

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

- On 27 November 2024, the opposition group Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), which controls Idlib governorate in northwest Syria (NWS), launched the 'Deterrence of Aggression' operation against Government of Syria (GoS) forces in Aleppo (AJ 30/11/2024). In coordination with the Salvation National Army (SNA) 'Dawn of Freedom' operation, the two major opposition groups have seized control of at least 237 cities, towns, villages, and military bases from the GoS. Within six days, the opposition had significantly expanded its territorial control, taking full control of Idlib governorate, large parts of Aleppo governorate, and areas of northern Hama governorate (CA-SYR 03/12/2024).
- On 3 December, opposition forces advanced towards Hama city, situated strategically in central Syria north of the capital Damascus, encircling on all fronts except to the south. Violent clashes have been taking place between opposition fighters and GoS forces on the outskirts of the city (Reuters 04/12/2024).
- Since the opposition offensive, GoS and Russian airstrikes have targeted opposition-held areas in Idlib and Aleppo, raising the death toll to 56, including 20 children, by 2 December.
- It is estimated that hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured since the beginning of the escalation, although the exact number is yet to be confirmed.
- Escalating violence has displaced up to 178,000 people, severely affecting shelter, food security, healthcare, and access to education (UN News 04/12/2024). In Aleppo, many families are sheltering in overcrowded camps, with limited resources and restricted humanitarian access worsening conditions. Food scarcity is a growing concern, with bakeries and markets struggling to operate as a result of nightly curfews imposed by HTS and supply chain disruptions. Healthcare facilities are under immense strain, with many hospitals closed or only offering emergency services. Public health concerns include the risk of waterborne diseases resulting from poor sanitation. Lack of security and funding limitations are challenging efforts to restore clean water in Aleppo. Protection services, including support for gender-based violence (GBV) victims and child protection, are severely limited as a result of funding gaps and facility closures. Education has also been disrupted, with schools and universities in Idlib and Aleppo suspended amid continuing hostilities, leaving children's access to learning increasingly jeopardised.

178,000

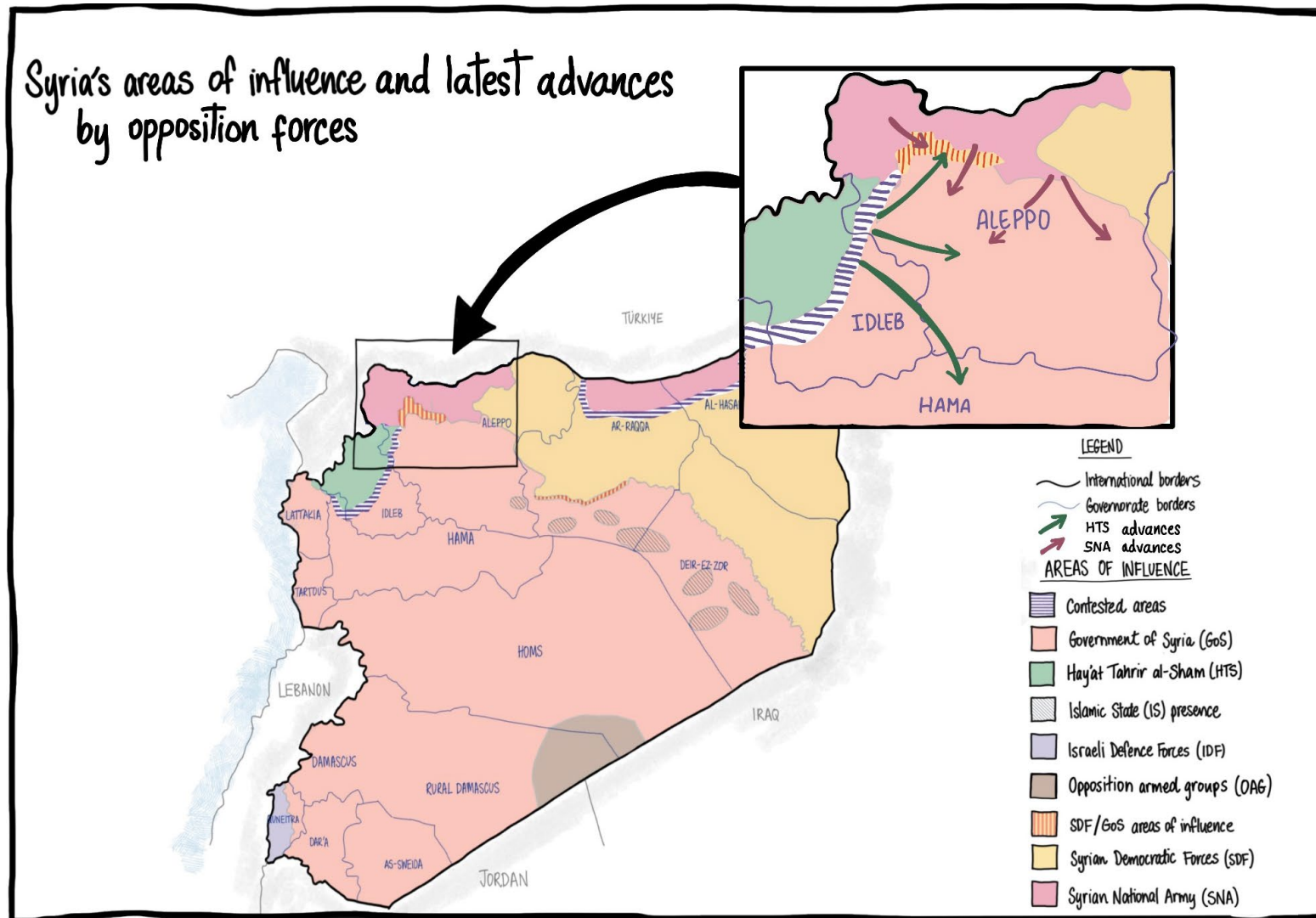
PEOPLE DISPLACED BY
RECENT HOSTILITIES

Food security concerns

AS A RESULT OF
REDUCED ACCESS TO
MARKETS AND FEW
OPEN BAKERIES

Many humanitarian organisations suspended operations in Aleppo

Map 1. Syria's areas of influence (by 27 November) and latest opposition advances



Sources: ACAPS using data from International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2024 and CA-SYR "opposition launches large-scale offensive from northwest Syria" report 03/12/2024

Note: by 6 December 2024, opposition forces had advanced over Aleppo, Idlib, and north of Hama, as indicated by the arrows, but the extent of their control remains to be seen.

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- Northern Syria already shelters millions of IDPs, many of whom live in overcrowded camps with limited access to necessities such as food, shelter, and sanitation. With the continuation and possible further escalation of hostilities, increased displacement is expected.
- The Syrian humanitarian response was already experiencing very low funding, forcing the UN and other responding organisations to suspend planned programmes and operations in 2024. This funding shortfall leaves limited ability to scale up essential emergency response, leaving millions of people at risk.
- Food security conditions are expected to worsen, with 13 million people already food insecure prior to the recent escalation of hostilities (WFP accessed 05/12/2024). The combination of market disruptions, bakery closures, disrupted supply chains, rising prices and exchange rates, dual-currency use, curfew in Aleppo, and lack of food aid will likely deteriorate an already precarious food security situation.
- Concerns remain around the coordination of humanitarian assistance in areas experiencing a change of control.
- Bombings near hospitals or even direct strikes on medical facilities will worsen the healthcare crisis in Syria. The health infrastructure in northern Syria, already fragile and short on supplies and staff, will struggle to handle an increase in injuries from conflict and the spread of disease in crowded displacement camps.
- Access to clean water, which is already limited, could further diminish with more infrastructure damage, increasing the spread of waterborne diseases.
- Continuing violence will also deepen civilians' psychological trauma, especially children, who have already suffered from prolonged exposure to conflict and displacement.
- Trafficking and smuggling networks will likely expand with the influx of newly displaced people, exploiting the chaotic environment to raise prices for basic transport and security. Those most in need will face debt or severe forms of exploitation to cover inflated costs.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This briefing note is based on a secondary review of publicly available data, including from humanitarian bulletins and updates, national and international news, and social media posts. The collected information has been integrated and validated with updates and online meetings from clusters, working groups, and two key informant interviews with a protection, gender, and GBV advisor and a health emergency information officer. The volatility of the situation, with fast-changing developments, constitutes a limitation to the analysis. Information is often short-lived, making it challenging to triangulate sources.

CRISIS IMPACT

Shelter

Escalating instability in Syria has led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people. Most recent sources report that up to 178,000 people have been displaced (UN News 04/12/2024). By 2 December, 5,000 families had departed from the Tall Refaat sub-district in Aleppo, including residents from northern Aleppo countryside and IDPs from Afrin, many of whom endured freezing temperatures with limited assistance before leaving. These families are now being accommodated in six collective shelters in Tabqa city, with a total of 10,000 families expected to relocate.

Thousands of people have fled to northern rural Hama, while in the central region, 66 individuals displaced from Aleppo and Idleb have reached shelters in Homs city. Limited shelter capacity further complicates the situation.

In the southern region, 6,100 families from Aleppo and Idleb have arrived in Rural Damascus, with some staying in shelters, hotels, or mosques. If hostilities persist, additional displacement and worsening conditions are likely (OCHA 02/12/2024).

Food

Security concerns and the imposition of a 19:00–07:00 curfew by the Military Operation Command, led by HTS, in Aleppo city are severely limiting bread provision (OCHA 01/12/2024). In Aleppo, 13 bakeries are currently operational, representing about 60% of bakeries in the area. In Idleb, only seven bakeries are operating. The Bakeries Association in Idleb can support bakeries for up to a month (ACAPS discussion with operational partners 03/12/2024). Bakeries are struggling as a result of multiple challenges, beyond the curfew and restricted baking times. Their need for substantial quantities of wheat and diesel is a key issue. Without these essential inputs, maintaining consistent production becomes impossible. Aleppo city is currently facing critical shortages in essential services and supplies, compounding the challenges for bakeries trying to meet community needs (SNA 05/12/2024).

Food availability in markets is diminishing rapidly, with vegetables expected to soon run out as a result of disrupted supply chains from Tartous and Dar'a. Many shops remain closed and markets are unable to restock, intensifying food scarcity. Nutrition is a pressing concern, as the latest SMART survey for 2023 reported that nearly 5% of children in NWS are acutely malnourished, with an estimated 506,000 children under five in Idleb and Aleppo in urgent need of treatment (SAMS 07/11/2024).

In 2024, rising food prices and the suspension of food aid have severely affected food security in Syria. Food prices have increased significantly, with government-controlled areas experiencing steeper rises compared to the self-administered northeast, a key agricultural hub. Internal conflict, energy shortages, and regional instability have disrupted supply chains, aggravating price disparities. Retail wheat flour prices surged by 50% year-on-year to SYP 9,700/kg (USD 0,66 based on the exchange rate before the recent escalation), and the minimum expenditure basket rose 92% from 2023 and has tripled since 2022.

The situation worsened with the scale down of the WFP's general food assistance in early 2024, a result of funding shortages. This cut-off affected 7.5 million people, while the combination of escalating food costs and reduced aid has left millions facing deteriorating food security conditions (FAO 01/11/2024). The WFP continues to provide emergency food assistance to one million people in the most severe need across Syria (WFP accessed 05/12/2024).

Health

The recent escalation of hostilities has affected access to healthcare. In Idlib, airstrikes have caused the shutdown of major healthcare facilities, including the University Hospital, National Hospital, Maternity and Obstetrics Hospital, and Cardiac Surgery Centre (UN News 03/12/2024). People are hesitant to visit healthcare facilities because of prior airstrikes targeting these facilities and the overall atmosphere of fear. Government-run healthcare facilities are also facing challenges, with uncertainty around whether staff will receive their salaries further complicating the situation (KII 02/12/2024). This has disrupted access to essential medical services such as emergency care, maternity services, and dialysis. In Aleppo, airstrikes near hospitals have further limited healthcare access. Fears related to the precarious security situation have also led a significant number of pharmacies to close, reducing access to medication (Sham News Agency Facebook 02/12/2024; ACAPS discussion with operational partners 30/11/2024). In Aleppo city, escalating public health concerns are linked to the presence of unburied bodies, which remain unburied and not stored in morgues primarily because they are still unidentified. Many of those killed had not been hospitalised because of the suspension of numerous health facilities, making it challenging to track or document them. The absence of family members to identify the deceased also further complicates the situation (KII 02/12/2024). A lack of proper sanitation and potable water can result in a heightened risk of waterborne diseases, including cholera (OCHA 01/12/2024).

Authorities have assured the population that some public health services will continue. Most hospitals, however, are now limited to emergency cases and fewer than eight are operating at minimal capacity, compared to over 100 at the end of November (UN News 03/12/2024). Efforts such as the #Online_Doctor initiative are providing free consultations through WhatsApp to address some healthcare needs (OCHA 02/12/2024).

Referral hospitals receiving patients evacuated from Aleppo by first responders, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), are under heavy strain, with high numbers of trauma cases. The WHO reports that thousands of injuries have been treated in recent days, with health workers continuing to provide care under challenging conditions. Insecurity and movement restrictions have led around 65 NGOs to suspend activities in Aleppo and Idlib, adding pressure to remaining facilities. The WHO has reported at least six attacks on healthcare facilities in Syria since 27 November, with facilities such as Bab Al Hawa Hospital in Idlib and Al Razi Hospital in Aleppo now restricted to emergency services (UN News 03/12/2024).

WASH

The WASH sector is actively working to restore access to clean water in Aleppo, with water pumping operations resuming under a rationing system following SARC humanitarian efforts. While hygiene promotion activities and the provision of sanitation facilities remain essential, the overall effectiveness of these initiatives has been constrained by limited resources and security challenges (OCHA 03/12/2024). By 3 December, the water station in Aleppo had resumed normal operations after resolving service disruptions caused by staff shortages (KII 03/12/2024).

Since the beginning of hostilities, the lack of regulated water supplies has increased reliance on unsafe water sources, significantly heightening the risk of waterborne diseases (OCHA 01/12/2024).

According to the 2023 SMART survey, 44.4% of households in Aleppo and 34.5% of households in Idlib depend on unsafe water sources. 95.6% of households in Aleppo and 80.6% in Idlib also do not implement water treatment practices (SAMS 07/11/2024).

Protection

Protection concerns have been reported, including limitations on freedom of movement, incidents of death and injury from airstrikes, and damage to civilian properties and infrastructure (OCHA 02/12/2024).

The recent escalation has severely affected women and children, halting nearly 50 protection facilities, including 19 community centres, and leaving over 7,000 women and girls without GBV support services. Most child protection services, such as case management and child-friendly spaces, are also suspended, increasing risks for children (OCHA 28/11/2024).

Education

Education facilities and access to education are under threat from the armed conflict. The escalation in NWS has severely disrupted education, with all schools and universities in Idlib and western Aleppo suspending classes since 27 November (OCHA 28/11/2024). Displacement further jeopardises children's access to education. This crisis highlights the urgent need to protect schools and provide alternative learning opportunities amid continuing conflict.

Social cohesion and community resilience

On 1 December 2024, Aleppo city appeared largely deserted, as fear of further developments led many residents to remain indoors. Shops were closed and a significant number of civilians were reported to be fleeing the city (Reuters 02/12/2024). The rapid changes in control have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear among the population (KII 02/12/2024).

The Middle East Council of Churches has stated that churches in Aleppo continue to hold prayers and mass as usual, denying rumours that controlling factions have imposed conditions on dioceses and churches. The council urged caution in sharing unverified news, highlighting the need for accuracy to avoid further instability (MECC Facebook 01/12/2024).

Impact on critical infrastructure

Between 1–3 December, at least six hospitals were hit in precision airstrikes, alongside several schools, IDP camps, and Aleppo University (Syria Weekly 03/12/2024).

The thermal electricity station located on the Aleppo-Ar-Raqqa road, a key power facility for northern Syria, is currently under the control of opposition forces (AJ Mubasher Youtube 01/12/2024). The station now operates for 12–16 hours daily, compared to previous periods when Aleppo residents had access to electricity for only one–two hours per day (New Line Magazine 02/12/2024; KII 02/12/2024; KII 03/12/2024).

Economic impacts

Following the start of recent hostilities, the Syrian pound recorded a sharp decline after months of stability at around SYP 14,700/USD 1. In Damascus, the exchange rate rose to SYP 16,000/USD 1; in Idlib and Aleppo, amid intensified military activity, this rate reached SYP 16,200/USD 1 and SYP 23,000/USD 1 respectively on 3 December (SP-Today accessed 04/12/2024).

Recent military escalations in northern Syria have added to economic uncertainty, as people in opposition-controlled areas increasingly use Turkish lira and those in Aleppo and Idlib predominantly transact in Syrian pounds. Much of NWS is closely tied to the Turkish economy, including the widespread use of goods and services originating from Türkiye and, hence, the use of the Turkish lira (TNH 06/06/2023). This dual-currency usage has caused confusion among merchants as to the pricing of goods and is expected to contribute to price inflation (KII 02/12/2024).

Humanitarian and operational constraints

The overall situation remains highly dynamic and subject to rapid change. While OCHA has effective coordination systems in place within Syria and through the humanitarian hub in Gaziantep, its operations have been suspended as a result of insecurity, including active fighting and widespread road closures.

Some areas, however, still remain open to assistance, such as reception centres in Idlib, where support continues for those displaced by the conflict (UN News 03/12/2024).

On 1 December, some UN-affiliate organisations in Aleppo relocated their teams to safer areas, such as Homs and Damascus, as a result of security concerns. Reports suggest that a child-friendly space in eastern rural Aleppo was burnt and a UN warehouse looted. Health sector organisations are working to safeguard and facilitate the immediate transfer of supplies to the SARC (OCHA 02/12/2024).

The White Helmets, a volunteer rescue group, are continuously providing humanitarian aid in Syria, including through rescue operations, body collection and documentation, aid provision, and humanitarian advocacy. As stated by their head, Raed Saleh, The White Helmets work to “document these bodies, bury them respectfully, and meticulously record their details to facilitate their identification” (Al-Monitor 04/12/2024).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Seasonal information

The winter season is likely to aggravate the conditions of displaced people, especially those in informal settlements and on the move (OCHA 30/11/2024).

Over five million people in NWS are facing another challenging winter season, with risks of severe flooding, heavy rainstorms, and snow. Around 70% of this population resides in over 1,500 camps and informal settlements, often overcrowded and lacking essential services such as drainage systems, electricity, and access to clean water. Last winter, over 1,000 shelters were damaged by flooding, and 70% of displacement sites remain without basic upkeep and maintenance.

The effects of harsh winter conditions are widespread. Families in poorly insulated shelters face serious health risks, particularly children, who are vulnerable to respiratory illnesses. Damaged roads and infrastructure, which worsen during winter, hinder the delivery of essential supplies, cutting off communities from basic resources. Inadequate drainage and sanitation lead to contaminated water in camps, while the lack of heating and insulation in schools could prevent 1.5 million children from attending classes.

To address these challenges, planned interventions for the 2024–2025 winter season include distributing stoves, fuel, thermal blankets, winter clothing kits, and winterisation supplies. Cash and voucher assistance will also be provided in areas with functioning markets to help families purchase necessities and support local businesses (OCHA 17/09/2024). If hostilities disrupt these efforts, the population may face more severe hardships.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Drivers of the current conflict

From 14 October 2024, hostilities in NWS had already escalated, with the first GoS and Russian airstrikes in three months targeting Idlib and western Aleppo. Over 120 attacks were reported within three days, striking residential areas, markets, and farmland. By 16 October, these strikes had resulted in at least 12 civilian deaths, including three children, and 43 injuries. A humanitarian ceasefire on 17 October allowed temporary evacuation and relief efforts, though many displaced families had returned by 18 October. Over 1,950 families were temporarily displaced between 14–17 October (OCHA 18/10/2024).

GoS media described the strikes as a ‘warning’ to opposition forces, following reports that the opposition may be preparing an offensive against GoS forces in northern Syria. Speculation had already arisen that opposition groups could be planning such an attack, capitalising on recent setbacks for Hezbollah, a key GoS ally, after Israel targeted and eliminated much of its senior leadership in Lebanon (The New Arab 15/10/2024).

A month later, on 27 November, HTS launched operation ‘Deterrence of Aggression’ in government-controlled western Aleppo. Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and a critical industrial and commercial hub, has largely remained under GoS control despite prior opposition advances. Simultaneously, the Syrian National Army (SNA), tied to the Syrian Interim Government, launched operation ‘Freedom Dawn’. By 1 December, reports indicated that both HTS and the SNA had advanced into Tall Refaat and parts of Aleppo city from the east (CA-SYR 03/12/2024).

Following the HTS offensive, GoS and Russian forces have been striking opposition-held areas of Idlib and Aleppo. The total death toll from these strikes since 27 November has risen to 56, including 20 children (Reuters 02/12/2024).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Recent changes in control in some areas have created gaps in managing and coordinating humanitarian operations, leading to challenges including a lack of reliable data, irregular updates, and limited community involvement in identifying needs and responses. While humanitarian efforts in NWS are coordinated based on access and needs, areas previously managed through Damascus face a coordination vacuum. Political sensitivities and operational complexities in these regions further complicate the situation, delaying effective aid delivery. NGOs’ fragmented operations in Syria, divided between GoS and opposition-held areas, lead to coordination challenges, unequal funding distribution, and gaps in aid delivery. Differing mandates and funding sources result in overlaps in some areas and neglect in others. Donors often favour politically aligned organisations, creating competition for resources and increasing funding uncertainties. Leadership disputes among NGOs and UN organisations further aggravate inefficiencies and delays, risking a loss of donor trust and leaving at-risk populations underserved. This fragmentation intensifies funding gaps and undermines the effectiveness of the humanitarian response in northern Syria (KII 02/12/2023; KII 03/12/2024).

Humanitarian aid structure in NWS

Until July 2023, the humanitarian aid structure in NWS operated under UN Security Council resolutions, renewed every 6–12 months since 2014. These resolutions used to allow cross-border aid delivery from Türkiye without requiring GoS approval (UNSC 12/12/2022). On 11 July 2023, after the last six-month mandate had expired, the UN Security Council failed to authorise an extension to the cross-border mechanism for humanitarian aid delivery into NWS (UN 11/07/2023). Following this, the GoS granted the UN permission to maintain access and provide assistance to NWS through three border crossings: Bab Al Hawa, Bab Al Salam, and Al Ra'ee. This permission has since been periodically renewed every three–six months (UNHCR 01/11/2024).

NWS comprises five distinct zones with varying challenges. Two zones, Idlib and the Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas, are accessible from Türkiye and host the majority of aid operations. The Idlib zone, controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government and HTS, includes parts of Aleppo and Lattakia and houses three million people in need. Türkiye maintains a strong military presence there. The Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas are governed by the Syrian Interim Government and its armed wing, the SNA, heavily aligned with Türkiye.

Three other zones remain inaccessible from Türkiye. Until before the recent escalation, Tall Refaat, north of Aleppo, was a contested zone involving GoS forces, Iranian and Russian allies, and Kurdish People's Defense Units/Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) groups. On 1 December, SNA forces advanced towards the enclave. The second zone, Menbij, under Kurdish-affiliated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) governance, experiences political and military tension with Türkiye, while GoS-controlled areas rely on Damascus for humanitarian access.

Funding shortages

The 2024 Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan faces one of the greatest funding shortfalls in recent years. Of the total USD 4.07 billion required, only 29.6% (USD 1.21 billion) had been funded by 3 December 2024, leaving 70.4% (USD 2.87 billion) in unmet needs (FTS accessed 03/12/2024). This marks a decline from 2023, when 41% of the plan was funded. This funding gap reflects declining donor commitments amid increasing global crises, alongside GoS bureaucratic protocols and control (U4 26/04/2024).

In 2024, funding shortage forced the WFP to reduce general food assistance by 80%, prioritising only one million out of the 3.1 million severely food insecure people (WFP accessed 05/12/2024). Escalating hostilities in Lebanon meant the WFP had to divert in-country food

rations to sustain the emergency response for people at borders and within Syria, including displaced individuals and host communities. Of the total USD 54.4 million appeal to support the current emergency response, in line with inter-organisation plans, the WFP urgently requires USD 50 million in new funding. The WFP also needs USD 20 million monthly to maintain its emergency programmes, which aim to assist one million Syrians and support school meals, nutrition, and recovery initiatives (WFP 22/11/2024).

Funding limitations also affect other sectors. The child protection appeal is facing an 86.7% funding gap, limiting urgent response efforts (ACAPS discussion with operational partners 28/11/2024).

Despite the WHO delivering medical supplies via the Bab Al Hawa crossing, a significant funding gap limits the availability of essential medicine and equipment for use in emergencies. The Health Cluster reported, even before the recent escalation, that 50% of all functional health facilities in NWS will fully or partially cease operations by December 2024 if additional funding is not secured (OCHA 18/10/2024).

By the beginning of December, the lack of financial resources had also led to the suspension of water and sanitation services in hundreds of camps and over 80 health centres, leaving populations – particularly displaced families – at heightened risk, without access to clean water, food, and shelter. This situation disproportionately affects women, children, and people with disabilities (OCHA 18/10/2024).

INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS

- Reports show that tens of thousands have been displaced by intensified fighting, with most recent sources reporting up to 178,000 people displaced, although the breakdown of locations is currently difficult to verify.
- Civilian casualties from airstrikes and shelling have also been reported, but the figures vary and there is little detailed data, such as age and gender breakdowns, to guide humanitarian responses.
- The situation is further complicated by the fluidity of the front lines, particularly around key areas such as Aleppo and Hama, making it challenging to determine current territorial control (The New Yorker 03/12/2024).
- Specific information on infrastructure damage, such as to hospitals, schools, and markets, is also lacking.

This report benefited from support by the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, which is supported by USAID and the Government of the United States.