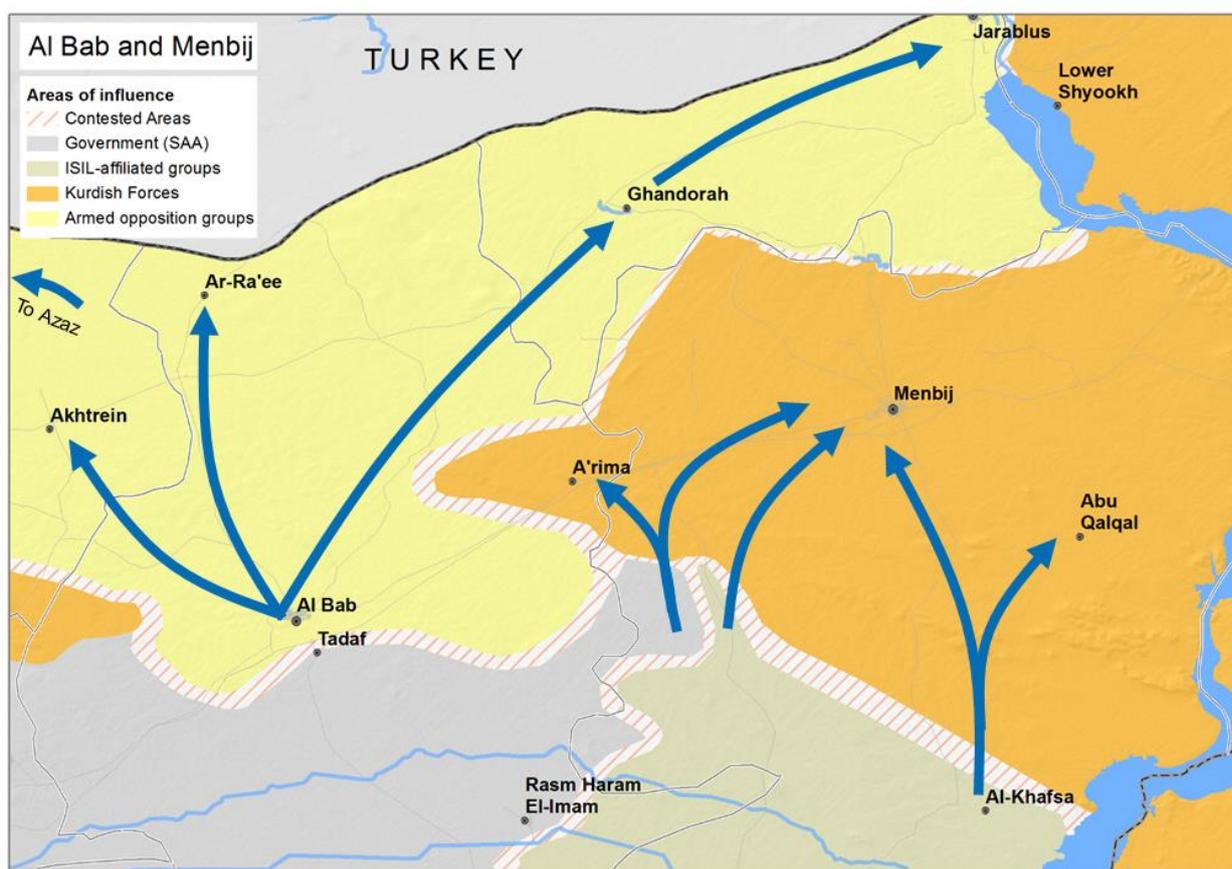


Highlights

- While fighting to take Al Bab city ended on 23 February with NSAGs associated with the Euphrates Shield taking over the city, hostilities to the east of Al-Bab city intensified on 25 February causing the displacement of more than 26,000 people.
- A total of almost 66,000 people were displaced in recent fighting. This includes nearly 40,000 people from Al-Bab city and nearby Tadef town, as well as, 26,000 people from communities to the east of Al-Bab city.
- The high contamination of UXO/IEDs in Al-Bab city is one of the main challenges facing returning civilians and humanitarians trying to respond.
- With the situation on the ground remaining unstable, humanitarian priorities include assurances by all parties for freedom of movement for civilians, the facilitation of civilian demining activities and unfettered access for humanitarian agencies and partners.

The below map illustrates movement of IDPs and the areas of influence in the eastern countryside of Aleppo:



Situation Overview

In November 2016, under the banner of “Euphrates Shield”, fighting between non-state armed groups (NSAGs) associated with the Euphrates Shield and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) commenced in and around Al-Bab city. The hostilities later decreased, only to proliferate again during the beginning of February 2017. On 23 February, the NSAGs associated with the Euphrates Shield announced that they have full control over Al-Bab city as well as the nearby towns of Qabasin and Bazagha.

Prior to the takeover of Al-Bab city by NSAGs, concerns were raised regarding the safety of an estimated 5,000 civilians who were believed to be trapped in the city. It is understood that some of these civilians were evacuated by NSAGs during the last days of the offensive.

On 24 February, hostilities between Government of Syria forces and ISIL in the Tedef town erupted, resulting in the takeover of the aforementioned town by the former. The hostilities caused the displacement of an estimated 2,000 people, all of whom reportedly fled northwards.

As ISIL retreats, the threat of attacks remains high. On 24 February, a car bomb exploded in Sosyan village north of Al-Bab city reportedly claimed the lives of at least 73 people and wounded 125. Reportedly, the majority of the civilians killed were IDPs from Al-Bab city, who were travelling through Sosyan village at the time on their way back to Al Bab city.

How soon humanitarian organizations will have access to Al-Bab city and surrounding communities remains to be seen. Aside from the IED/UXO contamination in town, there are no reported constraints to physical access to the affected population, especially as the Bab Al-Salam border crossing point is open. At present, there is no local council active in Al-Bab, a members of that council are based in Turkey and operate the council from there.

Since 25 February, to the east of Al-Bab city, hostilities between different parties to the conflict have intensified. Fighting continues between NASGs under the Euphrates Shield banner and ISIL; while at the same time, Government of Syria forces launched an offensive against ISIL in southern rural Menbij and Al-Khafsa sub-district. As a result, thousands of civilians were displaced in A'rima, Menbij and Al-Khafsa sub-districts.

Given the recent advances Government of Syria forces have made, an overland route between Government of Syria held areas in Aleppo governorate and Syrian Democratic Forces held areas in Menbij and northeastern Syria might open up, potentially making it possible to deliver humanitarian supplies using this route in the coming months.

Humanitarian Needs and Response

The Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster reported that 39,766 people were displaced from Al-Bab city since the start of the hostilities in November 2016. Of these, 26,798 were displaced during February due to the escalation in violence. A significant number of IDPs (14,420 people) remained in Al-Bab sub-district, whereas 3,019 fled to A'zaz sub-district; 2,950 to Suran sub-district; 2,625 to Mare; 2,100 to Aghtrin; 2,800 to Ar-Raee; 3,787 to Ghandorah; 5,300 to Jarablus; 2,022 to Menbij and 444 to Abu Qalqal. Small numbers of IDPs were also reported to have reached Afrin district, Idlib countryside and the southern countryside of Aleppo governorate.

Displacement was reported in A'rima sub-district due to hostilities between Euphrates Shield associated NSAGs and ISIL, and between Government of Syria forces and ISIL. It is estimated that 9,900 people were displaced within the sub-district and to nearby sub-districts such as Menbij.

Humanitarian sources report that the ongoing hostilities between Government of Syria forces and ISIL in southern rural Menbij and Al-Khafsa sub-district have resulted in the displacement of at least 16,200 people. Of note is that the Al-Khafsa sub-district is home to the main water pumping station for the Aleppo governorate, which has been out of service since 15 January, affecting 1.8 million people in Aleppo city and parts of the eastern countryside of Aleppo. The takeover of the Al-Khafsa water station by Government of Syria forces could help reactivate it and bring water back to the affected population. The majority of the 16,200 IDPs fled to nearby communities within the same sub-district, with around 1,000 people reportedly fleeing to Abu Qalqal sub-district.

The humanitarian response to the affected areas depends on improved access. With regards to IDPs from Al-Bab city, humanitarian partners in sub-districts that received those IDPs are in the process of carrying out rapid assessments to plan out the response. For example, WFP is planning to cover 1,200 IDP families from Al-Bab to A'zaz through the provision of ready-to-eat rations and cooked meals, starting from 1 until 5 March. Nutrition partners are planning to work in the rural Al-Bab district. A few partners are planning to provide integrated health and nutrition services including screening and treatment of malnutrition as well as infant and young child feeding counselling. Humanitarian partners from the NFI/Shelter Cluster distributed 83,796 non-food items and 3,412 shelter items in several nearby sub-districts such as A'zaz, Aghtrin, Al-Bab, Ar-Raee, Ghandorah and Jarablus, some of which were distributed to the IDPs from Al-Bab city. One potential constraint to response is that fuel trade routes might be disrupted due to the change in the areas of control around Al-Bab city. This may exacerbate the needs and impact the ability of humanitarians to respond.

In terms of the safe return of civilians and the establishment of humanitarian services, one of the main issues in Al-Bab city and nearby areas is the presence of IEDs and UXOs. Given the experiences of Menbij and Ain Al-Arab, ISIL is known to leave large numbers of IEDs prior to their withdrawal from an area. As such the current environment is not considered conducive for the safe return of civilians and for the work of humanitarians. Media reports indicate that Euphrates Shield associated NSAGs have already started mine clearance operations in the city.

The destruction of infrastructure during the fighting is likely to cause a serious lack of essential services in Al-Bab city for months to come. The rehabilitation of infrastructure is crucial as it ensures essential services and dignified living conditions for returning civilians. At present, they will need to travel long distances to obtain services such as health and water and sanitation. Humanitarian partners are ready to conduct rapid assessments and begin their response as soon as the environment is conducive.

Overall, the humanitarian response in these areas remains challenging. Partners operating in Menbij district rely on supplies purchased from the local markets in Menbij and Ain Al-Arab districts, or are imported from Iraq. This makes a comprehensive response challenging, particularly in areas newly accessible following their takeover from ISIL.

With the situation on the ground being unstable, it is of great importance that, unless a direct threat to their safety is present, the freedom of movement for civilians is respected by authorities on the ground. Facilitation of civilian demining activities remains a priority followed by unfettered access for humanitarian agencies.

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