

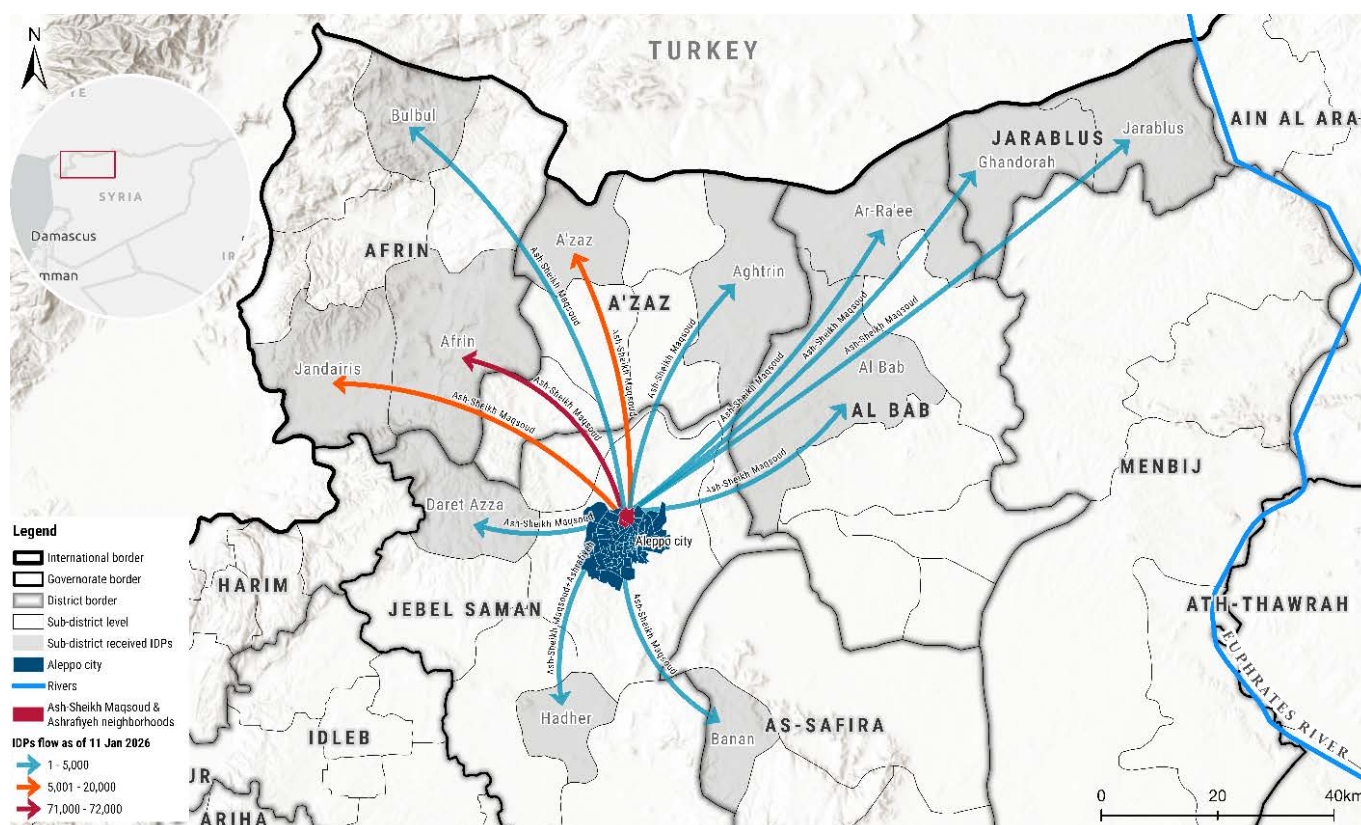
Displacement resulting from conflict escalation in Aleppo

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Between 6–11 January 2026, clashes between Syrian government forces and the Kurdish non-state armed group Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Ash Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh neighbourhoods of Aleppo killed 23 people and displaced 148,000 (OCHA 10/01/2026; SANA 09/01/2026). On 11 January, SDF fighters agreed to withdraw from both previously SDF-held neighbourhoods after a US-brokered ceasefire was reached amid threats of Turkish involvement (AJ 11/01/2026; Reuters 08/01/2026; France24 11/01/2026). The clashes represent one of the most severe episodes of violence between the Syrian government forces and the SDF since the fall of the Assad regime in terms of the geographic area affected, the intensity of hostilities, and the resulting displacement (SARD 08/01/2026; The National Context 07/01/2026). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports that indiscriminate government shelling, coupled with strikes on health facilities, created serious protection risks for civilians in the area (SOHR 08/01/2026).

Civilian evacuations of the ethnically diverse Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods have been facilitated via government-designated evacuation corridors. By 12 January, around 29,000 IDPs had returned to Ashrafiyeh (mostly from Afrin) since the ceasefire came into effect. The Government of Syria (GoS) has also organised returns but these remain limited and gradual, likely reflecting persistent security concerns (The National 10/01/2026). Displacements are constantly evolving, and the exact location of all IDPs remains uncertain. Assessments indicate that the majority of the displaced population had fled to Afrin, where they had relatives and friends, reflecting both social and ethnic ties in the Kurdish-majority city around 40km away, while others sought shelter with host communities in Aleppo or in one of

Map 1. Displacements from Aleppo neighbourhoods by 09 January 2026



Source: ACAPS using data from IOM (11/01/2026)

the 14 collective shelters across Afrin, Aleppo, and Sharan (OCHA 12/01/2026; IOM 12/01/2026). While humanitarian services in Aleppo city are generally accessible, shelters in Afrin face significant gaps in NFIs and winterisation support, reflecting the higher demand resulting from the district's concentrated IDP population (OCHA 12/01/2026).

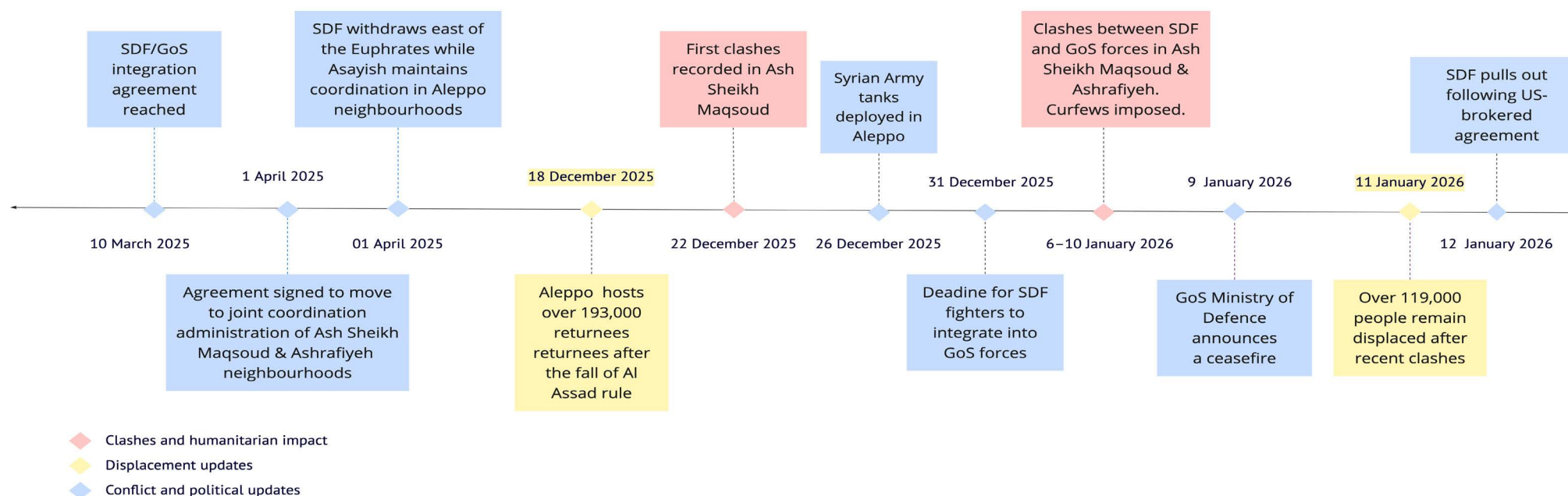
On 9 January, the Ministry of Defence announced a ceasefire offering safe passage for SDF fighters to northeast Syria, though no detail is available on provisions for family members, potentially creating a protection gap for households that remain without their primary earners or parents/carers (SANA 09/01/2026; AJ 09/01/2026). The ceasefire took effect on 10 January, with government police units deployed to Ashrafiyeh, Ash Sheikh Maqsoud, and Bani Zaid (Al Arabiya 10/01/2026; Asharq Al Awsat 10/01/2026). Transitioning to the GoS control of Ash Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh could heighten protection risks – particularly for Kurdish women who are perceived as more secular and socially active – including potential restrictions on mobility, public life participation, and service access (Govt. UK accessed 06/01/2026).

Shortly after the ceasefire, a drone strike hit the Aleppo governorate building, causing material damage but no injuries. The Government has accused the SDF, which has denied

the Government's unverified claims. The incident and government accusations highlight the fragility of the ceasefire. The authorities have subsequently affirmed that the curfew will remain in place until further notice as insecurities persist. Extended curfews are likely to disrupt daily life by restricting civilian movement, as well as access to markets, health facilities, and essential services. Families could face difficulties securing food and medicine, while daily wage workers will lose income, increasing household vulnerability (Asharq Al-Awsat 10/01/2026).

On 11 January, the Government declared the area under SDF control west of the Euphrates River as a 'closed military zone' amid reports of SDF mobilisation in Dayr Hafir (east of Aleppo), along the frontline dividing government and SDF-held territory (AA 11/01/2026; AJ 10/01/2026; Hürriyet Daily News 13/01/2026). This increases the risk of pre-emptive displacement as families flee to avoid being caught in fighting. Some reports indicate that civilians are already leaving the area, although the number of people fleeing and their destination remain unclear (Syria TV 13/01/2026). At the same time, the military-zone designation is expected to disrupt basic services, including health and WASH, limit freedom of movement, and constrain humanitarian access.

Figure 1. Timeline of events leading to the recent clashes and displacement in Aleppo



Sources: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (18/12/2025); The National Context (12/01/2026); AJ (11/01/2026)



Pre-crisis context

The conflict escalation is linked to a range of political and security factors, including unresolved questions surrounding the integration of the SDF into Syrian military and security structures. The Syrian government has dismissed Kurdish calls for decentralised rule, preventing the implementation through disagreements over a March 2025 agreement and contributing to tensions that have at times escalated into armed clashes (France 24 08/01/2026; Modern Diplomacy 08/01/2026; The National Context 07/01/2026; ISW 08/01/2026). This agreement did not clearly define the constitutional status of SDF-controlled territory or whether it would retain any degree of autonomy. It specifically established a nationwide ceasefire, secured SDF cooperation in combating pro-Assad forces, and formally recognised Kurdish people as an integral part of Syria, entitled to citizenship and constitutionally guaranteed rights, as well as representation and participation in the political process (AJ 10/03/2025; BBC 11/03/2025). It also required SDF members to individually be integrated into the Syrian armed forces rather than retaining any autonomous SDF structures. However, the agreement was not clear, and both the SDF and the Syrian government interpreted it differently. The SDF's rejection of this condition has been one of several factors contributing to the renewed clashes and instability; notably, a 4 January meeting in Damascus between the SDF and the Syrian Government intended to advance the agreement's implementation after the 31 December 2025 deadline was missed, ended without tangible progress, and highlighted unresolved disputes over the integration of armed forces (Enab Baladi 04/01/2026; AJ 23/12/2025 and 04/01/2026; Syria Direct 10/01/2026). The two neighbourhoods, formerly under full control since 2015 of the SDF, whose command contrasts greatly with the Syrian government's conservative orientations, were placed under a joint security and administrative governance arrangement as a municipality in Aleppo city in April 2025. While the SDF withdrew most of its fighters east of the Euphrates River in April, its internal security forces (Asayish) have continued to operate in the neighbourhoods, while the Syrian government security forces operated checkpoints around the area (EPC 24/11/2025; Syria Democratic Times 21/04/2025; ISW 08/01/2026; The National 07/01/2026). This shared control structure had made the areas hotspots for broader government and SDF tensions, resulting in sporadic clashes (Al Jazeera 07/10/2025 and 23/12/2025).

For the US, the SDF/YPG (known as the People's Protection Units) is regarded primarily as a force to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northeast Syria with leverage limited to that objective. This US backing also shapes Aleppo dynamics by providing the SDF with leverage to resist government demands on integration while constraining its options, particularly by limiting its ability to escalate militarily beyond the US counter-ISIS mandate, and by influencing expectations amid the current escalation (AA 04/12/2024 and 10/01/2026; BBC 11/03/2025; AJ 10/12/2025).

Türkiye views the Kurdish-led SDF and YPG as extensions of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party and a significant security threat along its southern border, increasing the risk of displacement and civilian harm in northern Syria. In recent years, this perception has driven

repeated cross-border military operations, including air strikes, in an effort to establish buffer zones in northern Syria – contributing to civilian displacement, disrupting access to services, and constraining humanitarian assistance (France 24 08/01/2026; TRT World 09/01/2026; The New Region 25/12/2025).

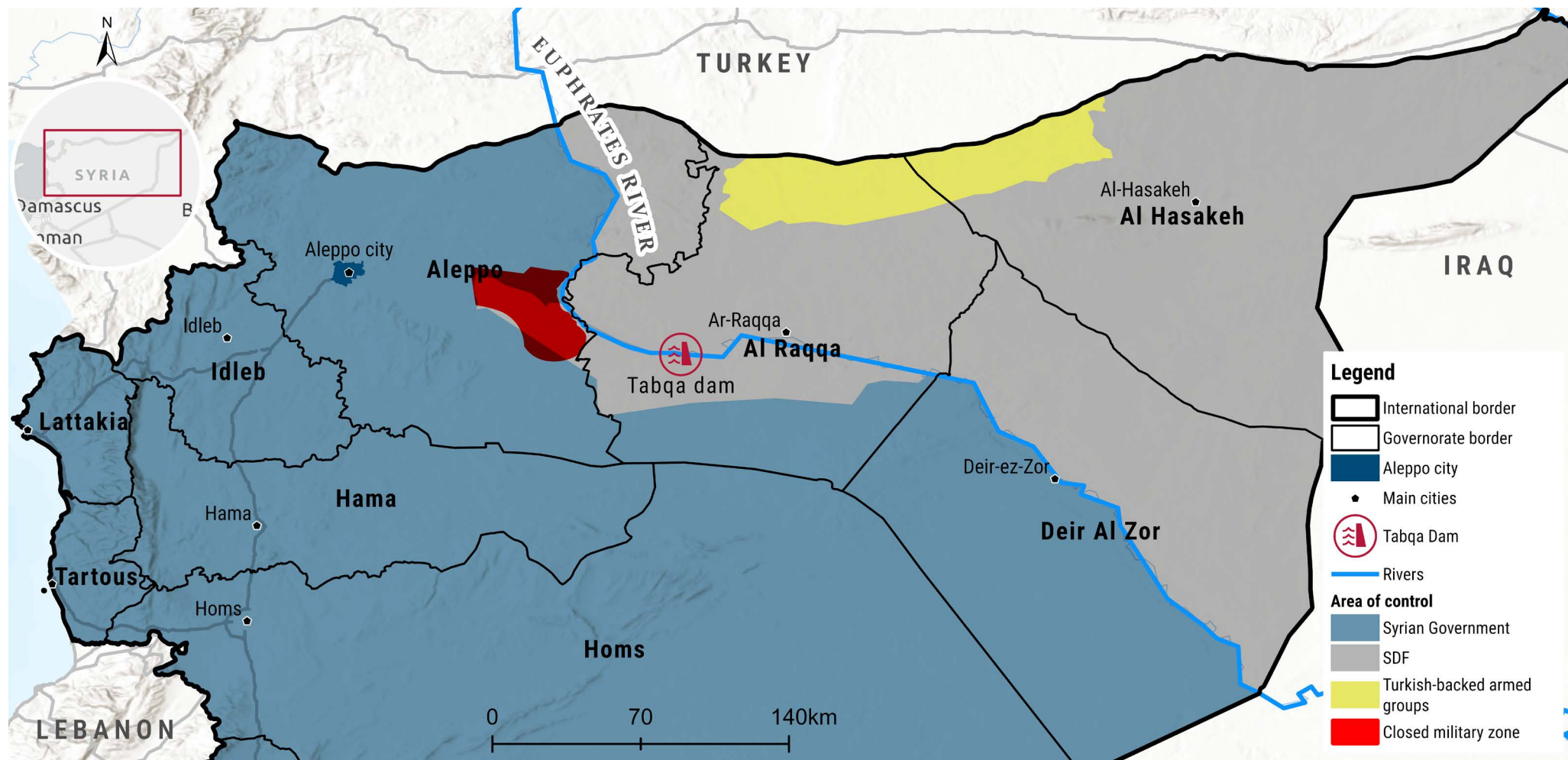
By 18 December 2025, Aleppo was hosting over 193,000 returnees, representing more than 15% of all returns nationwide since December 2024. Returns are concentrated in Aleppo owing to perceptions of relative security and access to basic services. Until November, the governorate was hosting over 1.31 million IDPs – roughly 22% of the national number of more than six million people (SARD 08/01/2026; UNHCR accessed 09/01/2026; UNHCR 18/07/2025; IOM 19/12/2025). The uptick in armed conflict in Aleppo has triggered population movements, with more than 148,000 remaining displaced in total until 12 January 2026; these new displacements compound pre-existing needs for essential services such as health, WASH, and livelihoods and generate additional urgent humanitarian needs among the displaced population (OCHA 12/01/2026; SARD 08/01/2026; SANA 08/01/2026 a).

Anticipated scope and scale

The ceasefire in Aleppo remains fragile as it focuses on halting immediate hostilities and facilitating SDF withdrawals without addressing the underlying causes of the dispute, with an elevated risk of renewed hostilities across the front lines between the SDF and government forces (TNA 11/01/2026). As negotiations continue to stall, the Syrian Government has mobilised forces towards Dayr Hafir and Maskana, the last remaining SDF held areas east of the Euphrates, indicating that it may seek control over these cities (Hürriyet Daily News 13/01/2026). Supported by pro-Government Arab tribes, this would be strategically significant, securing a key Aleppo–Ar-Raqqa corridor and potentially granting access to the Tabqa Dam. Active hostilities will disrupt supply routes, impede humanitarian access, and likely cause displacement. At the same time, the Tabqa Dam is a key water and hydroelectric power source for northeast Syria, which provides irrigation for more than 640,000 hectares of agricultural land (Atlantic Council 11/08/2017). If the Syrian government forces take control of the Tabqa Dam, this would cut off populations in northeast Syria and is likely to worsen water and electricity shortages, threatening the provision of health services and food security (MSF 06/11/2026).

Renewed military operations would likely trigger displacements along ethnic lines, with Arab communities moving towards government-controlled areas and Kurdish communities towards the northeast. This dual movement would intensify the protracted displacement crisis and strain overstretched shelter and health resources (IFRC 02/10/2025). In northeast Syria, shifts in territorial control over the Tabqa Dam would restrict access to key water and electricity sources, worsen shortages, and disrupt irrigation, further driving food insecurity, limiting healthcare, and heightening gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection risks with the elevated exposure to exploitation (OCHA 28/01/2025).

MAP 2. NORTHERN SYRIA AND LINES OF CONTROL BY 13 JANUARY 2026



Sources: ACAPS using data from LM (accessed 13/01/2025); OCHA (accessed 18/12/2025); AAWSAT (accessed 15/01/2026)



Although Türkiye has denied involvement in the recent escalations, it views the SDF as a security threat and aligns with Syrian government efforts to pressure the SDF into dismantling its structures and integrating into state institutions. Türkiye is likely to embolden the Syrian Government and heighten the risk of further escalations if the parties fail to make progress in the negotiations. With vested interests in stabilising its southern border and neutralising what it perceives as the SDF threat, Turkish military involvement in future clashes presents a credible but so far low risk (Reuters 11/01/2026; Daily Sabah 10/01/2026; Al Arabiya 22/12/2025).

Potential Turkish involvement, direct or indirect, could enable wider military operations, most likely targeting Ayn Al Arab (Kobani, which has a majority Kurdish population) to connect Government-held areas in Aleppo with the Turkish border, easing some of Türkiye's security concerns and improving the Syrian Government's leverage in future negotiations (EIP accessed 12/01/2025; Al Arabiya 22/12/2025). Kobani's capture would also sever SDF territorial control over key border areas and enable the Syrian Government to establish a continuous territorial link in the north and push the SDF away from the Turkish border. It would also likely have significant humanitarian consequences; around 450,000 people live in Kobani, 95% of whom are Kurds living alongside Arab, Armenian, and Turkmen minorities (EIP accessed 12/01/2025). A large-scale military operation is likely to disrupt access to basic services and cause mass displacement. Following previous displacement patterns, people are likely to seek refuge in SDF-controlled cities such as Al Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Tabqa (HRW 11/12/2024).

Beyond Aleppo, the widening rift between the Syrian Government and the SDF is likely to increase instability in eastern Syria. Some pro-Government Arab tribes in Deir-ezZor and Ar Raqqa may be emboldened to challenge SDF authority, while ISIS could exploit the resulting security vacuum to regroup and intensify attacks as both sides divert resources towards confronting one another (Asharq Al Awsat 10/07/2025; ICCT 16/05/2025). Increased ISIS activity would heighten insecurity across routes, further constraining humanitarian operations and elevating risks to civilians and aid workers.

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CRISIS IMPACT

Shelter and displacement

Until 12 January 2026, at least 119,000 people remained displaced from Ashrafiyeh and Ash Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhoods (IOM 12/01/2026). From 7 January, population movements have been reported, with thousands of families fleeing primarily seeking shelter with host communities within Aleppo city and Afrin district. Initial displacement patterns indicate a preference for nearby urban and periurban locations, suggesting mobility constraints and a reliance on existing social networks (NPA 08/01/2026). Until 12 January, at least 1,100 people were sheltering in 14 temporary centres – nine in Aleppo city, three in Sharan, and two in Afrin – while fewer than 1% were residing in tents, open areas, makeshift shelters, unfinished buildings, or rented accommodation (OCHA 07/01/2026 and 12/01/2026; IOM 11/01/2026).

Identified priority needs include cash assistance, food, NFIs, shelter, WASH, and site management interventions, alongside service provision maintenance for host communities. Affected areas will require basic rehabilitation and support from humanitarian responders before services can fully resume (IOM 11/01/2026; OCHA 07/01/2026).

Beginning on 31 December 2025, heavy snowstorms affected 90 IDP sites across northern Syria for several days, blocking access roads and affecting around 158,000 displaced people in Aleppo, Al Hasakeh, and Idleb governorates. By 6 January 2026, a total of 785 shelters and tents were entirely destroyed and 4,116 were damaged, leaving people without sufficient shelter and at risk of hypothermia and respiratory illnesses, including flu and pneumonia (OCHA 06/01/2026; Donare 07/01/2026). Any IDPs sheltering in temporary centres are likely to be exposed to these conditions during the winter months and will face compounded protection risks stemming from overcrowded conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to essential services (OCHA 06/01/2026). Overcrowding and insufficient privacy measures can create environments conducive to GBV, including in densely populated collective shelters.

Health

By 7 January, damage had been reported to several hospitals, including Zahi Azarak (the main public hospital), Ibn Rushd (the primary haemodialysis centre), Othman hospital, and the city's maternity hospital – all of which have ceased operating because of the damage, without a clear indication of when they would reopen. Al Salam Hospital has also been affected but remained operational by 8 January although the capacity to absorb additional caseloads was unclear (OCHA 07/01/2026; Enab Baladi 08/01/2026).

This latest escalation compounds a long-term preexisting deterioration of Aleppo city's health sector. After years of conflict and repeated attacks on medical infrastructure, most facilities' capacities were already overstretched. Syria's healthcare system has experienced systematic degradation since 2011, with WHO documenting that only 54% of the health facilities across the country were fully functional in 2025, reflecting years of attacks, resource depletion, and infrastructure collapse (World Bank 06/12/2025; EUAA 07/07/2025; UN 03/12/2024). The closure of specialised facilities such as Ibn Rushd hospital is particularly concerning given that kidney disease patients require consistent dialysis access (SANA 30/12/2025). Damage to critical health infrastructure, especially leading to the closure of hospitals and maternity facilities, severely constrains healthcare access for displaced people during the cold season when the risk of respiratory illnesses, including flu and pneumonia, escalates. Many people already face barriers related to documentation, and combined with mobility restrictions and lack of provision, patients will likely be forced to seek care in overstretched facilities, attempt dangerous crossline movements, or be left without urgent or specialised treatment, putting people with disabilities or chronic diseases at particular risk, indicating likely needs for targeted medical referrals, mobile health services, disability-inclusive programming, and advocacy for safe passage to essential care (Protection Cluster 03/04/2025; OCHA 07/01/2026; Enab Baladi 08/01/2026; UN 07/01/2026).

Protection

According to the Aleppo Central Response Committee, several sources reported attacks on the displaced fleeing during evacuation operations. Between 6–11 January, the SDF shelled areas around the humanitarian corridors and residential neighbourhoods in central Aleppo, with several projectiles killing 23 people and injuring at least 104. On 10 January, direct attacks to public and private infrastructure, including ambulances, were also reported to cause civilian casualties along the humanitarian corridor. These incidents severely constrain medical evacuations and disrupt humanitarian movement, limiting the ability to transport the injured and critically ill, delaying referrals to higher-level care, and increasing operational risks for humanitarian responders attempting to access affected populations (SANA 08/01/2026 a and 08/01/2026 b; OCHA 10/01/2026). SOHR has reported heavy, indiscriminate government shelling, coupled with strikes on health facilities. The Department of Foreign Relations of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria also reported mass abductions in the affected neighbourhoods (SOHR 08/01/2026; Kurdistan24 13/01/2026).

Since the collapse of the Al Assad regime, a contested information space has emerged across Syria, quickly being filled with competing sectarian narratives. The narratives frame the January 2026 clashes in Aleppo, primarily between Syrian government forces and Kurdish-led SDF fighters, as existential communal battles rather than contested security and political disputes (Insecurity Insight 01/04/2025). Many responses frame the attacks through sectarian

or ethnic narratives, presenting them as part of wider religious or political conflicts. Such polarised interpretations contribute to mistrust of information sources and deepen sectarian and ethnic divisions, shaping how humanitarian crises and aid efforts are perceived. For displaced populations, these framings heighten protection risks and strongly influence movement decisions. As a result, families may refrain from returning to areas associated with rival groups despite improved security out of fear of discrimination or retaliation. This complicates humanitarian planning and increases the risk of secondary displacement, as people seek safety not only from violence but also from hostile social environments and fractured community relations (SMEX 21/01/2025; TIMEP 30/01/2025).

Humanitarian constraints

The military confrontations have impeded access to some areas of Aleppo city. By 13 January, the security situation had shown signs of stabilisation through the return of some residents to Ashrafiyeh, the clearing of obstacles (including unexploded ordnance), and the restoration of services in Ash Sheikh Maqsoud (ECHO 13/01/2026). That said, reports continue of sporadic drone activity in and around Aleppo city. This activity continues to result in access constraints, including temporary movement restrictions and operational delays (OCHA 12/01/2026).

Until 11 January, movement between northeast Syria and interior areas remained limited, with reports indicating that the Dayr Hafir–Aleppo road and Tabqa–Athriya road are partially or intermittently closed, with checkpoints and security controls enforcing some closures, affecting civilian movement and food and fuel supply routes (IOM 12/01/2026). On 8 January, movement restrictions were reported on the road linking Allaramoon and Shihan, as well as access roads around Ash Sheikh Maqsoud within Aleppo city (OCHA 08/01/2025 and 07/01/2026). It is unclear if restrictions along these roads had been lifted by 14 January.

The Government has imposed a curfew since 8 January and issued evacuation advisories for parts of Ash Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh (OCHA 08/01/2025; Enab Baladi 10/01/2026). Self-imposed confinements could increase because of fear of the risk of future clashes spreading beyond Ash Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh neighbourhoods or their impacts. This disrupts livelihoods and education.

On 10 January, the Government announced the closure of schools for at least two weeks, as well as universities, government offices, and the Aleppo International Airport (OCHA 10/01/2026). Until 12 January, civil aviation authorities had maintained the suspension of all flights to and from Aleppo International Airport until further notice (OCHA 12/01/2026). The suspension of flights may hinder the arrival of aid supplies, increasing response constraints, and affect the free movement of people.



Access to information

There is no clear picture of the total number of people on the move and their needs because IDP numbers are constantly changing, and it is possible that not all are registered or will be targeted for assistance. Many people are likely staying with relatives and family members instead of shelters and may not receive assistance; this also constrains knowledge on the exact number of IDPs and the needs of people and host communities.

Most figures available are provided by the Government, but there is no breakdown of the ethnicity of those displaced. This is likely to affect assistance targeting, as well as worsen protection risks and the tracking of movement patterns. On 12 January, 39 Kurdish-dominated political groups in Syria issued a written statement expressing concerns about the perceived lack of neutrality in the discourse of many Arab-run media outlets. The statement highlighted that these outlets are reported to frequently reflect the Syrian Government's narrative, though this remains a perception rather than an independently verified fact (ANHA 12/01/2025). This could indicate that most publicly available information from media and the Government does not represent Kurdish civilian perspectives.

There is also a high risk of disinformation and AI-manipulated content, which may result in verification delays and cautious planning. Aid organisations have encouraged formal verification and authentication of all information (KSC 12/01/2025).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

The national Government has been leading the majority of the humanitarian response, which may result in the prioritisation of areas based on political allegiance. The Aleppo Directorate of Emergency is coordinating the shelter response with INGOs and NGOs, though emergency food response capacity remains limited as a result of funding shortages and access challenges (OCHA 07/01/2026). The International Rescue Committee and its Syrian affiliates have been forced to suspend humanitarian operations in the city because of insecurity affecting protection assistance (IRC 08/01/2026). By 13 January, it remained unclear how many humanitarian organisations were operating in Aleppo, and a surge in needs could lead to wider coverage gaps and increased morbidity.

Funding cuts

In 2025, an estimated 16.5 million Syrians (over 70% of the population) required humanitarian assistance, with 24% of them located in Aleppo (OCHA 28/01/2025). Insufficient funding amounting to 27% of overall requirements was provided – a drop of 42% compared to 2024 – leaving critical needs across the country largely unmet. This decline is expected to be experienced in 2026, with humanitarian organisations having to prioritise sectors to ensure the people with the most severe needs are assisted (Syria Direct 12/12/2024; OCHA accessed 12/01/2025). Reflecting these constraints, the 2026 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan aims to target around 50% of the 16.5 million people identified as in need (OCHA accessed 14/01/2026). With this hyper prioritisation, many people in need following the recent clashes are at risk of being excluded from humanitarian assistance, aggravating existing vulnerabilities. For example, more than 16% of health facilities across Syria were forced to suspend or reduce capacity in 2025 (UNRIC 01/09/2025; EUAA 07/07/2025). Many community centres and safe spaces for women and girls have also closed as a consequence, heightening protection risks, including of more early marriage and GBV (OCHA 18/09/2025). These closures are likely to further affect recently displaced women and children by reducing the services available to support them. The reduction in funds to the regional Syrian refugee crisis has also directly affected the services available to them, compelling many Syrian refugees to return despite persistent security challenges and adding strain to already fragile services (Reuters 07/12/2025; UNHCR 04/07/2025).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Pre-existing displacement and extreme winter conditions

Inadequate winterisation support for existing and new IDP sites will worsen the situation by exposing displaced and newly displaced populations to freezing temperatures as shelters are destroyed or damaged. Even without large-scale destruction, people die from exposure to extreme cold, and reliance on burning solid fuels for heating and cooking contributes to respiratory illnesses through prolonged smoke inhalation. Winterisation response gaps can magnify the shelter, health, and protection risks already identified.