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## **The Impact of Earthquakes on Refugee Crisis: An Overview of the Recent Cases in Turkey and Syria**



**Faheema K.C.**

Student - Politics and International Relations  
Pondicherry University  
Research Intern - Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Education

### **Introduction**

Turkey and Syria are countries located in a seismically active region known as the Mediterranean seismic belt. Frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions characterise this region, and Turkey and Syria experienced devastating 7.7 and 7.6 magnitudes of earthquakes in February 2023, killing over 50,000 and injuring 100,000 people. This earthquake surpassed the devastating 7.4 magnitudes Izmit earthquake in north-western Turkey in 1999, killing over 17,000 people. Syria also had considerable losses in the past and present owing to the impacts of earthquakes, which killed its people and destroyed many buildings in the cities of Aleppo, Damascus and Qamishli. In addition to earthquakes, Turkey and Syria have experienced a significant refugee crisis in recent years. In Syria, the ongoing civil war has forced millions of people to flee their homes. Turkey has taken in millions of refugees from Syria and other neighbouring countries. The combination of seismic activity and the refugee crisis creates significant challenges for both countries in managing disaster response and supporting vulnerable populations.

**The magnitude of the Refugee Crisis caused by earthquakes in Turkey and Syria**

As per UNICEF, more than 850,000 Turkish and Syrian children remain displaced. According to the current estimates, at least 2.7 million people out of 14 million got displaced in various locations, including migrants. Out of the total population, 1.8 million people are migrants in Turkey. Based on official data available at the governorate level, mapping of displaced people outside the affected provinces shows that at least 1.1 million people—primarily Turkish citizens—have relocated to other areas of the nation. This number includes the 2.7 million displaced people within the 11 provinces. The earthquakes are thought to have ejected more than 500,000 people from their homes in Syria. When the aftershocks persist, many youngsters are terrified to return to their damaged houses, where many families' homes have been destroyed. With 6.8 million displaced people, including approximately three million children, Syria had the highest number of internally displaced persons worldwide, even before the earthquakes. In Turkey alone, the earthquakes caused more than 150,000 buildings to collapse or become unusable, leaving an estimated more than a million people homeless.

### **Economic, social and Psychological impacts of earthquakes on refugee communities in Turkey and Syria**

Turkey is the largest host home to refugees, hosting 3.7 million people, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The earthquakes have surmounted the economic challenges in rebuilding, and the volatile region will face repercussions. While the refugee crisis is already a challenge the world faces, the environmentally induced refugee crisis can have long-term impacts that force people to stay displaced for extended periods. Responding to environmentally induced refugee crises often requires different solutions and resources than typical ones. The displacement caused by natural disasters like earthquakes requires much economic assistance for rebuilding, immediate humanitarian aid and protection measures. According to the World Bank rapid damage assessment report, the earthquakes that struck Turkey have directly inflicted \$34.2 billion in damages, around 4 per cent of the nation's 2021 GDP. The cost of rebuilding is estimated to be much higher than the direct damages.

Earthquakes can be traumatic events leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in many individuals. Refugees who have experienced trauma in the past may be particularly vulnerable to developing PTSD after an earthquake. The refugees are already trauma inflicted as they face

difficulties navigating life and are more vulnerable to conflicts. The earthquake has made many children orphans and lost their support systems (Duzova et al., 2023). Earthquakes have destroyed various necessary infrastructures, including hospitals and schools. The disruption of community structures and networks that are essential sources of support for refugees can further isolate refugees and exacerbate feelings of loneliness and despair.

### **Potential conflict during a disaster**

Refugee crises can often lead to conflict between the affected countries and neighbouring countries. Conflict can happen in many ways. The sudden influx of refugees in the aftermath of earthquakes can put a strain on the resources of the host country, including food, water, and shelter, which can also create competition for resources between the refugees and the host community, leading to tensions and conflict. According to Amnesty International, Syrian refugees have been victims of verbal and physical abuse by civilians and state actors during the earthquake. The aftermath of a natural disaster like an earthquake will push the country into the need for resources. Refugee crises can also create political tensions within the host country, as different groups may have different opinions on responding to the crisis. This can lead to political polarisation and conflict. The reason why most countries refuse to host refugees is because of presumed security concerns. There are considerable xenophobic and hypocritical elements in the discourse of "who should carry the burden of refugees?"

### **Conclusion**

The impact of earthquakes on refugee crises is significant and can exacerbate already dire humanitarian situations. Recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria have shown that displaced populations are particularly vulnerable to the effects of earthquakes, as they often lack the resources to prepare for and respond to these disasters adequately. These earthquakes have resulted in the widespread destruction of homes, infrastructure, and essential services, forcing many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to endure even more hardship.

The earthquakes in Turkey and Syria have highlighted the need for increased attention to disaster risk reduction and preparedness, particularly in regions with large populations of refugees and IDPs. The disparities in assistance from the international community were also a matter of

concern; While Turkey got speedy assistance and aid from the international community, Syria was getting less attention for several reasons, including the political sanctions. There is also a need for greater coordination and cooperation among governments, humanitarian organisations, and other stakeholders to ensure that affected populations receive the support they need to recover from these disasters and rebuild their lives.

Overall, it is clear that earthquakes significantly impact refugee crises and that more needs to be done to address the vulnerabilities of displaced populations in the face of natural disasters. By taking a more proactive approach to disaster risk reduction and preparedness and working together to provide adequate support to affected populations, we can help mitigate the impact of earthquakes on refugees and IDPs and ensure that they can better cope with these disasters in the future.

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