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Webinar: The current humanitarian crisis is doubling the suffering of the Syrian people

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK) has organised another successful webinar ([available to watch here](#)), this time on the series of earthquakes that struck Turkey and Syria on 6 February has led to the deaths of approximately 42,000 people and many more injuries.

The failure of many international agencies to respond promptly has exacerbated the effects of the disaster, with many thousands of people still without sufficient shelter, food, and other necessities.

In response, AOHR UK invited experts from across the world to address the humanitarian crisis in Turkey and Syria and to explain how various international actors can improve their assistance to the affected people of both countries.

Dr Roba al-Salibi, a Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, said that “the earthquake has compounded layers upon layers of the humanitarian crisis in Syria”, and that “the humanitarian response to the earthquake has disproportionately disregarded Syrian suffering and people’s need for aid.”

On the inadequacy of aid to the affected people in Syria, Dr. al-Salibi said that “the opposition-controlled region in northern Syria faces more obstacles and challenges because of the Assad regime’s continuous oppression”, though added that “Western sanctions on Syria have been one of the obstacles to aid delivery to the places affected.”



“The miserable failure of international humanitarian aid in responding quickly and swiftly to the tragic earthquake exposes the selective empathy of the international community where certain lives are valued over others”, said Dr. Al-Salibi.

Speaking next, Robert S. Ford, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014, said that Western countries, including the United States, must provide more humanitarian aid to Syria in the wake of the earthquake.

“There must be an understanding among Western capitals that international humanitarian law allows them to set aside temporary concerns about Syrian state sovereignty”, Mr. Ford said, “in order to get life-saving urgent humanitarian assistance into Syria without a Security Council resolution.”

He added that “the US administration may have to reach out to banks to reassure them that the treasury is not going to penalize banks for facilitating financial flows in the cause of humanitarian assistance to Syria.”

On the issue of the Western acceptance of Syrian refugees, Mr. Ford said, “last year, 2022, the United States accepted only about 4300 Syrian refugees which is a tiny number compared to the number of displaced people, and it is a small number compared to the need to help people.”

“Western countries in general, and the US in particular, must urgently be revising their policy on accepting refugees”, he added.

Speaking next, Farouq Habib, the Deputy General Manager of the Syrian Civil Defence Forces, or White Helmets as they are commonly known, said that he was “disappointed with the unfair treatment and unbalanced response to the needs of the people affected by the earthquake in northern Syria”, and that “we still call for humanitarian assistance for all people affected in the regime-controlled areas and opposition-controlled areas.”

“We are frustrated due to the failure of the UN and the different international agencies to help the people in northwest Syria”, he continued.

“Why is the UN waiting for Bashar al-Assad to authorize them to help with their life-saving efforts, and waiting for the Security Council?”, Mr. Habib asked.



Mr. Habibi's colleague, Raed al-Saleh, the Director of the White Helmets, said that "the Syrian people did not delay in providing any construction equipment and funds they could to help in rescue operations for those affected by the earthquake."

Mr. al-Saleh denounced United Nation's response thus far to the disaster, saying that "the United Nations provided misleading information when the crisis began, and after has refused to provide aid except through crossings under the control of Bashar al-Assad – a clear message to those affected that there is no refuge for them except under the same regime that has caused this trouble from the very start."

Tom Harb is an American analyst and a former Co-Chair of the American Mideast Coalition for Democracy.

Mr Harb began by saying that, "a lot of people, NGOs, charity organisations, and churches, are collecting donations to help the Syrian people in this disaster."

However, "there should be an immediate meeting in the UN to make sure they provide aid to White Helmets on the ground".

He added that the question of practical access was crucial and that the "international community should talk to the Lebanese government about a couple of airports in northern Lebanon. They are so much closer [and so can help] providing aid to Syria."

In regard to the wider region, "Arab nations need to do something to expedite [their efforts] and make the needed impact. They must take urgent actions to help the people in the rescue operations, and provide movable hospitals, provide tents, and so on."

Speaking next, Dr. Yasin Aktay, a Turkish politician and Professor of Sociology, said, "unfortunately, the humanitarian crisis in Syria is not something new, it goes back 12 years."

In his view, "the Syrian regime holds responsibility for the current complicated situation in Syria."

He added that "although there is a shortage of international aid, the Syrians are helping themselves because they have some experience in facing similar crises due to the Russian and the Assad regime's shelling and bombing."

But, he continued, "we cannot forget about the responsibility of the United States in the affected area because they are already there."



Mrs. Salima Yenbou, a French MEP, said that “before the earthquake, Syria was witnessing the widespread repression and unrestrained violence of the Syrian regime, which caused the death of at least 500,000 people according to the UN’s statistics, and the displacement of approximately 7 million people.”

Mrs. Yenbou defended the sanctions that have been imposed on the Assad regime as the only way to address its violence and added that several concerned countries are working to ensure that those same sanctions do not constitute an obstacle to humanitarian aid to the country.

Mrs. Yanbou argued that the Syrian regime is stealing from the aid provided to those affected by the earthquake: “the biggest challenge the European Union currently faces is how to provide aid to the Syrian people without working with Bashar al-Assad”, said the MEP.

Speaking after Mrs. Yanbou, Dr. Nabeel Khoury, a former Director of the US Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, said, “the Syrians have suffered what we call here a triple whammy, three big blows. One of them is from nature, a natural disaster. One of them is from the Syrian regime. One of them is from a failing international system which is, frankly, too complicated and too troubled by politics.

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