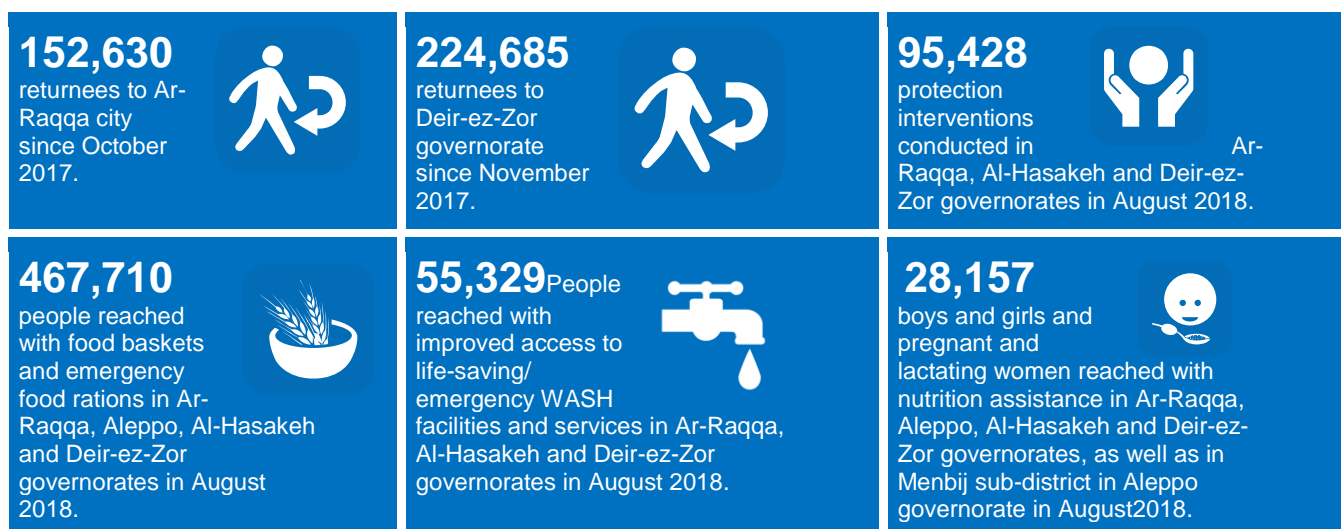




This report is produced by the OCHA Syria Crisis offices with the contribution of all sectors in the hubs and at the Whole of Syria (WoS) level. The situation overview covers the period from 1 September – 30 September 2018. The next report will be issued on or around 5 November 2018.

## Highlights

- The situation of civilians who remain trapped in the ISIL-controlled Hajin enclave along the east bank of the Euphrates River in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor, as well as the situation of estimated 27,000 people displaced since June, remains a significant concern amidst ongoing reports of airstrikes, ground offensives, and explosive hazard contamination as well as high levels of reported need.
- The United Nations (UN) and its partners have begun to scale-up the response to those civilians displaced by ongoing hostilities in the vicinity of the Hajin enclave. Four UN implementing partners were able to provide limited assistance to IDPs in Gharanij. This is in addition to the 22,500 people in the Hajin and Theban areas who receive food each month from WFP.
- An estimated 224,685 people (as of 25 September) have returned to their areas of origin within Deir-ez-Zor Governorate since November 2017.
- Over the reporting period some 92 cases of typhoid were reported in the Areesha camp in Al-Hasakeh Governorate, a reduction in new cases from the previous reporting period. This outbreak of typhoid is in addition to ongoing reports of acute bloody diarrhea in Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa and Al Hasakeh governorates, with some 245 cases reported over the reporting period.
- An estimated 152,630 individuals returned to Ar-Raqqa city since October 2017, although conditions remain uncondusive for returns due to high levels of destruction and explosive hazard contamination. Sub-standard living conditions in IDP sites, protracted displacement, movement restrictions and a lack of information on the scale and scope of explosive hazard risks in Raqqa city may all be factors influencing IDP decisions to return.



## Situation Overview

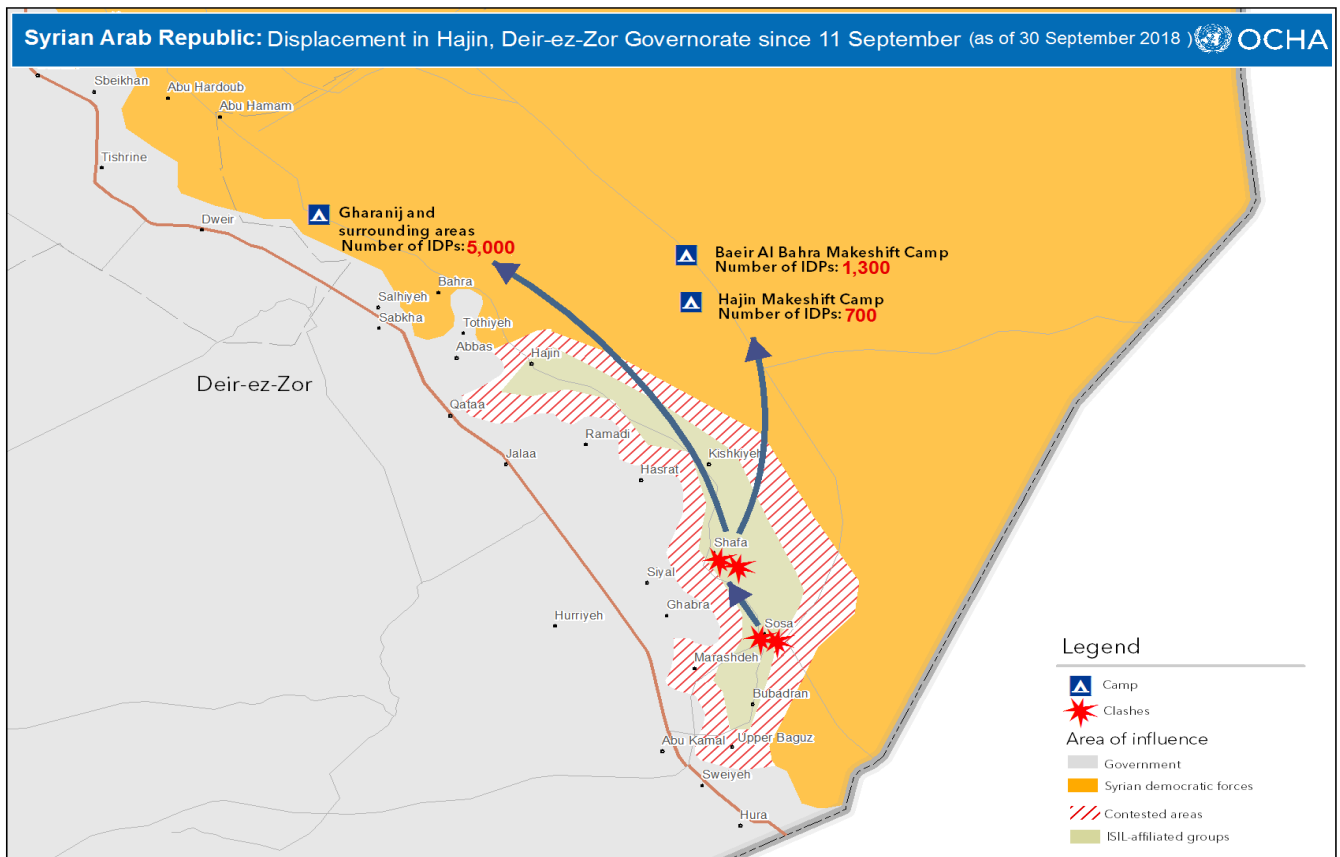
On the 11 September the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the International Coalition Forces (ICF) announced the third phase of the Al-Jazeera Storm operation to clear ISIL elements from their last remaining strongholds in the so called Hajin enclave in the south-east of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate along the east bank of the Euphrates River. In the ensuing period a significant escalation in airstrikes and ground-based hostilities have been reported resulting in civilian death and injury, concentrated around the towns of Al-Sha'afa, Al-Baghouz, Suwaidan and Hajin. On the 20 September the SDF reportedly gained full control of Al-Baghouz town and is now conducting a 'security sweep' of the area to root out remaining ISIL fighters and clear explosive hazards from the town. As of 25 September, the SDF had also reportedly encircled Suwaidan with civilians apparently unable to leave or enter

the town. An estimated 15,000 people, including 5,000 ISIL fighters and their families, are reported to remain in ISIL-controlled areas.

Against the backdrop of this escalation in hostilities and reported restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians, there are significant concerns for the safety and security of civilians estimated to remain under ISIL-control in the Hajin enclave. Over the last month, scores of civilians have reportedly been killed and injured due to airstrikes or having been caught in the cross-fire. The ability of civilians to move freely remains unclear given ongoing high-intensity hostilities as well as persistent reports of restrictions imposed by parties to the conflict that prevent civilians from reaching safety.

The recent escalation of hostilities has reportedly led to the displacement of some 7,000 civilians from the Hajin enclave, predominantly Hajin and Al Baghouz towns to SDF controlled areas since the 11 September. The majority of those who have been displaced comprise women, children and the elderly. Upon leaving ISIL-controlled areas these people are reportedly subjected to security screening at SDF checkpoints in the Badiya desert area, with reports that young men are being separated and detained for further investigation. There are also reports that some IDPs have had to pay US\$300 in informal fees in order to enter SDF-controlled areas. Most IDPs are being sheltered by host communities or placed in IDP sites. However, there are also reports that some IDPs are clustering in open areas. There is currently very limited onward movement to IDP sites in Al Hasakeh due to security restrictions.

An estimated 5,000 (1,000 families) of the 7,000 people recently displaced are reportedly being hosted by local communities in Gharanij town as well as Bahra and surrounding villages. A further 200 IDPs are reportedly sheltering in a makeshift camp on the outskirts of Gharanij. In addition, there are reportedly some 700 IDPs sheltering at the Hajin makeshift camp while a further 1,300 people are also estimated to be sheltering in the makeshift Baeir Al-Bahra IDP site in the desert, approximately 15 km from Bahra village and 15 km north of Hajin. Reports suggest that the site is receiving an average of 20-25 new arrivals each day. According to a UN inter-agency assessment team which visited the site on 19 September, conditions are dire. In terms of WASH, there is no access to safe drinking water (with water sourced directly from the river without treatment) or latrines (a few 'scattered pits' have reportedly been dug outside the camp, with no privacy). There are no health facilities. Food is limited to two packs of bread per family per day. In terms of shelter, 25 tents have been set up. The site is reportedly fenced in and surrounded by four military observation posts, with IDPs allegedly facing severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. The UN is advocating with the Deir-ez-Zor Civil Council (DCC) to relocate these IDPs to Gharanij town where the majority of IDPs are located and which enjoys greater access to markets, health services and humanitarian assistance.



According to a recent report, IDPs in sites and informal settlements across northeast Syria (Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor) face widespread challenges. With almost all residents of such sites sheltering in tents, the need for additional/replacement structures was highlighted in several sites, particularly with winter approaching. The conditions in informal settlements were reported to be particularly challenging, with reports of inadequate access to health assistance, livelihoods, WASH facilities and education. In Abu Khashab and Twahina informal settlements children reportedly have no access to education. Following a UN inter-agency mission to Twahina informal settlement on the 2 September, as well as an intention survey amongst displaced men, women and youth in the area (see previous report, Protection Section) the humanitarian community in Qamishli agreed to proceed with plans were to resettle 9,500 IDPs (1,900 IDP families) to the Mahmudli site in order to improve overall service provision.

Multiple infectious disease outbreaks continue to be reported across northeast Syria. During the reporting period 92 new cases of typhoid were reported in Areesha camp in Al-Hasakeh. This outbreak is thought to be due to the consumption of unsafe water and follows the ongoing acute bloody diarrhea outbreak in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Similarly, during September, a further 242 cases of acute bloody diarrhea have been reported due to consumption from contaminated water sources.

On 18 April, the Directorate of School Health reported a measles outbreak particularly affecting school-aged children, with 83 new suspected cases of measles reported during September in Ar-Raqqa Governorate in addition to 28 suspected cases from Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

Leishmaniasis also continues to affect people across Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh governorates. Over the course of September 110 cases of leishmaniasis were reported in Ar-Raqqa Governorate, 55 cases in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and 129 cases in Al-Hasakeh. Leishmaniasis has largely spread due to a lack of healthcare and health actors operating in affected areas.

## Humanitarian Response

Over the reporting period humanitarian partners have begun to scale-up the response to those civilians displaced by ongoing hostilities in the vicinity of the Hajin enclave. Four UN implementing partners were able to provide limited assistance comprising Ready to Eat Rations (RTERs) and hygiene kits to IDPs in Gharanij. This is in addition to the 4,500 families in the Hajin and Theban areas who receive monthly food through WFP General Food Assistance (GFA). New IDPs can also receive GFA once their needs have been assessed.

On the 26 September the UN in Qamishli began to dispatch food, nutrition and WASH assistance for some 5,000 IDPs as part of an initial response to affected people in the area. In addition, a mobile health clinic was deployed on the 25 September, which will be able to respond to the needs of IDPs across multiple locations. In terms of the response to IDPs in the Baer Al-Bahra IDP site who face especially dire conditions, UNICEF is ready to support with water tanks, the provision of safe drinking water and the distribution of nutrition supplies. UNHCR is also assessing the need for full NFI kits as well as eight big communal tents to IDPs in the site. As of the end of September the UN in Qamishli reported that 1,000 families in Gharanij and Hajin camp had received assistance.

The response to the various infectious disease outbreaks reported in northeast Syria is also ongoing. WHO has begun the implementation of an awareness campaign around water borne diseases through the deployment of health education teams to provide health education sessions on prevention measures and the principles of personal hygiene. The campaign will be implemented in five IDPs camps in Al-Hasakeh Governorate. In addition, as part of the wider efforts to address the acute bloody diarrhea outbreak, WHO and UNICEF have continued the implementation of a campaign, distributing aqua-tablets and conducting awareness raising activities targeting approximately 20,000 households in 20 villages located along the east bank of the Euphrates river. At the same time, in Deir-ez-Zor 11,332 households were provided with aqua-tablets. Both agencies are planning to expand the areas targeted with the Hygiene campaign in Al-Mayadin district planning which will include a further 16 villages along the Euphrates River. With regard to the response to the measles outbreak, a second round of the sub-national measles campaign was concluded on 27 September. In rural Deir-ez-Zor, over 40,000 children were vaccinated during the second half of September through outreach conducted by a mobile team. In Al-Hasakeh Governorate, over 255,000 children in IDP camps were vaccinated, with approximately 92 per cent coverage.

Northeast Syria NGOs continue to scale up humanitarian assistance in Ar-Raqqa city where 11 NGOs and many Syrian NGOs are implementing various multi-sectoral programmes. These NGOs are also providing assistance along the west and north lines in Deir-ez-Zor. NGOs are currently in the process of finalizing winterization plans, including cash and in-kind response across northeast Syria in key response locations.

## Access

In September, UN agencies transported humanitarian supplies by road to Qamishli via 57 trucks (three UNHCR, three UNICEF and 51 WFP) from Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia and Tartous governorates. During the same period, WFP transported food supplies by road to Deir-ez-Zor via 13 trucks from Homs Governorate. Organizations were able to deliver assistance to Qamishli and Deir-ez-Zor without significant delays during the month of September.

During the reporting period WHO was also able to airlift 21 tonnes of essential medical supplies and vaccines to Al-Hasskeah Governorate. These items are sufficient to provide over 137,000 medical treatments and include more than 365,000 vaccines for polio, measles and other infectious diseases.

During September a fifth transshipment through the Rabiaa/Yarubiyah border-crossing into Syria took place, comprising 3 UNFPA trucks carrying supplies including Emergency Reproductive Health kits.

## Protection

The ongoing hostilities in the Hajin area, the situation of civilians in Hajin and the ongoing displacement have emerged as critical protection concerns during the reporting period.

A rapid assessment conducted in the Baeir Al-Bahra area north of Gharanij revealed a challenging situation for the protection of civilians, with acute and different protection needs for various segments of the population. The visit noticed the presence of several individuals with specific needs, including persons with physical disabilities as well as women and children; including some cases of unaccompanied children and pregnant and lactating women in need of reproductive health interventions. The vast majority of the IDPs expressed an intent to return to their areas of origin as soon as safety is restored, or alternatively join relatives and acquaintances in nearby areas. Fewer families expressed an intention to move towards Al Hasakeh or to move further afield. Families were also splitting and leaving members behind in Hajin, allegedly to protect assets and properties. There was a clear reluctance among IDPs to remain in the current site area due to the multiple humanitarian and protection concerns identified. Reportedly, before reaching the site, IDPs underwent a process of security screening lasting a few days and continuing while in the site. Reportedly, families could exit the areas of origin only by paying a fee and depicted the situation *en route* as highly insecure, with IDPs at risk of being caught in the hostilities and being hit by mortars launched from the ISIL positions, including in proximity to gathering points where the security screening is carried out. The consultations highlighted an urgent need for all parties to the conflict to ensure the safety of the civilian population, including during the security screening processes, which should be conducted in areas outside the line of fire, where the population is not at risk; should be expedited and; should follow due process as, for instance, indicated in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) previously shared with the SDF. Due process should also be respected when separating and detaining persons suspected of affiliation with extremist groups. According to reports received by the consulted IDPs, groups of men in the Baeir Al-Bahra IDP site have been moved to a separate and unknown detention facility. At the time of writing, relatives had reportedly not been informed of the whereabouts of their loved ones.

The overall situation in the Baeir Al-Bahra IDP site is also of concern. The presence of security personnel patrolling the site at night has led to some concerns around privacy and security. Consulted women did not disclose any specific incident – although no female staff were present during the assessment mission - but expressed general discomfort around using WASH facilities at night due to lack of lighting and privacy. The absence of female staff overseeing the site also contributed to some discomfort amongst the female population. In addition, all IDP personal documentation was reportedly confiscated upon arrival at the site. Mobile phones were also reportedly confiscated, with communication with relatives outside the site not permitted. Freedom of movement outside the site, including for medical cases, reportedly remains restricted.

IDPs expressed specific concern around the stigma from the local community, who associates them with ISIL. The situation of persons with specific needs in the Baeir Al-Bahra site is also reportedly dire. Women expressed anxiety in terms of general insecurity and lack of access to medical services, particularly reproductive health interventions and the availability of sanitary items. A number of displaced children had not received education while living in areas under ISIL control. The elderly also expressed concerns with regards the potential for further family separation, difficulties in communicating with relatives and the absence of medical services.

In these circumstances, the acceleration of the security screening process (in line with standard procedures), the ability of IDPs to receive humanitarian assistance and respect for the right of IDPs to freely move outside the site and choose alternative hosting arrangements are of critical importance.

In other IDP sites hosting IDPs from Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor the situation remains stable, albeit with significant protection risks for the displaced population. While sporadic arrivals of new IDPs from Deir-ez-Zor have been recorded, the number of return movements and verifications during assistance distributions have decreased. Children represent the majority of the displaced population (some 62 per cent), particularly children under twelve years of age (some 48 per cent). It is estimated that adult males account for less than 16 per cent of the IDPs in sites. The protection presence and provision of services continue through the UN partners in Qamishli and INGOs active in northeast Syria, with improved coordination and more systematic processes of protection monitoring established.

Displacement has contributed to a climate of anguish, idleness and desolation, triggering negative behaviors from youth, children, and leading to suspected situations of exploitation and abuse. Women and youth note the need for increased activities inside the sites, such as vocational training, occupational support, and recreational activities. Abuses such as domestic violence against children, child labour, children engaged in begging or in substance abuse have been highlighted by the camp administration during the visits of humanitarian actors. Incidents affecting children related to unsafe WASH facilities installed in the sites underline the need for additional support and combined awareness raising campaigns on safety. The health situation for persons with specific needs is a source of apprehension for families living in the sites, as many of the health actors do not have continuous day and night services in the sites. As a result of the constraints preventing IDPs from leaving the sites, many high-risk cases have been left untreated after hours.

Protection activities continue in IDP sites. This includes child protection activities, such as recreational sessions, individual and group-based psychosocial support, risk education – including for families departing the sites. GBV interventions are being reinforced, with awareness sessions, direct services, distributions of dignity kits and interventions with the camp administration to bring attention to the situation and to advocate for the application of a survivor centered approach, with strict adherence to the dignity and confidentiality of the survivor. Legal aid sessions have started to be provided in Mabrouka site to raise awareness on issuance and retrieval of civil status documentation. However, in the context of protracted displacement in sub-standard conditions, protection concerns continue to emerge, particularly in relation to issues relating to access to basic services and recourse to harmful coping mechanisms, including GBV related.

Return to Ar-Raqqa city and Deir-ez-Zor has continued during the reporting period, with challenging conditions in IDP sites highlighted as an important factor driving returns. Respect for humanitarian standards during the organization of the movements and in the treatment of the departing population remains problematic, with a constant need for presence of protection actors on the ground to observe the process and conduct advocacy with the civilian administration and the security forces. The departures which occurred during the reporting period, particularly from Ein Issa site, were generally organized by the camp authorities with the IDP council preparing lists of departing families subsequently approved by the camp administration. Humanitarian partners organized Risk Education sessions before departure to reduce the security risks in contaminated areas of return. While in previous weeks personal documentation was returned to the departing families before leaving the camps, it was observed during some recent movements that the practice of restitution of documents *en route* resurfaced, creating challenges for the population who were not aware of any missing document until after leaving the site. In some cases, undocumented families were initially not allowed to leave the site, increasing the risk of family separation. Episodes of confiscation of NFIs, even after thorough security checks by the local security forces, have been intermittently reported, together with the request to pay up to 5,000 SYP in exchange for Asayesh escorts. Protection actors brought the cases to the attention of the camp administration to deter the practice and during the last movements the situation was reported to have improved.

Outside the IDP sites, protection actors continued to plan and move towards implementation of protection activities in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. Some northeast Syria INGOs have reportedly begun supporting GBV Case Management interventions in Tabqa, while others are looking into connecting GBV services with health facilities. Qamishli-based UN agencies are still encountering some challenges in obtaining permissions to establish facilities in Tabqa. At the same time northeast Syria INGOs are developing plans to build the capacity of humanitarian organizations present in Tabqa, Ar-Raqqa, or Deir-ez-Zor through workshops and capacity building targeting both local actors and the community. This includes explosive hazard awareness, risk education as well as awareness on safety messaging, including on family unity during movements, with an increased focus on inclusiveness for persons with low literacy and child friendly materials.

Plans for the relocation of families from the Twahina makeshift IDP settlement to a new and better equipped site in Mahmudi area is taking shape at an inter-agency level, with site planning and design of possible facilities being completed. Mine Action support is being discussed to make sure that the site area and the surroundings are surveyed and eventually cleared of explosive hazards. While the intention survey already conducted indicates the voluntary character of the move, protection actors continue to advocate that the establishment of an administered site does result in restrictions in freedom of movement and encampment policies.

## 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 among others to lack of project approvals, continued ISIL threat. Numerous areas where needs are assumed to be acute, particularly in East and South-East Deir-ez-Zor, remain out of reach for humanitarian actors.
- **High levels of explosive hazard contamination:** The contamination levels in areas that shifted control continues to be considered very high, particularly in Ar-Raqqa city and on Deir-ez-Zor roads and towns, although all population centres and rural areas, more generally where there were military operations or armed groups, are also of concern. In addition, due protracted interruption of humanitarian assistance and services in the IDP sites IDPs may decide to return to areas of Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates where their safety – particularly from explosive hazards – can be at risk.
- **Policy environment:** Although there have been some improvements, 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 and confiscation of personal documentation, more frequent in certain areas. The intermittent bureaucratic impediments to operate in IDP sites and conduct certain activities are also of concern for humanitarian actors as it hinders planning, implementation and predictable provision of services to the population. The process of return needs to remain fully voluntary, safe and well informed. It should not be triggered by sub-standard living conditions, lack of assistance or constrained freedom of movement.
- **Scalability:** The scalability of the assistance and local capacity remain limited and unpredictable, including for any possible increase of humanitarian 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 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 an essential necessity for key humanitarian actors to be able to continue operations throughout the second half of the year, amidst competing emergencies elsewhere in the country.

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