



# THE REPERCUSSIONS OF TURKEY'S EARTHQUAKE ON LOCAL POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS

**POSITION PAPER**

**REGIONAL POLITICS**

FEBRUARY 2023

(THIS PAPER WAS PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH *ASBAB*.)

## Summary

■ The repercussions of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake have not fully taken shape yet, and it is too early to determine all the aspects involved. However, they have added to the uncertainty that characterizes the local political environment in Turkey before the elections, which could potentially be postponed. Meanwhile, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is facing one of the most burdensome challenges of his 20-year rule. As such, he will do everything in his power to efficiently manage the crisis and play a leading role in the recovery and reconstruction efforts to increase his chances of reelection.

■ The election dates could be postponed, but such a decision depends on two factors. The first factor is administrative and is related to the damage to the infrastructure in the regions affected by the earthquake and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of citizens who left their cities and lost their identification documents. The second factor is based on the ruling party's assessment of the transformations in public opinion following the disaster and will be determined by the people's evaluation of the preventive measures taken by the government to respond to potential earthquakes and their level of satisfaction to its response to the earthquakes and its management of the crisis. Any negative economic repercussions, such as a new leap in inflation, could also negatively impact the popularity of the ruling coalition.

■ The ten cities affected by the earthquake contribute to nearly 9% of the country's GDP. Nonetheless, the initial assessment indicates that the earthquake's economic impact will be enduring. This is mainly because the major industrial and commercial centers are located in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, and Kocaeli, which have not been hit by the earthquake. The same applies to the major touristic destinations in the country - Istanbul, Antalya, and Edirne.

■ It is too early to determine the total economic losses in the medium term. The aid that Ankara will receive to support its rebuilding and recovery efforts will determine the pressure exerted by these losses and the reconstruction requirements on the Turkish economy. Most of the expected aid will be sent from the Arab Gulf states, the European Union, and the United States - with potential support from China and Russia.

■ The focus of President Erdoğan and the priorities of his government for the coming months will be on internal affairs. Some external files are expected to be settled, at least in the short term. These include the fight with Greece over the Aegean Sea and plans to resettle Syrian refugees in Northern Syria.

■ Despite international solidarity, broader geopolitical equations will remain present. In this context, Turkey will monitor the actual level of support provided by the European countries and

the United States, which will be interpreted as political messages. While the Chinese position remains ambiguous, Russia could potentially provide aid, particularly if the West failed to offer significant support to Ankara. Although Qatar is expected to deliver effective support, the level of assistance offered by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will reflect the extent to which these two countries value investing in their strategic relations with Turkey.

## **Introduction**

■ On 6 February, two strong earthquakes struck the southeastern cities of Turkey and the regions of northwestern Syria. The first, with a magnitude of 7.7 on the Richter Scale, had its epicenter in the Pazarcık District, in the city of Kahramanmaraş, in Southern Turkey; while another, with a magnitude of 6.5 on the Richter Scale, hit the İslahiye district of Gaziantep, in southern Turkey. This earthquake, which is the strongest to hit Turkey in decades, led to a devastating calamity that resulted in the death of more than 39,600 persons in Turkey (as of Friday evening, February 17) and more than 5,800 in Syria. While roads suffered severe damage and the different airports of the region witnessed varying degrees of destruction, almost 85,000 buildings have collapsed or have been identified as in need of demolition in the Turkish regions, and 121,515 buildings were listed by the Turkish government as suffering from some degree of damage. Additionally, the Turkish government declared a three-month state of emergency in the ten most affected cities -Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, Malatya, Kilis, Gaziantep, Osmaniye, Şanlıurfa, Adana, Diyarbakır, and Hatay.

## **After the Disaster: Ambiguity in Local Politics and Lull at the Geopolitical Level**

■ Local politics and geopolitics have always been impacted by natural disasters, independently of government planning. However, this is not a one-way process. On the one hand, opposition forces can take advantage of such incidents to question the government's capacity to manage crises efficiently, while the government can, on the other hand, benefit from its ability to mobilize state resources and present itself to the local public opinion as an effective leadership that can properly address the consequences of the disaster. In this context, the Bülent Ecevit government in Turkey was accused of mismanaging relief funds and failing to improve the infrastructure after the 1999 destructive İzmit earthquake, which resulted in damages that were worth millions of dollars while the country was facing a major economic crisis. The aftermath of the earthquake shed light on the poor government leadership and the failure of its economic policies and prepared the ground for the victory of the Justice and Development Party in the 2002 elections.

■ Turkey is on the cusp of decisive presidential and parliamentary elections that the government scheduled for mid-May. Even though the results of the elections are inconclusive, the repercussions of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake have made them even more uncertain. Driven by feelings of anger and fear, voters may decide to overthrow the ruling party. However, if the government competently addressed the crisis, this may reaffirm the position of the Justice and Development Party, which would regain the trust of voters.

■ This position paper presents our initial assessment of the repercussions of Turkey's earthquake on three levels: the economy, local politics, and geopolitics.

### **First: Economic Repercussions**

■ The Turkish cities affected by the earthquake represent nearly 15% of the country's population (approximately 13.5 million people). However, they are considered among the poorest provinces in Turkey and contribute to nearly 10% of the country's GDP – approximately 15% of the agricultural output, 9% of the industrial production, and 8% of foreign trade.

■ Given that these regions play a limited role in the economy, the initial assessment indicates that the economic impact of the earthquake will be enduring. This is mainly because the 5 major industrial and commercial centers are located in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, and Kocaeli (53.7% of the GDP), which have not been affected by the earthquake. The same applies to the major touristic destinations in the country - Istanbul, Antalya, and Edirne (76.7% of the total number of tourists). In the ten cities affected by the earthquake, production (such as agriculture) will not be impacted. Additionally, the strategic infrastructure has not suffered from widespread and long-term damage. This includes major gas pipelines, oil refineries, airports (except for the Hatay airport, which is out of service), and major ports - with the exception of the port of Iskenderun, where a fire broke out.

■ Responding to the aftermath of the disaster and the efforts invested in sending basic goods to the afflicted areas may undermine the government's efforts to control inflation in the short term. However, the aid flows received by Turkey to support the relief and recovery efforts will improve the balance of payments and may ensure the stability of the Turkish Lira in the pre-election period. After the elections, the government and the Central Bank may revoke their defense of the value of the Lira, which will result in a pressing necessity to adjust exchange rates.

■ The amount of foreign aid received will influence the state's budget deficit, which has been estimated at 3.5% of the GDP by the government. In addition, the GDP growth for this year might be affected, although the impact is likely to be limited compared to the 1999 earthquake when real GDP decreased by 3.3%. In this context, the European Bank for Reconstruction and

Development (EBRD) [assessed](#) the losses that resulted from the earthquake as “reasonable”, or nearly 1% of the GDP, as reconstruction efforts are expected to boost the economy through counterbalancing the negative impact of the earthquake on the infrastructure and chain supplies, because rebuilding activities fall within the scope of increase in production. Economies can quickly replace lost production, as evidenced by previous earthquakes, such as that of Kobe, Japan, in 1995; that of Niigata, Japan, in 2004; and that of Chile in 2010.

■ We should stress that we cannot reach a final assessment of the losses endured by the Turkish economy at this point as the damages are still being quantified. This is reflected in the large discrepancies in the assessment of losses presented by the different parties. For instance, the Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation (TÜRKONFED) estimated that the loss resulting from the earthquake is \$70.8 billion from the damage to homes, \$10.4 billion from the loss of national income, and \$2.9 billion from the loss of working days. This gross proceeds of about \$84 billion is controversial as other estimates suggest lower numbers. For example, [J.P. Morgan Bank](#) estimated material losses to be equivalent to \$25 billion only, urging Barclays PLC to affirm that it is too early to assess the full impact of the earthquake at the time.

## **Second: Repercussions on Local Politics and Elections**

■ Turkey is expected to witness moments of national unity and solidarity in the wake of the destructive earthquakes. Nonetheless, the opposition will most probably seize the opportunity to emphasize that the expansionary economic agenda of the Justice and Development Party, such as increasing the minimum wage and keeping interest rates low, will burden Turkey’s economic ability to swiftly rebuild losses that are estimated at billions of dollars. If pledges of international aid are below damage estimations, Turkey will endure more of the reconstruction’s financial burden, which will strengthen the opposition’s arguments.

■ The opposition, and some of the victims’ relatives, will also focus on reports on the safety of buildings and their conformity with earthquake resistance standards, and their impact on the considerable number of victims in this calamity. These reports will be connected to potential governmental and administrative corruption within municipalities, which incited some construction companies to overlook regulations intended to increase the resistance of buildings to earthquakes. This is what prompted the Turkish authorities to detain dozens of building contractors and investigate them for allegedly violating construction standards.

■ The elections date might be postponed, given the losses in infrastructure and the relocation of hundreds of thousands, potentially millions, of citizens outside their cities. These factors make it challenging to organize the polling process in the affected areas. More importantly, the decision to postpone the elections will also be based on the estimations of the government,

or the ruling Justice and Development Party, regarding the extent to which the public opinion has shifted after the disaster, and whether people believe that the government was properly prepared for the earthquake and whether its response to and management of the crisis were efficient.

■ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is facing the most rigorous challenge in his 20-year rule, considering these complex circumstances. The bet is on Erdoğan's proactive management of the crisis through leading the recovery and reconstruction efforts. This will cement his chances of being reelected and mitigate the negative consequences of the crisis. The ruling party is widely supported by the local media, which will enable it to influence the mainstream popular narrative. In this context, Erdoğan promptly resorted to the activation of the "fourth level alert state" to swiftly mobilize rescue teams and international aid, following a different approach than that adopted for the management of the massive forest fires crises in the summer of 2021.

### **Third: Geopolitical Repercussions**

■ Turkey's international relations are expected to improve, in particular after regional players and allies were quick to send aid. These include countries such as France and Greece, with [which there was a recent increase in geopolitical tensions](#). In this context, relations are expected to improve, and regional geopolitical tensions will most likely be reduced, but only in the short-term, given the electoral polarization in Turkey and the deep-rooted disaccords, namely with Greece, especially if it attempts to change the status quo in the Aegean Islands.

■ The extensive response to the appeal for international assistance demonstrates Turkey's status and, therefore, the efficiency of Ankara's foreign policy. This led all conflicting parties (such as Russia and the West, Iran and "Israel") to participate in the rescue operations. The government will seek to highlight that this is the result of the policy adopted by the government to reduce regional tensions, and which resulted in Turkey receiving aid from the [gulf countries](#), Egypt, "Israel", and even Greece. Such a thing was unconceivable two years ago.

■ While Qatar is expected to contribute efficiently to the recovery and reconstruction efforts, the main indicator is related to the willingness of the other Gulf countries, in particular the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to invest in their strategic relationship with Turkey, rather than contain the tensions. This will become clear through the level of financial support they will provide to the reconstruction programs and the economic support programs for people affected by the earthquake. Such programs will represent a burden for the state budget, which is overburdened by the expansionary support and government expenditures programs approved in recent months by the government to cope with the inflation wave.

- Despite the state of international solidarity, geopolitical equations are still present. Turkey will monitor the actual level of support provided by the European countries and the United States, which Ankara will interpret as political messages. These will not only be related to external issues, such as Sweden's membership in NATO. Indeed, European countries and the United States may rely on domestic pressure against the government at the onset of the elections. While the Chinese position remains ambiguous, Russia could potentially provide aid, in particular if the West failed to offer any significant support. Even though Russian President, Putin, may be unable to provide financial assistance, he could support Turkey by sending shipments of gas, for example. Such aid is of equal importance with financial aid because it will result in a surplus in the Turkish balance of payments that the government can use to accelerate reconstruction efforts while avoiding additional burdens on the budget.
- Because the earthquake undermined an already fragile governance structure, the region of northwestern Syria may also witness social instability. In Syria, the most affected areas were Idlib and Aleppo. The first is governed by Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, while the control over the second is divided between the Syrian regime forces and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. Many internally displaced people live in these areas, which rely extensively on Turkish aid. However, Turkey's struggle in its post-disaster response and international sanctions that impede aid to Syria led to the faltering of the international response to the emergency needs of the people of Idlib and northern Aleppo, which could threaten the delicate social stability.
- The earthquakes of 6 February also resulted in a widespread damage in the Syrian territories under Turkish protection. As a result, the Justice and Development Party may be unable to move forward with its plan to resettle one million Syrian refugees to that area, from the 3.6 million refugees living in Turkey. Meanwhile, the opposition is using the presence of refugees to feed nationalistic feelings and influence public opinion to stand against the government prior to the elections. The Turkish opposition may be more cautious than in the past when calling for the return of Syrian refugees during the electoral campaign, considering the internal displacement of large numbers of Turkish citizens from the afflicted cities and the exacerbation of human suffering in northern Syria following the earthquake. Regardless, the nationalistic rhetoric hostile to refugees and foreigners will remain on the agenda of some Turkish opposition parties. Nonetheless, the government will not revoke the measures and laws it adopted regarding foreigners and refugees over the past year.



AL SHARQ  
STRATEGIC  
RESEARCH

## ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

A THINK TANK THAT LOOKS TO UNDERTAKE IMPARTIAL,  
RIGOROUS RESEARCH TO PROMOTE THE IDEALS OF  
DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, AN INFORMED CITIZENRY,  
MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.

[research.sharqforum.org](http://research.sharqforum.org)

   SharqStrategic

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza  
Floor:6 No:68 Postal Code: 34197  
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
Telephone: +902126031815  
Fax: +902126031665  
Email: [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)