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**NATO SUPPORT MISSION TO
EARTHQUAKE RELIEF
EFFORTS IN TURKEY**

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Introduction

NATO, when required, carries out disaster relief operations and missions in response to natural or humanitarian disasters. In response to the devastating earthquakes in Turkey in February 2023, NATO established temporary shelters for thousands of people and coordinated an airbridge to deliver vital supplies from allies and partners. The mission, complying with the general principles of International Humanitarian Law, acted in a very unstable political environment, considering the strategic position of Turkey as a powerful state in the Mediterranean Sea and a member of the Alliance.

This paper analyses the legal framework in which the mission has been acting, and its conformity to it, as well as its political implications in the light of the complex diplomatic relations between Turkey, United States, and NATO.

I. The Earthquake and the Applicable Legal Framework

During the early hours of 6 February 2023, a powerful earthquake of 7.8 magnitude struck, with its epicentre near the Turkish city of Gaziantep, around 150 miles north of the Syrian border. A few hours later, a second earthquake of 7.5 magnitude hit north-central Turkey. These natural events caused extensive damage, including the collapse of buildings in the densely populated Turkish cities of Adana, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Matalya, Osmaniye and Sanliurfa (British Red Cross, 2024).

These catastrophic events, which completely devastated several areas of Turkey, required a committed and globally sustained humanitarian response to provide aid to those affected. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were left homeless and without shelter, food, potable water, and medical care. Thousands also remained missing. In response to these concerning and difficult conditions, the Turkish government quickly invoked a state of emergency in the affected provinces (Amnesty International, 2023).

In responding to this major crisis, the first concern of the International Community has to be the promotion and protection of the human rights of the affected populations. This includes respect for basic human needs: the right to life, security of person, freedom of association, protection for refugees and asylum seekers, and protection of migrants' rights, including access to housing, adequate nutrition, potable water, and healthcare without discrimination (Amnesty International, 2023).

However, unlike armed conflicts, there are no legally binding set of regulations to govern the actions of those involved in aid and recovery following natural disasters, which leads, above all, to the inefficient delivery of aid, a lack of accountability amongst humanitarian actors, and a poor response overall to catastrophes. In fact, humanitarian law only applies when a natural disaster strikes during an armed conflict (Cameron, 2017).

Therefore, the international community has been manifesting a growing need for a better codification and disaster prevention, management, and recovery response. As a result, since 2001, the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) has set a comprehensive Programme of International Disaster Response Laws (IDRL), which studies International Law and its eventual applicability to natural disaster scenarios. In November 2007, the IFRC finally presented the 'Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance' (the IDRL Guidelines), which was unanimously adopted by all High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions.

Subsequently, the General Assembly of the United Nations issued three resolutions at its 63rd session, which encouraged the adoption by Member States of the Guidelines and the need for International Humanitarian Law for such Guidelines in several subsequent resolutions (Jansen, 2015).

The Guidelines are based on the idea that governments have two key responsibilities during humanitarian crises. First of all, to help aid organisations by making it easier for their staff and supplies to enter the country through flexible visa and entry rules, and by granting them legal recognition within the country. And secondly, to uphold their responsibility to their own citizens despite the crisis (IFRC, 2007; Cameron, 2017).

In addition to this first step in the building of a new legal framework, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) gave life to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) in 2005. The HFA is a 10-year agenda, outlining priorities and principles to foster coordination among governments, organisations, and humanitarian actors during a disaster response (UNISDR, 2005; Jansen, 2015).

A further development occurred in 2012, when the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the IFRC, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union published the pilot version of their 'Model Act for the Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance'. The Model Act aims to give states a reference model of enacting a national law relating to disaster recovery, which utilises the standards outlined in the IDRL Guidelines. It is intended as a tool for states who wish, on a voluntary base, to implement the content of the Guidelines. If a catastrophic event occurs, global experience proves that an affected state will benefit from having clear national legislation to facilitate the entry and coordination of international humanitarian assistance and which balances safeguards for public security and safety against the urgent needs of population (OCHA, 2012; Jansen, 2015).

The core structure of the Model Act is based on firm principles such as the primary role of the domestic authorities in fulfilling the humanitarian needs of their populations, meaning that the national government is principally responsible in disaster relief and National Red Cross, or Red Crescent Societies and other domestic civil society actors play a key supporting role.

Secondly, international relief providers must behave accordingly to the principles of humanity and impartiality, as well as meet minimum standards of coordination and quality in their relief goods, personnel, and programmes.

To achieve these standards, these actors need certain legal facilities, expedited procedures, or other accommodations, which may include expedited approval for disaster personnel, goods and equipment, facilitation of relief transport, exemptions from duties and taxes, and recognition of the legal capacity to allow them to operate legally within the country (OCHA, 2012; Cameron, 2017).

To summarise, whilst the IDRL Guidelines are designed to help governments prepare national and international aid systems before disaster strikes, the Model Act is a tool available to states who wish to implement them. This newly built legal framework is also not intended to outline a system for domestic disaster management. It is, instead, a model law to help states integrate assisting international actors into a coordinated response as quickly as possible, after the onset of a major disaster that overwhelms national capacity (Caron, Kelly, & Telesetsky, 2014).

Considering the evident effects of climate change, the enhanced legal protection and regulation of disaster responses have been frequent topics of discussion within the international community, as proved by the content of the UN Agenda 2030. Additionally, there has been a substantial increase in the number and type of actors responding to these disasters, including international organisations, local NGOs, militaries, private individuals, and small non-profit organisations. Countries that improve their domestic legislation and infrastructure by adhering to the IDRL Guidelines and the Model Act will be better able to facilitate fast and efficient recovery to an affected population within their borders (Sudmeier-Rieux et al., 2016).

II. NATO Intervention

Following the Turkish request for international aid, more than 1,400 emergency response personnel from more than twenty NATO allies and partners, including invitees Finland and Sweden, have been deployed to Turkey, in aid to respond to the devastating effects of the earthquakes, according to the general principles of collaboration and aid between Member States contained within Articles 2,3,4 of NATO Founding Treaty (NATO, 2023a; NATO, 1949).

NATO allies and partners provided a full spectrum of assistance, ranging from search and rescue teams with specialised dogs, firefighters, and structural engineering teams to medical personnel and supplies, and seismic experts. In particular, as stated by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during his visit to Ankara on 16 February 2023, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK, and the United States sent military aircraft to transport international aid and conduct medical evacuations. Other allies like Albania, Canada, and Germany provided financial and other types of aid. Across NATO member states, ordinary citizens raised millions of euros in financial support for Turkey (Davis, 2023; NATO, 2023c).

The mission was deployed and performed through NATO's Euro-Atlantic Response Coordination Centre, which constitutes the primary civilian response mechanism for the Alliance in the Euro-Atlantic area. It functions as a centre for exchanging information to coordinate requests and offers of assistance, mainly in cases of disasters of natural or human origin (NATO, 2023b).

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During the first month of the operation, humanitarian efforts focused on the provinces of Antakya and Iskenderun, where NATO set up temporary shelters for 4,000 people left homeless. The shelters, built by NATO's Support and Procurement Agency, included heating, power generators, and medical treatment areas. By the end of February 2023, NATO extended the scope of its action to the province of Defne, there by attending to the entire affected area. In addition, allies and partners have flown around 10,000 tents, blankets, and pieces of medical equipment from Pakistan to Turkey, as well as providing medical supplies such as X-ray facilities (NATO, 2023d).

Over the subsequent months, the commitment of the allies grew. France, for instance, delivered 5,000 tents and thousands of blankets. Even invitees Finland and Sweden and NATO partner Japan sent thousands of emergency responders and supplies and established field clinics in the territory of the affected provinces (NATO, 2023d).

On 12 April 2023, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Christopher Cavoli, during their diplomatic meeting, marked the positive signals of the improved living conditions and the handover of the Antakya facility from NATO to Turkey. Because of the massive damage to schools, the first to move into the building were 100 Turkish school children and their teachers. The Turkish authorities manage the site, which primarily functions as a boarding school (NATO, 2023e). As of this moment, NATO continues to maintain three temporary relief sites housing thousands of people in Antakya, Iskenderun and Defne (NATO, 2023e).

III. Political Implications

The Eastern Mediterranean region is a strategically significant one in relations between West and East because of its geographical location. In fact, its proximity to Europe, Asia, and Africa makes it a crossroads of cultures, trade routes, and historical conflicts. Turkey, together with the other influential states of this area (such as Egypt, Greece and Cyprus), plays a pivotal role in regional politics, energy resources, and security dynamics (Lampas & Filis, 2023).

With NATO's second-largest military, its location at the crossroads of three continents, and its vast hinterland, Turkey presents itself as an ideal partner to strengthen Euro-Atlantic security. This is evident from its participation in all NATO operations and missions, conducted after the Cold War and its support to the EU missions open to non-EU NATO members, such as Operation Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Nasi, & Ceylan, 2023).

These factors suggest a potential Turkish government interest in improved relations with Western nations, particularly the United States, a key NATO member. This concern arises from Turkey's current role in Mediterranean geopolitics and the desire to encourage President Erdogan to pursue closer ties with Western allies rather than Russia.

To do so, the United States aims to become a more significant commercial partner by building a commercial partnership worth a hundred billion dollars, which will surpass Germany, Russia and China (Scala, 2023).

As such, the United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Turkey on 20 February 2023 to express the condolences of the American government to the Turkish population affected by the earthquake. This meeting followed a path outlined in the so-called Strategic Mechanism, agreed between the Biden Administration and President Erdogan, allowing both countries to schedule two annual meetings to discuss strategic matters concerning their alliance (Stea, 2023).

The meeting revolved around two main issues: the humanitarian aid offered by the United States and the security of NATO, especially regarding the war in Ukraine. On the part of the United States, the Biden Administration has granted humanitarian funds of up to a hundred million dollars for investing in the reconstruction of areas destroyed by the earthquake. American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will play a crucial role in channelling these funds and implementing rebuilding initiatives on site (Stea, 2023).

As for the second matter, the United States insisted on the necessity of ratifying the accession of Sweden and Finland in NATO as Member States, which Turkey opposed. In particular, the opposition of President Erdogan towards their accession stemmed from the Swedish refusal to extradite a number of Turkish political dissidents and the approval given to anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic demonstrations. However, after months of negotiations, President Erdogan finally ratified Swedish membership to the Alliance in January 2024. Finally, Secretary Blinken underlined the necessity of standing united against the Russian threat in Ukraine. His words can be considered as a critique of the ambivalent diplomatic behaviour of Turkey, which, on the one hand, has condemned the Russian invasion from the beginning, but, on the other, has not participated in the economic sanctions applied by NATO allies and EU states (Stea, 2023; Aksoy&Çevik, 2023).

IV. Conclusions

Turkey possesses just one entity with the capacity to respond to the catastrophic consequences of large-scale disasters: the military. Their remarkable transportation and communication skills, coupled with their disciplined training according to NATO standards, allowed the country to react effectively against the effects of the earthquake. The Turkish military structure was nonetheless unprepared to respond to such an event and necessitated international assistance. The events of February 2023 have revealed serious failures in preparedness, planning and mobilisation, as well as a lack of personnel and resources (Fisher, Muhaedin, & Zijavere, 2023; Aksoy & Çevik, 2023)

However, difficulties and deficiencies in the organisation and deployment of this support mission also occurred on the NATO side. First, NATO needed a larger and less costly civilian reserve component with appropriate skills. Second, while civilian agencies should have ultimately taken the lead in the coordination of its disaster relief activities, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) needed to be expanded and more adequately resourced. Third, the NATO Response Force's disaster relief capabilities should have been enhanced, so that it could become a premier disaster response force. An expert group should have been established within NATO to explore these and other options for strengthening NATO's ability to deal with emergencies of either human or natural origin, or more likely a combination of both (Davis, 2023).

This mission overall can be considered as a study-case for NATO administration to improve the core structure of future support and relief expeditions, considering that vast natural events will proliferate because of climate change. In light of that, International Community Response to them will need to improve.

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