

# Mass manslaughter by culpable negligence

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## Sarah Glynn

There are videos being [shared](#) on Twitter – perhaps you have seen them – of rescue workers calling in front of a collapsed building to ask if there is anyone still alive inside, and being met with total silence. As the days and hours since Monday morning’s massive earthquake pass by, that deathly silence will become all pervasive.

Dostoyevsky observed that a society should be judged by how it treats its criminals. Societies, or, more properly, their ruling elites, could equally be judged by how they cope with natural disasters. Both measures would be expected to give a very similar pattern.

On the evidence of this week, the verdict on Turkey and Syria is damning. Put simply, if they had acted differently, both in the past and following that first tremor, we would not be staring at such a massive disaster. (Other countries don't look too good either, but this article is already too long.)

Monday's earthquake affected ten provinces of Turkey, and also northwest Syria, an area that is home to – it is now calculated – some 17 million people. Large parts of its towns and cities are now totally uninhabitable, and while there is still a risk of aftershocks, it is not safe for people to stay in even undamaged homes. But temperatures are often below freezing, the area is buffeted by snow and rain, and many places are without water or electricity. The scale of the disaster is world news, and so is the catastrophic failure of the response.

This is a region with a very large Kurdish population, and there will be few Kurdish families from Turkey or Syria who remain untouched by the loss of family or friends, and the steady crushing of hope. The region includes a significant part of North Kurdistan (the Kurdish area within Turkey) and big Kurdish populations in Aleppo and in Afrîn (though Kurds have become a minority there since the Turkish invasion). But it also includes people of many other ethnicities, and cities where many Kurdish residents have become assimilated into Turkish society.

## **Turkey**

This should be a time of coming together to meet overwhelming humanitarian need. For the great majority of people, that is what is happening, but for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's strong man leader, who subjugates everything to his own quest for power, it is a time for anger and for doubling down on state control. At the root of that anger must be a recognition that his carefully constructed image is falling apart as people experience the murderous results of his leadership.

The grounds for this manslaughter were laid long before the earthquake. Erdoğan has presided over more than two decades of neoliberal crony capitalism, centred on a building boom where government contracts were

awarded to government supporters. Neoliberalism despises red tape, and political friends can look the other way when rules are ignored. Although Turkey's building regulations take account of the country's location over major geological fault lines, it is only too clear that these regulations have been more honoured in the breach than the observance. Indeed, the government has [issued](#) public amnesties for buildings breaching the codes, portraying this as helping their citizens. The push to development has also ensured that many of the open spaces where people could escape to safety have been built over. Even while the death toll of this week's catastrophic disaster is yet to be counted, people are talking about the risks of even greater carnage when the next earthquake hits Istanbul.

In the aftermath of the İzmit earthquake in 1999, the then government introduced a tax that was supposed to be used to enhance earthquake preparedness. But it has long been an issue of public knowledge and concern that very little of that money – now estimated to have added up to around €4.4 billion – has been [used](#) for the stated purpose.

This callous disregard for vital precautions has been combined with a refusal to listen to expert warnings of the probability of eruptions, or to engage with proffered [proposals](#) for mitigating action.

A similar refusal to plan for possible disaster and to listen to warnings left the country unable to fight the 2021 forest fires, and led to major mining disasters; but the short-sited pursuit of profit is hardly unique to Turkey, as anyone concerned about climate change must be aware.

Preparedness is also seriously impacted by actions resulting from anti-Kurdish policies. Decades of anti-Kurdish prejudice (long predating Erdoğan) have kept the infrastructure of North Kurdistan underdeveloped, and targeted Kurdish organisation. In recent years, the government has removed (and often imprisoned) elected Kurdish mayors, and arrested leaders of community organisations. They have not been able to destroy the Kurds' strong networks of community organisation, nor the political commitment behind them, but they have eliminated the municipal governments that would have been best

equipped to organise their community's disaster response, and weakened the organisations that are most active on the ground.

After the earthquake struck, Erdoğan's biggest, and most surprising, failing was not bringing in the army. This is the one institution with the organisation and the equipment to take on such a monumental task, but he has only mobilised a few thousand troops. This is especially remarkable in a man who cultivates an image as a patriarchal protector of his people, and has led some to conjecture that he might have been afraid that the army could outpace his own popularity.

Erdoğan has abrogated more and more powers to himself as head of a strongly centralised state. He is not afraid to use that state to suppress his political opponents, nor to crush community support networks that might threaten his patriarchal role. He has insisted that all relief aid must be organised through AFAD, the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority. Gratitude for aid should go to the government. But AFAD is by no means capable of the task they are being asked to do. Turkish state agencies are highly politicised, and the man leading AFAD's Disaster Response department [has](#) no background in disaster response. Past experience has made many people concerned that AFAD's delivery of aid will be driven by a desire to reward government supporters rather than the genuine needs of recipients. AFAD has proved woefully incapable of organising search and rescue, and also of providing basic shelter and sustenance for survivors; and state authorities have spent resources blocking the aid deliveries of others. Other organisations, especially the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have to [spend](#) precious time and energy working out ways to avoid having their aid distributions hijacked by the government.

Devastating government failure has produced widespread criticism and anger, especially from people whose families have died under the rubble as they waited for help that never came. The government's response has been to attempt to close down and criminalise criticism, and to delegitimise the anger as simply the result of provocateurs. On Tuesday, Erdoğan announced a "State of Emergency" for the affected provinces, giving himself more authoritarian powers. In a furious [speech](#) he told his listeners that he was

keeping a note of lies and distortions and would open his notebook when the time comes. Some journalists have been stopped from working and some social media users have been detained.

There have been growing reports of looting in the earthquake areas, and videos of looters being physically [punished](#), which have alarming echoes of the damaging scaremongering [following](#) Hurricane Katrina. Like in New Orleans, where such reports were later shown to have been dangerously exaggerated, there are many people who are content to see public anger being focussed on a few individuals (especially if they might be Syrian refugees) rather than on the criminal failures of the government; and the taking of essential goods in the current circumstances may be a rational survival mechanism. Erdoğan has [said](#) he will use the emergency law against the rioters.

In his bid to control public perception, Erdoğan even [closed](#) down Twitter, but after a furious backlash, which stressed how it was being used to locate survivors, the rule was reversed after nine hours.

There have also been reports of rescue teams being pulled away from their work at the last minute so that a Turkish team, [accompanied](#) by a camera, can get the credit.

However, the anger against Erdoğan looks to be too big to be put away, and his attempt to combine his stick with a carrot is unconvincing. His impossible promise to rebuild all housing lost within a year can do nothing for his credibility, while his [offer](#) of 10,000 Turkish Lira for everyone affected by the earthquake is insulting.

While Erdoğan has been concentrating on saving his image, most of the country has been concentrating on saving lives. The outpouring of human solidarity has been overwhelming – and much more than AFAD could hope to contain. Everyone is organising aid deliveries – from the big municipalities run by the Republican People's Party (CHP), and the big Islamic charities, to local community groups, and private individuals.

The HDP does not have large financial resources or political power, but their networks on the ground allow them to make best use of their resources. Together with like-minded community organisations they are providing a framework for self-supporting local organisation. In other words, they are continuing to put Öcalan's philosophy of grassroots communitarian organisation into practice.

The Kurdish diaspora has been frantically busy too – so busy, that this year's big Strasbourg march on the anniversary of Öcalan's capture has been postponed. Some people have gone back to Turkey to help search for relatives themselves. Others are focused on organising aid deliveries and raising money. They are very concerned that donations should avoid Turkish government control – why, after all, would you put the organisation that has systematically discriminated against your community, and has been responsible for mass manslaughter by culpable negligence, in charge of saving lives?

## **Syria**

Syria was already suffering from nearly 12 years of civil war, and even as they attempt to recover from the earthquake, Syria's population continues to be at the mercy of internal and international political rivalries. The Syrian death toll currently stands at over 4,000, but there will be many more lost beneath the rubble. The main destruction is in the northwest, divided between areas under Turkish occupation or control, and areas under the Syrian government. Autonomous North and East Syria escaped the worst impacts, though in the autonomous neighbourhoods of Aleppo – Sheikh Makhsood and Ashrafiyeh – there were six deaths and extensive structural damage; and there was damage and injuries in other places too. People have been staying outside their homes as a precaution, and the administration, along with the Kurdish Red Crescent, has set up tents in the region's cities.

Some 2,500 families from Sheikh Makhsood and Ashrafiyeh have moved to camps in Shahba canton, which is geographically separated from the rest of the autonomous region and already provides shelter to many of the people displaced by Turkey's 2018 invasion of Afrîn. More families are [expected](#) to

follow them. The administration has been working hard to support the new arrivals, but Damascus has not lifted their blockade on the region, which they want to force into surrendering control to the Syrian regime. Shabha's bakeries are [producing](#) extra bread, but deliveries of flour and other essentials are severely restricted.

Meanwhile, despite everything – and Turkey's massive needs for rescue and relief at home – the Turkish army has not stopped attacking North and East Syria. On Monday night, Turkish controlled forces [shelled](#) Shahba's Tel Rifaat, and on Thursday they [attacked](#) near Ain Issa with heavy weapons.

In contrast, the PKK, from their base in the Iraqi mountains, has declared a unilateral ceasefire in their war within Turkey. On Thursday, Cemil Bayik [announced](#) "We call on all our forces engaged in military actions to stop military actions in Turkey, in metropolises and cities... we decided not to take action unless the Turkish state comes against us and attacks us."

And, back in Syria, the Autonomous Administration and its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have set an example of humanitarianism, [offering](#) to send relief aid and support to any other areas of Syria that need it. But their approach has not been reciprocated, or even welcomed. The SDF reported that Turkish-backed armed groups have [stopped](#) them sending any help to either Idlib or Afrîn. Thirty tankers full of diesel and two trucks of relief aid are [waiting](#) near Manbij in the hope that they will be allowed to cross into the Turkish occupied area, where conditions are desperate, and fuel, which is no longer coming in from Turkey, is scarce.

Another convoy of aid organised by the Autonomous Administration [set off](#) from Manbij yesterday, hoping to reach the badly affected areas of Aleppo – if the Syrian Government allows it through.

Turkish-occupied Afrîn was badly damaged, and the town of Jindires is 80% destroyed. There have been reports that what official help there is, has been focused on the mercenaries and new settlers brought in by Turkey, at the expense of the original population, and also that an aid convoy

was [looted](#) by one of the mercenary groups. As I write, news has come in that an aid convoy [organised](#) by a Barzani charity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been allowed into Afrîn.

Little aid has reached Idlib either, where the Al Bab gate with Turkey provides the only United Nations approved access into Syria that does not go via regime held territories. (Other gates were closed by Russian and Chinese veto.) The UN has [promised](#) \$50 million of aid for Syria, but their first six trucks didn't arrive until Thursday as the roads across Turkey were badly [damaged](#). Until then, the only deliveries were of the bodies of local people recovered from the ruins in Turkey. This region, controlled by Al Qaeda offshoot, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, was already heavily dependent on aid from Western governments, and Thursday's delivery was arranged before the earthquake. It was followed by 14 more trucks yesterday – just a small fraction of what is needed. The UK government has [promised](#) an extra £3.8 million to the Idlib-based White Helmets for search and rescue operations, but this will be of little comfort to those with family already dying under the rubble.

The Syrian government has always insisted that all international aid to Syria should be delivered through Damascus, but very little that goes into Damascus reaches the regions outwith government control, as we saw during the Covid pandemic. Yesterday they issued a statement approving the sending of aid to other parts of Syria. It is not clear how this might work or under what restrictions, but Sky News [reports](#) that “The aid will reportedly arrive in rebel-held regions shortly, with the help of the United Nations, the Syrian Red Crescent and the International Red Cross.”

Syrian government-controlled areas have received international aid from a variety of governments, but notably not from the United States or Europe. Iran made sure to publicise their contribution despite failing to provide relief after the earthquake in Iranian Kurdistan little more than a week before. There have been many [demands](#) for the lifting of US sanctions from Syria, including by the United Nations. Despite their initial response that the sanctions exempt humanitarian aid, by Thursday, the United States [felt](#) it necessary to issue a general licence that “authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to



earthquake relief that would be otherwise prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations”. However, the sanctions have already had a disastrous impact on the country’s economy and infrastructure.

The politics of international aid needs an article of its own. Everyone acknowledges that small locally-rooted organisations are most efficient and effective in responding to real needs, and in long-term thinking beyond bounded programmes. Big charities and international aid programmes have been the subject of public scandals, and they have to work with the national authorities of the receiver nation. When conditions are desperate it may seem unimportant whose hands give out the blankets or make the soup, but it matters that donations are not wasted on big executive salaries, that aid delivery is based on need not vote banks, that local communities can build their own strength and resilience.

The consensus of the Kurdish diaspora communities is that donations should be sent to [Heyva Sor](#), the Kurdish Red Crescent, which has strong local connections in both North Kurdistan and North and East Syria.

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