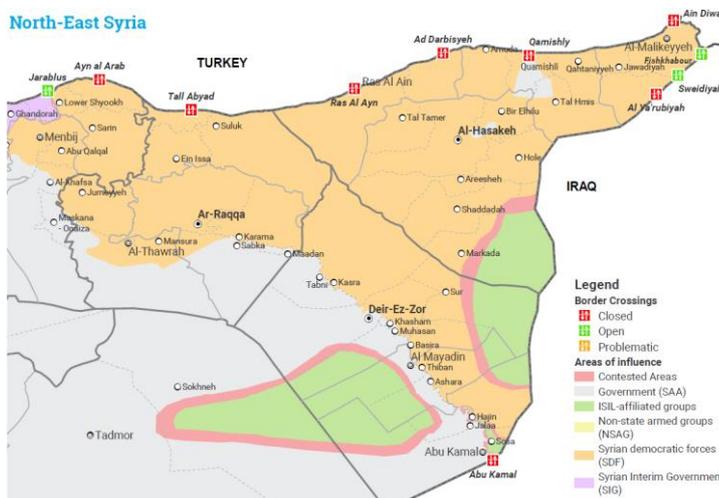




This report is produced by the OCHA Syria Crisis offices with the contribution of all sectors in the hubs and at the Whole of Syria (WoS) level. The situation overview covers the period from 1 February – 14 March 2018. The next report will be issued on or around 10 April 2018.

## Highlights

- As of 12 March 2018 an estimated 95,000 individuals reportedly returned to Ar-Raqqa city since the end of hostilities in October 2017.
- Among those trying to return home, more than 658 have been injured and 130 were confirmed to have been killed by explosive hazards since last October. On average, since January 2018 approximately 20-25 blast wounded incidents occur per week in Ar-Raqqa City.
- In Deir-ez-Zor governorate, ongoing clashes between Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continued creating new waves of displacement. In other areas of the governorate, an estimated 127,000 people have returned since end of 2017.
- Partners continue to face challenges in responding in northeast Syria, including administrative restrictions, pending security approvals to access restricted areas, and high levels of explosive hazard contamination.
- The first pilot convoy of eight trucks successfully crossed Yaroubiah crossing on 7 and 8 March. The convoy brought needed health and nutritional supplies for up to 40,000 beneficiaries.



**658**

blast wounded victims treated due to explosive hazards in Ar-Raqqa city between 20 October 2017 and 23 February 2018.



**57,000**

IDPs remain in seven IDP camps in NES as of 10 March



**127,000**

Returns to Deir-ez-Zor governorate since November 2017.



**95,000**

Returns to Ar-Raqqa city since October 2017.



**263,604**

people reached with food assistance in January in Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor governorates



**70,000**

people reached on a daily basis in 56 communities with water trucking services in January



**665,736**

children aged 2-23 months reached with polio vaccine (IPV) immunization round in January



**15,300** girls

and boys under five and 2,400 PLW reached with preventative and therapeutic life-saving nutrition support in January



## Situation Overview

### Ar-Raqqa Governorate

As of 12 March 2018 more than 95,000 people are estimated to have returned to Ar-Raqqa city since October 2017. The local administration anticipates that substantial numbers of people will continue to return, despite the high level of explosive hazard contamination and the limited services available in the heavily damaged city. A UN humanitarian

mission is awaiting government authorization to immediately deploy to Raqqa city for assessments of security and needs.

Extensive explosive hazard contamination continues to hamper safe returns and prevent a robust humanitarian response in the city. Despite reports of increasing returns, humanitarian partners continue to stress that conditions for informed, safe, and dignified returns in the city are still not in place. Among those trying to return home, more than 658 have been injured and 130 were killed by explosive hazards since last October. This does not include US-led Coalition numbers or deaths that occurred after patients were referred to hospitals. On average, since January 2018 approximately 20-25 blast wounded incidents occur per week in Ar-Raqqa City. The number of children, especially boys, among the victims has increased in February. This could be explained by warmer weather and the increase of children playing outside, in the rubble and other unsafe areas.

Medical and other essential services remain limited in Ar-Raqqa city. Reports indicate that one small health clinic and one maternity hospital are providing limited health services within the city. Treatment for common illnesses and non-communicable disease care are the most common health needs reported. These two health facilities are unable to meet growing health needs in Ar-Raqqa city and the restoration of hospitals will take some time. As a result, community level health services remain the immediate priority, particularly in neighborhoods with growing populations of returning residents for routine and emergency care.

While returnees consistently rank access to safe drinking water as a priority need, informal water trucking continues to provide water to households across the city. Humanitarian partners continue to truck safe, treated water to residents in western neighborhoods of Raqqa; however, informal water trucking is rampant, with hundreds of trucks filling up daily from unregulated points along the Euphrates River. There are serious concerns that the water distributed through informal channels is unsafe for consumption. Water treatment and testing is disorganized and sporadic across the city. Currently, the only access to networked water is in the Mishlab neighborhood, which receives four to six hours of water from the Maslak station. Operations and maintenance support has already begun at the Raqqa main pumping station to prepare for refurbishment and to identify the blockages in the network. Electricity network repairs are also planned for the Ar-Raqqa main pumping station.

Rising tensions have been reported in Ar-Raqqa governorate due to the compulsory conscription launched by SDF and a 100 per cent decrease of the monthly compensation given to the family of fighters killed on the battlefield (from SYP 80,000 to SYP 40,000). Unconfirmed reports indicate that the SDF have set up checkpoints on all roads in Ar Raqqa governorate and detained civilians in Al-Tabqa, Tell Abiad and Soluk. In the past two weeks, unconfirmed reports estimate that the SDF have detained more than 1,500 young people from towns and villages in the region with the aim of recruiting them.

These operations could reportedly have an impact on humanitarian workers working in northeast Syria as they are at risk of being taken to serve in the SDF. In late February, humanitarian partners responding in Ar-Raqqa city were asked by the local labour office to provide staff lists. Organizations refusing to provide the requested information were threatened with suspension from operating in the city and its countryside. This circular follows similar actions taken by the local administration in Menbij and other areas over the last two weeks.

## Deir-ez-Zor Governorate

In Deir-ez-Zor governorate, ongoing clashes between Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continued in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. During the reporting period, ISIL retained control over several villages in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor on the eastern side of the Euphrates River, as well as areas along the Syria-Iraq border east of Markada. Small-scale civilian displacement continued due to ongoing hostilities between SDF and ISIL in the southeast and eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor amid displacement towards the SDF-held areas and other areas.

On-going fighting, airstrikes and exchanges of artillery shelling continued during the reporting period in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River leading to more than 98 reported civilian casualties. On 4 February, multiple airstrikes were reported in Al-Bahra town in the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor, which is ISIL-controlled. 40 displaced civilians from Al Safirah city in Aleppo Governorate were reportedly killed, including 20 children and 13 women. On 19 February, 16 people including women and children were reportedly killed and ten others injured due to an airstrike on Hajin town in the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor city. On 21 February, airstrikes reportedly struck an IDP site located between Susat and Shafa, in Susat sub-district in Abukamal, in southern rural Deir-ez-Zor, which is under ISIL control. As a result, at least 16 civilians were killed and several others injured, many of whom were women and children. On 25 February, at least 24 people were reportedly killed and many more wounded when airstrikes on the Dharet Al-Allouni area in eastern rural Deir-Ez-Zor governorate reportedly hit an informal IDP gathering.

At the same time, explosive hazards contamination continues to hamper humanitarian access and poses a serious threat to the returning population. An estimated 30 people were reportedly killed and 21 injured by explosive hazards during the reporting period. With very limited explosive hazards surveys conducted by humanitarian mine action organizations, no detailed information is currently available on actual levels of contamination in areas of return and on the standard followed by non-humanitarian mine action actors in the clearance process in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, which may not be in line with humanitarian standards. Meanwhile, avoiding the creation of push and pull factors will be key to uphold the freedom of movement of IDPs as well as the voluntary and informed nature of returns. These dynamics remain highly fluid and require continued follow-up.

More than 137,000 people are estimated to have returned to western areas in Deir-ez-Zor governorate since November 2017. The figure includes nearly 14,400 households who returned to Deir-ez-Zor city, more than 5,800 households who returned to Basira, Khasham, Sur, and Tabni sub-districts in Deir-ez-Zor district, as well as approximately 1,600 households who returned to Al Mayadin city and approximately 1,500 households who returned to Abu Kamal city. A recent UN assessment conducted between January 14 and 3 February indicates that population figures in the area may be even higher, with an estimated 140,000 people residing in Deir-ez-Zor city, 40,000 people residing in the governorate's western countryside, and 15,000 people residing in the governorate's eastern countryside. The large-scale return movement is attributed to the improving security situation in addition to the notice given by the Government to public servants to return by 20 January or risk being dismissed. Information from local partners point at great needs by the population including in the formerly besieged areas of the city due to lack of services and particularly specialized services for children, women and girls and persons with disabilities.

Basic services and civilian infrastructure are widely lacking across Deir-ez-Zor city, and the wider governorate, particularly the areas previously affected by active hostilities. Priority humanitarian needs include health, WASH and protection services, particularly for persons with specific needs. In the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor governorate under GoS control, returnees reported that medical services and pharmacies are unavailable. People have to travel to Deir-ez-Zor city to receive medical care and buy medicine. Despite high levels of pollution, the Euphrates river remains the only source of water for many towns in the governorate. Most of the 115 purification stations along both sides of the river are out of service or only partially functional due to power outages and lack of fuel for the station's generators. Residents reported purchasing water from mobile water tanks (1,500 SYP for 200 liters).

UN assessments conducted between January 14 and February 3 noted that the availability of food in Deir-ez-Zor city and the western countryside is adequate; however, periodic bread shortages have occurred as a result of population increases. The REACH sub-district profile of Deir-ez-Zor governorate also indicate that while markets are functioning, bakeries across the governorate are not functioning and access to bread is a major challenge. Initial findings from a WFP assessment mission to Deir-ez-Zor city in late February revealed a slight improvement in the food security situation of the city. Prices are relatively lower than those during the siege and the market exhibited a modest selection of basic commodities and produce. However, the prices of staple items remain high for many vulnerable families including returnees who have exhausted their assets and cannot afford paying rent. The majority of people in the city depend mostly on humanitarian assistance and the number of people reliant on humanitarian assistance has increased due to returnees.

In Deir-ez-Zor city, the majority of streets of several neighborhoods remain closed and largely inaccessible due to the accumulated rubble. Rubble removal has cleared some main roads between neighbourhoods. Areas that have been affected by conflict, including in the urban perimeter of the city, are also at high risk of being contaminated with explosive hazards, representing a potential threat to civilians to these areas. Neighborhoods formerly under ISIL control have high levels of destruction and damage. Rubble removal is a high priority to facilitate movement within and outside city, where several bridges are reportedly destroyed. Reports indicate that on average more than 60 per cent of the city is damaged and the lack of available shelter combined with the increased population in Deir-ez-Zor city has led to inflated rent prices.

Pressure on available services (water, electricity, health, education, markets, bakeries) is also increasing. There is limited access to water in the city, with only two sections of the city receiving water via a pumping station for five hours per day, two days per week. Civilians in upper and lower Baqras in northern Mayadeen District also lack access to safe drinking water due to damage to the local water station. People reportedly purchase unsafe trucked water from the Euphrates River without any chlorination process, which reportedly causes diarrhea cases among children. Extensive water contamination has been reported. Furthermore, the current level of demand for medical support surpasses the capacity of the three health facilities serving the area.



## Protection

While displacement trends remain relatively stable from the height of the past months, limited arrivals to the various IDP sites – largely women and children - are still recorded from the areas in the southeast and east of Deir-ez-Zor, particularly Abu Kamal. Return continues to be presented by the camp authorities as a viable option while movements are still occurring from several IDP sites to SDF controlled areas of Deir-ez-Zor. However, the attitude of some of the IDP families in the sites seem to be cautious and based on information received from areas of return on conditions of safety and security as well as infrastructures and availability of accommodations. Consultations in Mabrouka IDP site, for instance, have revealed that while the majority of IDPs intend to return to their areas of origin located in Ar-Raqqa or Deir-ez-Zor, this was not realistically foreseen before July onwards, if current circumstances persist. Consultations with IDPs are ongoing in other sites.

While displacement have decreased, the overall protection situation in the numerous IDP sites remains challenging. Several sites are still above their absorption capacity, and conditions remains dire, with services and capacity of actors still below the needs and sufficient to address protection risks. More interventions and sensitization is needed to improve the gender-sensitive character of infrastructure and facilities, particularly wash facilities - to deter situations of harassment, fear of violence against women and girls, including sexual violence. Challenges to address prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV) cases are evident, including linked to access, capacity of staff on the ground, and the general socio-cultural environment not conducive to reporting and fueling stigma vis-à-vis survivors.

GBV concerns are also reported outside of IDP sites. A two-week long GBV rapid needs assessment was conducted by a protection partner in Tabqa city and surrounding areas through focus group discussions of women ranging in age from 14-66 (4 in total) and interviews (102 women and 15 men interviewed, including local entities, organizational workers and community leaders). 78 per cent of respondents were IDPs. Key findings highlighted more limited access to humanitarian assistance for women. While the most reported common forms of women finding ways to earn a living was through teaching, working for a local entity or doing domestic work, begging, and providing sexual services was also stated as a means by some women respondents. Women stated they are able to move outside the community, however, the majority indicated that they would do so in groups or with a male chaperone. 60 per cent of respondents stated that the biggest concern for women and girls was sexual assault, while 36 per cent stated that the biggest concern was domestic violence.

The handling of confiscated documentation by the site administration has reportedly improved, also thanks to the efforts of the protection teams. In Areesha site, where constraints and inefficiencies had been reported in the past, there is evidence that a better archiving system has been put in place by the site administration, with documents stored according to camp blocks and location of the IDPs. The confiscation policy remains nonetheless a serious concern. In the best case it hinders further departures, or return movements; in the worst case, IDPs may leave the sites to move to onwards destinations in the country without documentation, exposing them to possible security risk. Considering that many IDP families may have already members lacking Syrian personal documentation due to their prolonged residence in ISIL controlled areas, the further loss of official forms of documentation due to confiscation aggravates the situation.

The situation of children in northeast Syria remains of concern. Recruitment, military training and use of girls and boys is reportedly continuing underscoring the urgency of advocacy with responsible parties to immediately halt recruitment and use of girls and boys. Sharp increase in the number of foreign families in IDP camps was observed during the reporting period and the need to ensure protection and access to women and children with alleged family ties to suspected ISIL fighters remains paramount.

During the month in review, protection actors have continued to provide services to the IDP sites and host communities, particularly through mobile activities. Changes in bureaucratic requirements that might lead to a halting of assistance and services in the IDP sites, including much needed protection and health services, was therefore raising concern. While the situation seems to have temporarily improved, the importance of continuous presence is critical to build confidence and trust with the population, reinforce coordination amongst humanitarian actors and strengthen referrals.

Explosive hazards contamination remains a major protection concern, which continues to hamper humanitarian access, the ability to conduct assessments and challenges the principle of safe return in both Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. The reported increase of blast wounds in Ar-Raqqa city highlights the risks of physical safety around return movements of the civilian population. Based on the adopted policy on the return to Ar-Raqqa city, protection actors supported the elaboration of key messages for the humanitarian community when interacting with the population in the sites, related to safety and the challenges in providing available assistance.

Humanitarian mine action efforts also continue in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates, through the deployment of an integrated mine action response, which includes: 1) Risk education delivered to vulnerable population; 2)

Limited emergency survey, marking and clearance of hazardous areas identified by humanitarian partners, local communities and local authorities across accessible areas. Clearance and survey activities is highly prioritized by the humanitarian community as a precondition for the safe return of the population; 3) NGO staff members are receiving explosive hazards risk education training and training of trainers.



## Access

During February, UN agencies transported humanitarian supplies by road to Qamishli via 15 trucks (2 UNICEF; 6 UNHCR; 7 WFP) from Damascus and Tartous. During the same period, UN agencies transported humanitarian supplies by road to Deir-ez-Zor via 4 trucks (3 UNICEF; 1 WHO) from Damascus. Organizations were able to deliver assistance to Qamishli during the month of February.

In February, WHO airlifted 17 tons of medical supplies to Al-Hassakeh governorate in response to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) and critically ill patients in northeast Syria. The shipment contains enough supplies to treat at least 380,000 people, including those wounded as a result of the ongoing conflict. In addition, 14 tons of life-saving antibiotics, emergency medical kits, medicines, and other medical supplies were dispatched to Deir-ez-Zor governorate to mitigate critical shortages in the governorate's overstretched health facilities, to treat more than 303,000 ill or wounded civilians.

The first pilot convoy of eight trucks successfully crossed Yaroubiah crossing on 7 and 8 March. The convoy brought needed health and nutritional supplies for up to 40,000 beneficiaries. The future use of the Yaroubiah crossing will be guided by the following principles: (1) UNSCR 2393 provides the legal framework for the use of Yaroubiah; (2) every effort should be made to support ongoing response efforts to NES from within Syria (through the existing response modalities); the use of an additional modality should be complementary to existing modalities and not affect negatively those existing modalities; and (3) a recognition that its application should be based solely on an analysis of needs, capacity and the response gaps.

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