

# Syria

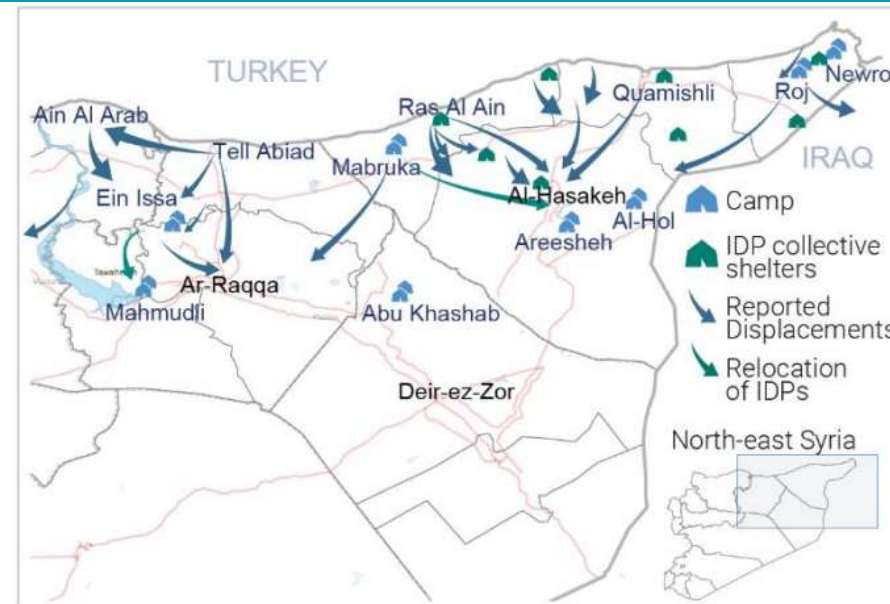
## Displacement in the northeast

Airstrikes and ground attacks hit multiple towns and cities in the northeast of Syria after Turkey launched a military offensive into the Kurdish-held territory on 9 October. As of 18 October, fighting between Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) caused over 146 civilian casualties and displaced at least 190,000 people from their homes. The majority have fled into Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates where towns are overwhelmed by the influx of IDPs and services are overstretched. Particularly Hasakeh city has seen large numbers of arrivals. Conflict has severely damaged the water and electric supply infrastructure.

### NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE



### IMPACT



Source: OCHA 18/10/2019

### Anticipated scope and scale

Continued escalation of conflict in northeast Syria puts over 2 million civilians at risk. Further displacement is likely to increase needs and push humanitarian services to their limits. People living in northeast Syria have experienced multiple displacements. The surrounding cities where people are likely to flee have been heavily contaminated with mines, and lack basic services. IDP camps in the area are already overstretched due to years of conflict.

### Key priorities



**+190,000**  
displaced



**Protection**  
concerns are high



**WASH**  
infrastructure damaged

### Humanitarian constraints



Humanitarian operations are severely hampered by heavy shelling, disrupted supply chains, and shifts in territorial control. International staff have been evacuated.

#### Limitations

Assessments are ongoing, and the impact is likely to increase over the coming days. The exact scope of the impact is therefore unclear.

## Crisis impact

The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the allied forces launched a military offensive into Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria on 9 October (REUTERS 09/10/2019). The operation targets the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who control the northeast of Syria. Airstrikes, heavy artillery shelling and ground clashes hit multiple towns and cities across Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates. As of 18 October, the most intense fighting between TAF and SDF took place in Tal Abyad, Ras Al-Ain and Qamishli (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019).

The conflict-affected area is home 2.2 million people living in SDF-controlled areas, including 1.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, as well as 450,000 people living in partly government-controlled Qamishli and Hasakeh city (HNO 2019; BBC 14/10/2019). Up to 300,000 people who are living in the immediate area around the hostilities are at risk of being displaced (ICRC 14/10/2019).

To date, at least 190,000 people, including 70,000 children, have fled their homes since the start of the military operations (IOM 15/10/2019; UNICEF 14/10/2019). Most people are fleeing away from the Turkish border deeper into the Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates. Displacement movements are difficult to track with people moving to new shelters several times due to the volatile situation (OCHA 14/10/2019). In particular, Hasakeh city in Hasakeh governorate has received an estimated 60,000 IDPs as of 15 October (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019). Reports suggest that Hasakeh city may be receiving one of the highest influxes (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019). However, confirmed numbers to compare arrivals across host communities are unavailable.

Hostilities caused at least 146 civilian casualties. OCHA reports an additional 42 deaths. However, it is unclear if this number is included in the casualty figure (OCHA 18/10/2019).

Attacks on civilian infrastructure, including power lines, water supplies, health facilities, bakeries and a school are reported.

The full impact of the conflict remains difficult to verify as conditions on the ground are changing rapidly. Numbers on displacement and casualties are likely to increase as more information becomes available and the conflict continues to escalate.

Humanitarian needs are severe and multisectoral. WASH, protection and healthcare have been identified as the main needs.

**WASH:** Water infrastructure has been severely damaged by the fighting. As of 18 October, the main water station in Hasakeh governorate, serving 400,000 people, was out of service due to damages to the power grid (ICRC 14/10/2019; OCHA 18/10/2019). As a temporary solution, people are pumping water of poorer quality from nearby dams. However, the water supply provided by the dams is insufficient and can support the

needs of the population of Hasakeh city only for about 10 more days (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019). Repair works to the water station are ongoing but have been hindered due to the clashes (UNICEF 15/10/2019). Water infrastructure in close proximity to the frontlines remain at risk of being damaged by the clashes.

**Protection:** Protection concerns are high for populations living along the Turkish/Syrian border as well as for IDPs remaining in camps close to the frontlines, where access to humanitarian assistance is severely restricted (OCHA 14/10/2019).

Additionally, many people fled their homes without belongings or papers and are in need of civil documentation (UNHCR 15/10/2019).

There are also reports of extrajudicial killings of civilians and targeted attacks on civilian convoys fleeing the violence as well as medical facilities, indicating serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights (OHCRC 15/10/2019; Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019).

**Health:** The already depleted healthcare services in northeast Syria are further strained by the ongoing conflict in the region. As a result of the hostilities, two national hospitals in Ras Al-Ain and Tal Abyad are currently out of service along with two health centres in Tal Abyad. People in need of essential healthcare and lifesaving support experience challenges accessing health services due to insecurity. There are widespread shortages of medical supplies and health workers, some of whom are also displaced by the conflict (OCHA 14/10/2019; WHO 13/10/2019).

Damages to the main water station in Hasakeh governorate and restricted access to clean drinking water raise the risk of outbreaks of infectious diseases. Acute diarrhoea and typhoid were two of the most reported diseases in the northeast already before the current escalation of violence. Further escalation of conflict leading to increased displacement, overcrowded living conditions, and lack of WASH services increase the risk of waterborne diseases (WHO 13/10/2019).

The need for comprehensive mental health and psychological support is reported (OCHA 14/10/2019).

**Shelter:** Displacement is ongoing with reportedly thousands of people on the move. Most of the displaced have sought shelter with relatives, friends or host communities. Places in pre-existing camps are limited and there is high risk of overcrowding. Some 48 collective shelters in schools, mosques and unfinished buildings were set up across Hasakeh city, Tal Tamer, Darbasiyah, Malikeyyeh, Qamishli, Ras Al Ain, Tal Hamis, and Ya'robiyah. The shelters are hosting around 8,000 people (OCHA 18/10/2019). However, numbers of people staying in collective shelters change quickly as people continue to seek for alternative accommodation after arrival (OCHA 14/10/2019). As winter approaches and displacement is expected to increase, the need for adequate shelter will become more important.

**Food and NFIs:** Food and NFI needs, including the need for cooking gas and heating fuel, are reported across the affected region but a comprehensive overview is unavailable (OCHA 14/10/2019; WFP 16/10/2019). It is likely that access to markets is restricted in areas where hostilities are taking place.

**Education:** According to UNICEF at least one school was attacked in the fighting. Details about the attack and damages to the school are unknown (UNICEF 14/10/2019). Moreover, thousands of students in Hasakeh city are unable to attend class as school buildings are serving as collective shelters (ICRC 14/10/2019).

## Humanitarian and operational constraints

The escalation of conflict has severely hampered humanitarian operations in northeast Syria. Fast evolving conflict developments have resulted in a highly fluid security situation. Humanitarian organisations are dealing with constantly changing armed actors and are experiencing serious challenges in negotiating safe access. An unpredictable operational environment and ongoing airstrikes, shelling and armed clashes have led to the suspension of humanitarian operations and relocation of international staff of most INGOs (MSF 15/10/2019; UNICEF 15/10/2019; Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019). Additionally, many Syrian staff have been displaced due to the violence (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019). Movement for remaining staff, mainly in Qamishli, is highly restricted due to the ongoing fighting and ERW/UXO contamination (OCHA 14/10/2019).

Additionally, TAF have captured part of the M4 international highway, cutting a main supply road that connects Aleppo and eastern Syria into two. The closure of M4 is likely to hinder the supply of humanitarian goods (WFP 14/10/2019).

With many humanitarian organisations based along the Turkish/Syrian border and relying on cross-border access points, a possible change in control over the territory raises concern about general humanitarian access to the region. If TAF manage to take control over the area, humanitarian organisations will need to renegotiate cross-border access as well as conditions for delivery of aid.

## Aggravating factors

### Past displacement and (existing) vulnerability

Years of conflict have had a severe impact on northeast Syria. The region is economically depleted and basic services are significantly weakened. Many people living in the area have been displaced multiple times and have experienced extreme physical and mental stress due to conflict and uncertainty exhausting their self-reliance and increasing their dependency on humanitarian aid. More than 910,000 of those

living in the area were already in acute need of assistance before the escalation of violence. Nearly 710,000 people were already internally displaced (OCHA 14/10/2019; HNO 2019). Some 91,000 people across five IDP camps rely entirely on humanitarian assistance for survival (Joint NGO statement 10/10/2019; NPR 11/10/2019; OCHA 18/10/2019). A disruption of assistance due to the conflict would have serious humanitarian consequences.

People on the move are exposed to high levels of explosive hazards contamination, especially in areas that were retaken from the Islamic State (IS), like Raqqa city (Syria INGO Regional Forum 15/10/2019).

Movements further south into government-controlled region raises protection concerns due to the risk of conscription. Following a deal between SDF and Government of Syria (GoS) aiming to deter Turkish advancement, the Syrian regime is currently expanding its territory in the SDF-controlled areas (Al Jazeera 15/10/2019). Families perceived to be part of the opposition are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and arrests by the Syrian regime and are therefore restricted in their movement.

There are also concerns for Arabs living in the SDF-controlled areas. Prior to the escalation, tensions between Arabs and Kurds in the region had been rising following a series of violent protests against Kurdish rule in Deir-ez-Zor (REUTERS 08/05/2019). Now the SDF is fighting Arab armed groups allied to the TAF, Arabs living in the region may be at risk of individually motivated retaliations by Kurdish forces.

## Contextual information

### Overview of the current conflict

On 9 October, Turkey started a long-threatened offensive, named “Operation Peace Spring”, into the Kurdish-controlled northeast of Syria (REUTERS 09/10/2019). The operation was launched just days after an announcement from US president Trump that the US would be withdrawing its troops from the Turkish/Syrian border (REUTERS 07/10/2019). As of 21 October, fighting between Turkish allied and Kurdish forces along the Turkish/Syrian border appeared to have halted.

Most of northeastern Syria has been out of government control since 2012. Kurdish groups were able to take control after forces allied to the GoS left the area to fight opposition groups in other parts of Syria. In 2015 the largest Kurdish group, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), created an alliance with local armed groups forming the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Supported by the US, the SDF was able to drive out IS from the area and to set up an autonomous administration to govern the region (ACLED 12/10/2019; BBC 14/10/2019).

Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which they consider a "terrorist group". Turkey regards the presence of YPG forces close to its borders as a grave security threat.

In August 2019, Turkey and the US agreed to set up a "security mechanism" along the Turkish/Syrian border and to clear the area from YPG fighters in an attempt to avert a Turkish cross-border operation (REUTERS 07/08/2019). However, Turkey stated the efforts of the US were not yielding the results it wanted (REUTERS 03/10/2019).

Turkey's offensive aims at removing Kurdish forces from the border area and creating a buffer zone 32km into Syria to which millions of Syrian refugees can be relocated (Al Jazeera 15/10/2019).

An announcement on 13 October that the US plans on withdrawing from northeast Syria altogether was followed by a significant shift in alliances when the SDF and GoS came to a Russia-backed deal shortly after. The SDF agreed for the Syrian army to enter Kurdish territory and deploy forces along the border to deter the Turkish assault (Al Jazeera 15/10/2019).

On 15 October, TAF and GoS forces entered Manbij, a strategic town in the middle of the northern belt of Syria. The town, previously under IS control before it was captured by the SDF in 2016, is a local economic hub and adjacent to the strategic M4 highway (Al Jazeera 16/10/2019).

On 17 October, Turkey agreed to pause its offensive for five days under a US-brokered ceasefire deal allowing time for the SDF to pull out from the planned buffer zone (19/10/2019). Although military activities have slowed in most of the areas, scattered fighting in Ras Al-Ain and Tal Abyad continued to be reported in the following days. At the time writing, the SDF started withdrawing its troops from Ras Al-Ain (REUTERS 20/10/2019). Turkey has warned it will resume its operations if the SDF do not pull back all forces from the region before the ceasefire ends on 22 October (REUTERS 21/10/2019).

## Key characteristics

**Demographic profile:** Population in northeast Syria: 3,600,000 (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019)

**Health** - [countrywide] infant mortality rate: 14/1,000; under-5 mortality rate: 18/1,000 (UNICEF 2017).

**WASH** - [countrywide] 94% use of basic drinking water services: 99% urban, 94% rural. 93% use of basic sanitation services: 96% urban, 89% rural (UNICEF 2017).

**Literacy** - [countrywide] adult literacy rate 81%; youth (15-24) literacy rate: 95% male, 90% female (UNICEF 2017).

## Response capacity

### International response capacity

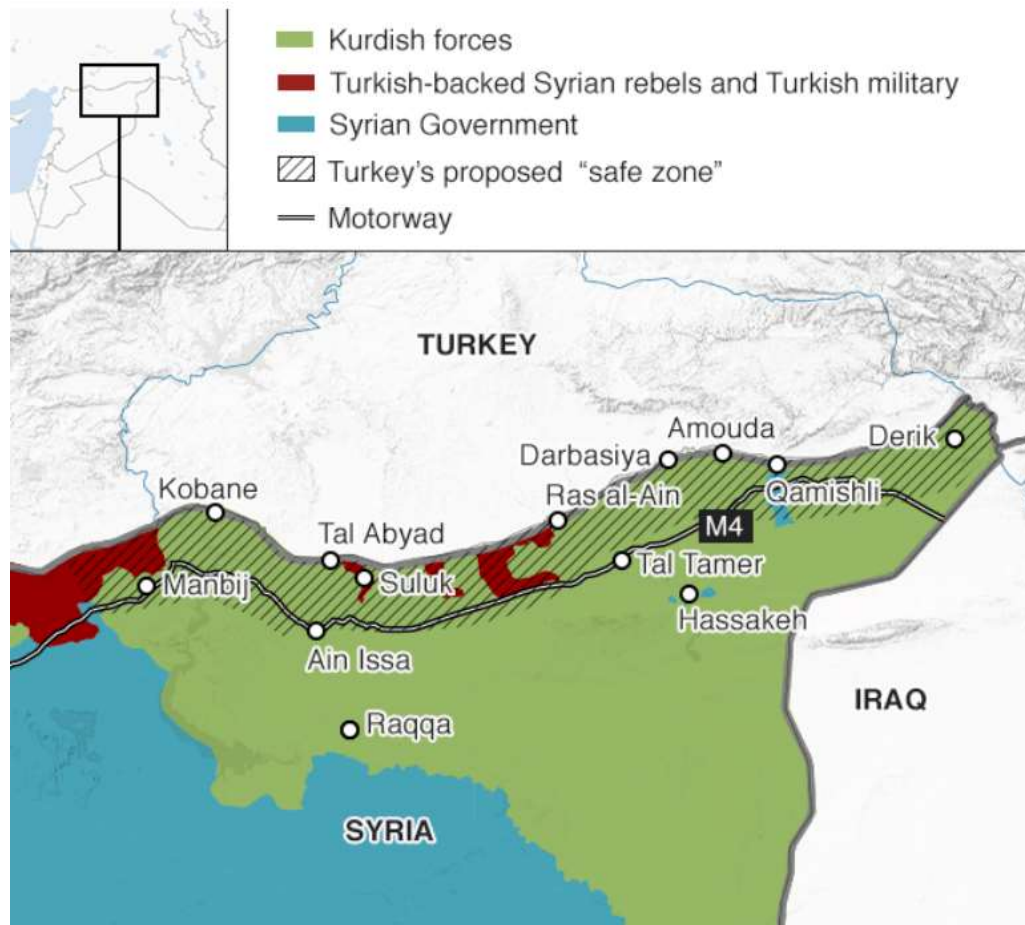
Major international organisations are responding to the crisis. Food, WASH, shelter, protection and health assistance are ongoing. Recent announcements of suspension of operations and evacuation of international staff has strained the response capacity and are likely to result in response gaps. UN agencies and INGOs have stated that they continue to operate through local implementing partners. However, the displacement of local staff may hinder operations (WFP 14/10/2019; UNICEF 14/10/2019; ICRC 14/10/2019).

### Information gaps and needs

The full scope of the humanitarian impact is unknown as the situation on the ground is fast evolving. Assessments are ongoing but operational constraints are hampering the process. Figures of displaced people and casualties are likely underestimated and are expected to increase as more information becomes available and the conflict continues to escalate. Information on humanitarian needs and the severity of the needs is limited and a detailed breakdown is unavailable.



## Map: Conflict area and safe zone



Source: (BBC 14/10/2019)