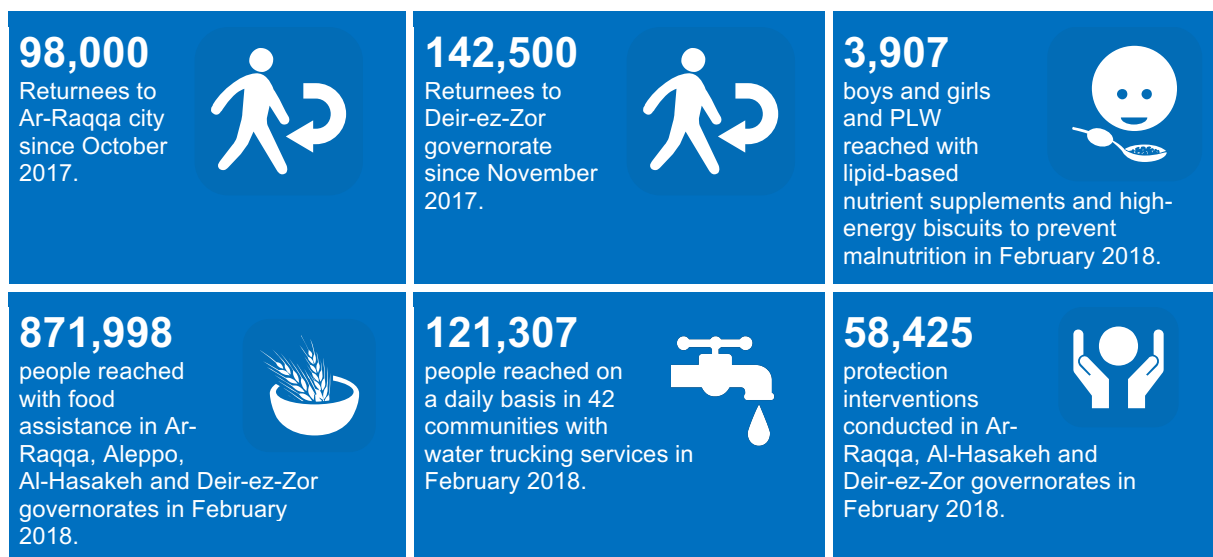




This report is produced by the OCHA Syria Crisis offices with the contribution of all sectors in the hubs and at the Whole of Syria (WoS) level. The situation overview covers the period from 15 March – 15 April 2018. The next report will be issued on or around 10 May 2018.

Highlights

- An estimated 98,000 individuals returned to Ar-Raqqa city since the end of hostilities in October 2017, although conditions for return remain unsafe. Explosive hazard 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 Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates.
- A UN humanitarian assessment team deployed to Ar-Raqqa city on 1 April to assess the humanitarian situation. It noted large-scale destruction throughout the city, a critical level of explosive hazard contamination amidst insufficient resources for surveying and removal of explosive hazards, as well as a shortage of public services.
- Following the escalation of hostilities in Afrin, new but limited displacement from the area has been reported. Some 160 families received and assisted in Newroz site, few others arrived in northern Al-Hasakeh Governorate and a slightly higher number of arrivals was reported in Menbij.



Situation Overview

Ar-Raqqa Governorate

Eight months following the expulsion of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from Ar-Raqqa city, protection concerns related to explosive hazard contamination, widespread infrastructural damages and the lack of public service delivery inside the city remain. Deaths and injuries due to explosive hazard explosions continue to be reported with alarming frequency in Ar-Raqqa city. Unverified reports indicate that incidents are occurring at an estimated rate of some 120 fatalities and 100 injuries per month. Health responders have noted an increase in injuries, primarily in women and children, reportedly related to scavenging through houses or rubble. Reports indicate a high risk of building collapse due to extensive structural damage in some parts of the city, as well as reported risks of recontamination of sites. Ongoing mine action efforts have focused on key infrastructure and roads.

Approximately 295,823 people from and within Ar-Raqqa governorate were displaced due to military operations in 2017, according to the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster. However, conditions are still not in place for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of IDPs. Displacement will likely become more protracted, as indicated by consultations with IDPs in the major sites in Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Despite these risks, an estimated 98,000 individuals returned to Ar-Raqqa city since October 2017.

Following a UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) site visit to Ar-Raqqa city on 21-22 March, a UN humanitarian assessment team arrived on 1 April to assess humanitarian conditions and priority needs of returnees in the city. The inter-agency assessment noted large-scale destruction and explosive hazard contamination throughout the city as well as a shortage or lack of public services. The team observed an extremely high level of destruction, with nearly 70 per cent of buildings destroyed or damaged.

At the time of the UN mission there were three functional healthcare facilities inside Ar-Raqqa city: (1) The Mashhadani Private Hospital, (2) the Dar Al-Shifa Hospital and (3) a health point in the Al-Mashlab/Ma'amoun district. Basic clinical laboratory services are available only through two private laboratories, located in the rural countryside. City residents reported not having access to hygiene promotion, outpatient consultations, comprehensive essential obstetric care, inpatient care and surgeries. Despite the resumption of some health services, further access and provision of basic healthcare, including routine vaccinations, is required.

During the inter-agency visit, the UN team observed many shops that were open for business, especially in the suburbs of the city. Food and non-food items are available at reasonable prices, oftentimes cheaper than in other areas in Syria; however, the low purchasing power of residents means that many city residents are unable to afford such prices. Mills and 37 bakeries have gradually reopened in the city and its surroundings, leading to the decrease of the price of bread from SYP 150 per bundle to SYP 100 per bundle.

Additionally, Ar-Raqqa city continues to lack basic services, such as electricity. City residents continue to depend on generators, where available. Water is only being pumped to some neighborhoods, and even where it is pumped, the quantity is often insufficient. Some 80 per cent of the population depends on water trucking services, 20 per cent of which is reportedly unsafe for consumption. The main pumping station in the city is not functional due to electrical and mechanical issues, however, water supply could be restored if the main pumping station was rehabilitated.

The inter-agency mission conducted to Ar-Raqqa city on 1 April was attended by representatives of the key protection agencies. Although limited time did not allow for a thorough assessment, the mission undertook some important observations and brief discussions with returnees of different age and sex, including some adolescent girls. Brief consultations with male returnees highlighted a continuous concern for their safety and security in the city, particularly during nighttime, while law and order institutions seem overstretched and ill-equipped.

During the inter-agency mission protection actors detected high levels of trauma and distress amongst the population, linked to earlier experiences during years of ISIL control, exposure to hostilities, and displacement to IDP sites with limited freedom of movement. Children seemed to be particularly affected, with experiences of panic attacks, sleeping problems, and general lack of attention. The concerning phenomenon of high numbers of unaccompanied and separated children, including orphaned, was also highlighted. In the absence of any form of support to care-giving families, there is a concern for possible forms of abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Child labour was also observed as a very common phenomenon.

Early marriage was often identified as a major protection concern. The mission confirmed a significant presence of adolescent girls divorced and abandoned by their husband, as well as survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. In general, brief consultations with returnee women revealed their high level of hardship in everyday lives and in undertaking the simplest chores, due to lack of basic services such as running water, electricity, education for children and – in many cases – the presence of husbands or family members with disabilities to be attended without adequate resources. The presence of military and police forces in the city was also presented as a source of discomfort and fear of harassment by some of the consulted adolescent girls.

The plight of persons with disabilities, including war injured, was emphasized by the local administration, particularly due to the lack of suitable health services and rehabilitation support. The situation is even more complex in the case of children with physical disabilities and other impairments, who cannot rely on any specialized form of rehabilitation or psychosocial support.

The issue of civil documentation was also noted as a main challenge. The reported number of unregistered births and marriages is staggering, due to the prolonged absence of proper systems and administrative offices to issue notifications of vital events. Identification documents are reportedly issued to facilitate the control and the movement in the urban and semi-urban areas of Ar-Raqqa governorate, while recognizing the non-validity of these documents in Government-controlled areas.

Cross-border humanitarian partners continue to provide support to key services throughout the city, including water points, water trucking, rehabilitation of water stations, chlorination of water, provision of health care, emergency NFIs, hygiene kits, food baskets, cash and shelter kit distributions. The United Nations and partners are currently working on a response plan for the city on the basis of the needs identified during the assessment mission.

Deir-ez-Zor Governorate

During the reporting period, ISIL retained control over several villages in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor governorate on the eastern side of the Euphrates River, as well as areas along the Syria-Iraq border, east of Markada. On 18 March, ISIL took control over additional areas in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, including the T2 Oil Pumping Station located 70 km west of Abu Kamal city.

Explosive hazard contamination continues to present a daily risk for thousands of children, women and men across Deir-ez-Zor governorate with increasing numbers of blast wounded victims treated due to explosive incidents. Without explosive hazard surveys conducted by humanitarian mine action organizations, no detailed information is currently available on actual levels of contamination in areas of return. Further efforts are needed to increase the level of awareness of local communities, IDPs and returnees with risk education campaigns, in addition to the conduct of survey, marking and removal of explosive hazards. While current mine action interventions focus on Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa governorates, needs in Deir-ez-Zor governorate are reported to be high. The absence of fully operational public hospitals in Deir-ez-Zor governorate has heightened the vulnerability of persons seeking immediate medical treatment, particularly for blast-wounded individuals.

Approximately 253,035 people were displaced from and within Deir-ez-Zor governorate in 2017, according to CCCM. Despite the risks posed by explosive hazards, thousands of families are returning to their places of origin in Deir-ez-Zor governorate. On 8 April, the Government of Syria (GoS) reportedly opened two crossing points on the Euphrates River in eastern rural Deir-ez-Zor governorate to facilitate the return of IDPs from areas controlled by the SDF. To date, the majority of returns to Deir-ez-Zor governorate have been to Khasham and Kisreh sub-districts, where approximately 142,500 IDPs and returnees are living.

At the same time, large numbers of displaced persons are still sheltered in IDP sites, informal settlements, and to a lesser extent in host communities. An estimated 94,000 IDPs remain in 54 IDP sites across Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates, as of 4 April according to CCCM. However, displacement in Deir-ez-Zor is not limited to the IDP sites in Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa Governorate, but it includes a non-specified but visible number of families in hosting arrangements in Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

The humanitarian response in Deir-ez-Zor governorate has been mostly limited to northwestern sub-districts, more specifically Kisreh and Khasham sub-districts districts, and to the accessible and less affected areas of Deir-ez-Zor city. While humanitarian actors continue to scale up the response in the governorate and in the city, access remains difficult in some areas in close proximity to frontlines, due to ISIL infiltration risks and administrative requirements. Unconfirmed reports indicate that food supplies have depleted in most ISIL-controlled areas in eastern rural Deir-Ez-Zor governorate, resulting in a sharp increase of prices of basic commodities such as milk, meat and fuel. Medical supplies are also reportedly lacking.



Access

In March, UN agencies transported humanitarian supplies by road to Qamishli via 49 trucks (3 UNICEF; 3 UNHCR; 43 WFP) from Damascus, Homs, Lattakia and Tartous. During the same period, three ICRC trucks reached Deir-ez-Zor governorate. In February 2018, cross-border actors provided support to nearly 600,000 people in need across Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa governorates.

On 4 April, it was reported that ten explosive projectiles landed in close proximity to the Fishkhabour crossing point, which is used by some humanitarian partners to access northeast Syria. Immediately after the shelling, the authorities on the Iraqi side closed the border from their side. The crossing was reopened on the following day.

The UN temporarily postponed the second humanitarian convoy through the Yaroubia border crossing, scheduled for 5 April due to unforeseen organizational constraints, but additional convoys are planned.



Protection

- The displacement situation in northeast Syria has largely stabilized, with a decrease registered in terms of new arrivals in the IDP sites and departures from the sites – largely return movements to Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates – exceeding the arrivals. The last minimal IDP influxes – particularly in Areesha IDP site in Al-Hasakeh Governorate – have largely originated from the eastern and southeastern areas of Deir-ez-Zor governorate, where ISIL-held pockets remain and ISIL clashes with both SDF and GoS forces continue, disrupting the lives of the civilian population and forcing them to flee.

- In some IDP sites, the site population still exceeds the capacity, notably in Areesha and Ain Issa IDP sites. Children and women continue to represent the majority of the population in all IDP sites (52 per cent and 21 per cent respectively), and remain exposed to conditions that lead to a variety of protection risks. As a result of the ongoing return movements, IDPs originally from Deir-ez-Zor governorate now represent the majority of the population in Areesha, Mabrouka and Al Hol sites, while a more mixed population with IDPs originating from Ar-Raqqa continue to reside in Ain Issa IDP site.
- Intermittent reports of child recruitment continue to reach protection actors from various sites. During the month in review, accounts have been provided about recruiters attracting adolescents, with promises of an income and increased assistance support. Advocacy continues at local and higher level with relevant stakeholders, reminding the latter of international commitments undertaken on the protection of children.
- Concerns have been raised by women on the decreasing level of services in some of the sites following restrictions applied by the local entities to some humanitarian health actors. Reproductive health services continued during the reporting period with no disruption.
- IDP councils in some sites, notably in Areesha, have started to issue certain forms of documentation, particularly marriage, divorce, birth and death certificates. While it is known that such documentation will not be granted any official value outside of SDF-controlled areas, this development needs to be followed to ascertain any possible use of these notifications as evidentiary statements in the future process of obtaining official documentation issued by the Government of Syria.
- Freedom of movement, screening and sponsorship procedures continue to be applied, particularly in sites located in Al-Hasakeh governorate, regardless of the reduced pace of new arrivals to IDP sites. This continues to trigger irregular movements outside the sites, to go around existing regulations and through dangerous informal routes that deplete the few monetary resources still left with the IDPs. Reportedly, the temporary exit from the sites is intermittently suspended and restrictions seemed to be applied whenever there are cases of IDPs not returning to the sites after having been granted a temporary exit, thus creating tensions between the site population and local forces in charge of maintaining law and order. Situations of family members considered as “bonds” to guarantee the return of the individuals that had been allowed to exit through the sponsorship system continued to be observed. Permissions to leave the sites for visits to other sites or to allow IDPs to complete administrative procedures in urban centres (Al-Hasakeh and Qamishli) are in place but are not evenly applied.
- Economic activities in the IDP sites remain limited and subjected to regulatory processes and fees applied by the site administration. Regular consultations with IDPs, particularly with women, in some of the sites have noted increased frequency of early marriages. These forms of gender-based violence (GBV) partially preceded the displacement and are linked to ISIL practices, but also partially follow the displacement and seem to frequently occur in the IDP sites. Reportedly, the persistence of this negative coping strategy is linked to the depletion of resources and is designed to ease the financial burden of the families confined in the sites. Early marriages are also described as deriving from an attempt to create new families to increase the amount of assistance, as well as a form of “protection” from external violence and to deter child recruitment. While the local administration has started to issue marriage certificates in the IDP sites, it appears that such certificates are not being produced for early marriages, rightfully considered a violation of the rights of the children. Despite the stance from the site administration, the practice continues.
- In March, consultations have occurred across the IDP sites on intention to return. An assessment of more than 6,500 household interviews indicated that more than 80 per cent of IDPs currently in the sites are not yet ready to return in the short term and do not have concrete return plans for the time being. The decision to return would be based on the evolving situation in their areas of origin and destination, with attention to security improvements, improved availability of basic services, livelihood opportunities and shelter conditions. The following factors were perceived as hindering returns: concern for the ongoing hostilities, the level of destruction and inhabitability of the houses, other individual security concerns, and the lack of livelihood opportunities widely reported by the consulted IDPs, with assistance being less important.
- Organized departures from IDP sites towards Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates are visible but remain relatively limited. Some concerns regarding return dynamics emerged due to intermittent reports, corroborated by observations on the ground, which indicated that site administration officials retained assets belonging to families departing IDP sites. Such occurrences decreased in response to the presence of humanitarian actors advocating against the practice and highlighting the humanitarian nature of assistance to persons in need. Another concerning trend is the introduction of a sponsorship system as a prerequisite for the settlement of inhabitants not originating from Ar-Raqqa governorate. While families from Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor have reportedly obtained the sponsorship through acquaintances and former employers, the system adds a new constraint on the freedom of movement of population in the area.

- During the reporting period, new but limited displacement from Afrin was reported following the escalation of hostilities in the area and the constraints to return to the city or to move towards Aleppo. Some 160 families were received and assisted in Newroz site, few others arrived in northern Al-Hasakeh governorate and a slightly higher number of arrivals was reported in Menbij. Reports indicate that new arrivals were not seen as being subjected to the same constraints in terms of freedom of movement, confiscation of personal documentation and implementation of sponsorship procedures, compared to IDPs from Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates.
- Protection partners in northeast Syria continue their activities in the IDP sites and hosting communities. A total of 14 organizations have reported protection activities in the three governorates since the beginning of the year, including UN major protection agencies, international and local partners, including two line ministries involved in risk education. To date¹ and since the beginning of the year, 102,067 protection interventions were delivered by these partners, both from within the IDP sites and as part of more regular programs for IDPs and hosting communities, including in Al-Hasakeh and Qamishli. The majority of current interventions relate to awareness-raising (more than 72,000 interventions (67 per cent), including more than 52,000 interventions related to risk education), provision of material support for persons with specific needs (almost 14,000 interventions, 13 per cent) and psychosocial support (more than 8,000 interventions, 8 per cent). However, critical gaps remain. The situation is expected to become even more demanding once the request for activities and services in Ar-Raqqa city start increasing and levels of contamination risk become acceptable for safe delivery of interventions.



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 remains challenging due to insecurity and explosive hazard contamination.
- **High levels of explosive hazard contamination:** The contamination levels in newly accessible areas are 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 still limited, particularly for Deir-ez-Zor governorate, while recent missions to urban areas in Ar-Raqqa governorate have reported a situation of high concern. 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.
- **Policy environment:** Humanitarian actors remain concerned for 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 and conduct certain activities such as health and protection programming are also of concern for humanitarian actors as it hinders planning, implementation and predictable provision of services to the population. 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, including for any possible increase of activities in Ar-Raqqa city. Increasing humanitarian needs will further strain current capacities and require a scale-up of supplies, humanitarian partners and reach. 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:** In the wake of other competing emergencies in other areas of the country, funding for the projects included in the 2018 HRP are essential 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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¹ As of February 2018, Source: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/whole-syria-protection-sector-dashboard>