

Scapegoats and fall guys in the earthquake zone

Looting narratives can serve authoritarian governments by sowing distrust between different communities, making it more difficult for people to self-organise. The Turkish Government wants the population to be dependent on the centralised state, however people's drive to support each other remains strong, especially in areas where the Kurdish movement has built well-rooted community structures.

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Social media from Turkey's earthquake zone is awash with videos of lynchings, where people – often police officers – have filmed themselves laying into men they have accused of looting – often Syrian refugees. Some of the victims are beaten to death.

I am going to talk about disaster myths, and I don't want to spread a new myth by giving the impression that these lynchings are happening everywhere. They are not. But every such act is a cause for concern, especially as they represent the most extreme expression of a racist violence that has been encouraged from the highest level.

Any proper overview of what is happening in the earthquake zone is impossible, but examples of videoed attacks include: [police relentlessly beating three Syrians](#) suspected of looting, a traffic cop whipping three suspected looters, Soldiers beating and kicking alleged looters, and three alleged looters killed in vigilante violence. [Five young men who came to help rescuers](#) in Adiyaman (Semsûr) were taken by the police, tortured, and left naked outside the city. And Turkish police have also [beaten to death](#) three young Syrian men who attempted to cross into Turkey to help rescue family members.

The situation seems to be especially bad in the severely damaged largely Arab area of Hatay, where a human rights lawyer [told](#) Mezopotamya News Agency that fascist groups brought from outside the area were targeting left groups, local volunteers, and refugees. Riha Bar Association has [filed](#) a criminal complaint against Ümit Özdağ, chairman of the far-right Victory Party, for inciting racial hatred and enmity through social media posts that accused Syrians of plundering the wrecked areas. Fear of violence led Austrian and German rescue teams in Hatay to [suspend](#) their work. It has been reported that Syrian refugees have been hurriedly [bused out](#) of Hatay's tent city for earthquake survivors. When journalists asked where they were being taken, they were told "hell".

Stories of looting were inevitable. An extensive literature shows that the belief that disasters are followed by looting is one of the most persistent disaster myths. It is a myth that is reinforced by sensationalist media and disaster

movies, and a myth that is welcomed by authorities that seek to bury their own culpabilities by turning public anger against scapegoated communities.

As Samantha Montana [explains](#) in Scientific American, researchers have found that, in fact, “people tend not to panic during disasters; they are not helpless; and crime rates rarely rise... Looting is extremely rare.” Because of the expectation of chaos, every report of looting – which may anyway be people recovering their own possessions or trying to meet basic needs of subsistence – is presented as heralding an inevitable breakdown of law and order. Irresponsible reporting creates panics and encourages, and appears to legitimate, violent and repressive responses.

It has become a truism that reactions to people’s actions depend on those people’s perceived ethnicity and class. Famously, [two photographs](#) from the floods following hurricane Katrina in New Orleans showed a black man ‘looting’ and white couple ‘finding’ food from a store. In New Orleans, victim blaming focused on poor blacks, who were othered as inherently violent. In Turkey the scapegoats are minority groups and refugees.

When the Turkish Government was exposed as unprepared to fight the widespread forest fires of 2021, [unfounded rumours](#) were spread accusing Kurds of fire-raising. This time, blame has been focused on refugees. Populist anti-refugee rhetoric has been increasingly common to all political parties other than the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and their left-wing allies. The earthquake straddled the Syrian Turkish border and there is an especially large number of Syrian refugees in this part of Turkey.

Looting narratives can serve authoritarian governments by sowing distrust between different communities, making it more difficult for people to self-organise. The Turkish Government wants the population to be dependent on the centralised state, however people’s drive to support each other remains strong, especially in areas where the Kurdish movement has built well-rooted community structures.

‘Looters’ have also been used as a [post-facto excuse](#) for bringing in a state of emergency in the ten affected provinces. This has nothing to do with

facilitating the emergency response. It is a mechanism for restricting freedom of speech and suspending basic rights. Soldiers who could have been helping to search through the rubble for survivors are instead guarding property, increasing the impression of simmering lawlessness.

An HDP spokesperson [noted](#), “The AKP-MHP government is attempting to legitimize its unlawful practices by using news of looting. The reports from earthquake-hit regions show incidents of unregistered detentions and torture.”

As many people have pointed out, the real looters are the country’s elite who have grown fat on the back of a struggling population, including all those people who benefitted from building homes that do not comply with earthquake regulations. While refugees have been served with the most brutal mockery of justice, some [building contractors](#) have been detained. Unlike looters – real or imagined – these people have blood on their hands. A lot of it. But we can be sure that unless there are very major political changes in Turkey, there will be few legal consequences for most of those involved in the lethal building boom with its officially condoned scorn for regulations. Arrest warrants for the contractors are meant to distract attention from the bureaucrats who looked the other way as rules were flaunted, and the politicians, including [Erdoğan](#) himself, who granted amnesties for buildings known not to comply. Some less-well connected people will be allowed to serve as the fall-guys – but spare your pity.

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