

CRISIS OVERVIEW

During 2022-2023 winter season, six million people across Syria will be in urgent need of winter assistance, an increase of 28% from the 2021 figure (OCHA 25/09/2022; Shelter Cluster/UNHCR 29/11/2022). The winter weather is expected to compound the existing humanitarian needs of displaced people affected by over ten years of crisis (IFRC 27/01/2022).

In previous years, the governorates most affected by extreme weather conditions were Idleb and Aleppo in the northwestern region of the country, particularly Afrin, Azaz, Dana, Harim, and Maaret Tamsrin districts (OCHA 25/01/2022; UNHCR 26/09/2022; CARE 17/01/2022).

Current fuel and electricity shortages are already affecting people and constraining their access to heating. The shortages are forcing people to stop using their traditional diesel stoves and use alternatives, such as firewood and even pistachio shells, as fuel (Reuters 08/12/2022).

The country is also facing a cholera outbreak, with over 57,000 suspected cases and 98 deaths as at 3 December (The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). 2.1 million people living in northwestern Syria's subdistricts are most at risk of developing a cholera outbreak (OCHA 02/12/2022). Idleb governorate is the second most affected province with more than 12,000 suspected cases as at 3 December (The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). The health response is not enough to cover everyone's needs during winter, with only 52% of hospitals remaining operational under harsh conditions (MDM 02/12/2022).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE

- The 2022-2023 winter season is anticipated to be particularly harsh compared to past years because of the aggravated electricity and fuel crisis affecting access to heating and fuel for cooking (UN 02/10/2022; SIRF 25/11/2022). Communities in northwestern parts of the country and in high-altitude areas are particularly susceptible to the effects of winter (OCHA 25/09/2022).

- There is a high risk of fires during winter because of the reliance on heating and cooking inside shelters, often in overcrowded tents. During the winter of 2021, 345 fire incidents destroyed 522 shelters and led to 12 deaths and 61 injuries (OCHA 30/09/2022).
- Without proper response, the upcoming winter is likely to cause deaths from hypothermia or fires inside tents. In 2021, three children died from winter weather-related causes. In 2020, at least ten related deaths were reported (CNN 19/01/2022; CBS 15/02/2020). These deaths were likely underreported.
- The cholera outbreak has been overwhelming the health response, and the overcrowding of shelters and subsequent lack of adequate WASH facilities can increase the spread of the disease.
- Northwestern Syria is usually very affected, but this oncoming winter northeastern Syria is also likely to be affected, particularly IDP sites in the region, with temperatures normally dropping below 0° C during the season (UNHCR 02/11/2022).

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

- The UN cross-border resolution expires on 10 January 2023, which could jeopardise certain camp management activities, such as the reporting of and response to weather-related incidents, and reduce the capacity to provide assistance to affected populations (UNHCR 26/09/2022).
- Conflict and insecurity, including shelling incidents, air strikes, and clashes in northwestern governorates, prevent humanitarian responders from reaching and providing assistance to affected populations (NRC accessed 06/12/2022).
- Snowstorms and torrential rains can cause roadblocks, hindering people's access to safety and assistance and creating access constraints for humanitarian responders (NRC accessed 06/12/2022).
- Fuel shortages are likely to limit the humanitarian response to isolated communities.



KEY PRIORITIES

6M

PEOPLE
REQUIRE WINTER
ASSISTANCE ACROSS
THE COUNTRY

2.1M

PEOPLE AT RISK OF
CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN
NORTHERN SYRIA

57,000

SUSPECTED
CHOLERA CASES

RISK

OF FIRE INCIDENTS



LESSONS LEARNT

- Unconditional cash assistance has been useful for each household to buy winter clothes and food according to their needs (UNICEF 28/11/2022). While some families struggle for food, others cite clothing, heating, and medicine as their main needs (NRC accessed 06/12/2022). Cash assistance allows each family to define these needs.
- During winter, IDPs tend to cook more frequently inside their tents, increasing the risk of fires. Training people, especially women, to respond to fires has proven useful in saving lives and reducing the impact of fires (OCHA 30/09/2022).

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Shelter

There are currently over 1,400 IDP sites in northwestern Syria hosting 1.8 million displaced people, of whom 56% are children (UNHCR 26/09/2022). In Aleppo and Idlib governorates, poor housing conditions are prevalent because of the conflict. Many of the displaced population live in unfinished buildings, informal settlements, and makeshift tents that do not provide adequate protection from extreme weather conditions, exposing them to the severe effects of winter (Syria Direct 21/12/2021; TRT World 09/12/2021).

In northwestern Syria, over two million people lack adequate shelter. Among this number, 800,000 live in old tents without adequate sewage and drainage and lacking access to water and electricity. 93% of these tents are more than a year old (UN 02/10/2022; Shelter Cluster/ UNHCR 28/09/2022). The displaced population is unable to afford wood and coal for heating during winter, and they resort to burning plastic and manure for warmth (MEMO 28/10/2022). In some areas, there has been a drastic rationing of electricity supply only available for one hour per day, disrupting livelihoods and daily activities (UN 02/10/2022). During the past three years, unsafe heating has led to at least ten reported deaths of children, but the death toll resulting from winter is unknown and likely to be underreported (ACU et al. 07/11/2022).

During the 2021–2022 winter, related weather incidents, such as floods, snowstorms, and strong winds, destroyed more than 6,700 tents and damaged over 22,800 in IDPs sites across northwestern Syria, and over 30% of all IDPs sites were experiencing flooding (UNHCR 26/09/2022).

People in Syria, particularly IDPs, need plastic sheets, mattresses, sleeping mats, and kitchen sets. During winter, there is a need to provide extra protection with thermal blankets, sleeping bags, waterproof floor covers, additional plastic sheets, portable heaters, rubber boots, and winter jackets (UNHCR 18/10/2022). The impact of inadequate housing on the health and safety of people worsens during winter.

Health

As at 3 December, roughly 57,000 suspected cases were reported across Syria. As at 29 November, more than 17,400 suspected cholera cases had been reported in both Idlib and Aleppo governorates, but since then the number of suspected cases has risen to 12,000 in Idlib alone, making it the second most-affected province in Syria (OCHA 02/12/2022; The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). More than half of these cases involve children aged five or younger. The outbreak started in northeast Syria because of contaminated water consumption from the Euphrates River and low water levels in northern Syria (The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). As at 2 December, there were 39 confirmed cases and two deaths reported in the Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad (RAATA) areas, which were only accessible to a few humanitarian actors via Turkey as of February 2022 (OCHA 02/12/2022; OCHA 22/02/2022). As at November, at least two deaths had been reported in IDP camps in northwestern Syria, but deaths may be underreported (OCHA/WHO 15/11/2022). The cholera outbreak is overwhelming health responders, and overcrowding in shelters during winter can increase the spreading of the disease. Cholera and other seasonal infections such as cold or flu can be confused with each other, adding further strain on the limited health system (The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). Eleven rapid response teams from the World Health Organisation (WHO) have been activated and eight Cholera Treatment Units (CTUs) have been established in six sub-districts across Idlib and Aleppo governorates (OCHA 02/12/2022). Responders highlight the need for treatment kits and medical supplies, the provision of supplies to labs, and training for health workers and communities (OCHA 01/11/2022).

Cold and damp winter conditions, compounded by overcrowding and a lack of access to adequate sanitation in IDP sites, are likely to increase cases of respiratory infection, health issues from smoke inhalation, pneumonia, and waterborne diseases (Tarnas et al. 07/06/2022; MSF 17/12/2020; Al Jazeera 01/02/2022). Inhaling fumes from burning plastic, manure, and coal is harmful and often results in children falling ill (MEMO 28/10/2022; The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). During the 2021–2022 winter season, hospitals saw an increase in cases of bronchitis and lung damage in children as a result of cold and poor living conditions (Al Jazeera 01/02/2022). Health responders also recorded more than 46,400 cases of acute watery diarrhoea (USAID 09/12/2022).

Prolonged conflict has already weakened and overstretched the health system in Syria. Many charity-run hospitals in the northwest have shut down or suspended their activities because of shortages in funding, medical equipment, disinfectants, and fuel (Al Jazeera 16/02/2022). An increase in patients because of the impact of winter conditions will likely overwhelm the remaining functional health facilities.

Winter also affects the mental health of IDPs, women, and other affected people. During this season, suicide rates increase across the country (World Vision 09/12/2022; Al Jazeera 17/08/2022).



WASH

Displaced people living in overcrowded informal settlements do not have adequate access to running water or sanitation facilities, which are likely to aggravate the cholera outbreak (The New Humanitarian 13/12/2022). In northwestern Syria, 45% of water stations need repair (OCHA 02/12/2022). Water in containers, tanks, and pipes can freeze because of cold temperatures, disrupting water networks and constraining people's access to clean water (OCHA 25/01/2022). Snow also affects people's access to sanitation, forcing people to resort to open defecation or withhold from using sanitation facilities, leading to negative health impacts.

Flooding often damages basic facilities, such as water supplies, sanitation, and waste disposal systems, increasing the risk of waterborne disease outbreaks in overcrowded IDP sites. As at 29 November 2022, health responders across Syria had recorded more than 46,400 cases of acute watery diarrhoea, including 422 lab-confirmed cholera cases and 12 related deaths. Responders are heavily making efforts towards the chlorination of drinking water and the monitoring of water quality (USAID 09/12/2022; OCHA 02/12/2022).

Food security

Approximately 12.4 million people in Syria (around 70% of the population) are food-insecure, including 3.3 million people in northwestern Syria (WFP accessed 24/09/2022; AAH 15/03/2022; OCHA 02/12/2022). In northwestern Syria, 97% of people live in extreme poverty. Their low purchasing power limits people's capacity to meet basic needs, making them dependent on aid (Al Jazeera 15/04/2022; OCHA 13/10/2021). Winter-related severe weather conditions could create access challenges for humanitarian responders and disrupt the delivery of food assistance to IDP sites, furthering reducing their access to food and nutrition.

Nutrition

Around 5.5 million people in Syria are malnourished, and half of them are in the northeastern regions (WHO 19/05/2022). The number of malnourished children in northeastern Syria has increased by over 150% in the past six months, with at least 10,000 more children facing malnutrition as at 8 November 2022 (Save the Children 08/11/2022). Nutrition status across the northwestern regions has also deteriorated. Cases of severe acute malnutrition has increased from 1.5–2% in 2022. In the northwest, at least one in three children and one in two pregnant and lactating women suffer from one form of undernutrition (UNICEF 16/08/2022). In Aleppo and Idlib governorates, chronic malnutrition among children aged 6–59 months increased from 19–24.5% between May 2019 and June 2021. The prevalence of global acute malnutrition increased from 0.9–4.7% over the same period.

Among pregnant and lactating women, the rate of acute malnutrition across northwestern Syria is 12.4% (PAC/UNICEF 18/10/2022). In areas with a high prevalence of malnutrition, there is more risk of fatalities from severe winter weather conditions, of which children are more vulnerable.

Education

Across the country, an estimated 2.45 million children are out of school, and an additional 1.6 million children are at risk of dropping out. Historically, school attendance decreases from 30–40% during winter from mid-December to mid-February, with sickness and absenteeism linked to cold weather disrupting education (ACU et al. 07/11/2022). Lighting and heating for schools are also limited. Only 4–7% of schools have electricity and heating during winter, affecting children's access to education (OHCHR 10/11/2022; OCHA 25/09/2022).

In the northwestern regions, IDP children face different limitations in accessing education. For one, there are not enough schools. In the Ras Al Ain IDP camp in northwestern Al-Hasakah governorate, there are only two schools for 3,000 students. Classrooms also often lack heating. Some education centres are prefabricated and do not protect children from the cold winter. IDPs in remote locations of camps are also less likely to attend school (Enab Baladi 05/10/2022; SOHR 14/02/2022; AA 20/05/2021). With limited access to education, children are at a high risk of facing different kinds of abuse, including early marriage and child labour (ACU et al. 07/11/2022).



AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Flooding

Climate change has increased incidents of heavy rainfall and flooding during winter in Syria, aggravating the impact of freezing temperatures, winter snowstorms, and prevailing conflict. In the winter of 2021–2022, flash floods washed away tents and belongings, leaving displaced people exposed to winter conditions (CARE 17/01/2022).

Displacement

There are approximately 1.8 million displaced people, half of which are children, across 1,421 IDP sites in northwestern Syria. In northeastern Syria, conflict has displaced around 655,400 people (WHO 27/01/2022). Many people living in the northwestern area have been displaced multiple times and exhausted their coping mechanisms, increasing their dependency on humanitarian assistance (UNHCR 26/09/2022). During previous winters, tents and makeshift shelters housing IDPs were insufficient to withstand high winds and heavy rains (CARE 17/01/2022).

In other conflict scenarios, such as Ukraine, winter has generated new displacements to warmer areas of the country (IRC 01/12/2022).

Conflict

Years of conflict and the subsequent displacement and loss of livelihoods have resulted in families being unable to meet their basic needs, including clothes and heating for winter (UNICEF 24/03/2022). Armed conflict has destroyed or damaged more than half of the medical facilities in the country (PHR 15/12/2021; OCHA 22/02/2022). In view of the increase in medical conditions and illnesses, conflict-related limitations on healthcare capacities may aggravate the effects of winter.

Poverty and inflation

90% of the population in Syria lives below the poverty line, and 44% of people in northwestern Syria cannot afford bread (UNHCR 02/11/2022). The prices of staple foods, such as bread, vegetable oil, sugar, lentils, and rice, have increased nearly fourfold in two years. The prices of vegetable oil and wheat flour have increased by more than 40% as a result of the crisis in Ukraine (OCHA 02/12/2022). 67% of the population in Syria cannot afford essential items available in the market (UNHCR 18/10/2022).

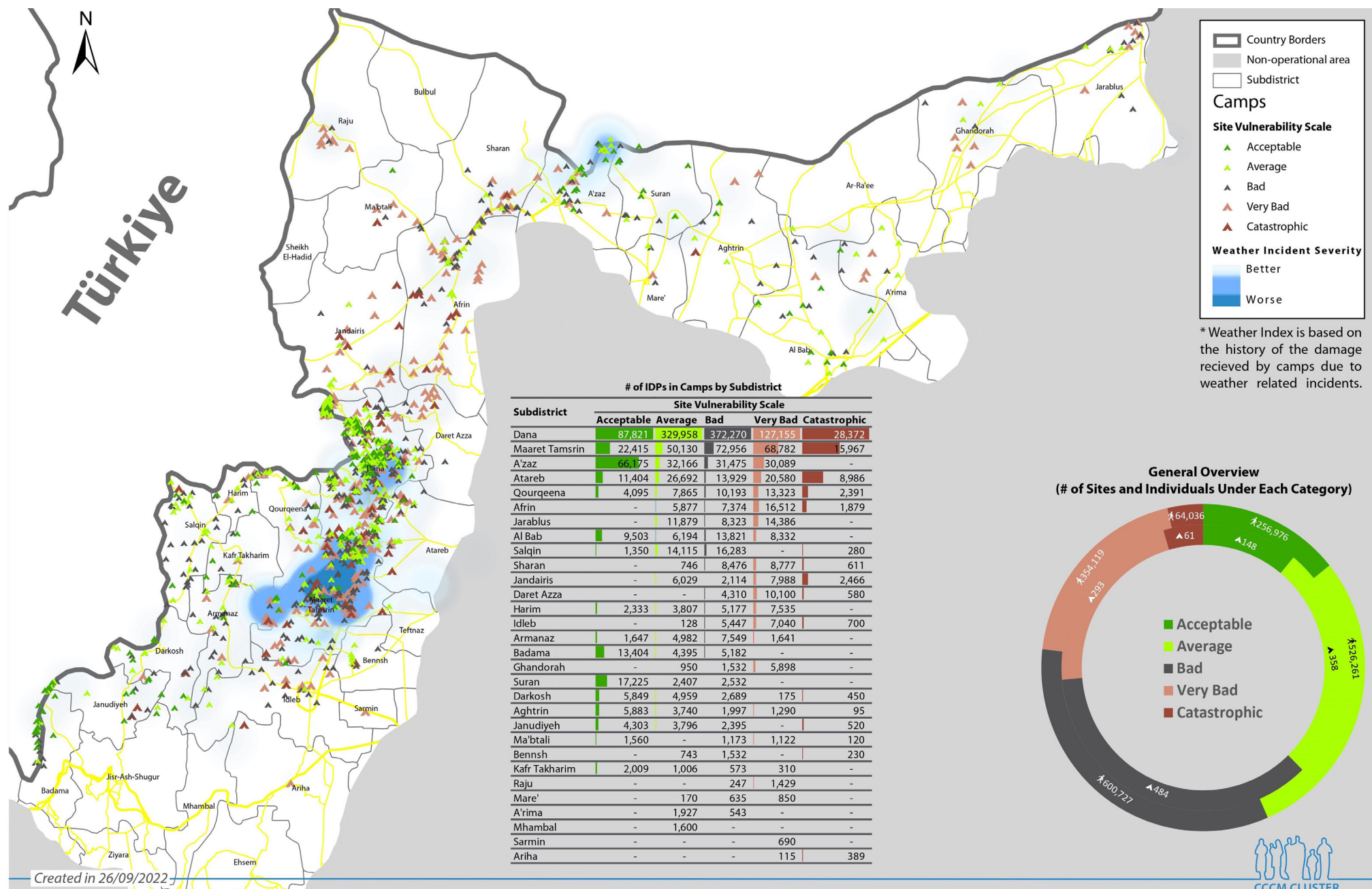
Cholera outbreak

From late August to November 26 2022, more than 9,000 suspected cases of cholera were reported in Syria (WHO 29/11/2022). During winter, overcrowding in camps may lead to a greater risk of cholera outbreaks given limited sources of drinking water in several areas of the country (mainly those near the Euphrates River) over several months (ACU et al. 07/11/2022; REACH 04/12/2022). Cholera symptoms can be easily confused with winter-related infections such as seasonal colds and flu, which may create further pressure for the overburdened health system.

Fuel and electricity crisis

Conflict has been affecting oil and electricity services in the country since the beginning of the Syrian war. The war has damaged oil and electricity infrastructure, and the country has received sanctions from Western countries. Since 20 November 2022, Syria has been facing a significant increase in artillery attacks, drone strikes, and attacks on oil and gas fields and electric power plants, affecting essential electric and oil infrastructure and limiting civilians' access to electricity and fuel (SIRF 25/11/2022). In December 2022, state agencies will close for two days in response to fuel disruptions (The National 07/12/2022). The cost of a litre of fuel has substantially increased by 127% from 1,100–2,500 Syrian pounds, affecting not only transportation but also food prices, heating, and subsistence for many families (France 24 07/08/2022).

MAP: WINTER WEATHER VULNERABILITY ANALYSIS AS AT SEPTEMBER 2022



Source: UNHCR (26/09/2022)