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**Crisis Communication Challenges in Türkiye's
Centralized Disaster Response:
A Case Study of the Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

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In Prague on April 30, 2024,

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Abstract

Crisis communication plays an imperative role in the response stage of disaster management, as it facilitates effective coordination, provision of rescue and aid operations, and dissemination of information to the public. This thesis analyses the challenges faced by Türkiye in the crisis communication aftermath of the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. Through a case study approach, this thesis aims to identify the inefficiencies, underlying contributing factors, and resulting impacts. The study utilizes Actor-Centered Institutionalism as the theoretical framework, emphasizing the role of actors, formal and informal institutions, and their interactions in shaping crisis communication processes. Methodologically, the research employs process tracing and in-depth interviews to trace causal mechanisms and gather nuanced insights from actors involved in Türkiye's response stage efforts. 5 people from diverse backgrounds who have been actively involved in the response stage aftermath the Kahramanmaras earthquakes have been interviewed. Findings from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of crisis communication dynamics in Türkiye and disaster management studies in general.

Keywords: crisis communication, disaster, management, earthquake management, Türkiye

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFAD - The Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency
(Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı)

ACI – Actor Centered Institutionalism

UNISDR - United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

AKUT - Search & Rescue Organization (Arama Kurtarma Derneği)

AKP - Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)

HDP - People’s Democracy Party (Halkların Demokrasi Partisi)

PKK - Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan)

NGO - Non-governmental organization

SCO – Sivil Society Organization

UN - United Nations

TOKI - Housing Development Administration (Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı)

WB - World Bank

Crisis Communication Challenges in Türkiye's Centralized Disaster Response:

A Case Study of the Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes

1. Introduction

Despite the wide range of research done in the positive sciences, analyzing the geophysical/geological factors in Türkiye for earthquakes, there is minimal research about crisis communication and disaster management's socio-political and administrative perspectives. A literature gap exists concerning the crisis communication-related inefficiencies stemming from the response stage of disaster management, especially in the context of Türkiye. As Hermansson (2017) argues, existing literature on disaster management institutions mainly focuses on North American or Western European contexts, and countries such as Türkiye are often neglected in the relevant literature. However, most disaster-prone countries have similar politico-administrative systems, such as Türkiye, regarding disaster management institutions. Therefore, studying Türkiye and the specific example of the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes is also a considerable contribution to the literature on general global disaster management/crisis communication.

This research will contribute to the literature by elaborating on the observed crisis communication inefficiencies aftermath Kahramanmaraş earthquakes by analyzing the underlying contributing factors and the types of occurred communication barriers with the help of Actor Centered Institutionalism. More specifically, the theory will be applied to the case study by unpacking the actor constellations that were present in the response stage of Kahramanmaraş earthquakes and the impact of existing mode of interaction among relevant actors on the observed barriers in crisis communication. Moreover, the thesis aims to highlight the importance

of the need for pre-planned strategic crisis communication to be prepared for the next environmental hazards and to minimize human losses.

Due to its geological and geographical characteristics, Türkiye faces a significant risk of disasters, including earthquakes and floods, resulting in a history marked by numerous catastrophic events (Kadiolu, 2008). The Hellenic arc and the North and Eastern Anatolian fault line are crossed through Türkiye (Ganas and Parsons, 2009). Approximately 95 percent of Türkiye's land mass is located in the seismic zones and thus prone to earthquakes (Çetin, 2013; Turan, 2012). Türkiye's geographical location straddling Europe and Asia, along with its population exceeding 80 million, tends to result in a greater severity of disasters compared to the global average (Ocal, 2019). According to Ganapati (2018), high degree seismic zones are the location to 69% of dams and 76% of businesses.

On February 6, 2023, a 7.8 magnitude quake struck southeastern Türkiye's Kahramanmaraş region, followed by a 7.6 magnitude tremor nine hours later in the same area, causing the fifth deadliest earthquake of 21st century (Zilio and Ampuero, 2023). The two earthquakes in one day caused a great crisis period both in Türkiye and Syria. The earthquakes affected 10 different provinces in Türkiye: Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Diyarbakır, Adana, Osmaniye, Gaziantep, Sanlıurfa, Adıyaman, Malatya and Hatay, where 14.01 million (16.5 percent) of Türkiye's population live (World Bank, 2023). This thesis will focus on Türkiye's disaster response, and crisis communication, particularly concerning earthquakes, which represent the most fatal environmental hazards in the country. The existing disaster management system, and crisis communication of Türkiye has several shortcomings which had caused certain delays in the provision of rescue and operations, inefficiency in coordination among different stakeholders, and other unexpected consequences.

“Hazards may be natural in origin, but it is the way in which societies have developed that causes them to become disasters” (Maskrey, 1993; Hewitt, 1996; Bhatt, 2002; Wisner et al., 2004; as cited in O'Brien et al., 2006, p. 65). Natural hazards include but are not limited to earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions (Şahin and Sipahioğlu, 2002). Environmental hazards and resultant disasters are not merely natural occurrences but represent social, cultural, and political

phenomena challenging society's ability to organize, limit destabilization, and transition toward recovery (Bavel and Curtis, 2016). Even though the occurrence of natural disasters is inevitable, policy interventions have the potential to reduce the impact of natural disasters on human capital formation by reassessing past disaster events and adapting policies and regulations accordingly (İskender, 2021).

The first 72 hours following a disaster are typically seen as crucial for disaster management because they need quick action, quick decision-making under time constraints, and cooperation amongst several agencies. For this, there is a need for strategically pre-planned crisis communication to minimize the effects of disaster, to minimize the human losses, ensure inter institutional communication, and reduce the panic in society. Crisis communication plays a crucial role to ensure the efficiency of initial disaster response in any given society. However, in many disasters around the globe several inefficiencies within crisis communication have been subject to research.

1.1. Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of 8 chapters. Chapter 1 is consisted of an introductory exploration of the chosen topic, the reasons behind its selection, an overview of the research problem and the highlighting the specific research objectives and questions. Chapter 2 includes the literature review in terms of socio-political background of Türkiye, status quo of Turkish disaster management system; and institutions and media under AKP government.

Chapter 3 focuses on the chosen theoretical framework, which is Actor-Centered Institutionalism together with its cornerstone concepts of constellation and modes of interaction. For this, the shaped constellation between the actors that are involved in the response stage of disaster management and the modes of interaction among them will be thoroughly analyzed.

Chapter 4 covers the conceptual framework of the thesis, which mainly refers to the concepts of disaster; disaster management; centralized vs decentralized disaster management systems; and crisis communication. Chapter 5 is consisted of methodology, research design, data collection methods (namely process tracing and in-depth interviews).

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the past solutions/institutional changes towards decentralization within Turkish disaster management system that usually took place right after the big earthquakes, such as Marmara and Van and Ercis earthquakes. Moreover, the reasons behind the failure of previous decentralization efforts will be furtherly discussed.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes as a case study, where the details of disaster management will be elaborated. As the thesis intends to find the communication challenges occurred during Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes, the experienced barriers will be classified as technological, sociological and organizational communication challenges will be discussed furtherly.

The last chapter includes the conclusion and discussion of the thesis.

To facilitate reader comprehension and engagement with the reading, each chapter is structured with distinct sub-sections, ensuring clarity and coherence throughout the thesis.

1.2. Research Problem

Türkiye's disaster and emergency context, specifically regarding earthquake features, settlement information, and analytical assessments, serves as a significant groundwork for crisis communication (Birinci, 2023). The Figure 1 shows the fault lines and seismic zones of Türkiye, which is proofing once again that earthquakes are inevitable reality for Türkiye and there is a need for strong and strategically planned crisis communication without waiting for another disaster to happen. Disaster management systems and crisis communication are critical in safeguarding communities during crises, yet the type of disaster management and crisis communication, particularly in the context of Türkiye, remains a subject of scrutiny.

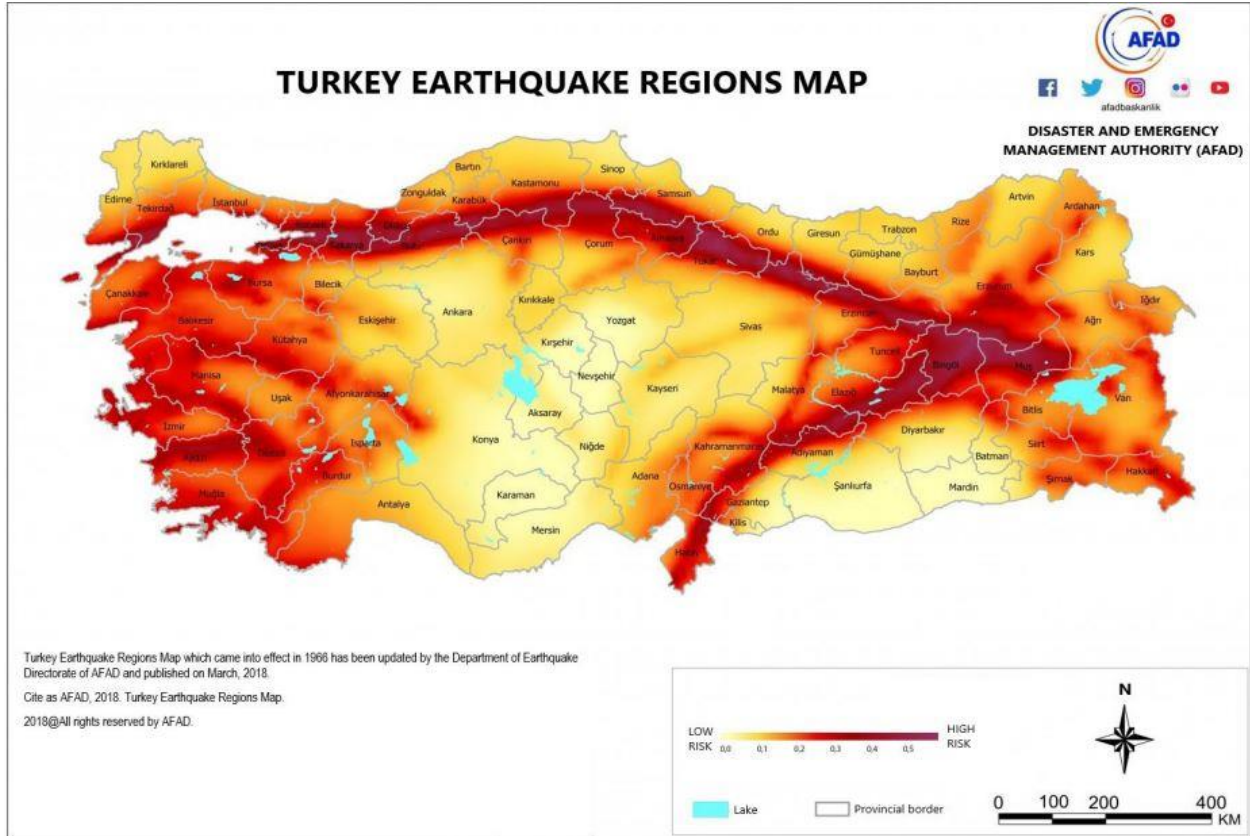


Figure 1. Earthquake Regions Map of Türkiye (AFAD, 2018).

Disaster management and crisis communication are pivotal policy domains, which necessitate the engagement of wide array of stakeholders across various sectors for many reasons. Decentralized disaster management systems are mainly characterized by its ability to involve multiple actors from different fields into the decision making and planning processes, whereas centralized disaster management is known for its hierarchical structure and limited numbers of institutions and actors engaged in the planning and decision-making processes. But “disasters are wicked problems, and no single agency can handle them alone (Weber and Khademan, 2008, as cited in Hermansson, 2016, p.333). Therefore, existence of single institution being responsible from all stages of disaster management system specifically in a country which has the current socio-political situation of Türkiye, is highly questionable. Existing literature highlights the constraints inherent in centralized systems within disaster management, attributed to the intricate nature of disasters. Thereby, this thesis is focusing mainly on the communication related inefficiencies after the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, by focusing on the crisis communication challenges that have occurred on the technological, organizational and sociological levels.

“Crisis communication plays the role of a glue, promoting collaboration and ensuring that efforts are not duplicated or misdirected” (Güneşer and Saygılı, 2024, p. 69). Therefore, existence of shortcomings in the crisis communication causes delays in the provision of rescue and aid operations and other necessary measures need to be taken during disaster response in a limited amount of time. After Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes, several different communication challenges had been observed, as the GSM operators and internet were collapsed in most of the affected areas; some affected areas were without help for a few days; the rescue operations were not enough due to the lack of human capital in The Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), and the inefficiency of coordination efforts, etc.

Even though humanitarian response aims for prompt and swift action when addressing disasters, typically completing initial assessments of fundamental necessities within 24 hours and initiating aid delivery swiftly thereafter (Mena and Hilhorst, 2022), the necessary activities within response stage were delayed and not efficient for the initial 24, 48 and 72 hours in most of the affected areas after the Kahramanmaraş earthquake happened. As Ugur-Cinar (2023) argues, the delay of rescue efforts had caused numerous preventable deaths. When the rescue operations are late and delayed, the death toll increases due to hypothermia, thirst, and hunger as people under the rubbles are trying to survive with minimal conditions.

Relevant crisis communication barriers and underlying contributing factors that occurred aftermath the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes will be analyzed under three main subheadings: technological challenges which would refer to infrastructure failure and social media restriction; sociological challenges which refers to the existing and long-lasting socio-political polarization in Türkiye among diverse identities; and organizational challenges which will comprehend on the centralized character of current Turkish disaster management system and moreover, the superiority of informal institutions over formal institutions in the current socio-political context of Türkiye.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

Crisis communication is one of the most crucial parts of disaster management system, as its efficiency has direct impact on the agility of response operations, therefore on the death toll and overall wellbeing of victims. The inefficiency of the crisis communication can cause delays, miscoordination in the provision of rescue and aid efforts, therefore can increase the death toll caused by the disaster. The main goal of this thesis is to comprehensively analyze the observed inefficiencies in the crisis communication aftermath Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, while also delving into the underlying factors behind relevant challenges such as informal and formal institutions' significance, actors' preferences and behaviors, and the type of disaster management and their relative impact on the crisis communication. By delving into the underlying reasons behind these inefficiencies, the study aims to provide insights into the structural, institutional, and socio-political factors that challenged effective crisis communication.

Specifically, the research seeks to identify, evaluate, and understand the various shortcomings in communication processes during the response stage of Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, both within and between relevant stakeholders, including governmental agencies, emergency responders, media outlets, and affected communities. In that regard, the relevant challenges will be classified and analyzed as such: technological, sociological, and organizational.

The main research question guiding this study is: "What types of crisis communication inefficiencies were evident during and after the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes?" Subsequently, this thesis seeks to address the underlying causes behind these communication shortcomings through the question: "What factors contributed to the relevant crisis communication inefficiencies observed during and after the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes?"

The thesis employs a research design centered on a singular descriptive case study, utilizing qualitative research methods. A mix-method approach is applied: process tracing and semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are aligning with the selected theoretical framework Actor Centered Institutionalism.

2. Literature Review

This thesis chapter will examine the political landscape of Türkiye during the tenure of the AKP government, spanning from 2002 to the present day. It will encompass the critical points in modern Turkish history that affected the current socio-political context and furthermore contributed to institutional inefficiencies during Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes. Furthermore, it will provide an in-depth analysis of the current disaster management system, the role played by AFAD, and the existing situation of traditional and social media in Türkiye.

2.1. Socio-political context of Türkiye under AKP government

Türkiye connects Asia and Europe in both geographical and political senses. Comprehending the socio-political landscape of Türkiye is crucial for this thesis, given the central role attributed to the actors and formal and informal institutions within its research framework. As elaborated upon in the theoretical framework, informal institutions and their relative significance vis-à-vis formal counterparts and preferences and behaviors of actors are primarily shaped by the cultural, social, and political norms prevalent in a given society. This section of the thesis will primarily scrutinize the AKP era, spanning over two decades, during which it had had considerable influence over formal and informal institutions, surpassing that of any other contemporary Turkish government.

After a protracted decade of coalition governments, the elections of 2002 brought the Justice and Development Party (JDP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) to power and resulted in the creation of single-party government (Çitak and Tür, 2008). As a result of 2002 elections, with slightly over one-third of the votes (34.3 percent), AKP secured a two-third majority in Türkiye's unicameral parliament, Grand National Assembly (Tepe, 2005). It was only after a few years aftermath the Marmara earthquake. Not surprisingly, building strong disaster management system was one of main premises of AKP that was used during the electoral campaigns. The party had imposed taxes to raise funds for the costs of safeguarding the nation for potential large earthquakes, and

significant gentrification projects had been carried out on the pretext of creating resistant homes (Ugur-Cinar, 2023).

Since 2002, the AKP has seen significant electoral success, creating a dominating party rule that has led to undisputed government with an overwhelming consolidation of power and an absence of an adequate checks and balances system (Müftüler-Baç and Keyman, 2012).

The AKP's rise to power and its wide-ranging electoral appeal have alarmed the secularist sectors of Turkish society as well as those in the Western intelligentsia, academic, and political circles who have grown rather pessimistic about the possibility of moderation in the post-September 11 world because its founders were largely drawn from the ranks of the National View Movement (NVM), known in Türkiye as a representative of political Islam (Ali Soner, 2010). However, the party members did not identify themselves with the NVM, rather, they identified their party as a conservative neoliberal democrat party. According to Yilmaz (2015), the party created a type of populism that is "conservative and neoliberal," which is "marked by focused anti-poverty initiatives and election-related expenditures, as well as attacks on privileged sectors and the effective control of inflation" (p.377).

Upon assuming power in 2002, the AKP expressed its commitment to initiating a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at meeting the criteria for European Union accession (Karaveli, 2016). Therefore, so-called Europeanisation¹ process has started for Türkiye. As Caman (2021) argues, in 2004, negotiations between Türkiye and the European Union commenced at the recommendation of the Commission, which assessed Türkiye as meeting the basic democracy and human rights standards outlined in the Copenhagen political criteria. Above-mentioned reforms had large scope which impacted SCOs, both formal and informal institutions, economy, the political landscape, etc.

¹ As a model of the term's definition, Featherstone and Radaelli (2003, 30) conceptualized Europeanisation as the processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms that were first defined and consolidated in European Union (EU) public policy making and politics (Coban Oran, 2022, p.1).

Following its second electoral triumph in 2007, a revamped AKP emerged, displaying heightened societal influence and diminished reliance on the EU and its democratization agenda, while also solidifying its stance against the secular base (Sipahioğlu, 2017). The AKP secured its third electoral triumph in the year 2011.

The year 2013 marked a significant period in the contemporary history of Türkiye, notably with the commencement of the Gezi protests on May 31st. Initially sparked by a group of civilian activists peacefully opposing the demolition of trees in Istanbul's Gezi Park and the proposed construction of a shopping center, the protests swiftly escalated across the country later that same evening. Spanning over two weeks, the demonstrations extended to nearly all cities in Türkiye. As Çıdam (2017) mentions, over the subsequent fortnight, the disputed public area transformed into a political platform where a wide array of participants, including environmentalists, Kemalists, feminists, LGBTQ+ communities, Kurdish groups, anarchist collectives, and diverse fractions of the far left, as well as a cohort of Islamists known as Anti-Capitalist Muslims, engaged in one of the Turkish republic's most noteworthy democratic initiatives (p.370). “According to official figures from the Minister of Interior, there were demonstrations in 80 out of 81 cities, with 3,611,208 people participating in 5,532 protests” (as cited in Gençoğlu Onbaşı, 2016, p.273).

The next year in the scope of this thesis is 2016, which had witnessed another failed coup attempt in modern Turkish history. According to Esen and Gumuscu (2017), since 1950, Türkiye has witnessed six military intervention attempts in its politics, with the latest occurring on 15 July 2016, when a civilian mobilization prevented the coup, marking the first instance in modern Turkish history of civilians halting a military coup with mass support. President Erdogan went to a TV to call his supporters to the street, to the squares by saying “I am calling my nation to the squares and airports of our cities. Let their minority to come with their tanks and weapons, let’s see what they will do to the nation. I have not seen any power above the nation’s power”. After the failure of coup attempt, the government has declared OHAL (Olağanüstü Hal, State of Emergency Rule in English). “Due to the Emergency Decree-Laws, 3122 institutions and foundations were closed (1748 associations and charitable foundations, 834 educational institutions, 49 health foundations, 109 student dorms and pensions, 15 private universities, 19

labor unions, union federations and confederations, 34 TV channels, 34 radio channels, 65 newspapers, 5 news agencies, 29 publishing houses, 19 journals) and 985 commercial businesses were transferred to the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund” (Altıparmak, 2017a, as cited in Yesil, 2021, p.228).

Moreover, perhaps the most striking constitutional change on Türkiye’s recent history was the change of the governmental system from parliamentary to the presidential in 2017, which was accepted by referendum. “The new draft introduced 18 amendments; while the parliament was authorized to enact laws on budget, and check the presidential powers in a limited framework, the president was empowered over the state institutions” (Gümüşçu and Esen, 2017, as cited in Özçolak, 2020, p.62).

In 2023 both presidential and parliamentary elections took place, where AKP’s coalition that was mainly consisted of far right, Islamist parties have won 322 seats out of 600 in the parliament, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have won again after the second round of presidential elections (Özkaya, 2023).

2.1.1. Institutions under AKP

During AKP’s governance, there have been several notable shifts in institutional dynamics of Türkiye. These transformations consist but not limited to a growing emphasis on informal institutions at the expense of formal ones; a trend towards the politicization of formal institutions, etc. Under the current government's administration, Söyler (2013) observes a phenomenon termed as "perverse institutionalization" in Türkiye, where the prevalent establishment of undemocratic informal norms disrupts and undermines the functionality of constitutional institutions, regardless of whether they are formally articulated as written rules (p.312).

Following the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system, there has been a notable escalation in the influence by the current Turkish president over formal institutions. The president wields immense authority over institutions, having sole discretion in appointing all

ministers and senior civil servants across all departments (Adar and Seufert, 2021). “In other words, during its more than two decades in power, and particularly in the wake of its 2011 electoral victory, the AKP government not only established firm control over state institutions but also built an extensive clientelistic network that closely ties different segments of society to the state” (Aydin-Duzgit, et.al., 2023, p. 1). According to Bermeo (2016), Türkiye has been experiencing democratic backsliding, and its primary form in Türkiye involves 'executive aggrandizement,' where elected officials progressively undermine checks on executive power, implementing a series of institutional changes that limit the ability of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences.

2.2. Mainstream and social media in Türkiye

2.2.3. Mainstream Media

According to Coşkun (2020), current government restricted media freedoms, fostered clientelist networks between media stakeholders and political elites, and inadequately safeguarded media professionals, consolidating their power and control over the state apparatus and strategically manipulating information to serve their interest. The government's grip on the media extends to having full control over eight of the nine primary television channels and all newspapers except three (Grigoriadis and Karabicak, 2022). Consequently, country's media freedom status has been changed from 'Partly Free' to 'Not Free' by the Freedom House in 2014 (Freedom House, 2014).

All these leads to the creation of political polarization among different media channels, organizations alongside with the decreasing power of journalism compared to the government (Sozeri, 2015, as cited in Liazos, 2023). “According to Reporters Without Borders, since 2017, much of the Turkish public has turned to independent outlets that are critical of the government or international independent media outlets in order to be informed about political and economic news, as %90 of the national media is under the control of the government” (Borders 2023b, as cited in p.28, Duygu, 2023).

2.2.3. Social Media

As social media enables ordinary citizens to spread and express the information, ideas, it is usually perceived as a threat for the countries characterized by democratic backsliding. Therefore, in these kinds of regimes, the governments leverage online censorship to shape the public's perception of key issues, propagate narratives favorable to the regime and monitor opposition as needed (Dal and Nisbet, 2022).

Website censorship, legal action against social media users is among the common practices within the extensive tactics utilized by current government to regulate online content (Yeşil, et.al., 2017). Gezi protests can be considered as a critical turning point in this regard, as by that time the mainstream media was not providing any information regarding the protests, people have started to use social media channels actively to disseminate information among each other and for external actors, which triggered the government's censorship over social media platforms. During the early 2010s, Türkiye introduced laws aimed at obstructing, filtering, monitoring, and retaining data from websites deemed oppositional to the governing party's dominance (Maksimov, 2023).

2.3. Current disaster management System of Türkiye

Government agencies are tasked with safeguarding the welfare of the public and ensuring citizen safety through proficient crisis management (Palttala, et.al., 2012). By agencies, the governmental institutions whose primary function is disaster management are meant. In that context, Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), who is the primary responsible actor for disaster management in Türkiye will be discussed in the following part of thesis.

2.3.1. AFAD

Since the establishment of AFAD in 2009, there is one governmental central institution that is responsible for all the stages of disaster management cycle, who needs to manage the communication between different involved actors such as NGOs, municipalities, local experts, etc. The Ankara-based AFAD Headquarters oversees various departments responsible for functions such as planning and prevention, emergency response, recovery efforts, civil

protection, earthquake management, administrative services, information technology, communication, and strategic development². “There are 81 provincial disaster and emergency management directorates and 11 regional search and rescue teams located in İzmir, İstanbul, Bursa, Afyon, Sakarya, Ankara, Samsun, Diyarbakır, Erzurum, Van and Adana. They work under the Governor’s offices of the cities and although Municipalities and NGOs are involved at the local level, the local AFAD directorates have the main role in the owing tasks” (Platt and Drinkwater, 2016,p. 224).

In total, AFAD employs 688 personnel in its central organization, comprising 549 permanent staff and 139 temporary workers, while across provincial units, there are 5,294 personnel, including 4,767 civil servants and 527 permanent workers (AFAD, 2022a, p.12). Meanwhile, the population of Türkiye is considered as 85.3 million for 2023.

Due to the centralized characteristic of disaster management system in Türkiye and also traditional earthquake engineering, local administrations have been struggling to actively participate in natural disaster management, primarily owing to the lack of explicit emphasis on disaster management within the laws governing their formation (Aydiner and Özgür, 2016). According to Balamir (2002), the provincial governorates, despite being the sole accountable bodies post-disaster, do not participate in the decision-making procedures for municipal disaster planning, which causes “incongruous relationship” between these two parts (Gülkan, 2009). Moreover, AFAD had been subject to criticisms in terms of nepotism and favoritism. Hermansson (2019) conducted interviews with AFAD personnel, revealing instances of favoritism within the organization, wherein the president of AFAD appoints individuals with closer personal ties to higher positions.

² AFAD, 2013–2017 Strategic Plan, Office of Prime Minister, Ankara, 2012 < https://www.afad.gov.tr/UserFiles/File/STRATEJI/Afad%20Strtjk%20web_en%20son.pdf > .

3. Conceptual Framework

In this chapter of the thesis, frequently used concepts will be furtherly elaborated, such as disaster, disaster management, centralized and decentralized disaster management systems.

3.1. Disaster Management

The term disaster is defined as “a serious disruption of the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of affected society to cope using only its own resources” (UNISDR, 2007; United Nations, 1992, as cited in Caymaz, et.al., 2013, p.610). Irrespective of the source, disasters are defined as an unexpected and, mostly, by their unforeseen occurrence that necessitates prompt action to mitigate the situation, according to the World Medical Association (2010). Disasters are events resulting in casualties and damage to property, caused either by natural phenomena within the environment's cycle or by human-induced factors (Özden, 2016, as cited in Çeliksoy, 2023, p.315).

On the other hand, the term ‘disaster management’ is defined as: “The systematic process of using administrative directives, organizations, and operational skills and capacities to implement strategies, policies and improved coping capacities in order to lessen the adverse impacts of hazards and the possibility of disaster” (UNISDR, 2009).

According to Richardson (2005), to force order and reason onto the chaotic reality of catastrophes and the human response to them, disaster scientists have created disaster phase models throughout time. Disaster management represents an extension of the overarching concept of risk governance, aiming primarily to prevent, diminish, and shift the adverse impacts of disasters by employing strategies encompassing mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (Çelik, 2015).

Petak (1985) explains the above-mentioned phases of the disaster management cycle as such: mitigation refers to addressing societal risks and implementing risk reduction programs; preparedness is about developing response plans, training first responders, fostering collaborations between relevant agencies and securing essential resources; whereas the response

stage refers to providing emergency assistance, minimizing additional damage, and aiding the recovery process; and the last stage recovery includes supplying immediate aid to restore essential services and maintaining support until normalcy returns to the community.

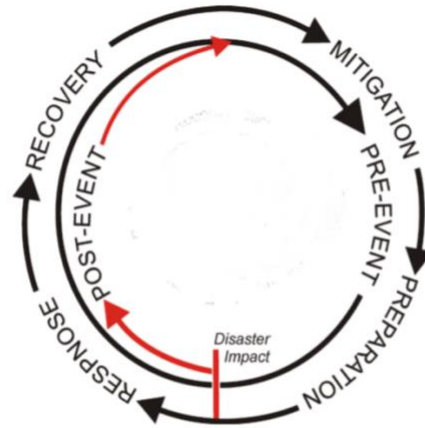


Figure 2: Four phases of Disaster Management Cycle

(adapted from Herold and Sawada, 2012, as cited in Arifah,et.al., 2019, p.4)

This thesis focuses on the communication challenges that have appeared during response stage of Kahramanmaras earthquakes which jeopardized the provision of immediate assistance, minimizing the additional damage and provision of the aid.

3.1.1. Centralized vs decentralized disaster management systems

Disaster management systems can be categorized as two distinct groups: centralized and decentralized disaster management systems. According to Marks (1978), centralization involves consolidating decision-making among a select few, while decentralization entails broader participation in the decision-making process. In other words, centralized systems are more hierarchical and lack the participation of different actors, while the latter is characterized vice versa. As Scott and Tarazona (2011) argue, advocating for decentralization in disaster responsibilities aims to enhance the involvement and capability of local actors. Decentralization also can be defined “as the devolution of power and responsibility over policies from the national level to the local level” (De Vries, 2000, p.193).

Existing literature on disaster risk management shows the extending benefits of decentralized disaster management systems for several reasons. The first and foremost reason is since majority of the disasters occur locally rather than nationwide, leveraging local information, expertise, and resources is crucial for effective prevention strategies (Messer, 2003). Almost every disaster occurs at the local level, leaving numerous communities to rely solely on their resources for the initial seventy-two hours following the disaster's impact (O'Leary, 2004). Thus, rather than awaiting bureaucratic approvals or central government assistance which can significantly delay the initial response, in decentralized systems, local actors and institutions have the capacity to act with heightened efficiency and expediency.

Furthermore, as the urgent intervention is crucial and more than needed during and after the disaster, local authorities and actors can play more effective and efficient role, as they are typically the first to arrive at the site, initiating rescue and mitigation efforts (Hayek, 1984, as cited in Bae, 2016). As Baker and Refsgaard (2007) states: "The distance between the disaster and the decision-makers in a centralized system may also limit the learning process needed to change strategy rapidly as the situation evolves" (p. 334).

During crisis moments, efficient communication becomes imperative; however, in scenarios where a singular entity necessitates communication, the process may become protracted. Moreover, excessive hierarchical and bureaucratic structures within the communication framework can impede an agile response, potentially causing delays. The intricate nature of natural disasters surpasses the capability of any singular organization or authority to independently manage, thereby substantiating the imperative for collaborative engagement among entities vested in disaster management (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). According to Hermansson (2017), promoting decentralization is seen as a catalyst for amplifying engagement, fostering greater capacity, and enhancing communication and coordination among diverse governmental levels and sectors.

Moreover, scholars argue that decentralization has a beneficial influence on the delivery of public services (Bardhan, 2002), as it increases both "allocative efficiency (through better matching of public services to local preferences) and productive efficiency (through increased

accountability of local governments to citizens, fewer levels of bureaucracy, and better knowledge of local costs)” (Kahkonen and Lanyi, 2001, p.1). As Baker and Refsgaard (2007) argue, the best-case scenario is for community-based and civic groups with the authority to direct relief activities and the local expertise to lead the assessment of needs and the scope of response.

3.2. Crisis Communication

Communicative dimension of disasters has emerged as a distinct area of research only after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, as it has been overlooked for a significant period within disaster management studies (Nohrstedt and Admassu, 1993). The communication aspect of disaster management system is mainly divided into two categories: risk communication and crisis communication.

Risk communication aims for prevention of the harm, while the crisis management is derived from the crisis management and public relations (Williams and Olaniran 1998, as cited in Steelman and McCaffrey, 2013, p.686). In other words, while risk communication takes place before the crisis happens, crisis communication becomes crucial during and after the crises.

According to Coombs (2010), the gathering, processing, and distribution of information needed to handle a crisis situation is a wide definition of crisis communication. “Crisis communication plays the role of a glue, promoting collaboration and ensuring that efforts are not duplicated or misdirected” (Güneşer and Saygılı, 2024, p.69). As Seeger (2006) argues, crisis communication is significant by its focus on specific cases and has typically prioritized the delivery and the content of messages during such occurrences, highlighting the cruciality of disseminating precise, timely and beneficial information. Its main aim is to minimize ambiguity, address and resolve the existing circumstance, and glean insights from it (Ulmer, et.al., 2007). Essentially, crisis communication serves three primary roles: directive data, which advises individuals on self-defense measures, adaptive data, which assists individuals in managing unpredictability, and assimilative data, which pertains to information aiding an organization in safeguarding its image (Sturges, 1994).

Crisis communication is a crucial subfield within the broader disaster management studies and its aspects such as interpersonal influence, media relations, technological systems, and interorganizational networking are the focus areas in this regard (Garnett and Kouzmin, 2007).

As the scope of this thesis is encompassing the response stage of Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, the crisis communication and the main aspects of it together with the experienced inefficiencies in this regard will be thoroughly analyzed in the following chapters.

4. Theoretical Framework

In this section, the theoretical framework of Actor Centered Institutionalism will be discussed in further detail. Moreover, the definition of institution will be elaborated to prevent a possible ambiguity in the use of the term.

4.1.1. Definition of institution

Prior to delving into the theory of Actor Centered Institutionalism, it is imperative to establish a precise definition of the term "institution" to mitigate potential ambiguity and ensure conceptual clarity. Institutions can be understood as rules in their simplest form. The existing literature distinguishes the institutions into two types: formal and informal institutions. While informal institutions encompass traditions, societal conventions, moral standards (Potucek, 2018), formal institutions mean written, formal rules and organizations (Streeck and Helen, 2005). Informal institutions, which represent the unspoken guidelines of political existence, serve three key roles: they supplement formal institutions by addressing their deficiencies, facilitate the coordination among overlapping or conflicting institutions, and function alongside formal structures in governing political conduct (Azari and Smith, 2012). The role of informal institutions in the public policy making varies from country to country.

The effectiveness of societies in dealing with extreme events is determined by the presence of established formal and informal policies and institutions (Handmer and Dovers, 2007, as cited in Nohrstedt and Parker, 2014, p.236). Likewise, crisis and disaster scholars observe that processes

of learning and preparedness for extreme events are constrained by a variety of social and political factors (Boin et al. 2009).

4.2. Introducing theory: Actor-Centered Institutionalism (ACI)

Being one of the new institutionalism theories, Actor-Centered Institutionalism emphasizes the agency and the autonomy of actors within institutions and consequently their impact on the institutional outcomes (Scharpf, 1997). According to Ploch (2017), the emergence of ACI was in response to the ongoing social differentiation, the goal was to challenge the traditional idea of separating the state from society, which asserts that only the state has the authority to control and direct societal affairs, relegating other social groups and organizations to passive roles. Actor Centered Institutionalism is built on the idea that how current establishments shape individuals' viewpoints, aspirations, and abilities greatly influences their behaviors (Potucek, 2018).

According to Pancaldi (2012), actors are the primary architects of policies, although institutions, including formal laws and social norms, certainly influence actors' perceptions and interactions, thereby shaping policy outcomes. "Institutional rules must be 'enacted' by actors, but institutions themselves are produced and reproduced through these actions. Institutionally defined situations influence the interests and even identities of actors within the boundaries of an institutions, and conversely institutions are rules defined in relation to stable configurations of actors with particular (institutionally defined) identities and interests." (Jackson, 2010, p. 5)

Formal institutions are creating the settings and arenas for actors. However, ACI recognizes the informal interactions that might take place outside of the institutional arenas, and thus norms and rules can be broken (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995, as cited in Breindl and Kuellmer, 2023, p.370).

As Weissert and Fahey (2018) argue, ACI emphasizes the deliberate use of institutions or a sense of affiliation by interested actors to strategically pursue their goals. An actor's perspective is influenced by cognitive factors, where conflicts may arise from their various affiliations with social entities such as regions, political parties, or countries (Breindl and Kuellmer, 2013).

ACI has two cornerstone concepts: constellations and modes of interaction. “Actor constellations’ provide the crucial link between substantive policy analysis and interaction-oriented policy research” (Kriesi and Jegen, 2001, p. 251). The actor constellation delineates their array of strategic alternatives, which they can blend in various manners to achieve their goals and preferences (Dobšinská, et.al., 2013).

Moreover, the interaction that are taking place among actors’ forms denote how actors engage, thereby determining the specific measures of public policy they enact (Dobšinská, et.al., 2013). According to Scharpf, modes of interaction among policy actors are distinguished as such: bargaining, hierarchy, unilateral action, majority decisions (1997).

4.3.Methods of Application

This research employs Actor-Centered Institutionalism to analyze the constellation of involved actors in the response stage of disaster and the mode of interaction among them. In the context of Kahramanmaras earthquakes, the main actors are considered as such: AFAD as a primary responsible actor, government officials; political parties/municipalities; local NGOs; GoNGOs; volunteer rescue/aid groups; media outlets; etc.

This thesis argues that due to the current socio-political and politico-administrative situation of Turkiye, the actor constellation during the response stage of Kahramanmaras earthquakes is highly polarized and situated as: pro-government and oppositional actors’ constellations. Moreover, in the recent decades the increasing superiority of informal institutions over formal institutions is exacerbating the efficiency of crisis communication. Disaster management and crisis communication are the policy domains that necessitate effective communication and collaboration among all involved actors and institutions. However, the existence of political polarization and superiority of informal institutions is causing the delays, the uneven distribution of needed resources, etc.

Furthermore, modes of interaction among involved actors is classified as hierarchical due to the centralized character of existing Turkish disaster management system, where AFAD is at the top of the hierarchy. As it is mentioned in detail in the conceptual framework, centralized disaster

managements are characterized by their hierarchical structure which is also impeding the agile response at the time of crisis where the agile and urgent response is needed. Moreover, as the AFAD is formal governmental institution and is at the top of the hierarchy in terms of disaster management, its communication and collaboration with oppositional/non governmental organizations became more challenging due to above-mentioned reasons.

Through the lens of ACI, the thesis describes how the constellation of actors and their interactions influence the effectiveness of disaster response and crisis communication strategies.

5. Methodology

This section of the thesis will delineate the adopted methodology, encompassing details regarding the research design and the selection of two primary research methods: process tracing and in-depth interviews.

5.1. Research Design

The research design is chosen as a single case study, and the research methods for the study are qualitative research methods. Utilizing a single case study approach is advantageous for this thesis as it allows for a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the specific context and dynamics surrounding crisis communication challenges within Türkiye's disaster response system. By focusing on a single case, namely the Kahramanmaraş earthquake, the intricacies of communication processes, institutional structures, actor constellations and their interaction types can be deeply analyzed.

Case studies have been prevalently employed within the realm of social sciences, demonstrating particular utility in fields oriented towards practical application, including, but not limited to, education, management, public administration, and social work (Mahdi, et.al., 2020). According to Thomas (2011), in case studies, researchers use a research strategy to comprehend a real-world phenomena in significant natural settings that are pertinent to the event they are studying. A case study is often characterized as a thorough and methodical exploration of a single entity—be it an individual, group, community, or another unit—where the researcher conducts a detailed

analysis of data concerning multiple variables (Heale and Twycross, 2018). Case studies can be either single or multiple case studies according to Yin (2003). This thesis adopts a single case study method, by analyzing the observed crisis communication inefficiencies during the response stage of Kahramanmaraş earthquakes.

As Siggelkow (2007) argues, single case studies can comprehensively illustrate the presence of a phenomenon. A single case study approach can offer unique advantages when examining complex phenomena within a specific context, such as the centralized disaster response in Türkiye, particularly focusing on Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. Secondly, the use of a single case study allows for a comprehensive examination of the historical and contextual factors that have influenced the development of disaster management policies and practices in Türkiye, particularly in the wake of critical junctures such as major earthquakes.

Three classifications of case studies—namely exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory—are delineated by Yin (1984). According to Zainal (2007), exploratory case studies aim to investigate particular aspects of the data that pique the researcher's interest, descriptive case studies seek to depict natural phenomena present in the data, and explanatory case studies meticulously scrutinize data to provide insights into observed phenomena at multiple levels. Moreover, considering the nature of the proposed research questions, this study is considered as descriptive single case study. Descriptive case study explains a phenomena or intervention along with the actual setting in which it took place (Yin, 2009).

5.2. Research Methods

The research methods of this thesis are selected mainly as process tracing and in depth semi structured interviews. The principle behind using them, together with their alignment with the research topic will be furthermore discussed in the following part.

5.2.1. Process Tracing

Systematically, the process tracing method aims to discern the causal mechanisms or sequences of events leading to a particular outcome that necessitates explanation (Wolff, 2012). Beach (2017) argues that the process tracing is a method that scrutinizes specific cases in-depth to meticulously follow and understand the intricate causal mechanisms driving a process. At a philosophical and knowledge-oriented level, process tracing aligns with the shift toward social science explanations reliant on identifying causal mechanisms which represent the fundamental components generating observed developments and results (Elster 1998; Gerring 2007b; Mayntz 2004, as cited in Bennett and Checkel, 2012).

Process tracing can be effectively utilized alongside Actor-Centered Institutionalism (ACI) due to its capacity to dissect and analyze the causal mechanisms behind institutional dynamics, which is central to the ACI framework. ACI focuses on the role of individual actors in shaping institutional outcomes, highlighting their agency and interactions within institutional contexts. Process tracing allows researchers to trace the actions and decisions of key actors over time, providing insights into how their behavior influences institutional dynamics. In this thesis, process tracing has been utilized to trace back to the initial 24, 48, 72 hours aftermath the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes to understand the context and chronology behind the observed communication barriers. Moreover, the past solutions and triggering events as critical junctures have been added to the analysis to have more holistic approach in terms of understanding actors' behavior in shaping the institutional outcomes.

Critical junctures in the history of Turkish disaster management system's evolution are considered as the biggest earthquakes' occurrence, such as Marmara earthquake, Van and Ercis earthquakes, that paved the way for institutional changes. By unpacking the sequences of events leading to specific outcomes, process tracing complements ACI by offering a detailed understanding of how individual actors navigate institutional structures, negotiate power relations, and drive institutional change. This combined approach enables a nuanced analysis of the interplay between actors, institutions, and broader societal forces in shaping institutional development and outcomes.

5.2.2. In-Depth Interviews

Interviewing is utilized as one of the suitable data collection methods in this thesis, as the communication related inefficiencies cannot be uncovered only through the process tracing. Interviews persist as a widely utilized approach owing to their ability to document various perspectives on reality, deepen our insight into individuals' drives, viewpoints, and encounters, and enable investigation of both mundane and extraordinary occurrences in authentic settings, emphasizing firsthand experiences (Milas and Huberman, 1994, as cited in Johnstone, 2017). The interviewer's intention to uncover undisclosed aspects of the interviewee's experiences, not typically revealed through a questionnaire, contributes to the depth of the interviews (Allmark, et.al.,2009). In an in-depth interview, the researcher skillfully leads a prolonged conversation with the participant by posing well-prepared, thoughtful questions, while also actively listening and reflecting on the interviewee's responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2011; Brouneus, 2011).

This particular research method is aligning with the core ideas of chosen theoretical framework Actor Centered Institutionalism, as it allows us to get rich insights into the perspectives, motivations and behaviors of individual actors within institutional contexts. ACI highlights the actors' interactions within institutions and their role in shaping of institutional outcomes. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to directly engage with the active actors who were actively working at the disaster area in the aftermath of Kahramanmaraş earhtuqakes and to explore their beliefs, perceptions, and decision-making processes. Moreover, the main aim was to uncover the norms, values and interests of actors within crisis communication. For this, respondents have been asked main questions such as “Which kind of communication inefficiencies have you experienced for the first 48 hours?”, “For how long did communication inefficiencies had been prolonged?”, etc. The exemplary questions have been added to the thesis as an Annex I.

The interviewers for this research have been selected through snowball sampling technique. This technique is widely favored for its networking and adaptability characteristics for finding the

respondents especially for the populations that are challenging to reach, due to some factors, such as vulnerability and sensitivity (Parker, et.al., 2019). In addition to the disaster victims, aid workers, journalists, politicians, and experts have also been exposed to distressing scenes and the human suffering resulting from the disaster, rendering them vulnerable and emotionally affected. Therefore, this specific sampling method has helped to reach to the interviewers.

In total 5 in-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted with different socio-political actors such as current political actors, NGO workers, experts, entrepreneurs, etc. who have actively taken a role in disaster mitigation efforts after the Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes. All the interviews were held in Turkish, and via online platforms. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

5.3. Limitations

As Hermansson (2017) explains, documentation/data of Turkish disaster management system is extremely hard to reach, and very limited. Therefore, this limitation has been handled by conducting in depth interviews with the actors who were actively working/volunteering at the disaster areas after Kahramanmaraş earthquakes.

Another limitation regarding the sample size in this thesis is its relatively small scale, with only five participants interviewed in-depth. While these interviews offer valuable insights into crisis communication challenges during the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations or contexts. Additionally, the narrow scope of participant perspectives may overlook certain nuances or variations in experiences related to crisis communication in Türkiye.

Moreover, another possible limitation could be the language barrier, since majority of the sources that were gathered were in Turkish, as well as the interview language. This limitation did not occur as the author of this thesis is native Turkish speaker.

5.3.1. Ethical Considerations

Considering the current political situation of Türkiye and potential challenges that respondents encounter for interviewing, the personal data of respondents have been used anonymized for confidentiality. The voice recording has not been asked due to the same reasons, only hand written notes have been taken during the interviews. The collected data will not be stored after the publication of this thesis.

Another potential ethical limitation concerning the research methods is the sensitivity of the research subject, coupled with the current socio-political context of Türkiye, which could have resulted in respondents leaving certain questions unanswered. To address this challenge, participants were briefed at the outset of the interview that their data would be treated anonymously, and their personal information was not gathered.

6. Past Solutions

To enhance comprehension of the evolution of crisis response capabilities, it is imperative to acquire deeper insights into how actors assimilate lessons from past events and the subsequent impact of these insights on policy formulation and institutional dynamics (Nohrstedt and Parker, 2014). Therefore, Past Solutions chapter will focus on the previous solutions to efficiency issues within Turkish disaster management system.

Türkiye's disaster management system has undergone significant evolution, notably influenced by critical junctures, often associated with major devastating earthquakes in the country's history. The centralized and hierarchical structure of Türkiye's existing disaster management system often results in reactive crisis responses by the Turkish government, with strategies being implemented only after the crisis has occurred, rather than through proactive planning (Unlu, et.al., 2010; Çelik, 2015). Thus, in this part of the thesis the previous decentralization and centralization efforts will be elaborated chronologically starting from the Marmara Earthquake in 1999 until Kahramanmaraş Earthquake in 2023 which are considered as the critical junctures that have triggered the status quo of Türkiye's disaster management system and led to changes at the policy and institutional levels.

6.1.1. Marmara Earthquake

Marmara Earthquake, registering 7.6 on the Richter Scale, happened on 17th August 1999 in the region between Bolu and Istanbul and lasted for 45 seconds. As per the Government Crisis Centre's report on October 19, 1999, the confirmed death count stood at 17,127, while the count of hospitalized individuals due to injuries totaled 43,953 (Özerdem and Barakat, 2000). World Bank's Marmara Earthquake Assessment Report stated as: 'the earthquake created the most difficult emergency management crisis faced by any nation in recent history' (1999, p.8). On the other hand, unofficial numerous sources contend that the number of death toll could be twice as high (Marza, 2004). The financial impact is estimated to be between \$9 billion and \$13 billion due to the damage caused (DPT, 1999).

Another striking fact is that the Turkish military, known for its organizational efficiency, faced public criticism for its delayed involvement in the initial two days of search and rescue operations following a disaster, eventually deploying 50,000 troops on the third day after the earthquake struck (Çetin, 2013).

One of the main challenges and reasons for the complete chaos was the lack of communication as well. Following the disaster, complete breakdown of communication networks, including GSM, resulted in a significant four-hour period during which the President and Prime Minister reportedly could not communicate due to the absence of backup telecommunication infrastructure between Ankara and Istanbul (Isbir and Genc, 2006, as cited in Çetin, 2013).

6.1.2. Decentralization Attempts

Institutional change commenced following the initial turning point identified in this thesis, namely the Marmara Earthquake, which led to a notable decline in public trust in the government's ability to manage disasters. Consequently, efforts to decentralize Türkiye's disaster management system marked the beginning of a slow process of institutional reform.

In 1999, significant challenges hindered efficient relief efforts: Absence of legislation facilitating local authority control over central government resources for disaster aid, the nonexistence of a

civil defense network, and an almost drained national earthquake relief fund (Turhan, 2005). Aydiner (2014) argues that the legal and institutional changes following the Marmara earthquake marked a new era, with the significant impact of life and property losses making 1999 a pivotal year. The increasing criticisms from the public have led the government bodies to adapt certain changes in terms of disaster management policies and laws. Increasing the responsibility of the municipalities is considered as the main decentralization attempt in that regard. As Balamir (2002) argues, municipalities and rural administrations became responsible to customize the disaster and emergency strategies for mitigation stage. However, this was also criticized by many as a national disaster management plan was also needed, together with the responsible institutions that can coordinate the communication between all involved actors and institutions (Hermansson, 2019).

A notable shift towards decentralizing the public administration system was proposed around the year 2000, but President Sezer vetoed it in 2004 citing constitutional worries (Göymen, 2006).

6.1.3. Establishment of AFAD in 2009

Consolidating disaster-related tasks under a single entity instead of multiple actors and institutions resulted in a fresh corporate reorganization (Akay, 2011). As it is indicated in its establishment rule, the relevant institution is responsible to define and plan the pre-disaster and post-disaster policies (Aydiner, 2014). Following 2009, subsequent to the amalgamation of various bodies, AFAD has functioned as Türkiye's primary coordinating entity for disaster-related decision-making. Its extensive authority encompasses all aspects of disaster control, ranging from readiness and assistance to rehabilitation and lessening of risks (Platt and Drinkwater, 2016).

6.1.4. Recentralization and Van and Erçis Earthquakes in 2011

The Van Earthquake, registering the 7.2 magnitude on Richter Scale, happened on 23rd October, 2011, in the area between Van and Erçis cities. The official death toll was 604, while the reported number of injured people was 2000 (Tolon and Mizrak, 2017).

Should involvement from local communities and civil society in Turkish disaster response prove challenging, the existing political fragmentation within the area stemming from the enduring conflict between the Turkish administration and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) could further intensify these obstacles (Hermansson, 2017).

Türkiye's heightened sensitivity stems from the longstanding Kurdish question, marked by a conflict between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since 1984, resulting in approximately 40,000 casualties, widespread displacement, and a breakdown of trust between government authorities and local communities.

6.2. Failure of decentralization efforts

In this part of the thesis, the underlying reasons for the failure of decentralization will be discussed furtherly.

Three main factors, according to Hermansson's (2019) in-depth analysis of Türkiye's disaster management system, contributed for the inefficiency of decentralization efforts: the introduction of new oversight mechanisms; the discrepancy between increased funding and additional local responsibilities; and the degree of collaboration between central and local government bodies.

Implementation of new oversight system here refers to the establishment of AFAD in 2009 as it is above-mentioned. The Turkish public administration system is known for its pervasive authority monopolies, political favoritism, favoritism, lack of openness and accountability, and politicization of the government (Aktan, 2001, Ozsemerci, 2003, as cited in Memisoglu and Durgun, 2008, p.428), therefore AFAD is not an exception in this regard. Following the forty-four (44) in depth interviews that Hermansson (2009) has conducted, the main concerns about AFAD's operation are as follows: the ambiguity of accountability, lack of transparency and favoritism. One specific example regarding this criticism is related to the lack of transparency during the recruitment process, as the head of AFAD is the responsible one to appoint the people to the positions based on their personal closeness and political loyalty to the ruling party AKP.

The second driving force for the failure of decentralization efforts is the mismatch between the capacity of responsibility of local actors. While the local actors started to have more

responsibilities, they continued to lack the capacity to be able to efficiently handle the increased responsibility. As mentioned elsewhere, local actors are considered as knowledgeable regarding the geography, specific needs, etc. However, even this argument becomes problematic when it comes to Türkiye, due to the existing politicization of the whole public administration system. “The provincial governors who are responsible for managing disasters in Türkiye are often new to the provinces where they work, and may therefore be unaccustomed to the local conditions” (JICA,2004, as cited in Hermansson, 2009, p.425). As a result, that local government representatives are not considered really informed about that particular locality.

The last point that Hermansson (2009) highlights is related to central-local collaboration. Both in centralized and decentralized systems, central-local collaboration has crucial impact during the crisis moments. The growing ethnic, political, and economic division in Türkiye makes it even more difficult for central and local players to collaborate and communicate, which is especially problematic when it comes to the Kurdish issue.

Deep-rooted Kurdish conflict is an intra-state and ethno-political conflict, which has been existing between Turkish government and PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) (Çakın, 2017,p.7). especially in the southeastern Türkiye, where the Kurdish people are the majority ethnical group, “perceived to threaten the country’s unity, the decentralization debate is controversial and politically sensitive in Türkiye (Goymen, 2006; Gul and Kiris, 2015, as cited in Hermansson, 2019, p.). This leads to several different difficulties in terms of communication between central and local actors. To be more specific, for example, where the HDP (People’s Democratic Party) governs the municipality, communication between Ankara and that specific region becomes more difficult due to above-mentioned ethnical and political problems.

7. The Analysis of the Case: Kahramanmaras Earthquakes

“As of 20 March 2023, the total death toll of over 57,000 (50,000 in Türkiye and 7,000 in Syria) — with numbers expected to rise — makes this event the deadliest in modern Turkish history, exceeding the tragedy of the 1939 magnitude 7.8 Erzincan earthquake, which killed nearly 33,000 people” (Hussain, et.al., 2023, p. 287). The disaster was one of the worst in the region in

the previous century due to a combination of factors including the shallow depth of the fault line and the simultaneous rupture of many fault lines (Havva et.al., 2024).

Official numbers of wounded people from the disaster is 115,00 people; and the 528,146 people have been evacuated from the disaster area (Aydınbaş, 2023). With the coinciding winter storm, those who managed to flee their homes faced frigid temperatures ranging from -5°C to -19°C , while the heavy snowfall blocked roads and railways, hindering search, rescue operations, and the prompt arrival of aid to the affected areas (Hussain, et.al., 2023). The following table (Table 1) shows the number of damaged buildings, their level of damage per province. In total 518,009 buildings are severely damaged or collapsed; 131, 577 buildings are moderately damaged, while 1,279,727 buildings had been considered as slightly damaged according to PSBD (2023).

Province	Severely damaged or collapsed buildings	Moderately damaged buildings	Slightly damaged buildings
Adana	2,952	11,768	71,072
Adiyaman	56,256	18,715	72,729
Diyarbakir	8,602	11,209	113,223
Elazig	10,156	15,22	31,151
Gaziantep	29,155	20,251	236,497
Kahramanmaras	99,326	17,887	161,137
Malatya	71,519	12,801	107,765
Hatay	215,255	25,927	189,317
Kilis	2,514	1,303	27,969
Osmaniye	16,111	4,122	69,466
Sanliurfa	6,163	6,041	199,401
Total	518,009	131,577	1,279,727

Table1. Damage distribution of damaged structures as of March 6, 2023 (PSBD, 2023)

Communication between crisis responders has been shown to be a critical element that benefits coordination, mitigation, readiness, and collaboration as well as community empowerment and

harm limitation (Van Gorp, et.al., 2015). In the case of Kahramanmaraş earthquakes crisis communication was especially challenging, considering the socio-political background of Türkiye, its existing disaster management system, strict control over media, etc. As Güneşer and Saygılı states, “Crisis communication plays the role of a glue, promoting collaboration and ensuring that efforts are not duplicated or misdirected” (p.69). Considering the impeccable importance of crisis communication after this kind of large-scale earthquake, this chapter of thesis will analyze the crisis communication challenges occurred during and after Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. The observed communication barriers are classified as: technological, sociological and organizational challenges. Subsequently, the underlying factors that contributed to the above-mentioned challenges will be discussed furthermore.

7.1. Technological challenges

Since technology frequently provides the sole means of bridging geographical gaps and facilitating communication between those reacting to and managing the crisis and persons in the crisis region, it is essential during crisis response and recovery (Fischer, et.al., 2016). In this part of the thesis, technological problems will be analyzed through two relevant challenges: infrastructure failure in terms of telecommunication and internet access; and social media usage.

The first communication inefficiency that was observed by the population living in disaster area was the absence of telecommunication, as majority of the GSM operators were not working. As Bozkurt and Demir (2023) argue, because the first 72 hours after the disaster is critically important, the absence of communication tools led to the inefficiency among the other factors of disaster management and impeded the coordination efficiency in terms of after disaster operations. The same issue was observed by Turkish population during the Marmara earthquake, that the government officials were contacting each other through live connection on TV, as the GSM operators were not operating. 24 years later, despite the improvements in the technology and communicational tools, the same obstacle had repeated itself. One of the respondents who is active member of Deprem Dayanisma said about telecommunication that:

“Every day some of us were gathering and going to the closest hill to be able to call people from other cities, such as Adana and report our needs like generator, equipment for the rescue operations, etc. One of our friends from Ankara has created a social media account to inform public about people’s needs in Hatay, as we had no access to any social media platform. But when it comes to communicate with each other on the disaster area, we were helpless. One day we needed neck protector for children that were being rescued by some volunteers, I will never forget that I needed to walk at least 1 kilometer to ask other volunteer teams to check if they have neck protector” (respondent from an NGO on Earthquake Solidarity).

Moreover, the respondent from Hatay has stated that they did not have any telecommunication for the first 4 days aftermath the disaster, and at least 7-10 days until they have all communication means including both telecommunication and internet.

Technological innovations and development have changed the operation of communication as well, starting with social media. Social media tools have altered how the general population can engage during disasters and other large-scale emergencies (Palen and Hughes, 2018). Therefore, the role of social media tools during and afterwards the disasters and alike emergencies have been subject to much research. Following Hurricane Katrina's impact in 2005, numerous affected individuals utilized social networking platforms, online journals, and similar means to exchange vital details (Procopio and Procopio, 2007), coordinate aid efforts by distributing essential resources to those requiring assistance (Torrey et al., 2007), and to locate missing individuals while also arranging accommodation for the disaster victims (Macias et al., 2009).

Considering the scale of Kahramanmaraş earthquake, and the evident inefficiency of local actors, the crucial role of social media was undeniable, as many people under the rubbles were reaching out to influencers, NGOs through Twitter to report their location (Toraman, et.al., 2023). Also, Twitter was the main communication tool for the provision of disaster relief, as affected people were able to post their needs by tagging influencers, politicians, etc. to be able to reach a broader audience. During the first 48 hours after the earthquake, most of the disaster related 52 million posts on social media platforms were posted on the Twitter (Haber Turk, 2023, as cited in Argin, 2023, p.149). However, the platform of Twitter was restricted by the

authorities after 72 hours which led to enormous criticism among the public. Moreover, the Turkish authorities commenced apprehending individuals for what they labeled as "provocative content" and "false information" shared on social media (Ertas, 2023).

7.2. Sociological challenges

Existing literature on crisis response challenges shows that the main sociological barrier in crisis response worldwide stems primarily from the diversity of different actors. By diversity, the ethnic, political, religious, etc. background of different actors is meant. Incorporating models of human activity and communication behavior is essential in designing communication systems (Manoj and Baker, 2007).

In Türkiye's current context, central-local collaboration faces significant challenges even in non-disaster scenarios, attributed to political and social polarization, hierarchical structures, the superiority of informal institutions over formal institutions, etc. Consequently, it is not surprising that during large-scale disasters, compounded by communication deficiencies resulting from the disaster, the situation exacerbates into a tragedy.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the socio-political context regarding the government's attitude towards minorities has created more discrepancies within crisis communication. For example, Hatay is mainly populated by Arabic-alevi people, and my respondent from Hatay stated,"

“ I believe that there was government discrimination specifically towards us because of our ethnicity. No one talked about Hatay in the first 24 hours. Police and jandarma have come to Hatay only after 4-5 days, but they also did not have any resources with them, so we were helping them as well by providing food, water, clothing for them” (respondent from an NGO on Earthquake Solidarity).

7.3. Organizational challenges

Organizational challenges are one of the significant barriers that occur during crisis communication management. It usually occurs among and within the responsible organizations involved in disaster management. Existing literature shows that strong organizational standards and regulations obstruct communication and make it more challenging to have a shared understanding of the issue (Fischer, et.al., 2016).

In the context of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake, the observed communication challenges mainly stemmed from the centralized and, therefore, highly hierarchical mode of interaction among involved stakeholders of disaster response efforts which is explained through the ACI, which resulted in the inefficiency of coordination and crisis communication among different stakeholders such as AFAD, NGOs, volunteer groups, army, municipalities, political parties, etc. “Organizational challenges are prevalent in disaster response, especially when groups that are accustomed to hierarchy and hierarchical (centralized) communication must suddenly work in a flatter, more dynamic, ad-hoc organization that emerges during post-disaster relief efforts” (Manoj and Baker, 2007, p.52). Slower reactions, incorrect practices, and not considering the local response to the decisions can easily be caused when only the central institution makes the decisions for the entire country (Öcal, 2021). For instance, numerous volunteer rescue workers have recounted instances on social media where, despite being on-site amidst the debris, they were barred from initiating rescue operations by officials citing the need for authorization from Ankara. Again, the local authorities were highly restricted in the first 24 to 48 hours as they were waiting for bureaucratic approvals from Ankara, and considering the scale of the earthquakes and the human capital of AFAD, it is crystal clear that agile response has not been achieved simultaneously in all the affected areas.

As mentioned above, AFAD is primarily responsible for coordinating different stakeholders involved in the disaster management system. Besides the apparent fact that this kind of large-scale disaster needs the involvement and cooperation of multiple stakeholders rather than only one responsible institution, coordination and collaboration among other actors and institutions have been insufficient due to the politically polarized actor constellations in the Turkish disaster

management system. The hierarchical mode of interaction between AFAD and other actors contributed to the observed deficiencies in crisis communication.

Moreover, organizational size of AFAD also created another barrier as it does not match the needed human capital. The interviewed disaster management expert from AFAD has answered to the question of “Were AFAD’s capability enough for the response stage?” as:

“Broadly speaking, we had 30.000 rescue workers and plus soldiers, NGOs, miners and of course international rescue workers that came across the globe. Our teams of course were not enough. Imagine, 39.000 buildings were completely destroyed. You need approximately 25 rescue worker for only one building. With the basic mathematics, we needed at least 1 million rescue workers to be able to work on all the rubbles”. (Expert, AFAD).

Respondents for this thesis have been asked about their experience with AFAD teams. 2 interviewers from Hatay have said that AFAD teams have arrived to the disaster area only after 3 days. A politician who was in Hatay aftermath the disaster has stated that:

“We have collaborated with every non-governmental organization, and even with other political parties, except governmental bodies. We had from no to very little connection with the AFAD team, but we could work definitely better if they communicated with us” (Politician from TIP).

Because most of Türkiye’s population lives in the seismic zones, the ministry, which is responsible for all stages of disaster management, has incomprehensibly low numbers of personnel.

The above-mentioned quotation clarifies the existing actors’ constellations, as pro-governmental actors and oppositional/non-governmental actors have created polarized constellations, which is creating a deficiency in the response stage in general. This, and furthermore, the hierarchic al mode of interaction among the relevant actors has caused delays, incorrect distribution of the collected aid, and increased death toll.

Moreover, almost all respondents stated there was inefficiency in coordinating the volunteer groups, especially volunteer rescue and aid groups. A respondent from Deprem Dayanisma

stated that she had seen a group of volunteer rescue workers after 24 hours in Hatay, who asked them what they should do and where they should go. A respondent from AFAD has answered the question regarding the coordination of volunteer groups as such:

“Volunteers does not make sense; they only impede the rescue efforts. They are ordinary citizens, and it is more likely that they will have PTSD after. I personally would not let the volunteers to the disaster area” (Expert at AFAD).

One respondent who had organized his own companies into aid distribution/coordination centers shared his experience of providing aid with large trucks/transporters for the first 72 – 96 hours in Mersin, Adana, Hatay. He has answered to the question of if he and any of his members ever faced any challenge to go into the cities:

“No, we had some brothers that we know. We called them, they registered our car numbers, so we did not have any issue in any city. Even the police could not stop us”. (Businessman)

This excerpt from the interview once again shows the superiority of informal rules over formal rules, as so many NGOs, oppositional political parties have faced challenges while trying to distribute the aid in the affected areas as it was uncovered during interviews and through process tracing, whereas knowing someone who has high position can solve the problem in a matter of seconds.

The structure of AFAD itself is highly hierarchical and has been criticized for favoritism, nepotism, corruption, inadequacy regarding the appointment of people to certain positions. Perhaps the most striking example for this is the educational background and career of Ismail Palakoglu, who is General Director of AFAD. Palakoglu has graduated from the department of Theology, and then served in different positions at the Directorate of Religious Affairs for several years before joining AFAD as a high level manager³. Obviously, as an actor who plays extremely important role in the disaster response, his career and educational background can be considered as a great mismatch regarding the knowledge and the responsibility.

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230210013702/https://www.diken.com.tr/afad-genel-muduru-ismail-palakoglunun-ozgecmisi-goz-kamastirdi/>

Another organizational barrier has stemmed from the delayed deployment of soldiers to the disaster area. Considering the fact that Türkiye has one of the strongest and powerful armies in the world, Turkish public and disaster victims were asking “Where is the Turkish army?” One respondent has stated that her friend from Antakya who was living close to military post and have tried to reach the soldiers there and ask for help for the rescue operations but she got the answer that “we cannot, we did not receive any command”. A respondent from AFAD has been asked whether it is presidential administration or AFAD responsible for dispatching the soldiers to disaster area, and he responded as such:

“It is completely AFAD’s responsibility bureaucratically. And yes, we have dispatched the soldiers from the first day for ensuring the safety, as a measure for preventing plunder. But soldiers should not be involved in the rescue efforts, it is not their responsibility. Even their wireless connection would not work in that scenario, since the affected area was so large.”
(Expert, AFAD)

Moreover, a respondent from Hatay has responded to the question regarding their experience with soldiers as such:

“Yes, we have started to see some small groups of soldiers after 2-3 days. They were helping the rescue operations” (Politician from TIP, Hatay).

Organizational challenges that have paved the way to the observed crisis communication challenges are due to the underlying reasons such as centralized disaster management system, hierarchical mode of interaction among different stakeholders, highly polarized actor constellations and superiority of informal institutions over formal institutions.

8. Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis was to identify the barriers and the underlying factors behind them in the crisis communication of Türkiye by analyzing Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes as a case study. Kahramanmaraş earthquakes is one of the deadliest disasters that ever happened in the

modern history of Türkiye, which needed strategically pre-planned crisis communication to ensure the agility in the disaster response. However, several crisis communication challenges have impeded the agile response. The relevant challenges are classified as technological, sociological and organizational barriers.

In terms of technological challenges, the infrastructure failure and the social media usage/restrictions have been analyzed as the contributing factors for the relevant challenges. After the disaster, the GSM operators and therefore internet did not work in severely damaged areas, such as Hatay for at least initial 4 days. It was confirmed through in depth interviews that less affected areas had relatively better telecommunication in the first days, such as Diyarbakir, Mersin. The infrastructure failure had lead to the loss of time for rescue and aid operations, which is problematic, as every single minute is valuable especially in the response stage.

Moreover, the social media platform X had been used as a communication tool among aid workers, and a lot of people under the rubbles were reaching out to influencers, journalists, etc. to communicate their location and ask for help. The relevant social media platform was restricted after 72 hours, without any specific explanation by authorities. However, the respondents have mentioned that since they did not have access to the internet in general, the restriction over the usage of X did not have major impact on their efforts.

These technological challenges slowed down the rescue and aid operations as aid and rescue workers and involved actors' communication among themselves was also impeded and led to an increasing death toll. Following the conducted in-depth interviews, it is evident that when there is a lack of communication tools, aid workers/volunteers need to have physical contact with each other in the disaster area in order to collaborate, which leads to the loss of time, considering how crucial are the first 24, 48, and 72 hours in the aftermath of any given earthquake. For example, respondents have stated that they needed to collaborate with other teams to share the equipment, aid, etc., since, in the initial days, everything was minimal considering the scale of the disaster. However, as they did not have any technological means, they lost time over physically finding each other.

The second type of observed crisis communication is classified as sociological challenges. Sociological challenges have been caused by the diversity of affected population and therefore responsible actors. By diversity, mainly the actors' ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class, political identity are meant. Here, ACI aids in comprehending how various actors' backgrounds may influence how they respond to particular occurrences.

Based on the conducted in-depth interviews with various actors, this thesis shows that the rescue and aid operations became more agile when the identities (political, ethnic, cultural, religious) of central-local actors/citizens are similar, and slower for the vice versa. In other words, actor constellations were socio-politically polarized and divided as pro-government and oppositional actors' constellations. Therefore, the collaboration and communication became smooth as it needed to be within each polarized constellation, whereas the communication among all of them became highly challenging and non-existent in some cases. For example, almost all respondents from Hatay have stated that their initial interaction with AFAD was very late (3-4 days after the initial earthquake), and they have coordinated their rescue and aid efforts with other volunteers and oppositional political parties. Furthermore, a review of Türkiye's current socio-political environment helps to get in a deeper understanding of the sociological problem, which is something that people in Türkiye encounter on a daily basis but is more apparent in times of crisis. For example, all the respondents who have oppositional, minority background have said that their communication with other non-governmental organizations, volunteers, and other oppositional political parties was efficient and transparent, whereas they had several challenges when it comes to communication and collaboration with governmental actors and institutions.

Organizational challenges have stemmed from the centralized characteristic of the Turkish disaster management system, which paves the way to a highly hierarchical structure and, therefore, delays inter-organizational collaboration. Following Scharph's (2000) understanding of the Actor Centered Institutionalism framework, the modes of interaction between responsible actors within disaster management are identified as hierarchical, with AFAD at the top. As it is widely stated, disasters are way too complex for any single institution/actor to manage alone, and an earthquake of such magnitude that affects ten cities in one nation cannot be efficiently handled by one organization alone. Especially considering the existing socio-political

polarization in actors' constellations in the context of the Turkish disaster management system, having a hierarchical structure is not considered favorable, as it immensely challenges central-local collaboration. As a result, the coordination activities have slowed down, which was vital in the initial days after the disaster for minimizing human losses and speeding up rescue efforts. Moreover, the mismatch between the needed human capital and the existing capacity of AFAD has also been analyzed in terms of organizational challenges. When it comes to the coordination of volunteer groups/NGOs, another organizational inefficiency occurs as, yet again, the scale of the disaster and its impact was immense.

To better understand the actors' responses to disasters and the current problems of disaster management systems in general, the previous attempts to implement reform in terms of disaster response have also been discussed. The previous solutions have been provided by the historical trajectory, namely the Marmara earthquake and the Van and Ercis Earthquakes, and the creation of AFAD, as significant disasters are usually turning points in the reform policies of the Turkish disaster management system.

Moreover, this thesis shows the superiority of informal institutions over formal institutions in Türkiye have also contributed to the observed communication inefficiencies, as it caused sociological and organizational challenges, which was also one of the reasons behind the failure of previous decentralization attempts. ACI helped in that regard to understand the actors' preferences and actions as the values, norms are playing important role in the shaping of actor preferences. Examples of cultural factors that challenge reform implementation in Türkiye are longstanding values and attitudes within the administrative system that manifest themselves in centralized decision-making structures, seniority systems, and nepotism (Sozen and Shaw, 2002). For example, knowing someone in the Turkish bureaucracy and therefore using the clientelistic network have helped a respondent to coordinate their own aid operations in the first 72 hours, whereas other interviewed respondents from oppositional backgrounds have stated that they faced several challenges by governmental institutions when they tried to distribute aid in the affected areas. Again, the polarization within actor constellations are evident which is contributing to the superiority of informal institutions.

To conclude, the observed crisis communication challenges aftermath the Kahramanmaras earthquake have been classified as technological, sociological and organizational barriers. While technological barriers have been caused due to infrastructure failure and restriction over social media usage, sociological barriers have been caused due to the diversity, which also helps to understand the polarized actors' constellations among involved actors. Moreover, organizational challenges have been analyzed through carefully examining the centralized character of existing disaster management system, moreover, insufficient resources of main responsible institution AFAD in term of human capital and coordination efforts with other relevant stakeholders. Moreover, as the constellation of actors is socio-politically polarized, the existing hierarchy in the mode of interaction between AFAD and other stakeholders have made the situation even more challenging.

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APPENDIX I – Interview Questions

Questionnaire

The interviews are anticipated to last approximately 25-30 minutes and will be conducted online via Zoom. Conducted in Turkish, the interviews will adhere to a semi-structured and in-depth questionnaire format. Interviewers have been recruited using the snowball sampling technique and comprise a diverse group of individuals, including politicians, journalists, and civil society organization (CSO) activists, who were actively involved during the Kahramanmaras earthquakes.

Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your occupation?
3. Where do you currently reside?
4. In which city were you when the Kahramanmaras earthquakes happened?
5. Can you talk about your experience of initial 24 hours aftermath the disaster happened?
6. Which actors did you see except disaster victims in the affected areas first 24, 48 and 72 hours?
7. Which kind of communication means did you have in the initial days?
8. If you did not have any means, how long did it take?