

Syrian aid group with roots in Arkansas working to render aid after deadly earthquake

Tembler adds to war-aid group's mission by [Teresa Moss](#) | February 12, 2023 at 4:23 a.m.

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Retired Conway businessman Jerry Adams (left), who volunteered with the Syrian Emergency Task Force after meeting founder Mouaz Moustafa, poses for a group photo during a visit to Syria in 2022. “There is a resilience and mission mentality for a better life in Syria,” Adams said of the group that is helping with earthquake relief. (Photo courtesy of the Syrian Emergency Task Force)

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The bags under Qusai Husien's eyes revealed his missed nights of sleep -- three since the earthquake hit and many during his lifetime in Syria.

On Thursday, he sat against a white wall, looked into a camera on his phone and told a story of despair but also resilience.

Husien's city of Atmeh near the Turkish border in northwest Syria has long depended on The Syrian Emergency Task Force, an organization deeply rooted and supported by Arkansans. As new tragedy struck, those in the region called for aid and the task force found itself in the middle of a new crisis.

From across the world, in a war-torn nation, now crumbling from the work of mother nature, Husien was telling the story for Arkansans to hear.

He talked about rubble. Rubble from the earthquake that covered relatives still. Rubble from bombs that forced the relocation of his family to northwest Syria.

He also talked about people. A man who lost all 12 of his family members but kept digging in the earthquake's rubble in hopes of finding someone else's family alive. And those who handed out roses instead of violence during protests from an age long past but not forgotten by Husien.

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Local officials were already reporting more than a 1,000 dead and 1,500 injured in Husien's region from Monday's 7.8 magnitude earthquake and its aftershocks.

Another crisis is looming for those who survived the earthquake -- the region continues to face freezing temperatures and limited resources.

Husien and his family moved to Atmeh in the Idlib Governorate from his home in Marret Al Nuoman about three years ago as the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad started to invade the area, he said. A hospital in his home city was struck by missiles multiple times by the Syrian government and Russian planes through 2016 and 2018. Markets in the city were also targets and were bombed or attacked between 2016 and 2019.

He was not alone in his migration to northwestern Syria.

The region, which is outside the control of the Assad regime, boomed in recent years as Syrians found themselves displaced. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimated about 4 million people in the region in 2021 with 2.7 million of them needing humanitarian assistance.

In recent years, the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria has expressed concerns about the already overwhelming crises happening in Syria with electricity, fuel and clean water shortages. It also notes sporadic Syrian government and allied air strikes in the northwest.

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Yet, cross-border aid to the region has been scarce in recent years and as of Saturday, National Public Radio journalists on the ground in Idlib Governorate reported aid had yet to arrive nearly a week after the earthquake struck.

Husien quickly connected with the Syrian Emergency Task Force upon his move to Atmeh. The organization was already operating a school to provide women, mostly widowed, skills and education in the city. Husien works at the school as a media coordinator.

The task force also operates a school for orphans, a free pharmacy and a safe house providing food and medical transportation to Turkey.

The organization was started by Mouaz Moustafa to support Syrian Opposition in 2011. Moustafa graduated from the University of Central Arkansas with a bachelor's degree in

international relations in 2008 and immediately started working in Washington, D.C., with former Arkansas U.S. Rep. Vic Snyder and former Sen. Blanche Lincoln.

As the task force grew, Moustafa, the organization's executive director, kept leaning on those Arkansas ties to support numerous programs launched over the next two decades.

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Moustafa, a Syrian American who immigrated to Arkansas with his family as a child, joined the Zoom call with Husien on Thursday. Since the earthquake, the organization had refocused all its efforts on responding to it. It also meant endless calls for Moustafa with national and international officials, media and anyone who could help get aid into the region.

"This little organization in Arkansas has brought and has more aid in northwest Syria than the U.N. has," Moustafa said Thursday.

But more is needed, he said.

"Right now we are talking about a million people already crushed," Moustafa said. "There are people who have lost everything. They need international aid to come. We need funds for northwest Syria. These people are without anything and the stability of the nation depends on it."

While working the political strings, the organization is also collecting money through its emergency relief fund. It is being allocated to a team in Turkey and then delivered on the ground, Abby Straessle, task force director of development said. She said two trucks, filled with aid from the task force and other humanitarian organizations, were on its way to northwest Syria on Saturday.

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Moustafa also worked in the past week to bring a series of journalists to the region to report the conditions.

Across the world in Syria, Husien, and others in his community dug through rubble. For three days they heard the cries for help and moans as they dug with their hands through crumbled buildings, he said. The community pleaded for heavy machinery to help find their loved ones, the ones they could hear trapped.

On the fourth day, Thursday, the cries had stopped, Husien said. There was still no aid and the hope of finding a family member alive was lost.

Husien woke up at about 4:20 a.m. in the morning as the earthquake struck, he said through a translator. He first thought was about his immediate family. Everyone in his house was unharmed. He checked with his sisters, who were married and lived elsewhere. They were also safe.

At about 6 am. he received a call that his uncle's building was completely collapsed. He gathered friends and family and rushed to the scene, he said.

"They started digging and digging with their bare hands," the translator said. "They got a lot of survivors out. His uncle's family is around 20 to 22 people. Two of the little girls and his uncle's wife were killed. He lost three family members that he was digging to find."

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Husien said for three days they just kept digging in hopes to find other survivors. As they found a dead person, they kept hope they'd find another alive.

Death was not new to Husien.

It was the extreme humanitarian crisis that brought the task force to northwest Syria in 2011, not long after the Syrian civil war started.

Jerry Adams, a retired Conway businessman who held various leadership positions in Acxiom Corp., first met Moustafa after watching him give a TED Talk at the University of Central Arkansas about Syria nearly a decade ago.

He was compelled to work with Moustafa as the friendship grew and he became a part of annual fundraisers for the task force. Two years ago he joined the task force's board and this past summer he visited Syria and the programs run by the organization.

Adams sat in on the Zoom call as well Thursday.

"There is a resilience and mission mentality for a better life in Syria," Adams said about his time working with the task force.

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And it was when speaking about hope that Husien's eyes switched from tired to alive.

He talked about faith in God. Faith in the Syrian revolution and faith in the Syrian people.

While the area desperately needs aid, Husien said he'd exchange any aid for democracy, if possible.

"They've seen that we've been bombed, tortured," Husien said. "I just want these people with power to take Assad out of power. We want democracy. We don't want this dictatorship anymore. We can go back and build a beautiful country."

For more information about the task force visit setf.ngo.