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One year since the Turkey-Syria earthquake Part 2

This is the second part of a three-part series.

The bourgeois parties’ “promises contest”

Before the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, about three months after the disaster, President Erdoğan and government officials travelled to the earthquake region and entered into a “promises contest” with the bourgeois opposition alliance led by the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP). These promises were soon forgotten by Erdoğan, who won the elections, or by the opposition parties that governed various municipalities.



Aerial photo shows the destruction in Kahramanmaraş, southern Turkey, Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2023. [AP Photo/Ahmet Akpolat]

The government had announced that 750,000 liras (now \$25,000) in grants and 750,000 liras in loans would be given to those who wanted to rebuild their demolished, heavily or moderately damaged houses. But it was not possible for people who had difficulties even in normal times to build new houses. While there is no information on how many people have taken advantage of the subsidy, Erdoğan said that a similar loan will be given to those who want to make their houses earthquake-resistant in Istanbul just before the local elections on March 31, 2024.

In Istanbul, in the Marmara region, where scientists expect a major earthquake soon, hundreds of thousands of buildings are thought to be unstable and millions of people are at risk.

Immediately after the February 2023 earthquake, then Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu said: “Both AFAD [the official response organization] and our Family Ministry will provide furniture aid. We have completed the preparations, we will announce within 2-3 days how much furniture aid will be provided to the earthquake victims”. However, answers to parliamentary questions from opposition parties indicate that no payment has been made.

Another measure the government promised to implement by the end of 2023, but did not, was the “marriage loan,” which would be valid in the 11 provinces affected by the earthquake and would be given to newly married couples under the age of 26. According to the information provided, the loan of 150,000 liras (now \$5,000) would have a grace period of two years and would be repaid in four years. Although the bill was passed by the Turkish parliament, it has not yet been put into practice.

The government’s most prominent promise was on housing. In a statement on March 15, 2023, Erdoğan had said, “We plan to build 319,000 houses next year, making a total of 650,000 houses, and hand them over to their owners.” Although there are about 1.5 months left, the construction of most of these houses has not yet started. The construction of 46,000 houses, which was started quickly for propaganda purposes before last year’s elections, will be handed over to the owners by drawing lots on the anniversary of the earthquake.

According to a report prepared by the Chamber of Urban Planners (ŞPO) in October 2023, the total number of houses in Hatay province was recorded as 887,909. The number of “demolished or severely damaged” houses was 258,974, 29 percent of the total. The number of “moderately damaged” houses was 308,438, 35 percent of the total. The number of public housing units tendered in the city was reported as only 12,000 in Antakya district and 12,000 in Defne district.



Destroyed buildings in Hatay after the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Turkey [Photo: Hilmi Hacaloğlu - Voice of America]

The same report has stated that 166,035 earthquake victims live in 62,050 containers in Hatay. If one adds to this figure the 5,380 people living in tent cities, the thousands of people living in tents and unregistered makeshift containers outside tent cities, and the earthquake victims who have temporarily migrated from the earthquake region, the number of public housing units put out to tender is far below the real need of the affected population.

Who is responsible for the devastation?

According to the government and municipalities, including those led by the opposition parties, the devastation caused by the two unprecedented earthquakes, which they called “the disaster of the century”, could not have been avoided.

In fact, major earthquakes had long been predicted by scientists. Although the danger was reflected in government reports, no action was taken. A report published in 2020 by the Governorship of Kahramanmaraş and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) under the Interior Ministry, outlined a 7.5-magnitude earthquake scenario for the city and said: “In the event of a major earthquake, it is foreseen that a large part of the city would be affected.”

The report summarised the urgent measures to be taken as follows:

In order to minimize the loss of life and property in a possible earthquake, it is essential to carry out detailed ground surveys in residential areas and evacuate buildings in hazardous zones. In addition, earthquake activity and earthquake risk must be taken into consideration in the selection of the establishment and development locations of new villages, towns and cities. Earthquake-resistant buildings with correct reinforced concrete and static calculations should be constructed on solid ground away from active faults.

A Master's thesis on Antakya, the central district of Hatay, published in 2019, which was also shared with the authorities, found that "80 percent of the buildings in the urban area consist of risky structures. Although these facts have been put forward in reports, and it is known that this city is in urgent need of transformation, no significant work has been done on this issue to date."

Hüseyin Alan, chair of the Chamber of Geological Engineers, sent an earthquake warning letter and a scientific report to several state institutions, including the Presidency and AFAD, in March 2021. Alan suggested in his letter, "The city should be re-planned according to the map of the live fault lines. Existing buildings must be reviewed and urban transformation work must be carried out. An earthquake plan must be prepared in Maraş."

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These vital warnings were also ignored.

The Turkish government and the entire political establishment, whose policies are driven by the profits and wealth accumulation of the ruling class and national considerations, are responsible for the devastation following the earthquake. As far as Syria is concerned, the US-led NATO powers bear the main responsibility.



Destruction in Jindires, Aleppo Governate, Syria [Photo by Alaa Ealyawi - Own work / [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)]

However, not a single person or authority responsible has been held to account, either internationally or in Turkey. Only a few Turkish contractors were arrested after the demolition. These arrests were also mainly motivated by the Erdoğan government's aim to deflect public anger.

During the earthquake, buildings designed by engineers who were members of the Chamber of Architects and the Chamber of Civil Engineers, whose projects and calculations had been examined by experts in the municipal planning departments and whose building permits had been issued, and which had been “inspected” according to the earthquake regulations, collapsed.

According to the bourgeois politicians and mayors, those who open up river banks, wetlands, agricultural areas, areas that are unstable according to soil surveys for construction; those who change zoning plans to build high-rise buildings in these areas; those who do not properly inspect the buildings according to the project; those who issue zoning/construction amnesties, those who build illegal floors in buildings, those who cut the number of support columns; those who do not take precautions despite the warnings of scientists, have no responsibility for the destruction and the death of tens of thousands.



Lütfü Savaş, Mayor of Hatay Metropolitan Municipality in 2023. [Photo: Tezcan Taşkiran (VOA)]

Since all bourgeois parties, both the government and the opposition, agree on this, they have no problem in re-nominating former mayors whose negligence in the quake-prone region was obvious and who did not take precautions. The most prominent example of this contempt to the population is the re-nomination of the current Hatay Mayor Lütfü Savaş, whose political responsibility for turning the earthquake in the city into a massive catastrophe is well known, by the main opposition CHP.

To be continued

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