NOTE

This is an excerpt from IDMC's 2019
Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID).

SYRIA

A decisive year for the conflict,
but not for those displaced

🔴 Areas under the control of the government as of December 2017

🔴 Territory taken by the government as of December 2018

🟢 Areas under the control of non-state armed groups as of December 2018

🟡 Areas under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces as of December 2018

🟢 Areas under the control of the Turkish administration as of December 2018

Sources: ISW and Liveuamap (2017, 2018)

The Syrian government brought large swathes of territory back under its control in 2018, making it a decisive year in the country's civil war. Non-state armed groups suffered severe losses as the government and affiliated forces retook Eastern Ghouta, Dara'a and Quneitra governorates, the southern Damascus suburbs and the city of Homs and its surrounding countryside. Only Idlib governorate remains in the hands of non-state actors.

As the conflict nears its end, discussions about post-conflict reconstruction and returns have begun. The government passed a new law in April which designates reconstruction zones across Syria. Law No. 10 also gives landowners in those areas a year to prove ownership or risk losing their land with no compensation.[89] This law has been criticised for its potential to create significant obstacles to return (see Spotlight, p.96).[90]

The year began with government forces advancing toward the north of Hama and west of Aleppo governorates northern areas of rural Hama and western areas of rural Aleppo, triggering more than 325,000 new displacements over a six-week period.[91] An offensive launched in February to retake the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta lasted seven weeks and triggered more than 158,000 new displacements between 9 March and 22 April.[92] Around 66,000 people were displaced to areas of north-west Syria including Idlib and Aleppo, which were still under the control of non-state armed actors. These areas have received large numbers of displaced fighters and their families over the years as a result of local ceasefires.[93]

Heavy fighting also broke out in the southern governorates of Dara'a and Quneitra in June and July, culminating in an agreement that restored government control. The offensive led to the single largest displacement event of the war.[94] The month-long campaign triggered at least 285,000 new displacements, the majority over a period of just two weeks.[95]
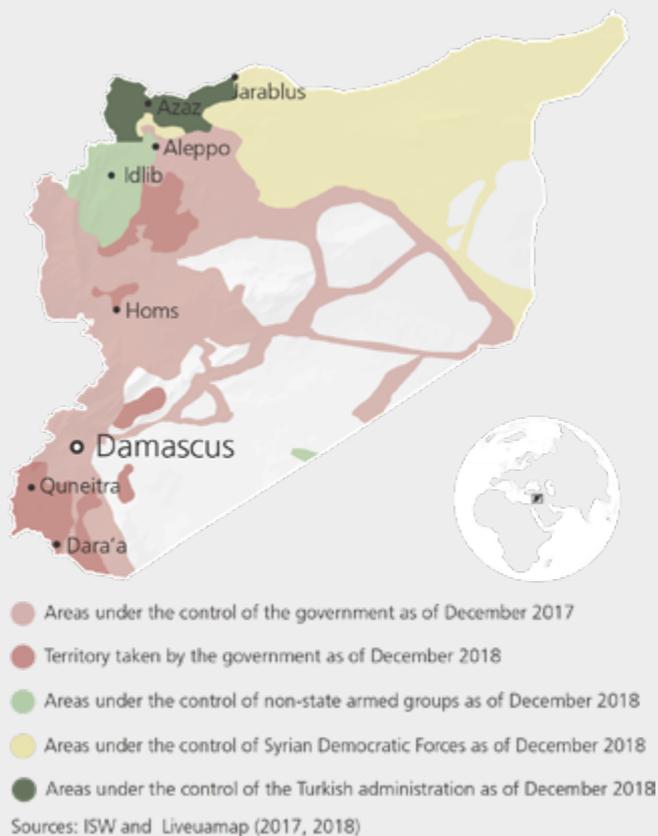
A similar fate seemed to await Idlib governorate in late August and early September. The build-up of government and affiliated forces along the conflict line in the north of Hama and west of Aleppo governorates and a subsequent increase in aerial bombardments prompted an international outcry and calls for restraint. The UN, international NGOs and governments around the world warned that further escalation would result in a humanitarian disaster.[96] The area is home to 2.3 million people, almost half of them IDPs, who would have had nowhere to flee because Turkey has shut its border.

Idlib is the largest host of displaced people in the country relative to population size, both in and outside camps, and repeated displacement within the governorate is commonplace. Aid agencies on the ground report that families have been displaced an average of three or four times, and some as many as a dozen times.[97] Many may have chosen to flee abroad had Turkey not closed its border. The proliferation of armed groups has further destabilised the region, with occasional clashes between factions and criminality disrupting daily life and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Turkey and Russia brokered an agreement on 17 September to establish a demilitarised zone between 14 and 19 kilometres wide along the contact line and extending into north-eastern areas of rural Latakia. Turkish military police have been stationed to monitor

High levels of damage, destruction and displacement in Aleppo.
Photo: UNHCR/Antwan Chnkdji, October 2018
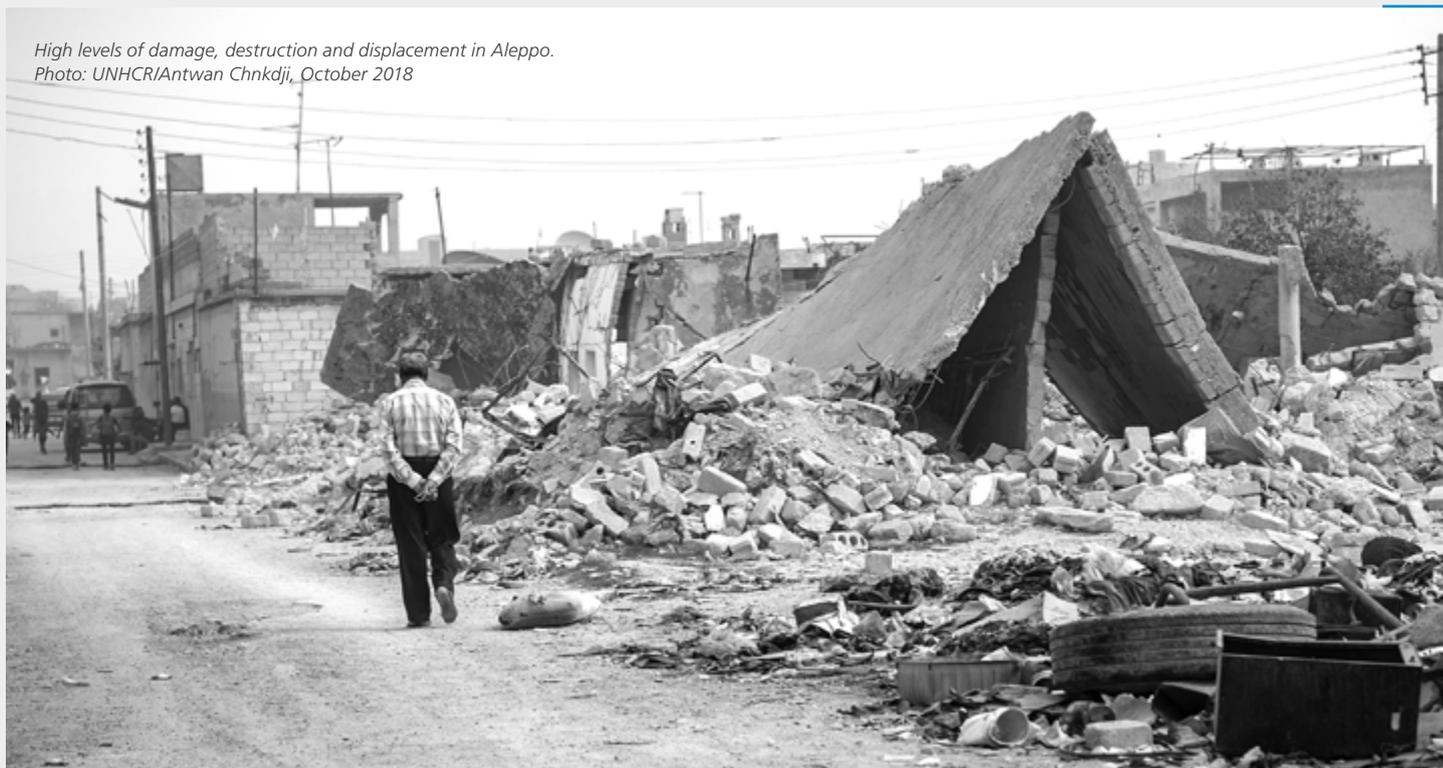
compliance, which includes the withdrawal of all heavy weaponry. The agreement may have averted a humanitarian disaster for now, but reports of violations by all parties are a cause for concern.[98] The initial stability it has introduced should be built on to establish a more lasting solution which genuinely protects Idlib's civilians.

Many of the IDPs who fled their homes in 2018 have since returned to their areas of origin, particularly in the south. About 695,000 people have been reported to have returned to their homes in 2018. However, given the extent of the damage caused by the fighting, ongoing insecurity and lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities, it is unclear how many of these will have reached durable solutions. An unknown number have been unwilling to return, preferring to wait and see what life will be like in their areas of origin under government control.[99]

Southern residents who want to remain in their homes, including former fighters, have been told to "regularise" their status with the government, which involves visiting a local registration centre to begin a reconciliation process and be granted amnesty. What this will mean for the many people who previously lived in areas beyond government control remains to be seen, but there have been some initial reports of former fighters and other young men being arrested.[100]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the security situation in the south has improved somewhat. Basic services are still lacking, however, particularly in rural Dara'a and Quneitra, and restrictions to humanitarian access means little aid has been delivered. Unemployment is also a problem, particularly for low-skilled workers and those suspected of being anti-government activists, ex-combatants or former officials in non-state armed groups.[101] Many government employees who have not been directly affiliated with armed groups have reportedly returned to their jobs.

As the conflict apparently nears its end, important post-conflict questions remain. It is unclear who will fund the reconstruction of major urban centres such as Aleppo and Raqqa so that those displaced are able to return in safety and dignity.[102] Nor is it clear how north-eastern Syria and Idlib governorate will be administered, a situation that has the potential to reignite conflict.

In a country where nearly half of the population has been displaced, managing the safe and sustainable return of refugees and IDPs will be a huge challenge. Pressure should be put on the Syrian government to address its displacement crisis with comprehensive policies in line with the Guiding Principles to prevent the country from descending into conflict again.[103]

| Notes

89. The law originally gave land owner 30 days to prove ownership, but in June 2018 the Syrian government extended the period to one year. The Washington Institute, "Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics", September 17, 2018.

90. Human Rights Watch, "Q&A: Syria's New Property Law, May 29", 2018.

91. OCHA, "Turkey | Syria: Recent Developments in North-western Syria (Idleb Governorate and Afrin District), as of 13 February", 2018.

92. OCHA, "East Ghouta, Humanitarian Update, Facts and Figures", 22 April, 2018.

93. OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 3", April 2018.

94. NRC, "Intense fighting in southern Syria creates largest displacement since start of war", July 6, 2018.

95. OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida, Situation Report No.1", July 4, 2018.

96. The Independent, "UN warns of "worst humanitarian disaster" of 21st century as 30,000 flee Syria's Idlib", September 10, 2018.

97. Interviews with aid agency on the ground, Syria, 2018

98. The Economist, "Turkey and Russia cut a deal over Syria", September 20, 2018.

99. Interview with NRC staff in Syria, 2018.

100. Syria Direct, "Life after reconciliation marred by arrests, broken promises as Syria's southwest returns to government control", October 16, 2018.

101. Interviews with NRC staff in Syria, 2018

102. BBC News, "Who will help rebuild the former "capital" of IS?", October 22, 2018.

103. Washington Post, "Why Syrian refugees are at risk of a forced return to Syria", February 13, 2019.