



This report is produced by the OCHA Syria Crisis offices with the contribution of all sectors in the hubs and at the Whole of Syria (WoS) level. It covers the period from 1 – 31 January 2018. The next report will be issued on or around 10 March 2018.

Highlights

- An estimated 61,000 individuals reportedly returned to Ar-Raqqa city since the end of hostilities in October 2017, however the number of returnees remains difficult to verify.
- Explosive hazards contamination continues to hamper humanitarian access and poses a serious threat to the returning population. Whilst the scale and scope of the contamination is still not fully known given the absence of a systematic survey, on average there are up to 50 incidents per week reported in Ar-Raqqa city, which have resulted in deaths and injuries.
- In early February, following one month of restrictions for humanitarian actors to operate in Hassakeh, an initial two-month agreement was brokered with the local administration and the Governor of Hassakeh, whereby some national NGOs will be allowed to resume humanitarian response efforts.

569

blast wounded victims treated due to explosive hazards in Ar-Raqqa city between 20 October 2017 and 26 January 2018.



61,000

Returns to Ar-Raqqa city since October 2017.



577,800

people displaced from and within Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates in 2017 (Source: CCCM Cluster).



Situation Overview

Administrative challenges to humanitarian response activities persisted in northeast Syria. In late December, national NGOs working in northeast Syria received a letter dated 20 December from the local administration, informing the NNGOs of the administrative requirement to register with the administration to continue their operations. After none of the NNGOs complied with the requirement, the local administration suspended all 25 NNGOs previously active in the area on 5 January 2018. In line with the official Syrian Government position, the Governor of Hassakeh instructed the NNGOs not to register and further instructed the High Relief Committee to stop issuing facilitation letters for the distribution of supplies and the implementation of projects in the area until the suspension was reversed. This marks the fourth time that NNGO activities have been suspended in northeast Syria due to bureaucratic obstacles.

The suspension of activities affected a total of 25 NNGOs in northeast Syria, eleven of which are currently partnering with the UN. The effects of the NNGO suspensions were severe with an estimated 60 to 70 percent of operations on hold, impacting up to 720,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance. The suspensions have particularly affected the delivery of health services provided by UNICEF, WHO and UNFPA. The suspension delayed distributions of food and emergency relief commodities in Al Hol, Ain Issa, and Mabrouka IDP sites. All clinics in the Areesha and Mabrouka IDP camps had to be closed, depriving the vulnerable IDP community of life-saving health services. During the reporting period, only 54,000 out of the more than 300,000 targeted people in need received emergency food assistance.

In early February, following one month of restrictions for humanitarian actors to operate in Hassakeh, an initial two-month agreement was brokered with the local administration and the Governor of Hassakeh by the UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, whereby the majority of national NGO operations will be allowed to resume work during a two month grace period. However, the impact of the restrictions was significant while it lasted. Any protracted interruption of humanitarian assistance and services in the IDP sites may create push factors for IDPs to return to areas of Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates where their safety can be at risk.

Ar-Raqqa Governorate

Explosive hazards contamination continues to hamper humanitarian access and poses a serious threat to the returning population. Clearance operations continued in certain areas of the city, focusing on key infrastructure, such as the main roads and administrative buildings. Whilst the scale and scope of the contamination is still not fully known

given the absence of a systematic survey, on average there are up to 50 incidents per week reported in Ar-Raqqa city, which have resulted in deaths and injuries.

According to the U.S.-led Coalition, explosive hazards reportedly killed 255 civilians between 20 October and 3 January. In addition, NGO partners estimate more than 569 individuals sustained blast-related injuries in the city between 20 October and 26 January. Humanitarian actors continue to caution that in the absence of a systematic explosive hazard survey, most areas of the city, including residential areas, remain potentially contaminated with explosive remnants of war (ERWs) and express concern that the provision of broad humanitarian assistance in Ar-Raqqa city could create an unsafe pull factor for IDPs. Humanitarian actors agree that humanitarian response activities should advance slowly and with caution (1) in neighborhoods where conditions are met for return, (2) be based on needs and security assessments, (3) be balanced with the response outside the city and in IDP sites to avoid creating pull factors, (4) continue harmonized and coherent messaging to the population and advocacy with authorities at various levels on safe and voluntary returns, and (5) continue and reinforced mine risk education activities.

A UN field visit to Ar-Raqqa city in mid-January found that the pace and scale of returns continues to increase despite the risk of explosive hazards, lack of basic services (water, electricity, etc.) and lack of economic opportunities. Returns as well as the re-opening of bakeries and shops continued to be reported in Ar-Raqqa city particularly in Al-Mashlab and Al-Rumaila neighborhoods. Overall, over 60,000 estimated returns to Raqqa city have been reported since October 2017. Al-Mashlab neighborhood has reportedly reached its maximum capacity, with an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 households currently residing in the neighborhood.

Markets are reportedly functioning in the city; however, food assistance was not distributed in Ar-Raqqa city during the reporting period. Availability of drinking water, electricity as well as health and education services remains limited. The main water station serving Ar-Raqqa city and surrounding areas is only able to function at a limited capacity due to significant water network damage. While water trucking activities are occurring in some neighborhoods, most neighborhoods continue to face a severe shortage of safe drinking water. Water trucking is reportedly available in the Al-Jazrah, al-Tayyar, Rumaila, Al-Haseiwa and Al-Berazy Square neighborhoods. During the reporting period, an estimated 8 million liters of fuel was distributed to schools, bakeries and some households. WASH and mine action actors are cautiously scaling-up their response inside city, although the conditions for voluntary, informed, safe and dignified returns are not in place.

Priority needs across Ar-Raqqa city include systematic explosive hazard survey, marking and clearance of areas potentially contaminated by explosive hazards, risk education campaigns, provision of drinking water, reconstruction support, and increased winter supplies. Priority needs in Al-Mashlab neighborhood reportedly include survey, marking and clearance of areas which might be affected by the presence of explosive hazards, as well as the provision of risk education campaigns, food assistance and emergency relief commodities including winterization items, rehabilitation of shelters, electrical and water systems and rubble removal. Neighborhood councils were recently established to identify community needs and support service provision.

For the first time since the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took control over Raqqa, students in Ar-Raqqa governorate sat for school exams in late January. Written exams were conducted for students in approximately 180 schools in Al Thawra district of Ar-Raqqa province, where more than 50,000 students from elementary and intermediate schools are taking their first examination in Al-Tabqa city, Al-Jarnya sub-district and Al-Mansoura sub-district. Schools are not currently operating in Ar-Raqqa city.

Deir-ez-Zor Governorate

The south-western part of Deir-ez-Zor governorate is currently largely under the Government of Syria (GoS) control, parts of northern and central Deir-ez-Zor governorate are under SDF control, while ISIL still controls pockets along the Syrian-Iraqi border, few communities along the eastern bank of the Euphrates river and across the south-western border of Deir-ez-Zor governorate with Homs governorate.

Airstrikes in Deir-ez-Zor governorate continue to result in civilian casualties. On 24 January, 15 civilians, including seven women, were reportedly killed in airstrikes on Al Sha'fa town in the countryside of Abu Kamal in Deir-Ez-Zor governorate. Civilians also face the danger of explosive hazards in Deir-ez-Zor governorate which ISIL reportedly planted before retreating from the area. Approximately 13 civilians were killed due to explosive hazards in the last week of January.

Over the last few months, government officials have reportedly increased their visits to Deir-Ez-Zor city with a view to activating basic services in the city, and to plan for further repairs of the city's infrastructure. Most line ministries officially stipulated that all civil servants who had fled the governorate/city were to return and resume their jobs in the governorate. Many displaced civil servants, however, have reportedly expressed concerns regarding their compelled

return, especially as they fear not being able to find adequate housing. By the end of January, an estimated 8,125 government employees returned to Deir-ez-Zor city, though overwhelmingly without their families.

In Deir-ez-Zor city, the majority of streets of several neighborhoods remain closed and largely inaccessible due to the accumulated rubble, and rubble removal only took place along the main roads between the neighbourhoods. Areas that have been affected by the conflict, including in the urban perimeter of the city, are also at high risk of being contaminated with explosive hazards, representing a potential threat for civilians to these areas. The technical capacity of the authorities and available equipment to survey and remove explosive hazards is not sufficient. The Assad Hospital is only partially operational, and while the military hospital and a medical facility in the Al-Qasour neighborhood sometimes accept patients that cannot be treated at the Assad hospital. All three facilities remain unable to satisfy the demand for medical support in Deir-ez-Zor city.



Displacement Trends

More than 255,700 people were displaced from and within Deir-ez-Zor governorate and an estimated 322,100 people from and within Ar-Raqqa governorate in 2017, according to the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster. Displacement data for mid- to late January is unavailable due to operational challenges.

Ar-Raqqa governorate

Further large scale displacements are unlikely. Conditions are still not in place for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of IDPs.

Deir-ez-Zor governorate

During the reporting period, civilian displacement continued due to ongoing hostilities between SDF and ISIL in the southeastern and eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor amid displacement towards the SDF-held areas and other areas. On 8 January, more than 150 families were reported to have been displaced from Hajin and Abo Al Hassan villages in the eastern rural DZ towards the desert as a result of a severe fighting between SDF and ISIL.



Returns

During the reporting period, thousands of IDPs returned to their homes in Deir-ez-Zor governorate including an estimated 700 IDPs who reportedly left Mabrouka camp to return to their homes in Deir-ez-Zor governorate. Reports also indicate that the GoS has declared the Abu Kamal and Al Mayadin sub-district in eastern Deir-ez-Zor governorate “cleared” for civilian returns, noting that there is no official confirmation from mine action partners as to whether the conditions in the areas are conducive for safe and dignified returns. To date, some 15,000 individuals have returned to the areas, and further return movement is anticipated.

In the absence of surveys conducted by humanitarian mine action organizations, no detailed information is currently available on actual levels of contamination in areas of return and on the standard followed in the clearance process in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, which may not be in line with humanitarian standards. Meanwhile, avoiding the creation of push and pull factors will be key to uphold the freedom of movement of IDPs as well as the voluntary and informed nature of returns. These dynamics remain highly fluid and require continued follow-up.

Although an estimated 61,000 individuals reportedly returned to Ar-Raqqa city since the end of hostilities, the number of returnees remains difficult to verify. Many people are reportedly returning to the city to check on their houses and leave soon after, while others choose to stay. Reports indicate that some families are returning from Ar-Raqqa city to Ain Issa IDP site after having failed to secure a proper accommodation, due to the level of damages and absence of basic services. Humanitarian partners continue to emphasize that the provision of broad humanitarian assistance may create a pull factor for IDPs. While survey and clearance operations are a high priority, the humanitarian mine action response remains constrained by security considerations and contamination continues to hamper safe returns.

An additional 43,000 people have reportedly returned to areas the eastern countryside of Ar-Raqqa governorate, south of the Euphrates river. During the reporting period, an estimated 200 people returned to the western countryside, to Debsi village (west of Tabqa) and Mansoura village (east of Tabqa).

The humanitarian community continues to assess opportunities for intervention in line with the policy paper on “Conditions for voluntary, informed, safe and dignified returns of IDPs to Ar-Raqqa city” endorsed by the humanitarian

leadership, based on which key communication messages have been elaborated at the local level for humanitarian actors to interact with the local population. At the same time, conflicting messaging and initiatives have been received by local civil and military entities, including site administration, regarding IDP return movements. While return trends are picking up, there were allegations that local entities have sometimes actively discouraged return movements while allowing returns to certain areas, including by declaring them 'free of explosive hazards' and enabling IDPs to register for returns. Humanitarian mine action organizations continue to warn that all areas affected by the conflict in Ar-Raqqa city remain unsafe for civilians, particularly as the survey and clearance efforts that are taking place are limited to roads and critical infrastructure and do not include residential areas, which are expected to remain highly contaminated.

Protection

Displacement trends have reportedly decreased from the height of the past months, but new arrivals to the various IDP sites – largely women and children - are still recorded from the areas in southeastern and eastern Deir-ez-Zor (particularly Abu Kamal). Return continues to be presented by the camp authorities as a viable option; however, these areas still experience active hostilities as well as asymmetric attacks from ISIL, putting the lives of the civilians at risk. Regrettably, the dynamics of the IDP journey reveal that exploitative smuggling mechanisms remain a modality for civilians to travel to the SDF forces checkpoints and onward to the IDP sites.

While displacements have decreased compared to previous months, the overall protection situation in the numerous IDP sites remains problematic. Several sites are still above their absorption capacity, notably Areesha and Ain Issa sites, and conditions remains dire, exposing population with specific needs, notably women, girls and boys, to various protection risks. There is an urgent need to improve the gender-sensitive character of infrastructure and facilities, particularly WASH facilities - to deter situations of harassment, fear of violence against women and girls, including sexual violence. The distress of women and girls has started to emerge given the relatively increased presence of protection services in the IDP sites. Challenges to address prevention and response to GBV cases are evident, including linked to access, capacity of staff on the ground, and the general socio-cultural environment not conducive to reporting and fueling stigma vis-à-vis the survivors. The protection sector, with its Child Protection and GBV sub-sectors, has worked with protection actors in the field and designed a series of urgent actions to be taken in this regard. This includes an increased advocacy and exposure of humanitarian staff to principles of GBV mainstreaming; the increase of GBV services – including integrated with reproductive health services to create a conducive environment for women and girls to share their concern; stronger referral mechanisms, particularly between protection, child protection, GBV and health actors in the sites; call to the concerned sectors for improvement of certain facilities, notably sanitation and lighting. Capacity limitations of local protection actors remain a difficult barrier to overcome to respond with the necessary and desired effectiveness.

Reports of cases of recruitment of adolescent males continue to emerge, with interrupted communication between parents and the recruited children soon after. Unfortunately, based on consultations with the male population in the sites, recruitment remains also an expedient for male and adolescents to economically support their displaced or returning families.

In light of the above, protection actors are concerned about the recent bureaucratic requests imposed by the Kurdish local administration that temporarily halted assistance and services in the IDP sites, including much needed protection and health services. While the situation seems to have temporarily improved, the importance of continuous presence is critical to build confidence and trust with the population, reinforce coordination amongst humanitarian actors and strengthen referrals.

Policies of restricted freedom of movement for IDPs in the sites persist. This is not affecting voluntary return movements to areas of origin of IDPs in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, and it is largely not applied to population who are willing to leave the IDP sites towards areas in northwestern Syria or other GoS-controlled areas. However, restrictions remain applicable for the displaced population in the sites who want to travel to areas in Hassakeh Governorate, for private, personal reasons or simply to find hosting opportunities and improve self-reliance. The sponsorship regime reportedly remains in force and IDPs who want to exit temporarily need to signal to the site administration a family member who will stay behind to guarantee future re-entry. Attempt to leave the IDP sites through alternative irregular modalities continue to be reported, including through simulated medical emergencies. Procedures, remain erratic and subject also to the turnover of the site administration. Reportedly, due to non-specified security reasons, in late January the modality of departure from the Ain Issa site was slowed down to two days per week. This is applicable also for families who may want to reunify with their members in other sites in the area.

The handling of confiscated documentation by the site administration has reportedly improved, also thanks to the efforts of the protection teams. In Areesha site, where the situation was most difficult, there is evidence that a better archiving system has been put in place by the site administration, with documents stored according to camp blocks

and location of the IDPs. The confiscation policy remains nonetheless a serious concern. In the best case, it hinders further departures, or return movements; in the worst case, IDPs may leave the sites to move to onwards destinations in the country without documentation, exposing them to possible security risk. Considering that many IDP families may have already members lacking Syrian personal documentation due to their prolonged residence in ISIL controlled areas, the further loss of official forms of documentation due to confiscation aggravates the situation.

Explosive hazards contamination remains a major protection concern, which continues to hamper humanitarian access, the ability to conduct assessments and challenges the principle of safe return in both Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. The reported increase of blast wounds in Ar-Raqqa city highlights the risks of physical safety around return movements of the civilian population. Based on the adopted policy on the return to Ar-Raqqa city, protection actors supported the elaboration of key messages for the humanitarian community when interacting with the population in the sites, related to safety and the challenges in providing available assistance. The delivery of a humanitarian mine action response also continues in Ar-Raqqa governorate, through the deployment of an integrated mine action response, which includes: 1) Risk education delivered to vulnerable population; 2) Limited emergency survey, marking and clearance of hazardous areas identified by humanitarian partners, local communities and local authorities across accessible areas. Clearance and survey activities is highly prioritized by the humanitarian community as a precondition for the safe return of the population; 3) NGO staff members are receiving explosive hazards risk education training and training of trainers.



Access

On 18 January, 34 trucks with humanitarian assistance en route to Qamishli were delayed at a checkpoint in Menbij by the local administration, and on 17 January, eight trucks en route to Qamishli were delayed at the Al-Taye checkpoint in Aleppo governorate by GoS forces. The blocking of trucks with humanitarian assistance is a reoccurring issue in northeast Syria, and has impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance six times prior to these two incidents. The delayed trucks carried more than 40,000 WFP food rations and other commodities bound for the hub in Qamishli were stopped a checkpoint in Aleppo Governorate's Menbij city per the new requirements that cargo be cross-loaded from Syrian to Kurdish trucks. On 24 January, all trucks were released and arrived safely to Qamishli.

The United Nations has dispatched humanitarian assistance to Deir-ez-Zor city by land between 7 September 2017 and 27 January 2018. A total of 74 trucks with United Nations humanitarian assistance have reached Deir-ez-Zor with the following: three trucks with UNFPA medical and WASH items, 39 trucks with UNHCR non-food core relief items, one truck with IOM medical supplies and non-food items, 19 trucks with UNICEF education materials, nutrition and non-food items, nine trucks with WFP food and nutrition items and three trucks with WHO medical supplies. The total number of trucks dispatched is 69 trucks. A security assessment was undertaken in late December 2017 with the facilitation of the Russian Federation.



Cross-Cutting Operational Challenges

Humanitarian actors face significant challenges in responding to needs in northeast Syria. Key challenges include:

- **Access and insecurity:** Access to vulnerable communities, particularly in and around Ar-Raqqa city, remain challenging due to insecurity and explosive contamination.
- **High levels of explosive hazards contamination:** The contamination levels in newly accessible areas is considered very high, particularly in Ar-Raqqa city and on Deir-ez-Zor roads, towns and large population centres as well as in rural areas. Information on contamination remains very limited. This poses a threat both to civilian populations as well as to humanitarian actors aiming to assist them, particularly in the context of increased return movements. A mechanism to demarcate and declare areas cleared and safe for humanitarian actors and the population continues to be necessary.
- **Policy environment:** Humanitarian actors also face challenges related to the policies being implemented by local authorities with regards to the treatment of the displaced population, particularly those subjected to restricted freedom of movement. These policies are contributing to a deteriorating humanitarian situation and are hampering the ability of humanitarian actors to engage beyond life-saving support in certain settings. The intermittent bureaucratic impediments to operate in IDP sites are also of concern for humanitarian actors as it hinders planning and implementation. In addition, any protracted interruption of humanitarian assistance and services in the IDP sites may create push factors for IDPs to return to areas of Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates where their safety can be at risk.

- **Scalability:** The scalability of the assistance and local capacity remain limited and unpredictable. The availability of certain supplies – such as life-saving trauma kits - has been particularly hard hit because of access issues. The delivery of specialized services, particularly for protection partners, also remains a challenge due to limited resources and capacity of local actors.
- **Funding limitations:** While humanitarian pooled funding (HPF) has been mobilized in late 2017, additional funding is still required to increase reception capacities in key sites and the number of people that can be assisted monthly with basic goods and services. Funding for the projects included in the 2018 HRP will also be necessary for key humanitarian actors to be able to continue operations throughout the first half of the year, amidst competing emergencies elsewhere in the country.

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