

Double displacement of refugees in the context of the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake

Eda Sevinin¹ | Didem Daniş²  | Deniz Sert³ 

¹Association for Migration Research (GAR),
Urla/İzmir, Turkey

²Galatasaray University, Istanbul, Turkey

³Ozyegin University, Istanbul, Turkey

Correspondence

Eda Sevinin, Association for Migration
Research (GAR), Erdoğan Ker Cad. No:65,
35430 Urla/İzmir, Turkey.
Email: edasevinin@gmail.com

Abstract

This commentary is based on our observations during our fieldwork in the earthquake region in Turkey that took place in February 6, 2023 in 11 provinces where 49% of the entire Syrian population in Turkey live. In this commentary, we focus on the case of Syrians, who have been subject to what we call double displacement. Syrian refugees who were already displaced due to the war and faced with many problems in establishing a new life in Turkey once again lost their homes and livelihoods due to the earthquake, exposing them to increased risks and vulnerability.

In a scale unseen in a century, two major earthquakes with the epicentre of Kahramanmaraş shook the earth, and with it, the entire region on 6 February 2023. On February 20, two more heavily destructive earthquakes hit Hatay, causing further loss of life and property. While the impact of the earthquake in Turkey was felt most in Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Diyarbakır, Adıyaman, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Malatya, Osmaniye, Kilis, Elazığ and Adana; in Northern and Eastern Syria, a great destruction was experienced in the regions of Aleppo, Idlib, Azez, Afrin and Hama. According to official statements, at least 57,500 people lost their lives in the earthquakes, of which 7259 were in Syria (Relief Web, 2023) and 50,783 in Turkey (CNN Turk, April 24, 2023). A few months later, thousands of people are still reported missing.

Like any natural catastrophe, this earthquake manifested existing social inequalities, while also creating new ones due to the serious economic, social and psychological loss experienced by millions. Before the earthquake, a total of 15,784,390 people were living in the earthquake-hit region in Turkey, of whom 14,013,196 were citizens and 1,738,035 were Syrians living under the temporary protection regime (PMM, 2023), making up 49% of the entire Syrian refugee population in Turkey. It is important to note that the earthquake-hit area has been a multilingual, multireligious, multisectarian and multiethnic region for centuries. This diversity in the population became more pronounced following the disaster as some populations were subjected to the unequal and uneven

The Association for Migration Research, GAR. This commentary is based on 'Migration and Earthquake—Assessment Report' published in Turkish by the same authors. Available at <https://www.gocarastirmalaridernegi.org/tr/calismalar/arastirmalar/goc-ve-deprem-durum-tespit-raporu/311-goc-ve-deprem-durum-tespit-raporu>.

© 2023 International Organization for Migration.

distribution of search and rescue efforts and emergency aid. Coupled with the lack of effective postdisaster coordination, this was widely interpreted as the manifestation of an implicit discrimination of how people of different languages, religions, sects and ethnicities were deliberately deprived of aid.

Postdisaster context was also marked by the lack of coordination and insufficient efforts to rescue people or aid the survivors on the part of the government and local authorities. Since the first day of the earthquakes, survivors faced many problems that prevented them from accessing vital needs, including search and rescue efforts. Many public institutions such as hospitals, governor offices and municipalities, which could have been key to crisis management and postdisaster relief were heavily damaged, making local coordination very difficult. The lack of coordination has been a general problem not only of public institutions and local administrations, but also of civil society organizations as well as international organizations and INGOs due to various factors: The *first* is rooted in the over-centralized management approach that has blocked and/or failed to facilitate the civic solidarity and other international efforts. *Second*, international organizations could not effectively operate in the region due to spatial limitations of work permits imposed on international organizations and NGOs. *Third*, the majority of local governments in the region have not been able to participate in the coordination work because they were heavily affected and paralysed by the destruction. *Fourth*, most actors involved in postdisaster relief efforts lacked emergency action plans and information on emergency response.

Nevertheless, nongovernmental organizations, political parties, municipalities, trade and labour unions and nongovernmental organizations, including volunteers, continue to work to find solutions to existing problems. Volunteer networks and flexibly organized civil initiatives have been at the forefront of many relief efforts, in search and rescue and delivery of emergency aid in the first days and in reaching out to far away villages and working in tent areas. Humanitarian aid NGOs took an active role in providing basic needs. Other NGOs transferred their field expertise by using methods such as rights monitoring and reporting.

Besides civil society, community-based support proved very valuable: People largely relied on their own resources. However, this was largely contingent upon factors such as community belonging, class, kinship and family ties, as well as the ability to access public or civil society efforts. For this reason, various groups who have already been facing exclusion in the society and are deprived of these resources are affected much more deeply by the disaster and the displacement that followed. The unevenness of the emergency response was coupled with rising hate speech and discrimination that was most intensely felt among Syrian refugees. Based on our observations during our fieldwork in the earthquake region in Turkey, in this commentary, we focus on the case of Syrians, who have been subject to what we call double displacement. Syrian refugees who were already displaced due to the war and faced many problems in establishing a new life in Turkey once again lost their homes and livelihoods due to the earthquake, exposing them to increased risks and vulnerability.

POSTDISASTER (FORCED) DISPLACEMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

Millions of people have lost their homes and livelihood and have been displaced by the earthquakes. According to UN estimates, approximately 1.5 million people were left homeless and 2.2 million people left the region in the first week following the earthquake (Sağıroğlu et al., 2023). This number increased to 3.3 million as of 1 March 2023 indicating an immense demographic mobility. Undoubtedly, the very first reason for postdisaster migration is the housing problem. Although much less discussed due to dire living conditions, the loss of jobs and livelihood is also critical consideration for postdisaster mobility as access to or deprivation of livelihoods affects people's ability to migrate to other places. Those who had the opportunity left their cities of residence and sought to meet their accommodation needs in other places. Resources and social networks determined people's choice to go to the rural areas of the cities they lived in, neighbouring cities that were unaffected or major cities outside the region. Besides those who chose to leave the region and seek other options in different places, millions of people –regardless of their decision to leave or stay– have been displaced and left without even the most basic amenities.

Among them, some could devise postdisaster solutions depending on their resources and networks while many others have had to rely on postdisaster relief.

Syrians, who make up nearly 12% of the population of the region, were also displaced after the quake. Although unofficial numbers remain unannounced, we learned that some Syrians chose to move to neighbouring cities while some of them went to metropolitan areas. Another option for Syrian refugees was to return to Syria albeit with certain conditions. It is estimated that around sixty thousand refugees have returned. The obvious lack of regulatory mechanisms for the movement of or humanitarian aid to refugees created further uncertainties and worries for the Syrian community in Turkey.

That said, many Syrian refugees stayed in the region. It must, however, be noted that those who stayed in the region were also subjected to loss of home and livelihood as well as displacement, at times more than once. The postdisaster displacement for Syrians has been marked by discrimination, hate speech and deprivation of aid and protection. Despite human rights and humanitarian principles that dictate equality and nondiscrimination in emergency response, beginning in the first week of the earthquakes, we have seen that refugees have been exposed to multi-layered forms of discrimination and hate speech, amounting to physical violence, lynching and ill-treatment in some cases. Reinforced by the increasing anti-migrant discourse in politics in the months prior to the earthquake, anti-Syrian attitudes became more visible. The hate speech and physical assaults led by the Victory Party, a new political party known for its anti-immigrant sentiment, created an even more insecure postdisaster environment by targeting refugees and increasing existing tensions.

Legal regulations issued within the scope of the earthquake response also justified the differential treatment of Syrian refugees. The circulars issued by the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) right after the earthquakes lifted the travel permits imposed on refugees and the internal mobility from the earthquake region to other provinces was allowed for a period of 60 days (this was later extended for another 60 days in April). In practice, the PMM suggested that affected refugees go to the provinces where their relatives live and/or where they can afford to meet their basic needs. Those who lack such means and resources were told not to leave the zone while simultaneously excluding them from the official aid provided to citizens and public institutions' formal evacuation programmes. Finally, the PMM announced that nongovernmental organizations would not be allowed to provide shelter support to refugees. Therefore, refugees were compelled to solve their problems by tapping into their kinship, family and social networks across the country. While civil solidarity platforms and migration NGOs working tried to organize solidarity, these solutions seem to fall short in the face of mounting needs and protracted nature of the postdisaster situation.

In addition to the problems faced by those who left the region, Syrians who continue to stay in the earthquake area have faced serious rights violations. After the earthquake, we saw that Syrians were repeatedly expelled from tent cities, neighbourhoods, Temporary Accommodation Centers and even places where they had been settled by state actors. There are reports that some Temporary Accommodation Centers (camps where Syrians with temporary protection status reside) were evacuated so that Turkish citizens could stay. According to a news report dated March 8, 2023, a group of Syrian families against whom complaints were made were forcibly removed from the tent city of Elbistan (Kahramanmaraş) bylaw enforcement. These various rights violations and the lack of any measures against them, but most remarkably, the emergency responses that displaced refugee population multiple times attest to the continuation of ad hoc policies and temporary measures with respect to refugees in Turkey.

Syrian refugees are very visibly aware of these exclusionary practices and wary of these tensions, and they consciously try to make themselves invisible in the society. They navigate by not asking for aid, being minimally visible in tent areas, trying to stay close to their relatives in public spaces, giving up on any public support and becoming introverted. For instance, a group of Syrian families working in agriculture before the earthquake in Hatay, started to stay in the greenhouses they previously worked, taking all the risks related to health and hygiene. Some Syrian families preferred this solution over others because they choose to remain invisible in order to be protected from the increasing discrimination and hate speech after the earthquake.

POSTDISASTER UNCERTAINTY

In the third month after the earthquake, the uncertainties continue. The government declared a State of Emergency for 3 months in the disaster zone including 10 provinces, on 7 February 2023. The State of Emergency, which was declared in order to 'use public power and opportunities in the most effective and rapid way in the fight against disasters' was criticized by many on the basis the state is creating a 'grey area' for both the organization of solidarity and access to accurate information. Various nonstate activities in the earthquake areas were left facing uncertainty in terms of their activities alongside constant prevention by state actors to undermine the civil solidarity and coordination efforts. Other legal measures taken by the government have contributed to exacerbating uncertainty and confusion concerning housing, livelihood, protection of vulnerable populations and the reconstruction efforts in the region.

For the refugee community, the existing uncertainty is all the more striking. The conditions awaiting refugees after the designated 60 + 60 days and any information about the rights and services provided to them upon return to the disaster zone are unknown. If these periods are not extended with another circular, how the returns will be organized and whether people who choose not to return will face the risk of illegalization are also important questions.

Despite all these negative experiences, there are also many good examples manifesting social links built between local Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees, such as Syrian and Turkish people participating together in rescue operations, Syrians pulling people out of the rubble and sharing the aid received from authorities and the civil society. However, the prolongation of problems in the post-earthquake period as well as the election atmosphere may damage these acts of solidarity and future actions. Given the size and the magnitude of the loss, there is a long road ahead for the reconstruction, which necessitates lots of hard work, coordination, cooperation and also support from the international community.

DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this Commentary are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors, Editorial Board, International Organization for Migration nor John Wiley & Sons.

ORCID

Didem Daniş  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6547-3341>

Deniz Sert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5360-6642>

REFERENCES

- CNN Turk. (2023) 78. gün! Depremde ölü sayısı ne kadar oldu, güncel yaralı sayısı kaç? Hangi ilde kaç bina yıkıldı, kaç kişi öldü? Available from: <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/76-gun-depremdede-olu-sayisi-ne-kadar-oldu-guncel-yarali-sayisi-kac-hangi-ilde-kac-bina-yikildi-kac-kisi-oldu> [Accessed 30 April 2023].
- Presidency of Migration Management. (2023) *Distribution of Syrian refugees in the scope of temporary protection by province*. Available from: <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> [Accessed 25 April 2023].
- Relief Web. (2023) *Syria/Turkey earthquakes situation report #7*. Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syriaturkey-earthquakes-situation-report-7-march-8-2023#:~:text=The%20death%20toll%20from%20earthquakes,Turkey%20and%207%2C259%20in%20Syria> [Accessed 26 March 2023].
- Sağiroğlu, A.Z., Ünsal, R. & Özenci, F. (2023) *Deprem Sonrası Göç ve İnsan Hareketlilikleri Durum Değerlendirme Raporu. AYBÜ-GPM Rapor Serisi-15*. Ankara: AYBU Migration Policies and Application Research Center (AYBÜ-GPM).

How to cite this article: Sevinin, E., Daniş, D. & Sert, D. (2023) Double displacement of refugees in the context of the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake. *International Migration*, 61, 341–344. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13171>