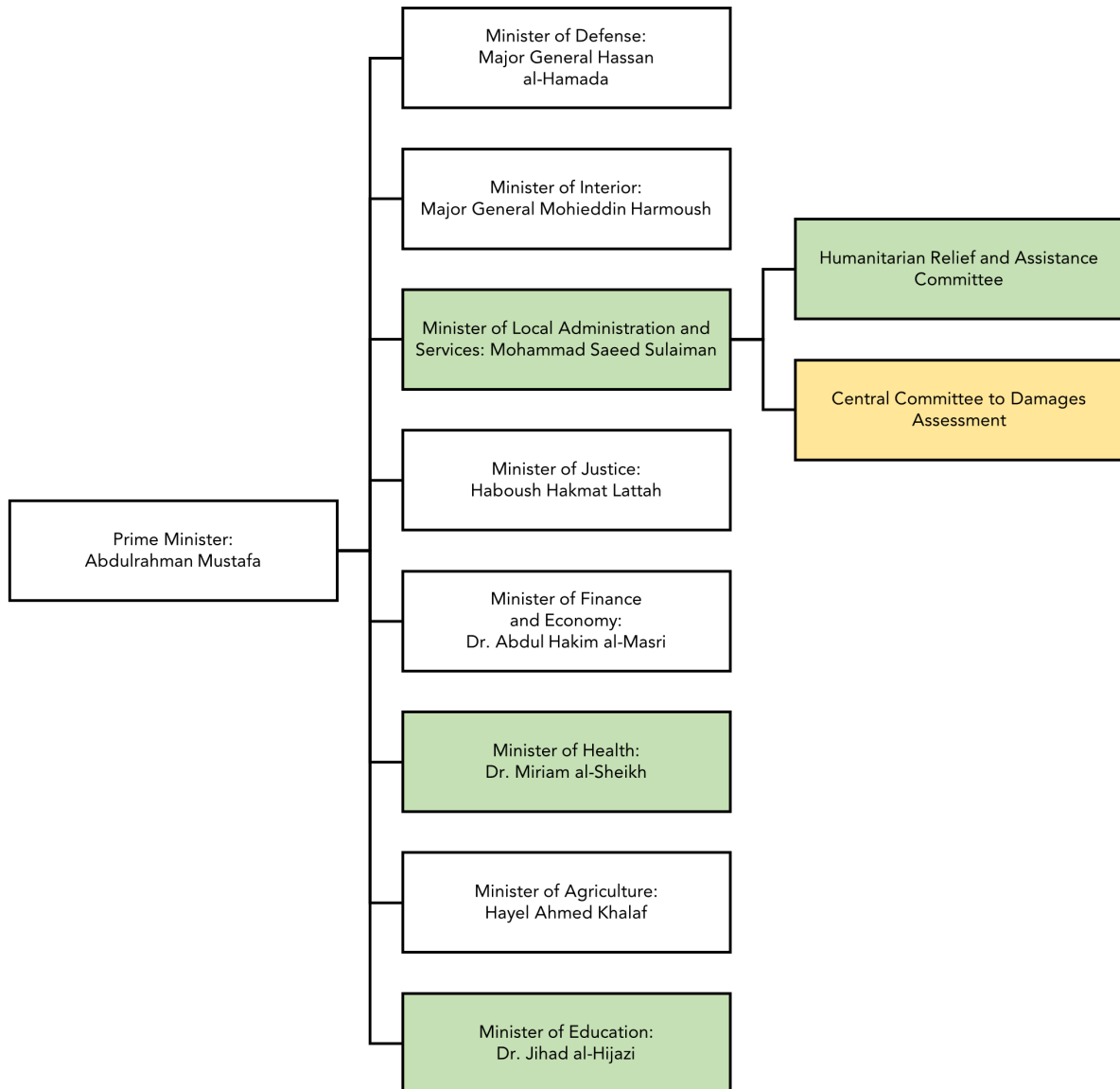
The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) has an official mandate from the Syrian National Coalition to administer early response and aid assistance, an objective pursued through its three core ministries: Health, Education and Local Governance. These entities oversee healthcare and educational services, while local councils manage daily administration in their regions, liaising with humanitarian actors to aid impacted communities (see Figure 2). The SIG has implemented mechanisms to control aid distribution, one of which is the Humanitarian Relief and Assistance Committee. This body aims to coordinate the activities of humanitarian actors with relevant ministries and exert influence through Health and Education Directorates in association with the Syrian Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF).

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with a local relief organization in Idlib, on 22 February 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Syria TV, "63,000 People ... Continuation of the Return of Syrians from Turkey Through 'Earthquake Leave'" (in Arabic), 11 March 2023, <http://bit.ly/3TzPznk>

**Figure 2: SIG Organisational Chart**



However, as it has limited financial resources, the SIG depends on external aid and grants, making it challenging to consistently fulfil its role. The Turkish management of the region and competitive struggle for control of the security sector contribute to administrative decentralisation, fragmentation and inefficiency within the SIG. Local councils, overseen by Turkish provincial governments, operate independently and lack coordination, leading to confusion and dwindling trust among aid organisations. The international community has seldom offered the SIG direct financial support due to concerns about its limited ability to govern effectively and independently and apprehension regarding transparency and accountability. Instead, it favours local NGOs and semi-autonomous institutions like the SRTD, the ACU and the Health and Education Directorates, which allow it greater control and the ability to demand regular audit reports and accountability.

## 2.1. The Response to the Earthquake: Missing in Action

Compared to the SSG in Idlib, the SIG faced different challenges in northern Aleppo. While the former dealt with widespread destruction in multiple locations, the SIG was confronted with a high concentration of devastation in a relatively confined space, particularly in the Afrin district. Afrin suffered significantly,

with 1,192 victims accounting for nearly 25% of the total deaths in north-west Syria.<sup>19</sup> The town of Jindires, the epicentre of the earthquake, experienced the highest number of casualties in a single city, with approximately 1,100 civilian deaths (see Map 1).<sup>20</sup> Compounding the challenges in Jindires, beyond obliteration of nearly 60% of the town,<sup>21</sup> were factors such as poor pre-conflict infrastructure, years of neglect in opposition-held areas and social tensions arising from systematic oppression of the local Kurdish community by factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA). These complexities made addressing the situation in Jindires more demanding for the SIG.

The long-standing lack of authority of the SIG became particularly apparent in the aftermath of the earthquake, highlighting its lack of initiative, inadequate control over its subordinates and failure to coordinate humanitarian efforts. Consequently, the coordination and management of the early response fell primarily on the 17 local councils that constitute the area. The fragile governance structure was exacerbated by the distance between local councils, a lack of coordination and their multiple subordination to different Turkish governors. This discord was evident in the emergency response in several sectors. Furthermore, the lack of a central authority capable of organising coordination among relief organisations, assessing needs and ensuring equitable distribution hindered the ability of local communities to devise strategies to effectively address the state of emergency and its urgent demands.

Among these governance challenges, it is essential to note the absence of transparency, accountability and oversight in the construction and housing process. This deficiency led to building practices failing to adhere to sound earthquake-resistant construction standards, even at the most basic level. Moreover, the governance challenges in the earthquake response efforts were closely intertwined with the local security context, including security breaches and factional infighting, which consistently threatened and hindered the dynamic response. The humanitarian crisis in Jindires highlighted the complications arising from a lack of coordination, overlapping jurisdictions in the SIG territory and discrimination against the local Kurdish population.

The extensive destruction in Jindires elicited empathy from the surrounding communities and the international media, which led to an influx of volunteers and regional aid organisations such as the al-Barzani Charity and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre. However, many untrained civilians obstructed the efforts of the White Helmets as vehicles and construction machines congested roads causing blockages and delaying crucial interventions and evacuations. The SNA only intervened to organise access to the city on 9 February, when the majority of life-saving efforts had finished.

The presence of high-profile regional aid organisations encouraged armed groups like the infamous Sultan Shah Murad Brigade to assert their authority and improve their public image.<sup>22</sup> With no intervention by the SIG Ministry of Defence or its Military Police, the brigade essentially took over aid distribution in Afrin and Jindires. Several humanitarian actors accused the group of intervening in aid distribution, of claiming credit for NGO interventions and of extortion. The involvement of the SIG was limited to lending the White Helmets materials.

Jindires local council attempted to coordinate assistance on the second day after the earthquake and invited the regional managers of Syrian NGOs operating there to a meeting. However, the meeting failed to establish an effective coordination mechanism, which resulted in a delayed aid distribution plan with lists of beneficiaries compiled by the local council at a later date.<sup>23</sup> The inability to create a better coordination mechanism was primarily due to competition among humanitarian actors, each vying to demonstrate a more effective response to the disaster.

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19 Assistance Coordination Unit, "Syria Earthquake Map."

20 Ibid.

21 Interview with Mahmoud al-Najjar, head of Jindires Local Council, Afrin, 15 March 2023.

22 Interview with the regional director of a Syrian Turkey-based NGO, Azaz, 8 February 2023.

23 Ibid.

## 2.2. The Aftermath of the Earthquake: Doubts and Shaking Ground

The SIG's response to the earthquake required a more focused approach and clear objectives to be evident in media appearances, meetings with donors and humanitarian actors, and post-quake institutionalisation efforts. Abdulrahman Mustafa, the prime minister of the SIG, appeared unattached to the local population during his first visit to ground zero on the second day after the earthquake. His lack of public statements and empathy led to a backlash on social media, with many criticising him for his apparent indifference. Mustafa's second appearance, alongside the Syrian National Coalition and Negotiation Committee leaders, took place six days later.

In the crucial first days following the earthquake, the SIG attempted to establish a mechanism to coordinate aid distribution and responses. It held meetings with NGO representatives in Turkey. However, these representatives were poorly connected with their regional managers on the ground, who were operating with a high degree of autonomy.

A month later on 6 March 2023, the Ministry of Local Administration created a central committee to assess damage and address various tasks related to the aftermath of the earthquake.<sup>24</sup> During the earthquake crisis the person in the SIG who played the most prominent role was the Minister of Local Administration, Saeed Sulaiman, a local businessman from Afrin. He took charge of most of the SIG initiatives and was the only official to meet UN and international delegations on the ground. The role of the Economy Ministry in providing free bread to affected communities in this period is also worth noting. This was an initiative financed by the Syrian Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF)<sup>25</sup> and was the first instance of the SRTF financing aid distribution in the Afrin district.

While the disaster presented an opportunity for the SIG and local administrations to fully exercise their authority without needing validation from Turkey, Turkey's absence and distraction (due to managing the disaster in its own territory) led to confusion among the SIG and the SNA. Evidently, the upper echelons of the local authorities were unable to take initiatives without clear directives from Turkey. The absence of Turkish agencies, particularly the AFAD, sparked criticism from Syrian activists, who were increasingly urging local authorities to seek greater autonomy in managing the area. In contrast, local councils and NGOs demonstrated greater resilience and ability to make swift decisions and independently execute actions.

## 3. Syrian NGOs: Left to Their Own Devices

Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a critical role in providing humanitarian aid and managing emergency responses in opposition-held areas in Syria. They are instrumental in bridging the gap between international aid organisations and local communities, offering comprehensive understanding of the region's socio-political dynamics and the immediate needs of the affected population. Primarily, these NGOs undertake various rescue operations during and after crises, such as earthquakes and armed conflicts. They efficiently deliver emergency assistance to those directly affected, including food, medical supplies, shelter and other necessities. Moreover, they frequently perform damage evaluations and offer detailed reports to international donors, thereby facilitating the allocation of additional resources to areas in need.

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24 Enab Baladi, "An 'Interim' Committee is Formed to Survey and Assess Earthquake Damage in Aleppo Countryside" (in Arabic), 6 March 2023, <http://bit.ly/3z1b7Q6>

25 Syrian Interim Government, "General Establishment for Grains Continues to Distribute Bread to Earthquake-Affected Areas" (in Arabic), 27 February 2023, <http://bit.ly/3yYziib>

Syrian NGOs collaborate closely with local communities to better understand their needs and ensure the most effective and efficient delivery of aid. This localised approach enhances the overall response strategy and takes into consideration cultural nuances, local power structures and the unique challenges in each area. These organisations also partner with international aid providers and local governance structures to maximise the reach and impact of humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the most influential actors are primarily responsible for executing UN humanitarian interventions in northern Syria and participating in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) clusters programme.

Early response decision-making typically involves several stages, including identifying emergencies, rapid needs assessments, coordination among actors and mobilising resources. There are four crucial stages in responding to a humanitarian crisis, such as a natural disaster or massive displacements.

The first stage involves gathering and assessing information. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, key actors utilise local sources, employ remote sensing techniques or rely on reports from partner organisations to comprehend the scale and impact of the situation. This preliminary assessment allows them to determine the extent of the crisis and understand the immediate requirements of the affected population.

In the second stage, coordination and communication come into play. Here, pivotal actors collaborate, share the information collected, assess the overall need and develop a response plan. This stage often necessitates establishment of ad hoc coordination mechanisms or activation of existing platforms, such as the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) or the OCHA.

Following the coordination phase, the third stage involves mobilisation of resources. Based on the needs identified, actors rally financial, human and material resources to address the situation. This may require reallocating existing resources, activating emergency funding mechanisms or appealing to the international community for additional support.

The final stage is implementation and monitoring of the response plan. Actors put into action the devised plan, assist affected populations and concurrently monitor the situation to ensure that needs are met. This stage involves distributing aid supplies, providing health care and shelter services, or establishing temporary camps for displaced persons. Monitoring allows the response to be adaptable and ensures it can be modified according to the evolving needs of the affected population.

Despite their pivotal role, Syrian NGOs often grapple with significant challenges. These include dealing with the vast area impacted by crises and the need for additional equipment and machinery to handle the scale of the damage. The region's complex and shifting control dynamics, with its numerous armed actors, adds to the difficulties they face. The table below provides an overview of Syrian NGOs operating in opposition-held areas and their primary activities.

**Table 1: List of the Most Prominent Local NGOs Working in OCHA Clusters<sup>26</sup>**

Organisation	Main Activities
Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)	Health services, medical training, emergency response
Violet Organisation	Education, child protection, livelihoods, WASH, health
Ghiras Al Nahda	Education, child protection, psychosocial support
Ihsan Relief and Development	Food security, WASH, livelihoods, education
Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets)	Search and rescue, first aid, public safety awareness
Binaa Organisation for Development	Shelter, infrastructure, WASH, livelihoods
Syria Relief and Development	Health, food security, WASH, education, protection

26 UNOCHA Syrian Arab Republic, "4WS Presence – OCHA," 1 January 2023, <https://bit.ly/3oqdgD0>.



### 3.1. The Response to the Earthquake: Unplanned Heroism

Driven by humanitarian values and without prior planning, Syrian organisations swiftly responded to the disaster in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Their efforts spanned three interconnected levels. First, they focused on rescuing people trapped under the rubble. The White Helmets declared a state of emergency and operated at total capacity right from the start. They mobilised approximately 2,900 volunteers in various fields, such as rescuing, firefighting and first aid, to directly engage in search and rescue operations. These volunteers used heavy machinery and equipment to aid their efforts.<sup>27</sup> However, the White Helmets encountered two main challenges. The scale of the disaster was larger than an NGO could deal with. While the area impacted by the earthquake covered over 200 square kilometres and included more than 60 devastated villages, towns and cities with 440 rescue points, the White Helmets could only manage 20 points simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> In addition, they needed more equipment and machinery to address the massive scale of the destruction and their existing resources were incompatible with the magnitude of the disaster.

Second, they provided displaced persons and those affected by the disaster with emergency relief services. During the first week after the earthquake, relief organisations focused on several key areas. Their primary response involved supporting the White Helmets in rescuing trapped victims and supplying fuel. Following this, organisations such as the Syrian American Medical Association, the Syrian Forum, the Molham Volunteering Team, Ataa, Violet and others adopted a multisectoral approach that included setting up shelter centres, distributing non-food items related to shelter and heating (such as heaters, clothing, fuel and blankets), providing ready-to-eat meals and later handing out food baskets. Programmes and projects prioritised assistance for those directly affected by the earthquake regarding locations and materials. Development-related programmes and projects not focused on relief were temporarily suspended in order to focus on establishing and preparing shelters for the affected population.<sup>29</sup>

Third, NGOs played a crucial role in the aftermath of the earthquake by conducting damage assessments and using media resources to raise awareness. For instance, the Free Engineers Syndicate, the Union of Free Engineers and numerous other NGOs helped evaluate the extent of the destruction on media platforms to inform the public and attract international support for relief efforts. Their involvement significantly contributed to the recovery process by providing the local community and donors with credibility and a sense of security.

Fourth, given the scarce resources, they launched donation campaigns. One of the primary reasons that Syrian NGOs were able to swiftly respond to the crisis was a recent shift to crowdfunding and collecting private donations. Historically dependent on international aid and grants, Syrian organisations have diversified their funding sources as the international community's enthusiasm for financing humanitarian assistance has waned in recent years. Generous contributions from the Syrian diaspora and sympathisers of various nationalities poured in within days of the onset of the conflict.

### 3.2. Trial by Earthquake: Complex Challenges and Triumphs

Meanwhile, NGOs encountered three primary challenges. The first was coordinating their interventions in areas such as data gathering and sharing, needs assessments and aid delivery. While coordination among organisations was not absent during the initial hours of the response, it was mostly confined to the field level. This was facilitated by field projects and field office managers to ensure that efforts

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27 Interview with Raed al-Saleh, 9 February 2023.

28 Ibid.

29 Interview with the regional manager of Syrian NGO on 26 February 2023.

were effectively coordinated and prevent service deprivation in certain areas and avoid duplication in others.<sup>30</sup> The second was procuring essential supplies from local markets to address immediate needs. Indeed, procurement from Turkey was disrupted during the first week, forcing Syrian NGOs to source materials in the local market. This led to a sharp increase in the prices of certain commodities, such as tents and blankets and isolation pads, with prices tripling during this period. However, food product prices remained stable with no significant increases. Some materials, particularly sanitation kits, were distributed from existing stocks.

The third was prioritising aid distribution and grappling with the question of merit. Notably, temporary shelters for earthquake-affected people were primarily built near existing IDP camps. As assistance was prioritised for earthquake victims, IDPs began to infiltrate their shelters to benefit from the aid. The question of merit slowly gained momentum as some individuals not directly impacted by the earthquake chose to live in tents out of fear. This led to increased scrutiny in aid delivery and the referral role of local councils grew in importance. Despite concerted efforts and some collaboration mechanisms, cities that attracted more media attention, such as Harem and Jindires, received more aid than others. Due to a lack of coordination in delivering assistance outside the shelter camps, individual tents received either multiple portions or none.

In addition to the commendable efforts of local NGOs, local initiatives also thrived. For instance, the Azaz local council gathered 3 million Turkish pounds for relief for Jindires in the first week. Similarly, the Homs and Eastern Ghouta communities respectively in Jarablus and al-Bab hosted displaced earthquake victims from Afrin. Grass-roots initiatives outside the region are also worth noting such as the Tribal Solidarity Convoy from eastern Syria.

On the other hand, some initiatives failed to deliver due to politicisation, such as a crude oil shipment from the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES). On 8 February, the AANES announced a shipment to the White Helmets of nearly 100 tanker trucks filled with crude oil and fuel. Claiming concerns over the possibility of the shipment being stolen and diverted by some SNA factions, Ilham Ahmad insisted on displaying the AANES banner on the convoy. This demand was perceived as an attempt at “whitewashing” the administration by the SIG.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the White Helmets, who were to receive the oil, deemed its quality unsuitable for their equipment and suggested distributing it for heating purposes.<sup>32</sup> This proposal generated little enthusiasm in the Autonomous Administration, which insisted on delivering the oil to the organisation. As the crisis escalated, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) expressed some willingness to negotiate the passage of the convoy with one of the local SNA factions, hoping to embarrass the SIG, which was being blamed for blocking the convoy. However, without sufficient incentives and approval from Turkey, none of the SNA factions took the initiative, so the convoy was sent back to its origin.

While various actors rushed to respond to the calamity caused by the earthquake, several gaps appeared in core functions such as information gathering, needs assessment, coordination and communication. Most of the efforts provided in these activities were ad-hoc and often redundant. Moreover, establishing new coordination mechanisms was considerably delayed, wasting valuable time and scarce resources. On the other hand, their accumulation of experience and expertise allowed local NGOs to efficiently mobilise their available resources and swiftly implement early response activities. Despite the international community’s delay in supporting local efforts, local stakeholders provided earthquake victims with crucial and timely assistance.

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30 The White Helmets, SAMS and Syrian Forum USA formed a consortium to coordinate their interventions in the WASH, healthcare and humanitarian aid sectors.

31 Interview with the 3rd Division head of legal office, Azaz, 9 February 2023.

32 Interview with Raed Al-Saleh, 9 February 2023.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, the extensive reach of the earthquake provided an unparalleled opportunity to analyse and compare the responses of the SSG and the SIG in their territories. Despite their geographical proximity and similar challenges, the two governments took contrasting approaches to disaster management. Navigating the intricate aid sector in opposition-held regions of northern Aleppo and Idlib presented many challenges. Hindered by fragmented governance, decentralisation and inefficiency, authorities like the SIG and SSG grappled with scarce resources and capacity. The involvement of external forces and armed factions added to the complexity of aid distribution. Assessing the contributions of various stakeholders is essential to enhance early responses and the effectiveness of aid assistance. The SSG focused on appearance and control and aimed to exploit the earthquake to challenge negative perceptions, but it lacked transparency and credibility. Meanwhile, the SIG faced issues involving coordination, authority and control, further highlighting its weak governance and damaging its public image. In the response to the earthquake NGOs played a critical role in disaster relief, as they provided swift and efficient aid despite challenges such as resource scarcity and a need for better coordination.

Moving forward, it is vital to recognise the importance of strengthening governance structures, enhancing coordination among actors and ensuring transparency and accountability in humanitarian response efforts. By addressing these challenges, local governments and humanitarian organisations can work together to provide timely, effective and efficient responses to future disasters and minimise the human cost associated with such crises. To improve future responses to natural disasters in conflict zones, it is essential to enhance coordination among local and international organisations, streamline aid delivery mechanisms and overcome political and bureaucratic barriers. Preparing for such crises requires a collective effort by all stakeholders, including NGOs, local communities and the international community, to ensure timely and efficient relief in the face of adversity.

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