

# SYRIA

## Displacement in the northwest

Conflict between the Government of Syria (GoS) and armed opposition groups has intensified since the beginning of 2019, and escalated since 28 April, in northern Hama governorate and southern Idlib governorate, causing a wave of displacement. Some 152,000 people have been displaced between April 29 and 5 May, the majority into northern Idlib and northern Aleppo. Military operations have caused a high number of civilian casualties. The humanitarian situation in the affected governorates is deteriorating, with ongoing clashes, airstrikes, and shelling. The majority of IDPs live in makeshift settlements and report acute multi-sectoral needs

### NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE



### IMPACT

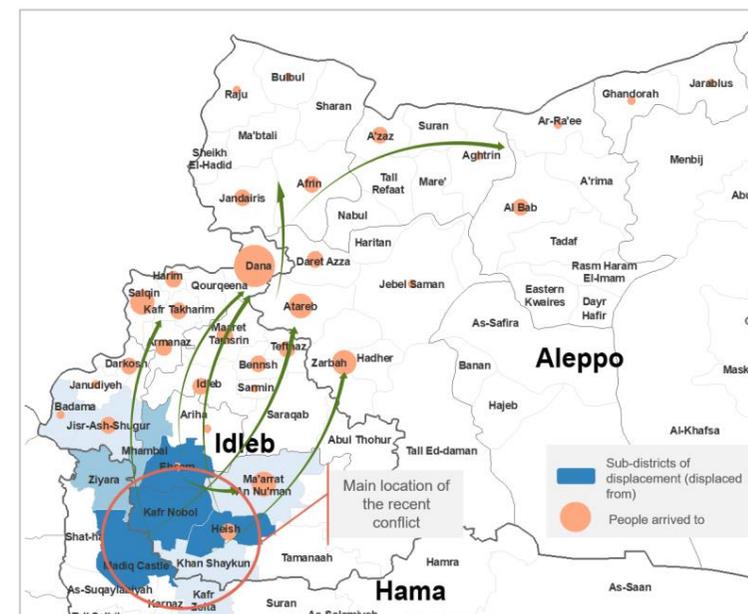


Image by: OCHA 07/05/2019

### Anticipated scope and scale

The ongoing hostilities are likely to **further escalate** and cause significantly more displacement, bring infrastructure losses, and increase the number of civilian casualties. Due to congestion in IDP sites, IDPs are likely to continue travelling and therefore expose themselves to **protection issues** and insecurity. **International negotiations** are not likely to find a political solution to this crisis.

### Key priorities



**+152,000**  
displaced between 29 April and 5 May



**12**  
health facilities have been hit



**+460,000**  
exposed to the violence

### Humanitarian constraints



Ongoing hostilities limit access to the affected areas, leading to suspension of aid activities and incidents of violence against humanitarian aid and actors. Ongoing response efforts are stretched and do not meet needs of the displaced population.

#### Limitations

The reported figures of IDPs and people in need change daily due to the crisis dynamics. Assessment capacities are limited in the affected areas due to insecurity and limited access. More detailed information on the needs and locations of the displaced population is needed.

## Crisis impact

The escalation of hostilities between the Government of Syria (GoS) and armed opposition groups in the opposition-held northwestern Syria, that started in the beginning of 2019, have increased since 28 April, severely affecting communities in Idleb and Hama governorates. A new wave of barrel bomb attacks and artillery strikes has hit houses, schools, medical facilities, markets and IDP camps in northern rural Hama and southern Idleb (OCHA 25/04/2019). Between 28 April and 6 May at least 80 civilians were killed, and 300 injured (OCHA 07/05/2019). Dozens more have been reported killed since 7 May. (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 08/05/2019). The fighting caused over 152,000 people to flee their homes between 29 April and 5 May. Most of the displaced are arriving in northern Idleb and in northern Aleppo governorate close to the Turkish border, where some 138,000 and 10,000 arrivals have been registered respectively (OCHA 07/05/2019). Another 462,500 people in 61 communities are estimated to remain exposed to the violence (Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations 05/05/2019).

Prior to the recent escalation, over 150,000 people had been displaced due to escalation of violence in the area since February 2019 (OCHA 07/05/2019). Fighting in the opposition-held northwest has escalated since the beginning of 2019 in response to Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS), a leading Salafist Jihadi coalition in the area, seizing control of the area from more moderate groups (The Guardian 28/03/2019). The northwestern region was declared a demilitarised zone under a deal between Turkey and Russia in September 2018 aiming to avert a government assault on the area. Despite the ceasefire deal, the GoS has stepped up their attacks in recent days, claiming they have been targeting extremist groups in the area (REUTERS 02/05/2019).

The recent violence has had a severe impact on the civilian population, civilian infrastructure, and provision of basic services in the northwest, which is home to over 3.5 million people. IDPs are reported to be in dire conditions with limited access to basic services (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019). Protection, health, and shelter have been identified as the main humanitarian needs. However, assessments are ongoing and current information on the humanitarian needs is limited.

**Protection:** The high intensity of fighting in densely populated areas, the use of heavy artillery, and the exposure to indiscriminate attacks heightens the protection needs of civilians. Between 30 April and 7 May the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights registered about 5,200 air and ground strikes (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 08/05/2019), including 757 barrel bombs.

Multiple ground-based attacks and airstrikes against civilian infrastructure, including IDP site schools and hospitals, have been reported (UNOHCHR 07/05/2019). Five of the twelve attacked hospitals had previously shared their coordinates with the formal deconfliction

mechanism which serves to protect humanitarian facilities from being targeted by Russia or its allies (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019).

According to the UN Human Rights Office, civilians fleeing the hostilities have been denied access by opposition armed groups to areas under their control in Afrin district in western rural Aleppo. (UNOHCHR 07/05/2019).

The increased fighting has resulted in the suspension or closure of several protection service points in the area, leaving the affected population without access to protection services, including case management and psychosocial services, in those districts (OCHA 07/05/2019).

**Health:** Between 29 April and 6 May, twelve health facilities were hit by airstrikes in northern Hama and Idleb governorates, reducing the capacity to provide health assistance in the region. As of 6 May, all of these facilities, which collectively used to serve 112,000 people, remain out of service (OCHA 07/05/2019). Northern Hama currently does not have any functioning hospitals (WHO 07/05/2019). Additionally, dozens of health facilities are operating at reduced capacity because of the violence (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019). Close to 300,000 civilians are reported to be affected by the reduced medical capacity in the region (WHO 07/05/2019). At least three health workers have been killed in the violence. Ten others have been injured (OCHA 07/05/2019).

There are concerns for infectious disease outbreaks due to overcrowding in temporary settlements (WHO 07/05/2019). Mobile clinics are reportedly unable to access the newly displaced populations because of the threats of airstrikes (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019).

**Shelter:** A severe lack of shelter is reported. Many of the newly displaced are reported to be without shelter, living in open fields or under trees exposed to the elements (Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations 04/05/2019). Several IDP sites have been targeted by airstrikes causing damage, which exacerbates shelter needs and causes further displacement (UNOHCHR 07/05/2019; OCHA 07/05/2019).

The 325 existing IDP sites in northern Hama and southern Idleb governorates, hosting over 471,000 people, are overwhelmed with the new wave of displacements. Some IDP camps are operating at more than 400% capacity (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019).

**Food:** Food needs have not been explicitly reported in current assessments. However, it is assumed that food needs are significant, especially among the displaced who have limited access to basic services. A REACH assessment conducted in the region in February reported on challenges to access food. It also reports on people having to resort to crisis and emergency-coping strategies in order to access food (REACH February 2019).

Due to the violence, at least six food security organisations are reported to have suspended their services, which likely impacts food access for people in the affected area (OCHA 07/05/2019).

**WASH:** Current assessments have not reported on WASH needs. However, some 3,147,000 are estimated to be in need of WASH in Idleb and Hama governorates. About 1,388,000 of them are in acute need (HNO 2019).

**Education:** The recent airstrikes and shelling have destroyed at least 10 schools in the northwest. Education authorities in Idleb governorate have suspended education activities in southern and eastern areas until further notice (OCHA 07/05/2019).

## Humanitarian and operational constraints

Humanitarian access to northwest Syria is constrained by insecurity and the presence of checkpoints, which has impacted the response capacities. Recent conflict developments have further deteriorated humanitarian access.

Ongoing fighting has forced at least 16 humanitarian responders, including 6 food security, 3 health, 4 protection and 3 nutrition responders, to suspend their operations in the region as of 6 May (OCHA 07/05/2019).

Humanitarian responders and health facilities have been targeted. At least 12 health facilities are now out of service. Three health workers have been killed in the attacks, ten others have been wounded (OCHA 07/05/2019).

NGOs have reported on their staff not being able to operational sites due to the insecurity on the roads. Insecurity is also constraining the movement and delivery of supplies. Supplies are running out because of the high needs and restricted ability to restock (Mercy Corps 07/05/2019). The displacement of humanitarian workers and high fuel prices or lack of fuel are likely hampering the relocation of humanitarian supplies.

Humanitarian cross-line access is limited because of lack of permission from the GoS. Escalating fighting further decreases the possibility of delivery from within Syria, due to lack of security guarantees from the involved parties (Welt Hunger Hilfe October 2018).

## Aggravating factors

### Increased food prices during Ramadan

Ramadan started on 5 May. Ramadan is typically a time when food prices reach a peak due to the increase in demand. In areas with increased military activity, merchants may be driven to move their products to safer areas, lowering supply at the markets and

driving prices even higher. The increased food prices may deteriorate people's already strained access to food items (Diyaruna 07/05/2019).

## Past displacement and existing vulnerability

An estimated 2.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance across northwestern Syria, including 1.7 million IDPs who may have been displaced multiple times and living in tented shelters for many years (OCHA 25/04/2019). A REACH assessment in 2,006 communities across Idleb, western Aleppo, northern Aleppo and Hama in February 2019 found 1,463,709 people to be in acute need in the assessed communities (REACH February 2019).

Displacement in recent weeks follows the trend of increasing movements recorded since the start of 2019. Prior to the recent escalation, some 150,000 people had already been displaced in the area since February 2019. Services to displaced communities were already strained before the onset of the recent escalation. Communities and sites that accommodate the newly displaced in Idleb are struggling with the congestion (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019).

## International Intervention

Turkey, Iran and Russia act as guarantors to the de-escalation zone in Idleb. Opposing political interests of guarantors of the Astana process risk destabilising it which is likely to bring more conflict and instability.

In mid-October 2017 Turkey deployed its military in the governorate in a move that was considered illegal by the GoS. The Turkish military has maintained its position in the governorate and also extended its presence in to Aleppo in order to isolate the Kurdish-controlled Afrin region. In anticipation of an offensive in Idleb, Turkey reinforced its observation posts there and tried to bring together opposition factions under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NLF). On 4 May GoS and Russian artillery hit a Turkish military position in Idleb and wounded several Turkish soldiers, underlining the risk of wider escalation (REUTERS 04/05/2019). Turkey has called on Russia and Iran to contain the ongoing offensive in Idleb. However, the operation continues despite Turkish objections.

Russia and Iran are the main countries backing the Syrian government. Increasing tensions between Iran and Russia may aggravate the conflict situation in northwest Syria. Russia and Iran have been fighting over influence in Syria. In mid-April clashes between Russian forces and pro-Iranian armed groups in the northeastern city of Aleppo were reported. Pro-Iranian groups have accused Russia of coordinating with Israel on recent Israeli airstrikes on Iranian military targets in Syria (VOA 02/05/2019). The competition

between Iran and Russia over political and economic interests in Syria may hamper the peace process in the region.

## Contextual information

### Drivers of the current conflict

The northwest of Syria is seen as the last major stronghold of the opposition. Evacuation agreements that were presented to opposition forces and civilians residing in contested areas led to the (forced) displacement of thousands of people into governorates controlled by the opposition, Idleb in particular. Opposition groups that have fought against the Syrian regime are now largely confined to this enclave (OCHA 03/01/2018).

The northwest was declared a demilitarised zone under a deal between Turkey and Russia in September 2018. Armed opposition groups were required to remove their heavy weapons from the zone. Extremist groups had to withdraw. The deal aimed to avert a full-scale government assault on the area possibly driving millions of refugees into neighbouring Turkey (REUTERS 02/05/2019).

Despite the truce, clashes have been ongoing. Following territorial gain by opposition group HTS, known for its hardline Islamic policies and previous association with Al Qaeda, the GoS has increased its attacks since the beginning of 2019. The GoS claims they have been targeting extremist groups in the area in this recent escalation (Al Jazeera 07/05/2019).

It seems that one of the goals of the GoS is to regain control over the strategic M5 and M4 highways from Aleppo to Hama and Lattakia on the Mediterranean coast. The highways link government-controlled cities with the Jordanian and Turkish border. Reopening commercial routes through Idleb would restore the state's economic control over the area. Losing control over the highways would mean the loss of financial assets for the opposition groups, the HTS in particular, and a weakening of their stronghold (REUTERS 06/05/2019).

### Stakeholders

**The Syrian Arab Army (SAA):** Government armed forces are currently trying to regain control of territories taken by opposition armed groups.

**Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS):** including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS is an Islamist coalition that formally split from Al Qaeda in 2016 and currently counts around 20,000 fighters (BBC 07/09/2019). As part of a coalition with other armed groups, they captured Idleb in 2015. HTS is currently the dominant opposition force in the area. In August 2018, the group refused to integrate into the National

Liberation Front ahead of any offensive on Idleb, claiming to be the sole legitimate defender of Sunni Syrians.

**The National Liberation Front (NLF)** is in Idleb governorate and was established with the support of Turkey. The NLF consists of 11 Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups and several other loose opposition factions. It reportedly has 70,000 fighters (Al Jazeera 19/08/2018).

## Key characteristics

**Demographic profile:** Population affected areas of northwestern Syria: 3,500,000 (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019)

**Nutrition – Idleb:** 2.2% GAM, 0.5% SAM; Hama: 1.1% GAM, no SAM cases reported (Nutrition Cluster).

**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 and local response

The response to the crisis is ongoing. CCCM, Protection, WASH, Shelter/NFI, Nutrition, and Food Security and Livelihoods clusters are present in the northwest with their partners.

Locally, the Syrian Civil Defence Service has been providing emergency assistance in the northwest (MEMO 12/04/2019). The HTS-controlled emergency response committee provides assistance for IDPs. Local and regional NGO's as well as volunteer organisations are also providing assistance (Dialy Sabah 11/03/2019).

However, the ability to respond has been compromised by the violence. Humanitarian staff has been displaced themselves. Humanitarian infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed in the fighting. Several organisations have had to suspend operations and some areas remain inaccessible due to insecurity. The scale-up of operations has been impeded by the violence in the region (OCHA 07/05/2019).

The number of newly displaced is overwhelming the capacities of responding agencies (Syrian American Medical Society Foundation 06/05/2019).

## Information gaps and needs

- Assessments are ongoing. Limited information regarding the specific humanitarian needs and the humanitarian conditions of the affected population is currently available
- There is a lack of sex- and age-disaggregated data on the displacement and the needs of the displaced
- Access is difficult in some areas due to the volatile security situation, therefore numbers on casualties may be an underestimation
- Information on WASH and food needs has not been reported

## Lessons learned

A similar situation was observed in Idleb where 212,000 people were displaced between 15/12/2017 and 15/01/2018 causing increased pressure on the local markets quickly followed by availability issues and price increases, affecting both IDPs and host communities. A growing number of people, especially children suffering from mental health conditions could not access the necessary healthcare and an increase in waterborne diseases was reported. Documentation concerns are likely to arise, either related to personal or property documents lost during the displacement or confiscated at the checkpoints. The situation was made more complex by multiple displacements as IDPs fled the moving frontline.