

Helping my Friends: Rethinking Disaster Diplomacy in the Wake of 1999 and 2023 Seismic Events in Turkey, Syria and Greece

Aiutare gli amici: ripensare la *disaster diplomacy* sulla base degli eventi sismici del 1999 e del 2023 in Turchia, Siria e Grecia

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Abstract

This article focuses on the intricate dynamics between seismic events and diplomatic relations, challenging a more conventional perspective on disaster diplomacy. Through a comparative analysis of the earthquakes in 1999 and 2023 involving Turkey, Greece, and Syria, the study's findings unveil that seismic disasters result not in a transformative catalyst but as integral components reinforcing pre-existing foreign policy strategies. The analysis of the disaster management and the diplomatic interplay, elucidated through the case studies, enriches our understanding of the multifaceted nature of global interactions during and post-catastrophe. Finally, the study initiates an exploration of disaster empathy versus disaster diplomacy suggesting a potential framework for further investigation, also in light of even more occurring catastrophes.

Questo articolo si concentra sulle intricate dinamiche tra eventi sismici e relazioni diplomatiche, sfidando una prospettiva più convenzionale sulla diplomazia dei disastri. Attraverso un'analisi mirata dei terremoti del 1999 e del 2023 che hanno coinvolto Turchia, Grecia e Siria, i risultati dello studio rivelano che i disastri sismici non sono un catalizzatore trasformativo, ma componenti integrali che rafforzano strategie di politica estera preesistenti. L'analisi della gestione del disastro e dell'interazione diplomatica, delineata attraverso i casi di studio, arricchisce la nostra comprensione della natura sfaccettata delle interazioni globali durante e dopo le catastrofi. Infine, lo studio avvia un'esplorazione dell'empatia nei confronti delle catastrofi e della diplomazia delle catastrofi, suggerendo un quadro potenziale per ulteriori indagini, anche alla luce di catastrofi ancora più frequenti.

Keywords

Turkey, Greece, Syria, Earthquake, Earthquake diplomacy, Disaster diplomacy
Turchia, Grecia, Siria, terremoto, diplomazia dei terremoti, diplomazia dei disastri

Introduction

In the realm of international relations, seismic events constitute peculiar types of disaster, which can trigger complex diplomatic dynamics among states. This study looks at the intersection of catastrophes and diplomatic relations, specifically exploring how earthquakes have shaped the interaction between nations. Focusing on two distinct cases—the earthquake of 1999 involving Turkey and Greece, and the seismic event of 2023 impacting Turkey and Syria—the research will investigate what forms of disaster diplomacy these three states have put in place. Contrary to a more traditional narrative according to which common catastrophic events might foster cooperation among nations, this analysis reveals a nuanced interplay where seismic occurrences either amplify existing diplomatic trajectories or expose the absence of diplomatic structures.

For example, the study will reveal how the earthquake of 1999, simultaneously affecting Turkey and Greece, served as an additional event for the development of the diplomatic relations. Indeed, rather than being a catalyst for a new diplomatic era, the seismic event accelerated an already existing process of rapprochement initiated by shifting geopolitical landscapes. Greece's had already altered its stance, attributed to a new wave of intending its relations with its neighbour, Turkey. This new approach resulted into a new strategy consisting of mainly 'Europeanising' the tensions with Turkey. The earthquake, while fostering mutual assistance during the disaster and post-disaster phases, acted within the contours of this pre-existing strategy to rebuild ties between the two states.

In stark contrast, the seismic incident of 2023, striking amidst non-existent diplomatic relations between Turkey and Syria, shows the complexities of disaster diplomacy. Furthermore, the complete absence of established diplomatic structures and the willingness of smoothing the existing tensions, had immediate consequences for post-disaster management. Unlike its predecessor in 1999, the 2023 earthquake concurrently impacted both Turkey and Syria, presenting additional challenges in the mutual assistance to each other. The lack of communication and coordination hindered aid corridor establishment, with mistrust between nations complicating the already delicate process. The earthquake, in this context, did not register effective assistance during both the disaster and post-disaster phases.

Guided by Kelman's analytical framework (2011) on disaster diplomacy, this study poses critical questions to assess the validity of the literature for these cases under analysis when applied to transboundary episodes. As the study navigates whether disaster-related activities lead to diplomatic relations, new diplomacy emerges, or if seismic events are strategically used within existing diplomatic strategies, a comprehensive understanding of the seismic and diplomatic interplay emerges.

In sum, the analysis of the two cases demonstrate that the seismic events emerge not as isolated catalysts for diplomatic change, but rather as instruments within the broader context of nations pursuing specific foreign policy goals. Disaster diplomacy, in this nuanced lens, becomes a tool employed by governments to build positive images and project trustworthiness. The lasting impact of seismic events on diplomatic trajectories reveals a complex frame, where catastrophes resonate differently across nations. In essence, this study unveils the multifaceted relationship between earthquakes and diplomacy, offering fresher insights into the intricate interplay of international relations in the wake of disasters.

What is a disaster diplomacy?

According to scientific scholarship, literature on 'disaster diplomacy' addresses the question on "how and why disaster-related activities do and do not yield diplomatic gains, looking mainly at disaster-related activities affecting diplomacy rather than the reverse" (Gaillard et al. 2008: 511-512). Additionally, it investigates whether disaster-related activities, pre-disaster, and post-disaster, can positively affect relations amongst states which would not normally be prone to such cooperation (Keleman 2020: 13). This seems of great relevance for the cases under analysis in this article, as both the relations in 1999 between Turkey and Greece, and between Turkey and Syria in 2023 had been historically compromised when the two seismic events took place in the Levantine region.

According to this study, the term 'earthquake diplomacy' falls under the umbrella of 'disaster diplomacy' specifically denoting seismic disasters that extend beyond national boundaries, thereby altering the course of bilateral relations (Mustafa 2006). Furthermore, according to Kelmen (2020) the examination of diplomatic consequences following the 1999 earthquake between Turkey and Greece have played a pivotal role in the inception and evolution of this field. Callaway *et al.* (2012) delineate disaster diplomacy through two primary lenses: the conservative perspective, centred on diplomatic collaboration among conflicting national governments in the context of natural disasters; and the broader viewpoint, encompassing engagement from non-state actors such as academics and NGOs to foster cooperation during such crises. Examining the involvement of non-state actors might become particularly insightful, offering valuable insights into how civil society organisations may either advocate or refrain from advocating for improved diplomatic relations between conflicting countries. However, while acknowledging the significance of this aspect, the focus of this article remains on the response of state-level institutions. This study adopts a distinctive approach by

focusing on the examination of social, economic, and political dynamics at the state level (DiMaggio and Powell 2000).

As stated above, the concept of 'earthquake diplomacy' is a distinct subset within the broader realm of 'disaster diplomacy'. However, using different labels conducts to different semantics. Indeed, the word earthquake would lead back to the idea of a natural inevitable disaster; on the other side, talking about disaster brings the analysis back to the social dimension, thus recalling a reflection on the unnatural dimension of the disaster. Furthermore, more recent literature broadly agrees on the fact that the utilisation of natural disaster is a misleading term. Indeed, natural hazards lead to deaths and damages – i.e. disasters – because of human acts of omission and commission rather than because of a natural process itself (Chmutina and von Meding 2019). In the context of this study, earthquake diplomacy is positioned within the broader framework of disaster diplomacy. This classification is supported by scholarly research, which establishes earthquake diplomacy as a significant contributor to the evolution of the broader field. Notably, the examination of the 1999 earthquake in Turkey, as explored by Keleman (2020), substantiates its role in shaping and advancing the discourse on disaster diplomacy.

Can a diplomatic disaster cycle management exist?

The aim of this article is to look at the ways in which the national governments of Turkey, Greece and Syria have operated after those seismic disasters occurred in 1999 and 2023. Additionally, it wants to investigate whether this has facilitated a diplomatic rapprochement between countries which were suffering diplomatic tensions. To achieve this goal, the study has resorted to the comparison of two case studies, the earthquake in 1999 which affected Turkey and Greece and the more recent 2023 earthquake, mainly involving Turkey and Syria. But what kind of operations can states conduct to help affected populations and ease tensions with their counterparts? To answer this question, it might be helpful to benefit from literature on disaster risk reduction or disaster cycle management.

The concept of 'disaster risk reduction' refers to the process of lowering risks by conducting methodical efforts to identify and control disaster-causing elements, including by lowering the vulnerability of people and property, managing land and the environment wisely, and improving preparedness for unfavourable occurrences (UNISDR 2009). Conversely, literature on the disaster cycle indicates a cyclical process of actions which always involves a disaster and the efforts to reduce disaster potentially. The disaster cycle generally includes a) mitigation/prevention, which is the structural and non-structural measures undertaken to limit the adverse impact of hazards and threats; b) preparedness – the series of activities taken to ensure an effec-

tive response to disasters; c) disaster impact – which consists in the realisation of the consequences of a hazard; d) the response, which is characterised by high levels of altruism among both survivors and emergency responders. This phase is made of search and rescue missions, aiding people, and letting resources arrive. The main goal of this phase is to prevent loss of lives and to minimise property damage; finally, there is e) the recovery phase: this phase takes place after the emergency responders leave and people start adjusting to the new context and take steps to gradually re-establishing the functionality of their space (Bosher and Chmutina 2017).

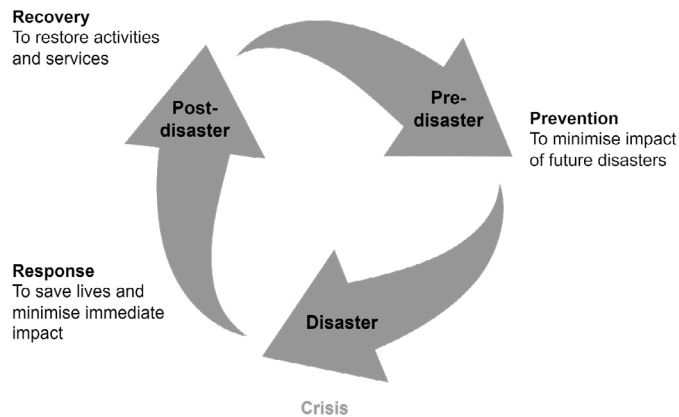


Figure 1. Disaster Cycle (author elaboration)

Thus, the primary objective of this paper is to examine the actions that nation-states can undertake at the governmental level during phases c) and d), namely in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and throughout the response phase. By drawing a comparative analysis between the seismic events of 1999 and 2023, impacting nations such as Turkey, Greece, and Syria, the study seeks to explore whether the effective management of these disasters has the potential to foster reconciliation or, at the very least, alleviate tensions among international actors.

According to the existing literature, the response phase often sees a high involvement of the international community. For example, Wisner *et al.* (2004: 50) contend that the success of this phase is “unlikely without external aid”. The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations was precisely established to generally support in preparation for or in the immediate aftermath of a disaster in Europe and worldwide. Conversely, the second phase of recovery is generally seen as a more domestic process.

On many occasions, national governments pretend they possess the domestic capability to deal with a disaster or are afraid of international influences on the national agenda (Keleman 2012).

This article is grounded in a theoretical synthesis of the literature on both disaster diplomacy and disaster cycle management. By examining the cases of 1999 and 2023 earthquakes, it assesses whether seismic events can serve as catalysts for restoring diplomatic relations among nations experiencing tensions, or they simply reinforce or confirm pre-existing strategy. Thus, the concept of 'disaster diplomacy' is construed as a series of disaster-related activities, spanning the pre- and post-catastrophe periods, with a focus on understanding how these activities can positively influence relations between states that may not typically engage in such cooperative efforts. The primary emphasis is on disaster-related activities shaping diplomacy, reversing the conventional perspective. Specifically, this research will centre on the response of state-level governments. The disaster cycle model, embracing mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery phases, can serve as the appropriate benchmark for examining actions taken to mitigate disaster risks and manage consequences. Thus, the article explores the potential impact of earthquake diplomacy during the response and recovery phases on the cases under analysis.

The two earthquakes

A. The 1999 İzmit and Athens earthquakes

On the 17th of August 1999, Turkey was hit by a devastating natural event with tragic consequences. In the Kocaeli Province of Turkey, located at the easternmost end of the Sea of Marmara around the Gulf of İzmit, a catastrophic earthquake measuring magnitude 7.6, resulting in immense devastation and an estimated death toll ranging from 17,127 to 18,373 individuals (BBC 2019). Commonly known as the İzmit earthquake due to its proximity to the north-western city of İzmit, it is also referred to as the 17th August Earthquake or the 1999 Gölcük Earthquake. Occurring at 03:01 local time, and originating from a shallow depth of 15 km, the earthquake reached a maximum Mercalli intensity of X (Extreme) and persisted for 37 seconds, leaving behind significant seismic damage. The 1999 calamity stood as one of the deadliest natural disasters in modern Turkish history (Barka 1999). In the aftermath of the earthquake, efforts were made to address the needs of those affected, resulting in the establishment of an earthquake tax aimed at providing assistance to the impacted communities (Said-Moorhouse et al. 2023). In terms of international assistance, numerous foreign

countries aided the rescue operation. In particular, Greece promptly pledged aid and support, taking the lead in extending a helping hand. Shortly after the earthquake struck, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs swiftly established communication with their Turkish counterparts, and the minister dispatched personal envoys to Turkey. Responding with urgency, the Ministry of Public Orders sent a dedicated rescue team comprising 24 skilled personnel and two trained rescue dogs (ERA 1999).

When the earthquake occurred, the diplomatic relations between Turkey and Greece were extremely tense. Starting at least from the 1980s, the two countries engaged in a series of security disputes, which included – *inter alia* – the detection of sovereignty rights and control over the Aegean Sea, military fortification of the Greek islands in the Eastern part of the Aegean Sea, and the never solved Cyprus-dispute (Turhan 2012: 122). Furthermore, while the disputes over the Aegean had long roots, the Cyprus problem gained popularity more recently, when the socialist party PASOK took the government of the country in 1993 and stayed in power till 2000. According to Güvenc (1998), PASOK's strategy was to internationalise the Cyprus problem. Additionally, the Greek PM Papandreou put strong emphasis on the connection between the resolution of the conflict with the Greek support for the successful progression of Turkey's negotiations with the European Union (EU) (Turhan 2012: 123). Lastly, the Greek socialist leadership was keen to ease the diplomatic relations with its neighbour, after Greece's suspected implication in the so called 'Öcalan's fiasco'. In 1999, the Greek National Intelligence Agency executed a risky operation that jeopardised its relations with several countries, including the United States and Turkey. The objective was to relocate Abdullah Öcalan, the fugitive leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), from Greece to a country in Africa to prevent his capture by Turkish authorities. Greece planned to conceal Öcalan in its embassy in Nairobi temporarily before moving him elsewhere (Hooper, Bates and Smith 1999; Varouhakis 2009).

Within this context, the 1999 earthquake inserted as a factor of détente between Turkey and Greece. Furthermore, only some weeks later, in September 1999 another magnitude 5.9 seismic event hit the region, this time 18 km from Athens. About 40 buildings collapsed, causing 143 casualties and more than 800 people injured. Furthermore, during the first days after the earthquake, about 100000 people had to abandon their homes (Elenas 2003: 77). As previously mentioned, although being NATO allies, Greece and Turkey had been locked in a series of tensions and disagreements fraught with historical baggage. Since fighting each other over Cyprus in 1974, they have come to the brink of war on separate occasions (Çoşkun 2023). However, according to Grigoriadis (2020: 616), the two quakes painfully reminded both Turkey and Greece "of their geographic proximity and common human security threats". The two disasters impressively accelerated a rapprochement between the two countries

which was, however, already started. For example, Greece had consented in 1996 to the establishment of the EU-Turkey's customs union on the condition that Cyprus would have obtained the EU candidacy status (Nas and Özer 2017). Thus, when the first quake hit Turkey in August, a swift response arrived from Greece (Tsakonas 2010). Indeed, the Greek reaction "changed the mood and led to a similar Turkish reaction after the Athens earthquake" (Tsakonas 2010: 75). The two countries were able to offer each other assistance and help either from official state channels or throughout private initiatives. In response, medical supplies, equipment, and rescue teams were promptly dispatched to alleviate the distress of those affected by the earthquake in Greece and Turkey (Tsakonas 2010).

As Ker-Lindsay (2007) points out, Greece was the first country offering assistance to and then concreting helping Turkey in August 1999. An hour after the quake, Greek foreign affairs minister George Papandreou was on the phone with his Turkish counterpart İsmail Cem. As Greece had established an emergency rescue team (EMAK), this was sent to Turkey within hours to assist the country. Furthermore, a group of Greek seismologists had been grouped to assist Turkey in the aftermath of the events. Two mobile hospitals were made available, together with nurses and doctors. A delegation of fifteen Greek MPs with medical training were sent as well (Ker-Lindsay 2007). All the Greek ministers let the Turkish government know that further help was available in case of necessity. Similarly, the Greek public as well started to get to work raising money and collecting food, medicines, and other needed items to help the victims. Public donations were collected, as well as donations from civil society organisations. The Orthodox Church, a "bastion of anti-Turkish sentiment in Greece" launched appeals for funds and help (Ker-Lindsay 2007: 59). Local governments and municipalities also played an important role in relieving the sufferance.

Similarly, when the earthquake affected Athens, the Turkish foreign affairs minister Cem immediately offered his country's help. In the end, little assistance was needed as the scale of the tragedy was far smaller than the one in Turkey. However, it should not be diminished the significant diplomatic benefits. The Turkish government showed a swift response and offer of assistance which helped to smooth the relations. Similarly, an overwhelming number of goodwill messages were sent from ordinary Turkish citizens to the Greek consulate in Istanbul, reporting that people wanted to build a new relationship (Ker-Lindsay 2007: 69). Despite some popular support here demonstrated, the initiatives undertaken by both the Greek and Turkish governments were certainly courageous, especially considering that particular national media outlets continued to advocate for antagonistic behaviours towards their neighbouring country. (Ker-Lindsay 2007).

Scholarship agrees that the earthquake constituted one of the most compelling causes for the change in the diplomatic relations between the two countries, but not

the principal one. According to Nas and Özer (2017), the earthquake diplomacy facilitated Greece in lifting its veto on Turkey's EU candidacy. This new style of diplomacy was conducted by the respective foreign ministers of the two states. By ensuring mutual assistance to each other, they helped a new round of talks brought at the EU level and aimed at resolving all outstanding bilateral disputes between the countries and adopting practices of good neighbourliness (Economides 2020: 602). However, as stated above, the arrival of PASOK in 1993 changed the Greek approach towards Turkey. For example, in 1996 it conceded the establishment of a Turkey-EU customs union. The rationale for that was to try to 'Europeanise' the long-standing crisis with Turkey (Nas and Özer 2017). According to Grigoriadis (2020), the 'earthquake diplomacy' developed in 1999 surely favoured a further rapprochement between Turkey and Greece so that the latter ultimately lifted its veto against Turkey's candidacy, thus securing a path for the resolution of their bilateral disputes. Thanks to this new political strategy, Turkey became in December 1999 a new candidate country for the EU, and the resolution of the Cyprus issue would not be a precondition for the membership anymore. Regarding the bilateral disputes, "both sides were invited to conduct bilateral negotiations. If these failed to produce a result by the end of 2004, the issues would have to be referred to the International Court of Justice" (Grigoriadis 2020: 616). However, while the positive effect in smoothing the relationship is undeniable, the process had started before the 1999 earthquakes.

B. The 2023 Earthquake in the Northern Levantine

On 6th February 2023, at 04:17 Turkish time, a Mw 7.8 earthquake struck southern and central Turkey and northern and western Syria. The epicentre was 37 km (23 mi) west-northwest of Gaziantep. The earthquake had a maximum Mercalli intensity of XII (Extreme) around the epicentre and in Antakya. It was followed by a second Mw 7.7 earthquake at 13:24. The seismic event was centred 95 km (59 mi) north-northeast from the first. There was widespread damage and tens of thousands of fatalities (USGS 2023). The magnitude 7.8 earthquake represents Turkey's most significant seismic event since the 1939 Erzincan earthquake of equivalent magnitude and is collectively the second most powerful quake ever documented in the nation's history, following the 1668 North Anatolia earthquake (Bohnhoff et al. 2016). It was also one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded in the Levant. It was felt as far as Egypt and the Black Sea coast of Turkey (Michaelson 2023). There were more than 10,000 aftershocks in the three weeks that followed. The seismic sequence was the result of shallow strike-slip faulting.

Widespread damage was documented in an area of about 350,000 km² (140,000 sq. mi), about the size of Germany (England et al. 2023). An estimated 14 million people, or 16 percent of Turkey's population, were affected. Development experts from the United Nations estimated that about 1.5 million people were left homeless (Hinshaw et al. 2023). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA 2023), the earthquake resulted in over 50,000 confirmed deaths, with 45,968 fatalities in Turkey and 7,259 in Syria. This makes it the deadliest earthquake in what is now present-day Turkey since the 526 Antioch earthquake and the deadliest disaster in its modern history. It is also the deadliest in present-day Syria since the 1822 Aleppo earthquake; the deadliest worldwide since the 2010 Haiti earthquake; and the fifth deadliest of the 21st century (Imbach 2023; Said-Moorhouse et al. 2023). Damages were estimated at US\$ 104 billion in Turkey and US\$ 14.8 billion in Syria, making them the fourth-costliest earthquakes on record (Mondesert and Delany 2023; Doyle 2023). Damaged roads, winter storms, and disruption to communications hampered the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency's rescue and relief effort, which included a 60,000-strong search-and-rescue force, 5,000 health workers and 30,000 volunteers (Özdemir and Kirby 2023). Following Turkey's call for international help, more than 141,000 people from 94 countries joined the rescue effort. For example, the EU mobilised search and rescue teams with a total of more than 1000 emergency workers through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2023).

The 2023 earthquake arrived at a time when diplomatic relations between Turkey and Syria were at an extreme low point. However, this had not always been the case. For example, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected Prime Minister of Turkey in 2003, he built strong ties with the incumbent rulers of the region, including Bashar al-Assad. In August 2008, famously he vacationed with his wife Emine, Bashar and his wife Asma in Bodrum (de Bended 2008). Nevertheless, as protests spread in 2010/2011 in some Arab cities such as Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, and subsequently in Syria, the Turkish government was faced with a clear decision between the revitalised crowds, demanding fairness, responsibility, and improved opportunities in life, and the existing situation. The then Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu declared: "we either could maintain ties to these oppressive rulers, or we could support the popular uprisings to secure basic democratic rights" (Davutoğlu 2013). According to Bechev (2022), it was Davutoğlu who believed that ignoring the popular upheaval shaking the region was the wrong call. Erdoğan, conversely, had a more cautious approach, in order to safeguard the national interest. Until summer 2011, Turkey still believed that it could defuse tensions with Syria. It was in July 2011 when – amidst its civil war – the Syrian Arab Army murdered more than 2,000 people in the city of Hama (Bechev 2022: 103).

Ankara responded suspending trade and diplomatic relations in September 2011. The then President of the Republic declared: “we cannot remain silent and accept a bloody atmosphere” (Gül 2011). The civil war profoundly affected Turkey and its political landscape, making it one of the largest hosts of refugees and asylum seekers, with nearly 4 million Syrians residing within its borders (Levkowitz 2024). Consequently, the discussion surrounding Syrians in Turkey evolved into a central topic of daily discourse, serving as “the main focus of political conflicts and one of the main instruments of domestic politics, which is fed by polarization” (Törenli and Kıyan 2022: 205).

Between 2011 and 2020, Turkey’s relationship with Syria endured considerable strain. Tensions heightened due to events such as the Turkish pilgrim bus attack, during which Syrian soldiers targeted Turkish buses, and the downing of a Turkish reconnaissance jet by Syria (Hurriyet Daily News 2013; BBC 2013; BBC Türkçe 2014; Hacaoglu and El Baltaji 2013). Incidents of border clashes and accusations persisted, culminating in military interventions like Turkey’s assault on Syrian troops following a mortar shell episode. The situation deteriorated as car bombs rocked Reyhanlı, claiming numerous lives. Additionally, Turkey became embroiled in conflicts against both ISIS and Syrian forces, notably through the Euphrates Shield operation. Leaked recordings unveiled Turkish intelligence contemplating rocket strikes from Syria, while 2020 witnessed Operation Spring Shield against the Syrian army (Deeb 2016; Kirbi 2020; Reuters 2018).

The February 2023 earthquake could have potentially marked a turning point in the region as it happened for the Turkish-Greek case. At that time, diplomatic contacts between the two governments were minimal. In Autumn 2021, the former Foreign Affairs Minister Çavuşoğlu met with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in Belgrade. During discussions with journalists, Çavuşoğlu revealed that the Turkish and Syrian intelligence services had initiated communication, signalling a warmup in relations after a period of discord over the Syrian conflict. The then minister declared that Turkey’s main objective was to “prevent the division of Syria” and wished for “a strong administration” in the country (Soylu 2022). Indeed, according to Yıldız (2021) the standstill in Idlib¹ - in north-western Syria - against Assad’s regime and inconclusive policies towards the Kurdish-led administration prompted Ankara to reconsider its strategy.

Furthermore, in January 2023, a month before the earthquake occurred, Çavuşoğlu suggested a potential meeting with Syrian counterpart Mekdad in early February, testifying an initial diplomatic rapprochement between Turkey and Syria since the conflict’s

¹ The Turkish military operation in Idlib province by Turkey is an operation by the Turkish Armed Forces which started in October 2017. According to the Turkish authorities, it was carried out to prevent the spread of conflicts and refugees in its state territory (Karasapan 2021).

started in 2011. According to Kucukgocmen *et al.* (2023), it was Russia urging Ankara to reconcile with Syria. The two countries' defence ministers recently held talks in the Moscow. While the Syrian conflict persists into its second decade, Assad's government has regained most of its territory, with Turkish-backed opposition and US-supported Kurdish fighters holding pockets of control. According to Milliken and Cafiero (2023), Turkey's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and Syria has evolved amidst shifting dynamics. Turkey backed the opposition movements against Assad, cementing its position as a defender of Sunni Islamist causes. However, with Assad's regime maintaining power, Turkey's focus shifted to fighting the PKK/YPG. Recent signs of a thaw between Turkey and Syria suggest potential rapprochement, raising concerns for Syrian rebel groups supported by Turkey. While Turkey's foreign policy changes, its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in the region could shift, impacting regional dynamics. A decade after the emergence of neo-Ottoman influence, Turkey has been unable to effectively reshape its strategic influence in the Arab region, encompassing both Syria and the entire Arabian Peninsula.

At the time the earthquake occurred, border restrictions had been imposed, impeding search and rescue efforts in northwest Syria. More specifically, on the day of the seismic events, there was only one cross-border access, who was damaged and could not have been re-opened until three days after the disaster occurred (Reuters 2023). Under the United Nations (UN) oversight, some coordination between the two actors in responding to the crisis were launched. The use of border crossings for relief efforts was established but limited, and there's a call for extended and increased access to ensure essential health and humanitarian assistance reaches those in need (Cinar et al. 2023). According to a UK Parliament Report (Loft 2023), three cross-border accesses were subsequently opened. However, one of the major reasons why additional corridors to send aid where not opened, was also because the Assad's regime did not want to open borders to non-controlled areas of the country. Indeed, while the Assad regime "controls most of the country, but the northern regions are controlled by a variety of armed and opposition groups" (Loft 2023: 12). Differently from what had happened with Greece, there were no reports of contacts between the two governments at their highest levels. Presidents Erdoğan and Assad did not directly talk to offer each other or coordinate assistance. Nor were found reports of contacts between the Turkish foreign minister Çavuşoğlu with his Syrian counterpart Mekdad. A regime of opening borders between Turkey and Syria was put in place under the UN. This entailed the authorisation and operational terms of specific border crossings to facilitate critical aid delivery and humanitarian assistance in response to crises (Albam 2023).

A possible modification in their relations arrived in July 2023, when President Erdoğan expressed his willingness to meet Syrian President Assad but rejected the

precondition of withdrawing Turkish troops from Syrian territory. Erdoğan suggested a potential four-party summit involving Syria, Russia, and Iran. However, he declared that Assad's demand for a complete withdrawal of Turkish forces before a meeting was deemed 'unacceptable'. Erdoğan then recalled ongoing terrorism threats along the border (Hayatsever and Kucukgocmen 2023). On May 10th, 2023, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran, Syria, and Turkey – Sergey Lavrov, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Faisal Mekdad, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, respectively – convened in Moscow for high level discussions. The meeting focused on re-establishing interstate relations between Turkey and Syria across various dimensions. Notably, the joint statement did not reference the February 2023 earthquake or its reconstruction efforts. In alignment with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 'Astana format' official statements², the ministers reiterated their commitment to Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the collective fight against terrorism. Emphasising the importance of increased international aid to Syria, they aimed to support the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of Syrians to their homeland and contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. The ministers agreed to task deputy foreign ministers with formulating a roadmap to advance Turkey-Syria relations, coordinating with defence ministries and special services of the four nations. There was no mention of the earthquake in the meeting. At the end of the discussion, while releasing a joint statement, the ministers acknowledged a positive and constructive atmosphere, committing to maintain high-level contacts and technical discussions in this quadripartite format in the future. However, despite this first meeting, the tensions soon re-emerged. As Erdoğan declared himself available in July 2023 for meeting Assad, the latter responded in August saying that "Terrorism in Syria is made in Turkey" (Al Arabiya 2023). According to Ciddi (2023), Assad has only a precondition for meeting Erdoğan, which is that Turkey gets its troops out of Syria, a condition that Turkey will hardly allow without guarantees near its southern-eastern borders. Therefore, although rebuilding relations remains a significant diplomatic challenge for Syria and Turkey (Ciddi 2023), the earthquake has quickly faded from public attention. Assistance in relief operations was notably limited, and expressions of sympathy between the two states for the shared tragedy were never publicly conveyed.

² The Astana Process is a peace initiative for the Syrian civil war implemented since December 2016 by the diplomatic efforts of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, acting in complement to the official UN-led Geneva process. The United Nations plays an observational role in this initiative. The peace process, initiated through negotiations held in the Kazakh capital, Astana, marked the first involvement of the Syrian opposition with al-Assad.

Findings

Disaster diplomacy is described by Kelman as the discipline that “investigates how and why disaster-related activities do and do not induce cooperation amongst enemies” (Kelman 2020: 13). Thus, by comparing the 1999 and 2023 earthquakes involving Turkey, Greece and Syria, the article aimed to better unpack whether those catastrophes have triggered any form of diplomatic rapprochement among those states. However, the analysis of the events induces us thinking that in both the 1999 and 2023 the earthquakes have had limited consequences in the modification of the diplomatic courses between Turkey and Greece and Turkey and Syria.

Indeed, the earthquakes occurred in 1999 which affected both Turkey and Greece accelerated a process that had already started before the catastrophic events. As Nas and Özer (2017) correctly point out, a changing in the approach had already started since 1996 when Greece conceded the establishment of a Turkey-EU customs union. The earthquake thus simply “brought to the fore” the process of rapprochement (Nas and Özer 2017: 57). Furthermore, the authors argue that the change in the approach of Greece was due to the diplomatic fiasco occurred when the PKK’s leader Öcalan was captured in Kenya with a Cypriot passport inside the Greek embassy. This led to the resignation of the then minister of foreign affairs and the search for a restoration of Greece’s international image. The new strategy was to ‘Europeanise’ the dispute with Turkey, bringing the discussion on a more, formal diplomatic level rather than over an overly militaristic or fundamentalist approach (Nas and Özer 2017). Thus, when the catastrophe occurred, Turkey and Greece assisted each other in the disaster and post-disaster phases (figure 1) of the disaster cycle. However, this mutual help was inserted within an already existing strategy of rebuilding ties between the two states. On the Turkish side, the Greek good willingness in reapproaching with its neighbour could have been strategically used to gain advantages, for example in terms of progression of the negotiations for the Turkish official candidacy to the EU. Indeed, Turkey became an official EU candidate country in December 1999, four months after the first earthquake. According to Tocci (2003), the Greek-Turkish rapprochement in the aftermath of the August-September 1999 earthquakes [...] provided a propitious atmosphere for a policy shift” so that in December 1999 at the Helsinki Council of the EU, “the Simitis government was willing to accept Turkey’s EU candidacy” (Tocci 2003: 222).

In contrast, the seismic incident of 2023 impacting Turkey and Syria revealed a starkly different approach. This happened during a period of virtually non-existent diplomatic relations between the two nations. The article has highlighted how the absence of diplomatic structures had immediate implications for the management

of the post-disaster aftermath. Notably, while the 1999 earthquake comprised distinct events sequentially affecting Turkey and Greece, the 2023 event concurrently impacted both countries. This simultaneity may have implications for the states' ability to assist or coordinate with each other. Despite this, no official communications at the ministerial level were reported between the two countries. Moreover, the lack of communication and coordination translated practically into challenges in opening corridors for delivering aid and services to the affected population. As a result, the first corridor was only established three days after the catastrophic event occurred (Loft 2023). Additionally, the complete mistrust between the two countries over each other made the passage of aids in the Northern region (hardly controlled by the government) extreme careful. In this sense, referring to Figure 1, during the 2023 seismic event neither the disaster nor the post-disaster phase registered an effective help from the two states. Subsequently, once the emergency phase reduced and the first more dramatic events end, the arguments were soon reconducted to the areas of tensions that have surrounded the debate between the two international actors: the refugee crisis, terrorism, the withdrawal of the Turkish troops from the North of the country (Ciddi 2023). Rarely the earthquake has been mentioned by the Turkish and Syrian leaderships as a field in which starting cooperating. Moreover, Levkowitz (2024) highlights the repercussions of the February 2023 earthquakes, which ravaged southern Turkey and northern Syria, exacerbating a surge in previously unprecedented anti-refugee sentiments and policies. A pertinent example is the abrupt expulsion of displaced Syrians from dormitories in Mersin, a city on the Mediterranean coast, to accommodate displaced Turks. Additionally, Levkowitz (2024) highlights NGO reports revealing a bias in the distribution of containers, with Turks receiving priority over Syrians. This heightened apprehension regarding potential new waves of refugees likely influenced discussions aimed at fostering cooperation between the two nations. Significantly, these events unfolded against the backdrop of the 2023 presidential elections, during which Erdoğan's opposition notably adopted a staunchly anti-migrant stance (Michaelson and Narlı 2023).

Kelman (2011; 2006) has developed a framework of analysis for examining the disaster-diplomacy activities. In particular, he has provided a checklist of four yes/no questions that should be asked for each case study to determine whether or not it is possible to talk about disaster diplomacy. These questions are whether a) the disaster-related activities lead to diplomatic relations; b) whether a new diplomacy emerge; c) whether the parties involved were seeking rapprochement rather than just using disaster related activities for public relations, or the disaster was used to

bail out the diplomatic process; finally, d) whether the diplomatic process lasted or not (Kelman 2011: 15). Other authors have then developed other questions to examine the quality of disaster diplomacy (see, for e.g., Gaillard *et al.* 2008; Gaillard *et al.* 2009). In the context of this study, the focus will remain on addressing the four questions.

Regarding the first inquiry, it is noteworthy that while the 1999 earthquake heightened diplomatic relations between Turkey and Greece, the 2023 earthquake did not yield similar outcomes in the Turkey-Syria relationship. In this sense, some scholars even argue against the application of the term 'disaster diplomacy' in this context (Gaillard *et al.* 2009). Addressing the second aspect, it is challenging to assert that these catastrophic events led to new diplomatic approaches between the involved states. Rather, it appears that the earthquakes expedited processes already initiated in the first case (1999) and affirmed an existing cautious dynamic between Turkey and Syria in the second case (2023). Thus, the response to the second question is less straightforward. Differently, the third question provides intriguing insights. The study of the events suggests that the earthquakes were strategically utilised to affirm the pre-existing diplomatic strategies that the countries had developed before the occurrence of the catastrophe. Thus, it appears that – as well as for other cases of public diplomacies³ – disaster diplomacy in this case was an additional tool at the hands of the governments “in the context of pursuing foreign policy goals through building a positive image of an aid provider and trustworthy partner” (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021: 940). This was to the detriment of any form of diplomatic empathy, intended as the “individual or a nation’s capability to sympathize with other individuals or nations [...] wants and needs” (Su *et al.* 2021: 6). Lastly, discussing the lasting impact of the disaster and its influence on the subsequent diplomatic trajectory proves challenging. While there is little doubt about the outcome of the more recent events in 2023, where no forms of disaster diplomacy were evident, determining the aftermath of the 1999 earthquakes affecting Turkey and Greece is less straightforward. Initially, a reconciliation occurred, but tensions resurfaced, notably by 2004 when Cyprus became a new EU member state, thanks to the Greek support (Nas and Özer 2017). In summary, the analysis suggests that the two seismic events affecting the three countries merely affirmed pre-existing diplomatic strategies. Forms of diplomatic empathy seemed missing in favour of diplomatic strategies which deliberately aimed at achieving specific foreign policy goals.

³ See, for e.g., vaccine diplomacy or health diplomacy.

Conclusions

The examination of the earthquakes in 1999 and 2023 involving Turkey, Greece, and Syria reveals a nuanced narrative within the realm of disaster diplomacy. Contrary to conventional expectations, seismic incidents do not necessarily act as transformative catalysts in diplomatic relations. Instead, they unfold within the context of pre-existing political strategies, either accentuating ongoing diplomatic trajectories or laying bare the inadequacies of diplomatic structures. The earthquake of 1999, shared by Turkey and Greece, served as an accelerant rather than an initiator in the process of rapprochement. Mutual assistance during the disaster and post-disaster phases operated within the contours of a strategic shift initiated by Greece since 1996. The seismic event merely brought to the fore an already evolving process, unveiling the intricacies of international relations in the face of natural disasters.

Conversely, the seismic incident of 2023 between Turkey and Syria unfolded amid the absence of diplomatic relations. The starkly different approach to disaster diplomacy, marked by non-existent diplomatic structures, highlighted immediate consequences for post-disaster management. The lack of communication and coordination, coupled with mutual mistrust, complicated aid delivery during both the disaster and post-disaster phases. Unlike the 1999 earthquake, the 2023 seismic event did not serve as a platform for effective assistance or the initiation of diplomatic dialogue. Guided by Kelman's analytical framework (2011), the exploration of disaster diplomacy unveiled critical questions surrounding diplomatic relations, the emergence of new diplomatic approaches, and the strategic use of seismic events within existing diplomatic strategies. Rather than being transformative agents, seismic incidents emerge as tools within the broader context of nations pursuing foreign policy goals, potentially at the expense of genuine diplomatic understanding. Additionally, comparing these two case studies underscores the importance of openness and willingness for reconciliation on both sides. In the aftermath of the 1999 earthquakes, there was an inclination towards reconciliation, with Greece expressing intentions to improve relations with Turkey and Turkey showing interest in joining the EU. However, following the 2023 earthquake, additional factors complicated matters. Concerns over a potential surge in migration from Syria to Turkey and Syria's demand for the withdrawal of Turkish troops from the North added complexity. Neither party demonstrated a firm commitment to address these issues, thus affecting the dynamics of disaster diplomacy.

In summary, this study has provided some updated perspectives on the intricate dynamics between disastrous events and diplomacy. It has unveiled earthquakes as integral components within the complex frame of international relations, their impact intricately shaped by nuanced contexts. The earthquakes and diplomatic interplay, as

illustrated through the two case studies, enhances our comprehension of the multifaceted nature of global interactions in the aftermath of catastrophe. These insights pave the way for potential future research avenues, particularly considering recent impactful events in the nearby region, such as the 2023 earthquake in Morocco and the devastating floods in Libya in September 2023. Furthermore, the article lays the groundwork for an initial exploration of disaster diplomacy versus disaster empathy, a distinction that could be further investigated in the light of the more recent scholarship on public health diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy, as for example discussed by Kobierecka and Kobierecki (2021) and Su et al. (2021).

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