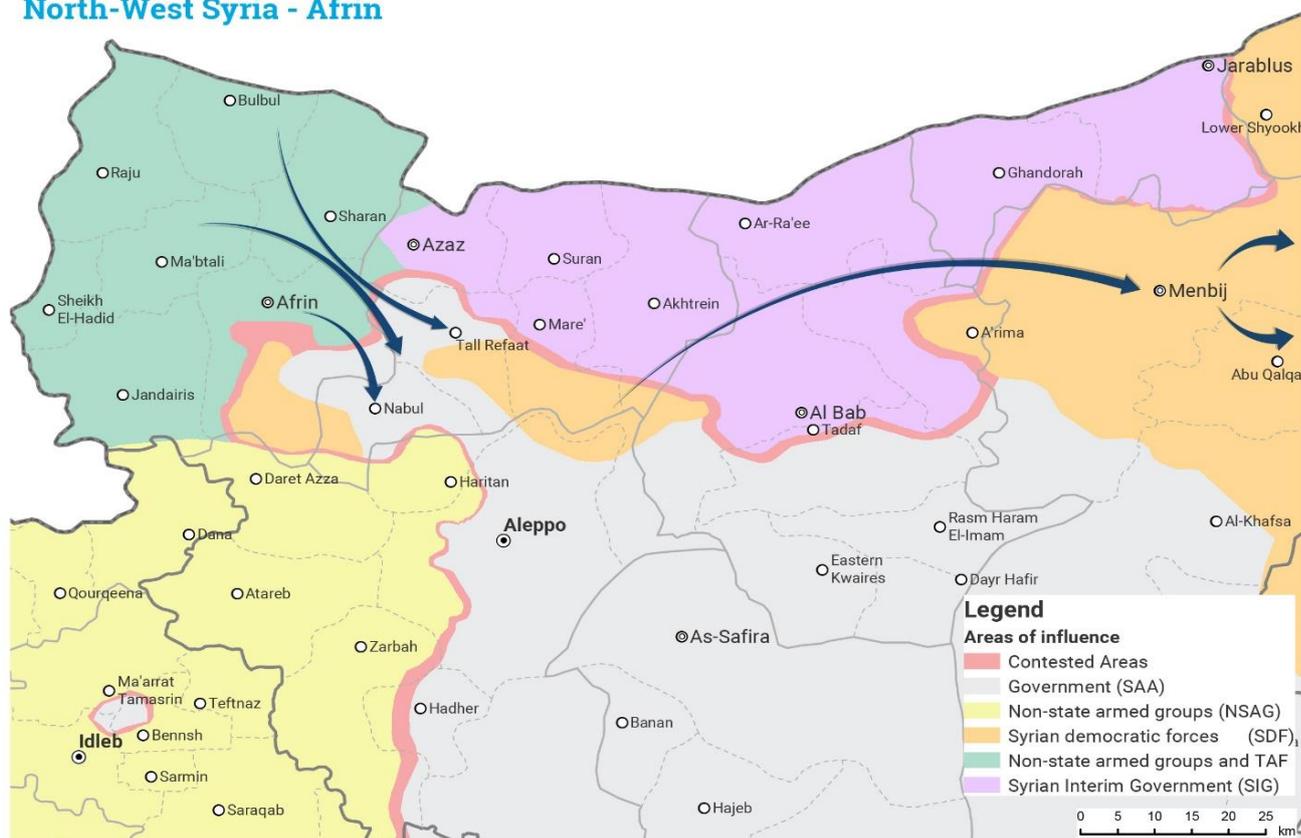


Highlights

- An estimated 98,000 people were displaced from Afrin district: 75,000 people were displaced to Tall Refaat sub-district, 15,500 to Nabul town and 8,500 to Zahraa town.
- The massive influx of IDPs is putting a strain on host communities, which are already overwhelmed. All 16 schools in Tall Refaat are being used as IDP shelters. As a result, no education taking place.
- UN teams observed that the majority of IDPs are women, children, and elderly people. Some IDPs said that it took them 36 hours to reach the sub-district. Serious gaps in the WASH sector have been reported, putting the displaced population at risk of contracting different diseases. Provision of health services in Tall Refaat sub-district is very limited with only one health point providing services.
- On 18 March, Turkish Armed Forces and allied Free Syrian Army factions established control over approximately 90% of Afrin district including Afrin city following 59 days of fighting.
- The United Nations has received worrying reports of threats of violence and arbitrary arrest against civilians, as well as looting of civilian property, by Syria participants to the conflict in Afrin city. These reports are deeply concerning. The UN demands that the parties to the conflict to respect their obligation under International Humanitarian Law and human rights law.

North-West Syria - Afrin



Situation Overview

On 18 March, Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and allied Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions exerted control over Afrin city, following the withdrawal of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from the city. Hostilities in the district began on 20 January when Turkish officials announced the beginning of Operation Olive Branch. Throughout the past 59 days, TAF and FSA factions established control over approximately 90% of the areas that were previously under the control of SDF in Afrin district, with few communities to the south of Afrin town remaining under the control of SDF.

The initial stages of the military operations in Afrin district caused tens of thousands of people to displace to Afrin city and surrounding communities. The then local authorities in the district imposed restrictions on the movement of civilians out of Afrin district, forcing some civilians to use unofficial means to flee the violence in their communities. With hostilities moving closer to the central part of the district around the middle of March, these restrictions relaxed and thousands of civilians fled. It is currently estimated that 98,000 people were displaced from the district: 75,000 people displaced to Tall Refaat sub-district, 15,500 to Nabul town and 8,500 to Zahraa town. Additionally, a few thousand people reportedly reached SDF-held areas in Menbij district, and 150 families reportedly reached Al-Hasakeh governorate, where they are being hosted at Norwoz camp in Al-Malikeyyeh sub-district. Based on these estimates, it is possible there are some 50,000 to 70,000 people who remained in Afrin city.

The massive influx of IDPs out of Afrin is putting a strain on the nearby host communities, which are already overwhelmed. All 16 schools in Tall Refaat sub-district are being used as IDP shelters resulting in no education taking place. Based on a field visit to Tall Refaat sub-district on 17 March, UN teams observed that the majority of IDPs are women, children, and elderly people. Some IDPs said that it took them 36 hours to reach the sub-district. Serious gaps in the WASH sector have been reported, putting the displaced population at risk of contracting different diseases. Provision of health services in Tall Refaat sub-district is very limited with only one health point providing services. Referrals could only take place to a private hospital in Zahraa town, which does not offer free services. In Nabul town, IDPs are mostly staying with the host community but the recent wave is being accommodated in warehouses and mosques. In Zahraa town, most IDPs are being accommodated in mosques or renting houses. Should more IDPs arrive, there is high likelihood that schools in both towns will be turned into shelters.

With hostilities in Afrin district reducing, the fuel supply routes to north-western Syria are expected to be reopened soon. Local sources in north-western Syria already reported that commercial trucks passing through Afrin district reached north-western Syria for the first time since 20 January. The disruption of the fuel supply routes has had significant impact on the operations of humanitarian organizations in Idlib governorate and adjacent NSAG held areas, with few organizations reportedly suspending some activities.

Following the change in control that took place on 18 March, there have been worrying reports of threats of violence and arbitrary arrest being carried out against civilians by FSA members, as well as looting of civilian property, emerged from Afrin city. The UN views these reports with utmost concern and demands the parties to the conflict to respect their obligation under International Humanitarian Law and human rights law. On 19 March, some FSA factions issued orders preventing their fighters from entering Afrin city without an official permission, to curb such misconduct.

Challenges and Humanitarian Response

Information on the conditions of people in Afrin is scarce, and the few partners operating in the area are attempting to respond. The situation remains fluid, and it is expected that in the coming days that as hostilities lessen in the rural areas of Afrin district, people are expected to want return. In Afrin city, local media sources reported few incidents of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) detonating and causing casualties in Afrin city. The level of contamination in the city remains unknown. Anecdotal information indicates that the contamination is limited to the buildings which were being used by Kurdish authorities in the city. Following reports of looting of civilian property in Afrin city, local sources from Afrin district that were displaced to Tall Refaat sub-district expressed hesitance about going back to the city. Civilians reportedly fear being perceived as affiliated by the SDF, which might subject them to detention or persecution. It is essential that parties to the conflict ensure the protection of civilians who remained in Afrin district and those who are wishing to return.

The water situation in Afrin city remains an issue of concern. Water shortages in Afrin city were reported in the beginning of March following the destruction of a water pumping station in Jandairis sub-district, and the change in control that happened at the '17th of April (Midanki) Dam', north-east of Afrin city. Prior to the takeover of Afrin city on 18 March, civilians resorted to using water from the nearby boreholes, which was not being chlorinated. The restoration of potable water through the networks remains a major priority to ensure that civilians residing in the city have sufficient access to potable water and are not at the risk of contracting waterborne diseases.

With regards to health services, reports indicate that the majority of the city's medical staff were among the displaced population to the nearby communities. Presently, local sources report that a private hospital in the western part of the city is still operational. A small number of doctors also remain present in the city. The lack of health professionals indicates the presence of a large gap in the health sector, which warrants adequate response.

The UN is providing people in need in Tall Refaat sub-district, as well as Nabul and Zahraa towns with food, health, nutrition, WASH, protection services and NFIs. Additional aid is already in the pipeline to scale up the response. UN aid delivered to date include 6,015 ready to eat rations and 1,000 bundles of bread (daily) to Zahraa and Nabul, medical supplies for 29,000 in Zahraa and Nabul towns, health supplies sufficient for 33,700 beneficiaries delivered to the Afrin department of health, supplies for 6,500 under five children and pregnant and lactating women in Afrin

city, 250,000 liters of water provided per day through water trucking in Afrin city neighborhoods, a child friendly space and community center (services for child protection, psycho-social support and gender-based violence) in Zahraa and Nabul and NFI kits, winterization items and clothing kits for thousands of people in Tal Refaat, Nabul and Zahraa. In Tall Refaat sub-district, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is providing primary health care services through two mobile teams. Access to nutrition services is extremely limited. Anecdotal evidence shows malnutrition is a concern, but no assessment has been done yet. SARC is distributing high energy biscuits to children under five and pregnant and lactating women. No cases of unaccompanied children have so far been reported; however, many children are being looked after by extended family members. Children with disabilities are not receiving the services they need.

In areas which were recently taken by the Olive Branch forces, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) distributed 500 food baskets; 19,000 ready-to-eat meals; 500 hygiene kits; 250 blankets; 60 mattresses; 1,083 clothing and 918 non-food items in 24 locations across Afrin district, between 15 February and 15 March. Main observations by the TRC indicate that the main needs are food and nutrition supplies, non-food items (specifically baby diapers), and hygiene kits.

The UN stands ready to deliver multi-sectoral assistance to 50,000 IDPs in Afrin and Tall Refaat sub-district, through the cross-line modality, once approvals and security guarantees are provided by all parties to the conflict. Given the change in control in Afrin district, it is likely that cross-line actors will not be able to access the parts of Afrin district that came under the control of TAF and FSA factions. Needs in these areas will have to be met through the cross-border modality. Historically, the humanitarian footprint of cross-border actors in Afrin district has been small; however, this is expected to change in the near future, as a number of Syrian NGOs, who are based in Turkey, are mobilizing resources to respond to the needs in the district.

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