

OVERVIEW

Humanitarian needs remain critical in Afrin district, Aleppo governorate, in northwest Syria (NWS) – almost four years after the Olive Branch operation in 2018, which saw the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army (SNA) gain full control over the district. Insecurity resulting from conflict remains widespread, as does a lack of rule of law, and ongoing hostilities and economic deterioration in northern Syria continue to drive displacement into Afrin, with many people experiencing protracted displacement. The influx of IDPs is straining already limited basic infrastructure and services. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the situation by placing additional burdens on the healthcare system and impacting the already dire economic situation in northern Syria. This report analyses the most urgent humanitarian needs for the population of Afrin.

Out of a total population of around 442,000 in Afrin, at least 80% are in need of humanitarian assistance according to discussions with humanitarian organisations operating in the district (key informant interviews 26/01/2021, 02/02/2021). The main identified needs are livelihoods, food, and protection. The Kurdish population is one of the most affected groups in Afrin, as they face constant harassment by local factions of the SNA, putting them at risk of losing their livelihoods and access to food and shelter, and increasing their protection needs. Other groups identified as being most in need are children and young people, IDPs (especially in

informal camps), and people with disabilities. It is difficult to estimate the number of those in need in the district because of the limited needs assessments conducted at the district and subdistrict levels.

About this report

Methodology: The needs analysis is based on a review of publicly available data and key informant interviews conducted between January–February 2021.

Limitations: Despite extensive information covering NWS where Afrin is situated, granular information about the different districts and subdistricts across the region remains scarce. Different actors operate in and control different areas of NWS, meaning that needs vary vastly across the region. Needs across subdistricts differ as the influx of IDPs is uneven. As a result, we try to not generalise across the region throughout the report. There are currently no available recent estimates of the number of people in need for the overall population nor for specific groups. Information on the needs of the Kurdish population remains very limited, because of sensitivities and biases.

MOST AFFECTED PEOPLE

Kurdish population

Harassment by SNA factions impacts livelihoods and shelter and increases protection needs

Women

Protection needs resulting from abuses by the SNA

Pregnant and lactating women need nutritional and food services

IDPs

Widespread lack of food, WASH, livelihoods, and shelter

Children and young people

Child labour, forced and early marriage, and recruitment into armed groups

People with disabilities

Social and economic exclusion and discrimination

Elderly

Risk of COVID-19

CRISIS IMPACT

The humanitarian situation in Afrin district is characterised by dire living conditions and high levels of needs across all sectors. This has been the case since 2018 when the district came under de facto Turkish control after the Olive Branch operation (Middle East Directions 25/07/2019). The operation lasted for two months, with violent fighting between the Turkish Armed Forces and the allied Syrian National Army against the Syrian Democratic Forces resulting in numerous casualties and displacement. Since March 2018, more than half of Afrin's Kurdish residents have left, while thousands of internally displaced Arab Syrians have relocated to Afrin. This was a result of Turkey's attempt to fill Afrin homes vacated by Kurdish residents displaced because of the hostilities by settling thousands of fighters' families and other Arabs and Turkmens there. Once Afrin fell under Turkey's control and influence, it was also more stable than other areas in NWS (Middle East Directions 25/07/2019; OCHA 19/03/2018; UNFPA 19/03/2018; IMPACT 05/2019).

Military operations in Afrin began on 20 January 2018 and the Turkish took over the district on 18 March 2018. Since then, displaced people have been moving into the district. Afrin's population, including residents, IDPs, and returnees, is in need of humanitarian assistance and access to basic services (HNAP 12/2020). Already strained infrastructure and services were put under further pressure with the arrival of thousands of IDPs from different parts of Syria including Ghouta, northern Hama, rural Damascus, and Idlib. In particular, there has been an increase in displacement to Afrin district since December 2019 because of hostilities in NWS, and displacement to Afrin continues – with around 13,000 arrivals recorded in December 2020 alone (UNHCR 08/01/2021; UNHCR 11/02/2021; OCHA 08/02/2021; OCHA 06/02/2020). As at January 2021, there were around 19,500 families – more than 122,000 individuals – internally displaced in the district (11,000 in 15 formal camps and 8,500 in 67 informal camps) (key informant interview 02/02/2021; REACH 31/03/2020).

At least 80% of the total Afrin district population is estimated to need humanitarian assistance (key informant interview 02/02/2021). As at December 2020, the population of Afrin district was more than 442,000 (154,682 residents, 285,550 IDPs, and 2,596 returnees) (key informant interview 26/01/2021).

According to the most recently published humanitarian needs overview, there were around 130,000 people in need in 2019 in Afrin district, including 98,000 in acute need. 97,000 people were in need of food security and livelihood assistance, 76,000 people were food insecure, and 21,000 were at risk of food insecurity (OCHA HDX 01/03/2019).

Since early 2020, as a result of the escalation of fighting in northern Syria and associated mass displacement – as well as the negative impacts of COVID-19 – needs across all sectors have been aggravated.

Livelihoods and food security

Years of instability, economic deterioration, and severe depreciation of the local currency – the Syrian Pound (SYP) – have resulted in a lack of secure and long-term economic activity in Afrin district. The need for livelihood and income support is high across all households. Livelihoods are reported as one of the most pressing needs for 56% of residents, 65% of IDPs, and 63% of returnees. 45% of IDPs reported food as being their priority need, followed by 32% of returnees, and 29% of residents (HNAP 12/2020).

Currently, the main sources of income for IDPs include small businesses and daily waged labour (mainly in construction and olive harvesting), which remains a challenge as businesses struggle to stay open, and the availability of this work is sporadic. IDPs also depend on non-productive means of livelihoods such as aid, savings, and remittances from family members living abroad (Impact 01/05/2019; key informant interview 02/02/2021; Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster 29/12/2020).

The lack of livelihood opportunities for IDPs has led them to adopt risk-taking behaviour patterns to generate income, such as joining armed factions, rummaging through trash and living on waste, or searching for recyclable materials (Enab Baladi 24/08/2020; Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster 29/12/2020).

Prior to 2018, the main source of income for the residents of Afrin was the agriculture sector, followed by trade and manufacturing. These financial sources remain the same; however, they were drastically affected by the Syrian civil war and the Olive Branch operation – primarily because of changes in power control, which affected the livelihoods of the Kurdish population, as well as population movements that led IDPs to find new sources of income in the district. Movement restrictions resulting from insecurity and security conditions also affected economic activities. This has led to the closure of small and medium-sized businesses and hampered people's ability to open new businesses (Impact 01/05/2019).

While residents also depend on aid for income, agriculture remains the main source of income for the majority of residents in Afrin district. The agricultural sector constitutes 70% of the district's revenue, despite the challenges hindering its development and limiting the livelihoods of those who depend on it (Enab Baladi 29/10/2018). The challenges facing agriculture are as follows:

Persistent insecurity and widespread attacks on farmers, as well as expropriation of agriculture (especially olive farming), by local SNA factions have heavily impacted families' livelihoods (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, YASA 31/07/2020). Olive trees in Afrin have been cut down by the SNA to obtain firewood for heating and trading purposes (key informant interview 26/01/2021; Afrin Post 24/01/2021; ARK 21/12/2020). There is estimated to be about 18 million olive trees in the Afrin area, down from 26 million prior to the 2018 conflict (VOA 16/12/2020).

Economic decisions made by SNA factions in favour of Turkish traders have affected Afrin's agricultural sector and limited livelihood opportunities for farmers (Middle East Directions 25/07/2019). For example, some farmers report that they were forced to make deals with either local factions or representatives of Turkey's Agricultural Credit Cooperatives, at prices set by them (SOHR 12/11/2020; SOHR 20/11/2020; Ahval 06/01/2021; Ahval 15/12/2020; VOA 16/12/2020; NPA 16/11/2020).

SNA factions impose taxes on the olive harvest and olive oil extraction. These regulations differ from one village to another depending on the military faction controlling the area. Anecdotal evidence from Kakhera village (Ma'btali subdistrict, Afrin) showed that armed groups controlling the village levied as much as 2,000 olive barrels as taxes on village residents (VOA 16/12/2020). Local media reported that factions controlling Afrin also seized the crops of sumac, grape leaves, cherries, and other fruit-bearing trees (Afrin Post 09/07/2020).

The lack of livelihood opportunities has also impacted access to food in the district. While there are no specific findings regarding the food security status in Afrin, the most recent Syria Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (mVAM) showed that half of Aleppo's households reported poor and borderline food consumption in the last six months of 2020 – the highest average across Syria (WFP 31/12/2020). During December 2020, the food basket price increased by 277% in Aleppo compared to figures recorded in December 2019; increases were reported in all 14 governorates, but Aleppo recorded the highest increase. The average price of a food basket in Aleppo in December was SYP 119,563 (USD 233), an increase of 18% compared to November (WFP 19/01/2021).

Wheat and bread shortages are reported in NWS and in Afrin, though to a lesser degree than the rest of Syria because of the proximity of Turkey, where most flour is bought. Bread shortages are driven by fuel shortages, limited number of bakeries (there are only 34 bakeries in the district), and differences in supply, demand, production capacity, and prices across different subdistricts. For example, Jandairis subdistrict reports shortages more often than Raju subdistrict. The discrepancy in prices is mostly a result of some organisations subsidising bread, which brings the price down to 1.75 Turkish Lira (TL) per kg from 3 TL per kg. As a result, thousands of people living in areas where these subsidies do not exist are unable to access this staple food, as unsubsidised bread is considered to be unaffordable (COAR 28/01/2021; COAR 21/09/2020; Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster 29/12/2020; key informant interview 26/01/2021; REACH 21/01/2021).

The volatility of the depreciation of the SYP has also impacted access to food. Because of this depreciation, people in NWS – including Afrin – have been increasingly adopting the TL and USD as their currency. There are reports of shortages of both foreign currencies however, and access remains irregular (COAR 06/07/2020), meaning that local people have to remain reliant on the volatile and fast-depreciating SYP. People without adequate access to TL and USD are more exposed to market shocks, and may face higher prices for the same goods and services because of exchange rate disparities – further marginalising already poor and vulnerable members of society (OCHA 13/07/2020).

Protection

Severe insecurity, a high prevalence of explosive hazards, and widespread crime have resulted in very high protection needs, especially for women, children, and the Kurdish population (key informant interview 26/01/2021). Although the security situation in the district is critical, protection is not always underlined as a major concern in needs assessments – possibly because of a lack of reporting on protection concerns for privacy reasons and for the safety of the victims. Humanitarians working in the area highlighted the need for more protection centres in the district however, especially for women and children (key informant interviews 26/01/2021, 02/02/2021).

People residing in Afrin are at constant risk of death or injury from regular insecurity incidents including shelling, car bombs, and landmine explosions (SOHR 30/09/2020, 03/10/2020, 12/10/2020, 15/10/2020, 24/11/2020, 04/12/2020, 02/01/2021). The most recent bombing occurred on 16 February 2021, when an IED detonated in a car in Al Mahmoudiyah neighbourhood in Afrin city; one person was killed. This followed another bombing that took place on 30 January 2021, in an industrial site in the centre of the town, where at least five people were killed (including children) and more than 22 were wounded (Al Jazeera 30/01/2021; SOHR 16/02/2021). These widespread bombings and indiscriminate killings are a concern for humanitarian organisations working in the region (WFP 11/02/2021). There are also several sporadic incidents of indiscriminate killings, arrests without reasonable cause, and kidnapping for ransom (SOHR 01/11/2020). During 2020, more than 940 people were kidnapped and more than 65 were tortured in Afrin (Afrin Activist Network 01/01/2021).

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), in particular sexual harassment, abuse, torture, and forced marriage, is widespread in Afrin (UN 14/08/2020). The Missing Afrin Women Project documented up to 88 women and girls who disappeared during 2020. As at 1 January 2021, 51 of them remained missing. Many abductions, forced marriages, and intimidation cases were also reported by media outlets. Women and children staying in IDP camps in Afrin are considered to be at a heightened risk of SGBV (Arab News 31/12/2020; Missing Afrin Women Project 01/01/2021).

Education

Education needs are very high among the population of Afrin because of underfunding, impacts of COVID-19 mitigation measures, and lack of educational spaces and teachers. Education is the most prioritised need for 99% of returnees, while 72% of IDPs and 60% of residents identified education as a priority (Southern Turkey Education Cluster 01/02/2021; HNAP 12/2020).

Access to education in the district is challenging because of the limited number of schools. According to one humanitarian organisation working in the district, there are around 232 schools in Afrin district, which is insufficient for the number of school-aged children. All schools in the district are run by the Turkish Ministry of Education and no private schools



have been given permission to operate, as they are not supervised by Turkish authorities. Some of the public schools' buildings are currently occupied by local SNA factions, further limiting the number of available spaces for education (key informant interview 26/01/2021).

The current curriculum is in Arabic. As a result, many Kurdish students in the district are facing difficulties in accessing education, as they are accustomed to studying in the Kurdish language and have difficulties in learning and speaking Arabic. Turkish is also being taught in some schools, adding additional pressure on Arabic and Kurdish students. These language challenges have resulted in many students falling behind in their studies (Enab Baladi 14/10/2020; Orient Net 12/03/2019).

Other barriers to accessing education include insecurity, poor road infrastructure, lack of documentation, and limited financial capacity which prevents parents from sending their children to schools (Enab Baladi 14/10/2020; key informant interview 26/01/2021). The economic factor has been identified as having the biggest effect on school dropout rates in the northern regions of Syria, including Afrin (Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies 30/03/2020).

There are not enough teachers to meet education needs, as many teachers have been displaced because of the conflict or have left the profession as they worked months without pay or were not being paid enough. Teachers receive an average of only TL 750 (USD 107) per month (key informant interview 26/01/2021).

WASH

The majority of IDPs surveyed in July 2020 across 29 IDP sites in Afrin faced challenges in accessing water supplies because of high financial costs, permanent water shortages, distances to water sources, and poor quality of water (key informant interview 05/02/2020).

IDPs in camp sites are in severe need of water, as these camps are not connected to the main water supply network. They therefore depend primarily on water tanks, and to a lesser extent on closed wells. Water trucking is often unaffordable for IDPs; however, prices differ across subdistricts. For example, while the survival minimum expenditure basket for water trucking for Sharan subdistrict was around SYP 8,600 in December 2020 (after increasing by 5% over the previous six months), the price in Sheikh El'Hadid subdistrict was almost SYP 15,000 (an increase of 99%) (key informant interview 05/02/2020; OCHA 25/07/2020; REACH 21/01/2021).

Camps also lack adequate sewage and garbage disposal mechanisms. According to one humanitarian organisation in Afrin, there is an acute need for solid waste management in communities. In camps, 54% of garbage is burned, while 31% is disposed of at landfills. This is likely to create environmental and health hazards for IDPs. Leishmaniasis cases increased rapidly in the last three months of 2020, rising more than 170% between 2019 and 2020 (key informant interviews 18/02/2021, 05/02/2021).

Health

Afrin's health facilities are overcrowded, and services are overstretched and insufficient for the population. There are not enough qualified medical staff. The presence of checkpoints within the district and poor road infrastructure restrict the movements of health personnel and ambulances. The lack of public transportation limits patients' ability to access primary health centres (PHCs) and hospitals, and private transportation costs are unaffordable. The referral system between different health facilities is constrained by the limited number of vehicles used to transport patients. Most patients have to pay for their own transportation if they need other treatment after 4pm (when PHCs close). Some of the nearest healthcare facilities are more than 25km away from the communities in need (key informant interview 02/02/2021; REACH 12/2020).

High costs of healthcare and medicine for some chronic diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular or renal diseases create further obstacles to accessing healthcare and required treatments (Enab Baladi 02/02/2021).

As at January 2021, medical and health services in Afrin district are provided through eight hospitals, 30 PHC facilities, 22 mobile clinics, and 56 community health teams (health/nutrition/WASH awareness mobilisation teams). There are four hospitals and 22 PHCs providing specialised maternity and child health services. There are no cancer treatment facilities in Afrin district; there is only one centre in NWS that treats cancer patients, which is located in Idlib (key informant interviews 26/01/2021, 02/02/2021; Enab Baladi 02/02/2021).

Because of obstacles in accessing healthcare in Afrin, some of the population seek medical care in other districts of Aleppo governorate (such as Azaz), in Idlib governorate, or in Turkey, as specialised care is available primarily in Idlib and Turkey. The national military hospital is in charge of facilitating referrals to Turkey for treatments that are not available in Afrin. A committee is responsible for evaluating cases and organising referrals (key informant interviews 26/01/2021, 02/02/2021). Patients can only enter Turkey through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in Idlib however, creating further obstacles for patients as this means that access to healthcare is susceptible to border closures. As recently as January 2021, the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing was closed to IDPs, returnees, and travellers from Syria to Turkey and vice versa (Afrin Post 04/02/2021; Enab Baladi 02/02/2021; HNAP 05/01/2021).

There are reported cases of organ trafficking, with victims including people with mild illnesses and injuries who are admitted to Afrin National General hospital (Kurdpress 10/01/2021; Ahval 06/01/2021; SOHR 11/01/2021).

Displacement, combined with overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate waste management, impaired nutrition, destruction of infrastructure, and lack of health facilities, has led



to the spread of diseases, such as leishmaniasis.¹ Leishmaniasis has reached epidemic proportions in NWS, with patients – especially those in camps – unable to access medicine because of medicine shortages (key informant interview 18/02/2021; Health Cluster 05/2018; NPA 10/05/2020; OCHA 21/12/2020; REACH 02/2019).

COVID-19

Medical services dedicated to COVID-19 cases are not sufficient, including testing services – despite these being provided in a national military hospital – quarantine procedures, and the ability of health facilities to monitor cases (HNAP 01/01/2021). Despite sufficient public knowledge of COVID-19 risks, the population is not following recommended precautions or implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures, including community lockdown, curfews, compulsory mask wearing, or social distancing (HNAP 01/01/2021). There are mitigation and protection measures in place in hospitals and health facilities however, with special units that provide treatment to infected cases (key informant interview 02/02/2021).

As at 16 February 2021, there were 21,072 confirmed cases of COVID-19 reported in NWS (OCHA 16/02/2021). Afrin has been one of the most affected areas, beside Idlib city and Dana subdistrict (WFP 31/12/2020). Around 285,000 of the district's population are exposed to moderate and high COVID-19 risk (OCHA 11/01/2021).

Shelter

Shelter is the least prioritised need for the overall population. 12% of IDPs prioritised the need for shelter, while no residents or returnees reported shelter as a priority need (HNAP 12/2020).

There are 7,000 IDPs living in inadequate and unfinished homes; it is unclear who these homes belong to (key informant interview 26/01/2021). An unknown number of IDPs live in collective sites, such as schools, poultry farms, unfinished buildings, wedding halls, public/religious buildings, warehouses, and factories. Some IDPs living in these collective sites are at risk of eviction and secondary displacement (Shelter Cluster 05/2020).

The sleeping conditions of IDPs are also dire. 73% of shelters assessed in early 2020 in Afrin subdistrict had inadequate sleeping spaces (less than 3.5 m²), and there were 4,000 people with inadequate sleeping space. Providing adequate safe shelter, including sleeping spaces, is essential for the protection of at-risk populations such as women and children living in collective sites and inadequate shelters. Overcrowding and sleeping in mixed gendered rooms with extended families or strangers increase protection risks such as gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse. Overcrowding may also contribute to the spread of COVID-19 among IDPs (key informant interview 02/02/2021; Shelter Cluster 05/2020).

Kurdish residents in Afrin are particularly vulnerable to problems related to shelter. Kurdish residents have experienced repeated and systematic looting of their property. Those who fled their homes after 2018 are reported to have had their homes occupied by fighters and their families, and by displaced people from Government of Syria-held areas. Some residents (primarily of Kurdish origin) were forcibly displaced, through threats, extortion, detention, and abduction by local factions affiliated with the SNA. It is likely that if Kurdish IDPs begin returning to their areas of origin in the district, housing needs will increase (UN 14/08/2020; RIC 09/10/2020; The Syria Report 18/11/2020; The Syria Report 23/12/2020; The Guardian 07/06/2018; Middle East Eye 03/05/2018).

Humanitarian organisations indicated the need for adequate shelter projects in the district, which include rehabilitation of roads, expansion of sewage systems, and water networks (key informant interview 18/02/2021).

MOST AFFECTED GROUPS

There are significant discrepancies in terms of personal security and access to basic services between people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and displacement status (residents, IDPs in camps, IDPs out of camps, and returnees) (Impact 01/05/2019).

Kurdish population:

The Kurdish population remain one of the most affected groups in Afrin, as they face constant harassment by local militia groups, putting them at risk of losing their livelihoods and access to food and shelter, and increasing their protection needs (key informant interview 26/01/2021). The Kurdish population in Afrin is at risk of personal threats, extortion, detention, and abduction from local SNA factions present in the district. Evidence also shows that Kurdish farmers are the most affected by harassment by the SNA, including taxes and extortion. Differential treatment between Kurdish and Arab farmers is reported in local media, and there are discriminatory policies in place – particularly against the remaining Kurdish residents – such as taxes on crops, and seizures and destruction of Kurdish civilian property. This is impacting the livelihoods of many Kurdish households that are dependent on agriculture (Enab Baladi 29/10/2018; Freedom House 08/04/2020; OHCHR 18/09/2020; Arab News 30/12/2020).

Services are provided in a discriminatory manner in areas in the district inhabited by the Kurdish population. Often, services such as electricity supplies and road network maintenance are lacking in comparison with other districts (EUI 14/01/2021).

¹ A skin disease caused by a parasite, which is transmitted through the bite of sandflies. Leishmaniasis is endemic in the Middle East. Since the Syrian war, reports of Leishmaniasis have increased at an alarming rate across northern Syria.

Language constraints limit the Kurdish population's ability to access basic services such as education and healthcare. This increases risks for children dropping out of school and of people not being able to access medical services to treat diseases and illnesses (key informant interview 26/01/2021; VOA 01/06/2019; Kurdistan24 20/01/2021).

Women:

Kurdish women are in need of protection, including SGBV services. Since 2018, women in Afrin have faced abuse and harassment by local factions of the SNA. Some Kurdish women have reportedly been tortured in the northern Syrian camps, while other women are being held as prisoners and were allegedly abused and raped by SNA fighters (Arab News 31/12/2020; UN 14/08/2020).

Although there is little data about pregnant and lactating women (PLW) in Afrin district, PLW are likely to be in need of special nutritional services (Food Security & Livelihoods Cluster 29/12/2020). PLW are likely to suffer from moderate acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, and they need access to lipid-based nutrient supplements and high energy/protein diets or supplements. The burden of childcare likely falls to the women, and could result in negative coping mechanisms to ensure that children are getting enough food and water (Shelter Cluster 05/2020).

Children and young people:

Children are at risk of child labour, forced and early marriage, and recruitment into armed groups. This is a result of the absence of sustainable access to education, and the increased adoption of negative coping mechanisms resulting from limited economic opportunities and depleted savings (Save the Children 12/2020; key informant interview 02/02/2021).

In emergency settings, children are at increased risk of malnutrition and illness, and babies are often born with underdeveloped immune systems. Given the lack of access to health centres providing care for children and the reduced access to food, it is likely that children's nutritional status has been affected in Afrin. As temperatures drop below zero during Syria's harsh winter months, displacement becomes particularly dangerous – and sometimes fatal – for the youngest (Save the Children 09/2020).

The combined effects of long periods without adequate access to schooling and limited income-generating opportunities create an environment that increases the potential for youth military recruitment. There is also a higher risk of crime and addiction among young people. Early marriage and divorce create challenges for young women because of the poor economic status of some families (key informant interview 02/02/2021).

IDPs in informal camps:

There is widespread lack of food, WASH, and shelter assistance for IDPs in informal camps. Displaced people are more economically vulnerable as often they had already lost access to essential socio-economic safety nets, including access to savings, employment, and domestic support, and have been separated from income-generating household members. The COVID-19 pandemic poses additional risks for IDPs in NWS, particularly for those residing in collective shelters (Shelter Cluster 05/2020).

IDPs in Afrin originate mostly from Idlib, Ghouta, northern Hama, and rural Damascus. There are 15 formal camps in Afrin hosting around 11,000 families, and 67 informal camps hosting around 8,500 families. Most informal camps were built on agricultural lands that are susceptible to flooding during the winter season.

Formal camps can only be established by the Turkish Ministry of Interior's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Most assistance, whether for formal or informal camps, is provided by AFAD and very few NGOs are allowed to operate in IDP camp sites. This limits the capacity of the response to the needs of IDPs in camps (key informant interview 26/02/2021; HNAP 2019).

People with disabilities:

Disabilities increase individual and household vulnerability because of exclusion from social, economic, and political activities – this can increase poverty, especially for more vulnerable population groups like IDPs and returnees (HNAP 2019).

Although there is a lack of information on the number of people living with a disability in the district, female IDPs are more likely to experience disability than male IDPs in NWS. In Aleppo and Idlib governorates, people with disabilities experience physical barriers and reduced access to services, including schools, WASH, and essential medical equipment (such as assistive products like wheelchairs) (Protection Cluster Syria 11/2020). They also face attitudinal barriers, such as bullying and threats of abuse and exploitation in their local communities, as well as discrimination by some humanitarian staff. Many children with disabilities face risks of exclusion, neglect, and stigmatisation (Protection Cluster Syria 11/2020). This is likely to affect access to humanitarian aid, because of preferential treatment or neglect.

An overall lack of specialised healthcare has left many people with undiagnosed disabilities or without proper care (UNICEF 12/03/2018; VOA 15/03/2019; Protection Cluster Syria 11/2020).

Elderly²:

One of the most at-risk groups for COVID-19 is elderly people. It has also been reported that most of the remaining Kurdish population in the district is elderly, as they were unable to relocate after the conflict in 2018. Some of the elder Kurdish residents are at risk of eviction from their homes and of harassment by the SNA (key informant interview 02/02/2021; VOA 23/12/2020; Rudaw 30/04/2020; SOHR 18/01/2021; Afrin Post 03/03/2020).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

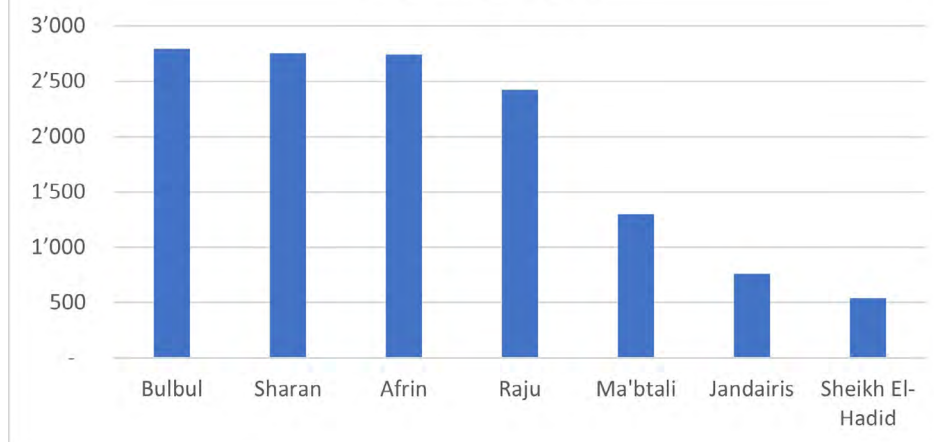
Displacement from other areas into Afrin

Afrin district has witnessed an influx of mass displacement throughout the years, with a spike in arrivals in early 2020. As at December 2020, Afrin district was hosting 13,314 IDPs and 1,181 returnees. Arrivals are primarily from Ghouta, northern Hama, and rural Damascus. Reasons for displacement vary, but displacement is mostly driven by economic incentives and a lack of access to services and livelihoods, as well as the security situation – including a risk of explosive hazards and an increase in hostilities (OCHA 31/10/2020; OCHA 08/02/2021). By the end of 2020, Afrin district was one of three districts across NWS that had received the most new IDP arrivals (Shelter/NFI Cluster 10/2020; OCHA 24/11/2020). This is likely to continue as hostilities persist in north Syria, causing further congestion in IDP sites. Camp management and coordination is controlled by Turkish authorities (key informant interview 02/02/2021), and their capacity to respond might be undermined by the number of arrivals.

Rain and low temperatures highlight the continued need for fuel and heating, winter clothes, blankets, and WASH. Without these, IDPs resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as a reliance on burning unsafe materials for heat, which has led to outbreaks of fires or caused injuries through the emission of toxic fumes. The likelihood of accidental fires is increased by challenges in accessing safe fuel because of fuel prices and availability (OCHA 26/01/2021).

The arrival of IDPs from different parts of Syria has also worsened communal tensions between the mostly Arab IDPs and the now minority Kurdish population. The increased arrivals have strained the already limited social services and resources in the district. The movement of IDPs is often concentrated in certain subdistricts, and some areas are therefore overwhelmed with new arrivals and services are very limited in proportion to the population (UN OCHA 08/02/2021; key informant interview 02/02/2021).

IDP flows to subdistricts in Afrin during December 2020



Source: OCHA 08/02/2021

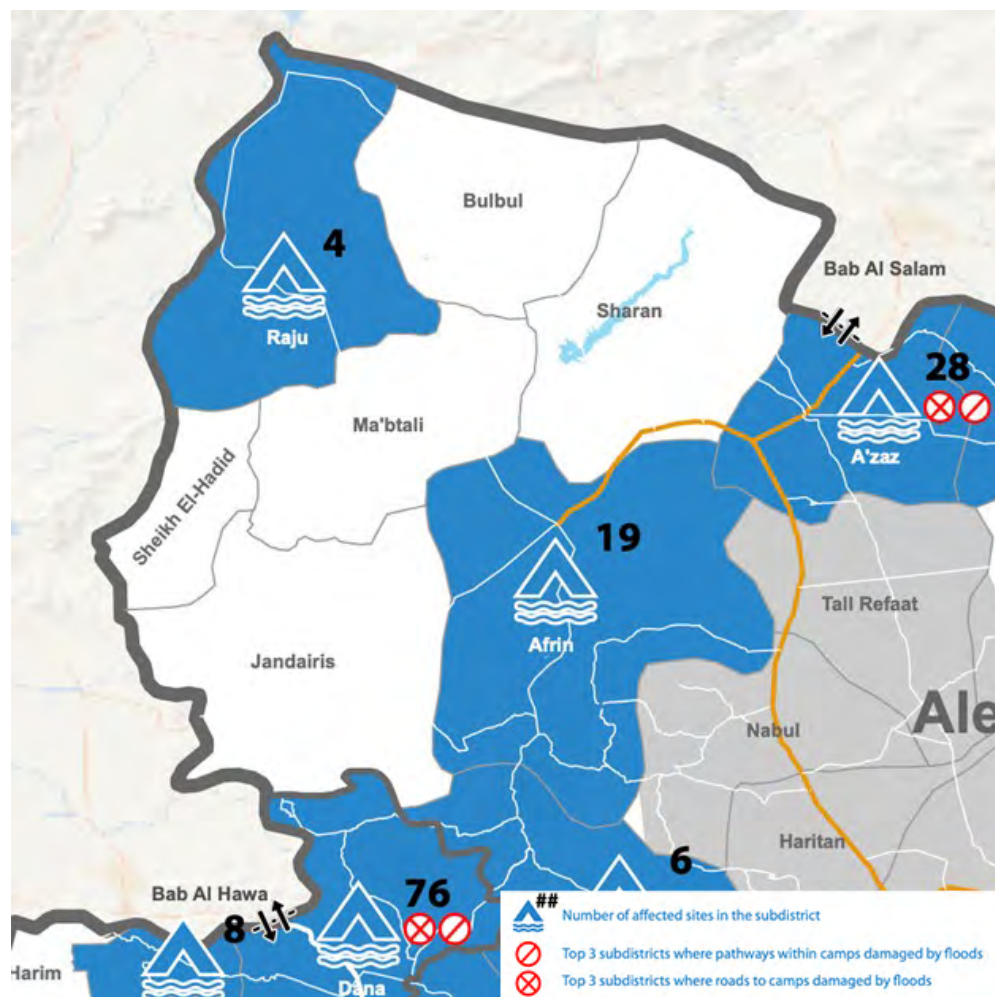
Flooding

The region in which Afrin lies is under constant threat of floods, especially in the winter months. In mid-January 2021, heavy rainfall and strong winds resulted in flooding across NWS. The affected subdistricts were Afrin and Raju. As at 4 February 2021, four camp sites were flooded in Raju subdistrict and 19 were flooded in Afrin subdistrict. It is unknown how many people were displaced, but close to 142,000 IDPs were affected across 407 IDP sites in NWS (ECHO 05/02/2021; UNHCR 11/02/2021). Roads within and leading to camps were flooded and destroyed, affecting access (ECHO 05/02/2021; Arab News 02/02/2021; key informant interview 26/01/2021).

Flooding is likely to increase the need for WASH services, such as waste disposal and clean water, as flooding often damages water pumps and water purification systems and increases the risk of waterborne diseases. People burn old clothes, nylon fabrics, and plastic to try and get warm, putting their health at risk as the fumes can lead to respiratory illnesses such as asthma and bronchitis (IFRC 24/12/2020; Daily Sabah 31/01/2021).

² Over 60 years old.

FLOODS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA



Source: UNHCR 11/02/2021

ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Afrin district is divided into seven subdistricts – *nawahi* – which are Afrin, Bulbul, Jandairis, Raju, Sharan, Sheikh El-Hadid, and Ma'btali, which have an approximate total of 265 communities. Pre-conflict, Afrin district was mostly home to the Kurdish population, as well as Arab, Yazidi, Turkmen, Syriac Christian, and evangelical Christian minorities mainly residing in the south of the district (Rojava Information Center 31/11/2019).

In 2012, the Government of Syria withdrew its forces from Afrin, leaving control of the district to the Democratic Union Party and its own armed forces, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, YASA 31/07/2020). Following the Olive Branch operation in 2018, governing bodies known as local councils emerged throughout Afrin, supported by Turkish authorities, to fill a critical need for social and governmental organisation. The elected local councils in these areas officially follow the Syrian Interim Government and are connected to the Aleppo provincial council, with direct administrative, logistical, and financial support from Turkish authorities – mainly the governors of Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay in southern Turkey (IMPACT 05/2019; key informant interviews 02/02/2021, 26/01/2020).

Overall, the provision of basic services at all levels, including education, health, telecommunications, electricity, and water, falls under Turkey. For example, the Hatay health directorate and health office in the local council oversee medical and health services (key informant interviews 02/02/2021, 26/01/2021, 27/01/2021; EUI 14/01/2021). Humanitarian assistance in Afrin district is also coordinated through the Turkish government (primarily through AFAD), in coordination with the local councils (key informant interviews 02/02/2021, 26/01/2020; EUI 14/01/2021).

Within the local council, there are multiple offices offering specific services to administrative areas. There is usually a humanitarian aid office (food and shelter services), medical aid office (health and protection services), media office, and municipal office (water, electricity, sewage, fuel, and other responsibilities) (key informant interview 02/02/2021; Etilaf 31/12/2020).

The presence of humanitarian responders is limited and most NGOs operate remotely, primarily from Turkey, and must collaborate very closely with AFAD for full unhindered access to Afrin (IMPACT 05/2019; key informant interview 05/07/2021).

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

There are at least 56 registered NGOs that have permission to work in Afrin. Any organisation that wants to work in the district must coordinate with the local council and the relevant body in Turkey to get permission to operate. They must also sign a protocol with a declaration about the organisation, its projects, and main activities. It is estimated that currently more than 90% of services are covered by humanitarian actors under the supervision of both the Turkish and Afrin local councils (key informant interviews 02/02/2021, 26/01/2020), except for the education sector which is under the responsibility of Turkish authorities and Afrin local councils. Only a few humanitarian organisations are working in education, but they are not the direct providers and only provide support to activities (key informant interview 02/02/2021).

The overall capacity of the response is low, particularly in the informal camps, and very few projects are implemented because of lack of funding, challenges in getting permissions (which are time-consuming because of the bureaucratic procedures and processes), no flexibility in project implementation, the security situation, a lack of qualified humanitarian staff, communication barriers (primarily language), and cultural barriers resulting from diversity within the population (key informant interviews 02/02/2021, 26/01/2021, 27/01/2021).

Overall, the security situation within Afrin remains unstable as fighting between armed groups persisted throughout 2020. In 2019, a formal security structure was formed under the Syrian National Army Framework, which included mostly Olive Branch military factions that took over control of the region (UN 15/08/2019). Each faction under this framework has de facto control over its geographic areas of influence. Despite the existence of this framework, there is an overall absence of law and order and there have been multiple reported cases of detention, torture, kidnapping, assassination, and missing people (UN 14/08/2020; STJ 22/01/2021; EUI 14/01/2021).

Environmental constraints such as flooding are likely to hamper humanitarian operations. The presence of checkpoints also slows down humanitarian movements; while checkpoints do not directly intervene with humanitarian work, they do require details of humanitarian personnel to be verified (key informant interview 02/02/2021). Bab al-Hawa, on Syria's northwestern border with Turkey, is the only crossing point between the two countries, and is often closed to IDPs, returnees, and travellers, and sometimes to humanitarian workers. This is likely to affect not only the access of workers but also humanitarian operations (Afrin Post 04/02/2021; Enab Baladi 02/02/2021; HNAP 05/01/2021).

INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS

- The quantity and scope of assessments carried out in Afrin district continue to be very limited, resulting in insufficient information on the profile of the affected population.
- Information about the Kurdish population in Afrin is lacking.
- The disaggregated number of people in need at the district, subdistrict, and communal levels is unknown.
- Data on food security in Afrin district is lacking.
- The number of elderly people and people with disabilities in the district is unknown.
- Information on the status of the reconstruction and rehabilitation of homes, schools, WASH, and agricultural and other infrastructure in Afrin district is lacking.
- Data on the education situation in Afrin district is lacking, including information on enrolment and the dropout rate of children in schools in the district.