



SYRIA SOLUTIONS ANALYSIS:

AN ASSESSMENT OF DURABLE SOLUTIONS CONDITIONS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MARCH 2022

BACKGROUND

Syria is the largest forced displacement crisis worldwide, with 13.5 million Syrians displaced over the past decade of conflict. At the end of 2020, **6.7 million Syrians were internally displaced while 6.8 million were living abroad as refugees.**¹ UNHCR estimates only **279,684 Syrian refugees voluntarily returned** to Syria between 2016 and April 2021.² According to the United Nations, currently 14.6 million Syrians inside the country are in need of humanitarian assistance.³

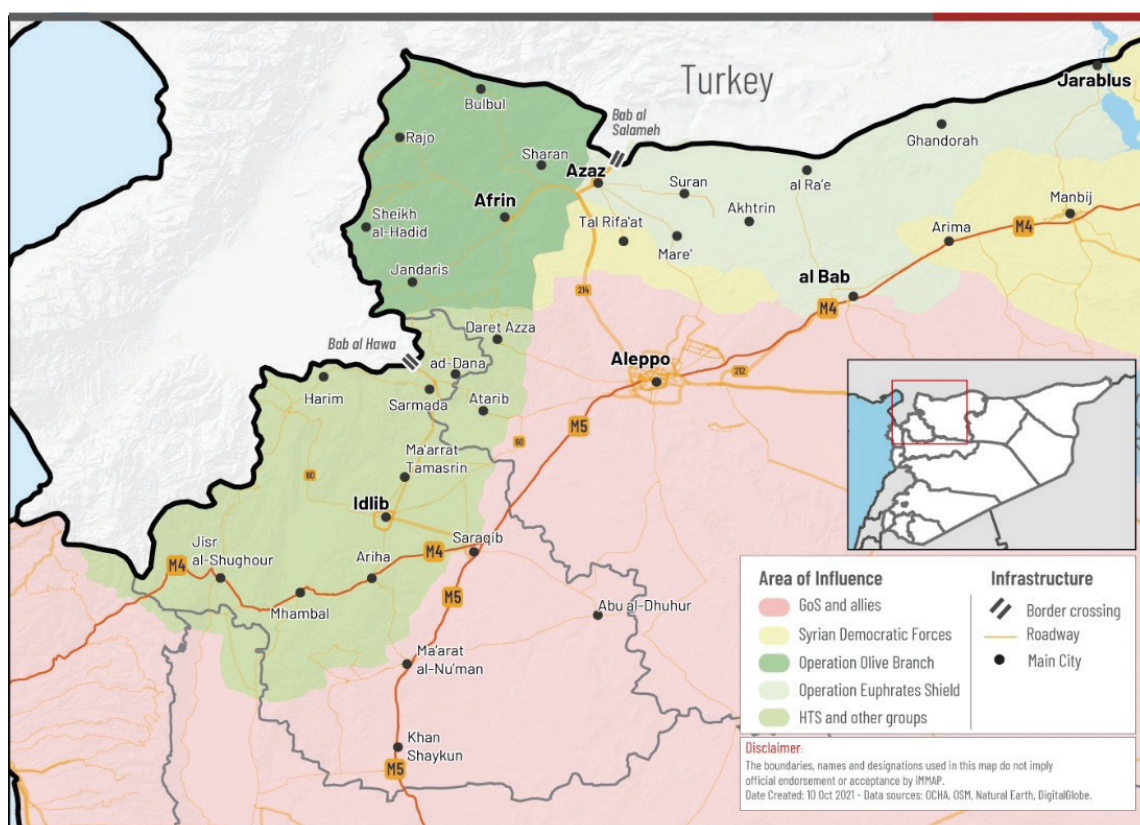
Northwest Syria (NWS), which today encompasses a geographic area spanning most of Idlib Governorate, small segments of Hama and Latakia Governorates, and much of northern Aleppo Governorate, has been a continuous **center of hostilities** since the outset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Syrian opposition groups first took control of the area in 2012, and control over the region has been contested ever since. Today, NWS remains the last major stronghold for opposition groups, dominated by Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham (HTS) in Idlib and surrounding areas.

1 UNCHR. Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2020. June 2021.

2 UNHCR. Registered Syrian Refugees in Host Countries: Durable Solutions. April 2021.

3 OCHA. Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic. February 2022.

Figure 1: Areas of political and military influence in Northwest Syria



Mass displacements to, from, and within NWS have occurred at multiple points throughout the conflict.⁴ From 2012 to 2016, fighting for control of Aleppo city and its environs resulted in multiple rounds of displacement both in the region and to neighboring Turkey.⁵ In 2014, the declaration of the ISIS “caliphate” and subsequent international anti-ISIS operations impacted parts of NWS as well as neighboring Northeast Syria (NES).⁶ Further, the Turkish and Turkish-backed offensive Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), which took place from 2016 to 2017, followed by Operation Olive Branch (OOB) in 2018, brought significant portions of NWS under Turkish or Turkish-backed opposition control, which in some cases prompted further displacement.⁷

In 2018, facing ongoing conflict in and around Idlib Governorate, the Government of Russia initiated several rounds of negotiations aimed at forming a de-escalation agreement. These negotiations ultimately failed, resulting in resumed Russian and Government of Syria (GoS) aerial offensives against opposition targets, followed by a large-scale GoS-led offensive in April 2019. This offensive alone displaced more than 940,000 persons⁸ before a ceasefire was reached on March 5, 2020.

⁹ The most significant hostilities since the ceasefire began in June 2021, contributing to renewed displacement dynamics and ongoing active conflict. This in turn prompted new displacement.¹⁰ In total, as of late 2021, an **estimated 2.8 million IDPs reside in NWS** – the largest number of displaced persons in the country.¹¹

4 United States Institute of Peace, M. Yacoubian. Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad. January 2021.

5 Reuters. Timeline: The battle for Aleppo. December 2016.

6 Reuters. Timeline: Syria conflict from pro-democracy protests to a flashpoint of great power rivalry. February 2020.

7 Reuters. Timeline: Turkey’s military operations in Iraq and Syria. October 2019.

8 International Crisis Group. Idlib Between September 2015 and May 2020: A Timeline. May 2020.

9 Ibid.

10 UNOCHA. Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria and RAATA, Situation Report. June 2021.

11 UNOCHA. Syrian Arab Republic: Developments in Northwest Syria and RAATA Situation Report, July 2021. August 2021.

This report is the third in a series seeking to illuminate conditions for IDPs, and displacement-affected communities as a whole, in order to build a durable solutions evidence base inside Syria, and to support actors seeking to expand durable solutions opportunities in the country.¹² It is intended as a reference document that can serve as a basis for future durable solutions thinking, including research, advocacy, or the incorporation of durable solutions elements into existing programming where relevant.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS CONDITIONS AND PROSPECTS

Displaced persons have the right to pursue durable solutions to their displacement. Typically, durable solutions for IDPs encompass sustainable *return* and reintegration into one's home community, sustainable *local integration* into one's community of residence, or voluntary *relocation* and subsequent integration into a new community. **The current political and conflict context in NWS severely restricts, and in many cases completely cuts off, IDP opportunities to pursue one of these durable solutions pathways.** As demonstrated throughout the report, residents of the region who hail from elsewhere in Syria – particularly government-held areas – have few to no opportunities to return home. A report on IDP intentions in NWS mentioned that 78% of IDPs wanted to remain in their current location and only a mere 3% stated they wanted to return to their place of origin.¹³ Furthermore, given the dire humanitarian conditions in NWS, the opportunities for sustainable local integration for the large number IDPs are very slim.

Local integration prospects in NWS are also highly restricted due to ongoing conflict, economic collapse, destruction of local infrastructure, the fracturing of community networks, and other factors outlined in this report. Conflict-related violence in particular continues to be a major driver of ongoing displacements, as well as contributing to the further **deterioration of physical, psycho-social, material, and legal safety conditions across the region.** The core finding of this report is that **conditions have worsened across virtually all these categories of safety,** and that all residents of NWS face significant challenges to achieving essential protection and access to basic services. In the absence of an inclusive and peaceful political solution for this region and with an escalating humanitarian crisis, these challenges are unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.

Currently, humanitarian assistance provided cross-border is a critical lifeline that helps to keep conditions in NWS from sliding even further into crisis. This assistance, which is provided by Syrian NGOs, civil society organizations and international agencies, helps to partially meet the basic needs of vulnerable displaced and non-displaced Syrians. **In light of the challenges to effectively work on and advance prospects for future durable solutions, it is imperative that concrete steps are taken to maintain and improve the humanitarian response in NWS. This requires ensuring that displacement-related vulnerabilities do not become further entrenched and exerting pressure on all parties in the conflict to de-escalate and find a sustainable and inclusive political solution, which could go far in addressing immediate physical safety concerns.** Doing so, at a minimum, could help to ensure that overall conditions do not worsen over time.

12 Other two reports: Whole of Syria Solutions Analysis, Northeast Syria Solutions Analysis. Available from the Durable Solutions Platform upon request.

13 HNAP. Future Intentions of Syrian IDPs: 2021 IDP Report Series. 2021

KEY FINDINGS

This report assesses the status of durable solutions conditions in NWS, including territories in and around Idlib, Afrin and al-Bab. The areas in Idlib Governorate are controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and supported by HTS and other opposition groups. The areas around Afrin and al-Bab are controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) with support from the Turkish-supported opposition (TSO) – these areas are also referred to as OES and OOB. Analysis is conducted across indicators relevant to physical, psycho-social, material, and legal safety as possible with existing data gaps in order to create a shared basis for understanding of current conditions for durable solutions for NWS's people.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

At a minimum, active conflict and other forms of physical safety concerns must be greatly reduced or eliminated for any progress towards durable solutions to take place. Key findings related to physical safety in NWS include:

- June 2020 saw the **most significant conflict escalations in NWS since the March 2020 ceasefire**. As of October 2021, ongoing conflict in NWS includes shelling in the southern Idlib areas of Jabal az-Zawiyyeh, regular clashes along the front lines of the eastern Idlib countryside, security incidents in Afrin, al-Bab, and Azaz as well as clashes along front lines with SDF-controlled Tell Rifa'at area. These have resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, as well as ongoing displacement from these areas.
- The current political and security landscape in NWS, with multiple opposition actors in control of large portions of land, is insecure in the long term. **Further, conflict escalations and the potential for future mass displacement events in NWS remain a significant concern** in the absence of a negotiated solution to the political future of the region.
- **Freedom of movement** concerns vary across areas of control in NWS. Other factors influencing freedom of movement for an individual or household include civil documentation and individualized safety concerns related to factors such as gender, age, and disability. Movement within opposition-controlled areas of the region is generally allowed, with sporadic limitations. However, crossline movement to areas under GoS or Self Administration of Northeast Syria (SANES) control is heavily constrained, with COVID-19 restrictions further limiting crossline movements.
- There is a pervasive **fear of violence** among displaced and non-displaced NWS residents alike. These fears are grounded in the realities of ongoing violence in the region, including recent military offensives and shelling, in addition to unexploded ordnances (UXOs), remaining ISIS cells, kidnapping, and other forms of non-conflict related crime, which remain pressing physical safety concerns in NWS.
- **Gender has a significant impact** on freedom of movement, risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), forced puberty and increased suicide rate among women and girls and other protection risks. Further, women in NWS are less likely to engage in livelihoods and face increased challenges engaging in justice mechanisms. Men further face risks to freedom of movement related to perceived threats.
- **Disability** impacts individuals' physical, psycho-social, and material safety. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) often face social stigma and limitations on their access to essential needs and services. Disability is highly prevalent in NWS, with HTS/opposition-controlled areas having the highest rates of people living with disabilities of any region of Syria.
- Unlike other areas of Syria, **forced conscription is not a major reported concern** in NWS, although it may influence decisions not to return to other areas of Syria.

PSYCHO-SOCIAL SAFETY

Psycho-social safety encompasses a wide range of factors including access to mental health and psycho-social services, community cohesion, and other elements that ensure displaced persons feel safe and capable of pursuing the durable solution of their choosing. Although a lack of data and overall stigma related to topics such as mental health and social cohesion make it difficult to gain a holistic picture of this criterion, available information suggests that:

- There is **no comprehensive understanding of available services** for mental health and other forms of support for psycho-social wellbeing. Some services, largely provided by humanitarian actors, exist for basic social and mental health treatment and support, but are limited in scope and may **be inaccessible to some populations** due to transportation issues, social stigma, and additional factors. Further challenges to service availability are influenced by coordination gaps between relevant actors.
- Although little is known about social networks in NWS, limited mapping initiatives suggest that **social fabrics have been significantly impacted by widespread displacement**, as well as economic challenges and other experiences of war. In some cases, cultural and political differences present a hurdle for longer-term community cohesion.
- **Prospective returnees rely on family, friends, and other informal networks** to receive information on conditions in their prospective area of return, with little reliance on formal sources.

MATERIAL SAFETY

For the material safety elements of durable solutions to be achieved, displaced persons must achieve an “adequate standard of living” that is commensurate with non-displaced community members. This includes access to basic housing, health care, nutrition, water, and other necessary materials for survival, **without limitations or discrimination** based on displacement history. Importantly, across Syria – including NWS – it is often common to see displaced and non-displaced community members experiencing similar material conditions, but these conditions fall far below internationally-recognized thresholds for dignified living. In such cases, durable solutions cannot be considered to be achievable. Other key material safety findings include:

- Programming and research related to material needs in NWS are **well-documented and evidenced**, particularly given the continued concerns that the UN's permission to operate cross border through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing will not be renewed. This recurring uncertainty for UN cross-border operations has posed a considerable threat to elements of material safety across NWS, and a severe reduction in aid would further remove pathways to eventual durable solutions from people's reach.
- NWS has an acute **lack of adequate health services**, although access and provision differ greatly across areas of control and sub-districts. A **lack of trained healthcare professionals**, particularly specialists, severely impacts provision of healthcare in the region, and special or severe cases often rely on medical visas to Turkey for treatment. COVID-19 overwhelmed the region in autumn 2021, with low vaccination rates and an already strained healthcare system contributing to a surge in cases that were not significantly lessened by a temporary lockdown.
- **Shelter is a major concern and a priority need across NWS**, where the majority of IDP settlements are informal and are threatened by seasonal flooding and overcrowding, among other concerns. Issues related to adequate housing affect other sectors, particularly for those living in various IDP sites.
- Electricity access and provision varies by area of control, with heavy reliance on supply from Turkish companies in SIG controlled areas with **extremely limited access** reported.
- **Access to safe drinking water is a major challenge** in NWS, which largely relies on water trucking, with communities vulnerable to disruptions in trucking services. Water prices are increasingly unaffordable across communities, and there have been increased reports of waterborne illnesses in the area.

- Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) programming in NWS has been **limited by perceptions of risk** by humanitarian actors and donors and by **available financial services** in the area, despite preferences for cash reported by communities in the region and across Syria.
- Extensive displacement, shifting military and political control, active armed conflict, and factors such as COVID-19 and ongoing fuel shortages have contributed to an **economic crisis** in NWS, which in turn has contributed to a poverty level above 90% among both working and unemployed individuals.¹⁴
- Due to protracted displacement and economic hardship, many communities have turned to **negative coping strategies** in order to meet their basic needs. Many residents have mentioned borrowing money from family and friends, buying on credit and spending savings. Additionally, child labor has been reported by over 75% of IDP assessed communities to support families through supplemental income and to buy essential goods.¹⁵

LEGAL SAFETY

A legal environment that ensures rights for displaced persons that are commensurate with their non-displaced counterparts is an essential component of durable solutions. This includes access to proper documentation and the ability to participate in relevant legal and governance mechanisms, among other components. Key legal safety findings include:

- The presence of multiple opposition and international actors across the region, coupled with the **absence of political dialogue, reconciliation, and agreements, NWS's status quo leaves the region highly vulnerable** to renewed conflict and mass displacement. Continued lack of political progress and absence of assurances, capacity, and will to ensure conditions that support durable solutions will persist in limiting durable solutions prospects for the vast majority of those displaced to and from NWS.
- **Lack of civil documentation** is a widespread concern in NWS, where a significant portion of the population has lost documents over years of repeated and protracted displacement. Women and children are especially likely to be missing documents, and female headed households, especially divorced and widowed women, face significant challenges in claiming basic rights without adequate documentation.
- **HLP Issues** related to abandoned property, informal settlements, expropriation of land and lack of rental agreements contribute to widespread perceptions of insecure tenure over housing and property. Property disputes over inheritance and ownership are common, with limited mechanisms for consistent resolution, further complicated by unclear land registry procedures.
- **Family separations take place** in NWS, as across Syria, with child separation being of particular concern due to ongoing economic challenges and resulting instances of child abandonment or departure for work opportunities. Although the full scale of this challenge and response is not apparent, large-scale organized efforts to reunite separated families are non-existent, with only small local efforts reported to be working to return abandoned children.
- Displaced persons are frequently **restricted from participation** in local governance structures, and many of the factors influencing their decisions to return are beyond their control, such as security and livelihoods.
- With multiple areas of control and no recognized governmental authorities, **access to justice is extremely limited** in all areas of NWS, with very little transparency in court systems and reported corruption and co-optation by political actors in different areas.

¹⁴ HNAP, UNDP, & NWS ERL Cluster. Livelihoods Situation Analysis in North-west Syria. September 2021.

¹⁵ REACH. [HSOS Northwest Syria: Livelihoods](#). August 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the acute and persistent humanitarian challenges facing Northwest Syria, at this point in time, supporting eventual pathways to durable solutions to displacement means maintaining and expanding the scope and quality of the existing humanitarian response. In doing so, organizations can help to ensure that conditions do not further backslide, and help to build individual, household, and community resilience to conflict that could, over time, lay the foundations of a more targeted durable solutions response. With this in mind, it is recommended that:

Actors supporting displacement-affected communities in NWS take steps to reinforce the existing humanitarian response.

- **Donors should:**

- Ensure the humanitarian response in NWS is funded and that protection remains central in all humanitarian response in NWS, including a specific focus on SGBV interventions.
- Provide longer-term funding that supports resilience and early recovery efforts for all populations to support emerging pathways for material safety, dignified housing and other programs that respond to immediate drivers of ongoing displacement within NWS.
- Together with the humanitarian community, ensure that programming responds both to emergency needs whilst laying the groundwork for more resilient households, communities, and service provision.

- **Humanitarian organizations should:**

- Ensure that programs are designed, implemented, and assessed in a way that provide equitable access to all populations and meaningfully address additional displacement-related vulnerabilities. Indicators from the Syria Solutions Analysis may be utilized to monitor this endeavor.

- **Governing authorities:**

- Ensure the humanitarian community is provided with adequate access to the communities in their areas of control to allow for information and data collection, as well as the necessary procurements for a proper response.

- **Neighboring countries:**

- Neighboring countries like Turkey should keep borders open and provide protection and access to asylum for civilians fleeing conflict and future military offensives. At the moment, Turkey's formal borders remain closed, threatening core protection and safety for IDPs. This should be coupled with an increase in the provision of protection visas provided by third countries.

Actors support local civil society capacity-building for evidence-based durable solutions interventions.

- **Donors should:**

- Expand support to include funding for humanitarian initiatives that also contribute to progress towards durable solutions. These may include, but are not limited to; youth empowerment, legal aid, community cohesion, and resilience initiatives.

- **Humanitarian organizations should:**

- Continue to support programs that, in addition to mitigating the vulnerabilities of displaced persons, also contribute to reducing such vulnerabilities. This includes building the capacity of local humanitarian organizations to deliver programming that meets identified needs.

Actors continue to analyze and advocate for durable solutions opportunities for the populations displaced to, from and within NWS, and support initiatives to link displaced Syrians to these solutions.

- **International and regional actors should:**

- Continue to call for a de-escalation of active violence and a peaceful political solution to the Syrian crisis. These are essential conditions for any meaningful progress towards durable solutions for people in NWS.
- Refrain from promoting the return of Syrian refugees to Syria, including NWS.
- International actors including governments and the UN should work to enact monitoring mechanisms so return movements, conditions in areas of origin and returns can be tracked, and to ensure reliable information is provided to IDPs wishing to return or relocate to areas of origin and or other areas.

- **Humanitarian organizations should:**

- Continue to collectively advocate for a de-escalation in violence, and for a peaceful political solution to the crisis to reduce the most acute physical security risks that communities in NWS face.
- Pursue programming in NWS that, in addition to meeting humanitarian needs, supports resilience and early recovery efforts, and provides displaced Syrians with information to assist in decision-making related to future durable solutions.
- Ensure that programming in other areas of Syria does not undermine the rights of IDPs displaced to NWS, including their property rights, but actively seeks to build protection of these rights for the future, including in Government of Syria controlled areas of the country.

- **International governments and policy makers should:**

- Establish and expand pathways to opportunities in third countries, including educational and labor migration, which could be accessed by some eligible NWS residents.
- Ensure access to all basic services as a priority in Syria and emphasize that this needs to happen by any means and through all modalities including by the renewal of the crossborder resolution and improvement of crossline access.



This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP II) for Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, which is supported by the Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Union, Ireland and Switzerland. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the Durable Solutions Platform and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the RDPP or its donors.