



IMPACT
Civil Society Research
and Development

Socioeconomic Impact of Displacement Waves in Northern Syria

Case study: challenges in daily living for the communities in Afrin district,
Azaz and Albab

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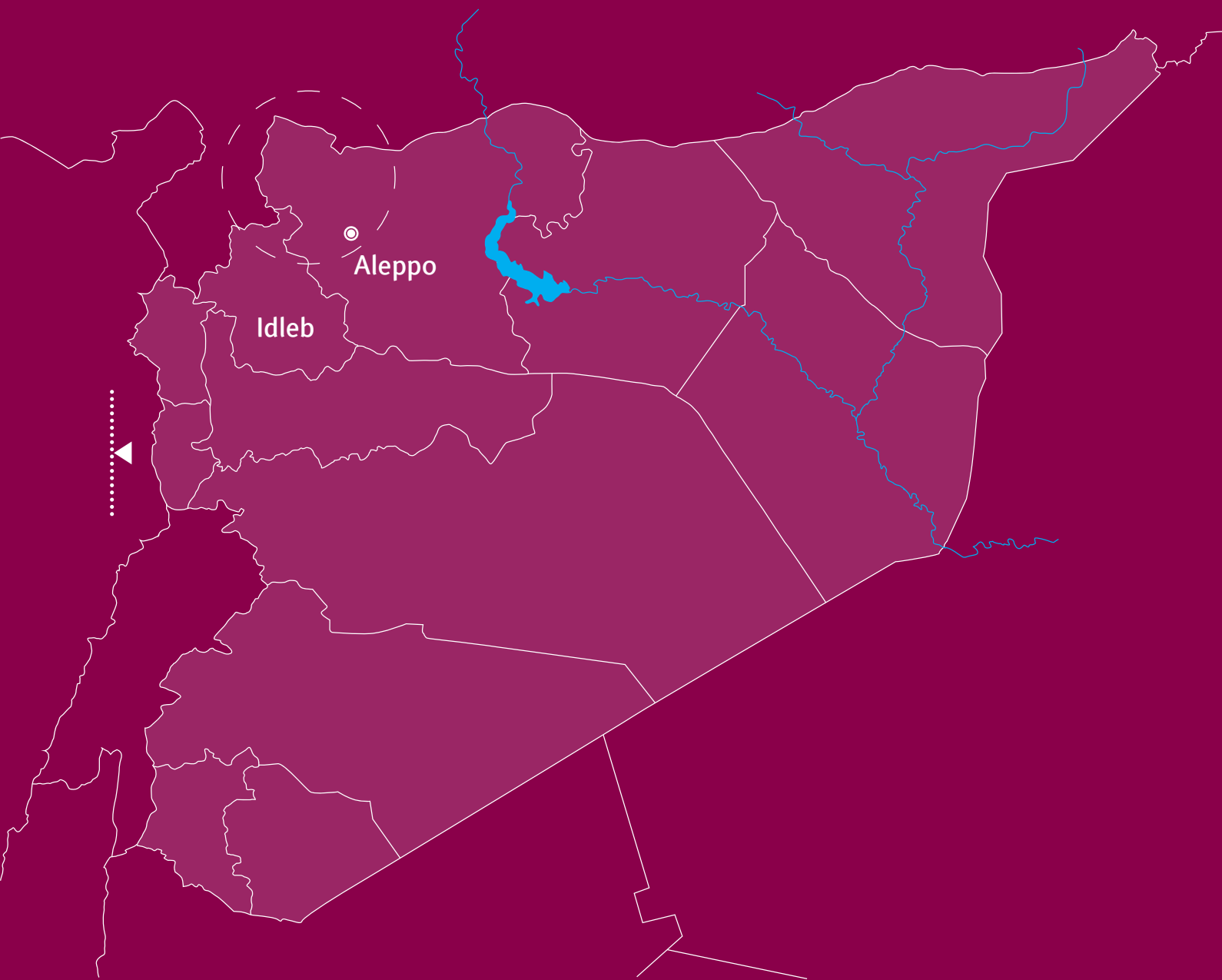


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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

● AOGs	armed opposition groups
● AFAD	The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey
● CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
● DEZ	De-Escalation Zones
● GoS	Government of Syria
● HLP	Housing, Land and Property
● IDPs	internally displaced people
● ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and Levant
● NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations.
● SIG	Syrian Interim government.
● SDF	Syrian democratic forces
● UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
● UN-OCHA	The United Nations office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
● YPG	People Protection Units

Executive Summary:



Eight years after peaceful protests started in Syria, approximately half of the country's population have had to flee from violence. An estimated 6.2 million people are internally displaced, with over 1.6 million population movements recorded between January and December 2018 alone. Meanwhile Syria remains fragmented under multiple areas of control. This has a direct effect on the daily lives of local communities, which often varies across specific sub-regions and towns.

Against this backdrop, this report represents a case study on the effects of mass displacement and change of control on host communities and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) living in host communities in northern Syria. More specifically, the report focuses on the local situation in five main locations: Azaz, Albab and Afrin district (Afrin, Rajo and Jenderes).

The findings of this case study indicate that a clear distinction can be made between the situation in the towns of Albab and Azaz on the one hand, and the situation in Afrin district (Afrin, Jenderes and Rajo) on the other. Albab and Azaz have been under de facto Turkish control since the latter conducted operation "Euphrates Shield" that was concluded in early 2017, and are gradually enjoying a relative degree of stability. Residents (both locals and IDPs) are however still faced with harsh financial conditions and limited access to services.

In stark contrast, the situation in Afrin district, which came under de facto Turkish control after operation "Olive Branch" (January-March 2018), is characterized by high levels of instability. There, the displacement of local residents and the resettlement of IDPs have exacerbated pre-existing ethnic tensions. The situation is characterised by high discrepancies between local residents and IDPs in terms of access to personal security, livelihood, freedom of movement and the ability to practice one's own traditions. Local residents in Afrin district have also been the victims of serious human rights violations and discriminatory practices imposed by armed opposition groups (AOGs), who are also seen as giving privileges to IDPs with connections to AOGs. The combination of these factors have created a sense of alienation among the original residents of Afrin district, which has resulted in a general sense of distrust and even hostility against IDPs. As the latter are also feeling disintegrated in their new host communities, the district's social fabric is being torn apart.

Aside from the divergences between the situation in Afrin district and in that in Albab and Azaz, the growing Turkish influence is evident across both areas. Through providing official backup to military factions, significant investments in infrastructure rehabilitation, and direct administrative and financial support to local governance structures, Turkey has become the de facto ruler in the whole area. Therefore recommendations provided in this report are partially directed to Turkish authorities, in addition to a set of recommendations offered to international policy makers, donors and civil society organisations.



1. Introduction

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Syria has already suffered eight years of violence, infrastructural destruction and staggering levels of impoverishment which, as is well known, have had drastic regional and international implications. The international community, including the UN, have, by and large, passively observed the crisis unravel and deepen with no considerable efforts put forth to limit its repercussions. This has significantly undermined the fundamental principles of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law not only in the eyes of Syrians who have witnessed their practical insolvency first-hand but also for people throughout the world.

By the end of 2018, the count of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria had skyrocketed to over 6 million as per the official figures provided by UNHCR¹, including 1.6 million people who were displaced during in 2018 alone². Aside from the direct humanitarian crises attached to these figures, such waves of mass displacement, accompanied by rapidly changing political and security contexts, have left their traces on the demographic profile of both home and destination areas, which have significantly altered the daily lives of local communities. Social, economic and legal challenges, which are evidently interrelated, represent undeviating manifestations of such changes and have been exacerbated as a direct result of such developments.

This case study report sheds light on daily living conditions in selected locations in Northern Syria in the light of the changing local context due to the shift in control and demographics.

1 <https://bit.ly/2YoaJXR>

2 <https://bit.ly/2WEXstd>

2. Methodology

The report mainly relies on primary data collected through interviews, which were designed specifically for this purpose, while

cross-referencing aggregated data with secondary sources such as media outlets, human rights and situational reports, NGO reports, as well as with local activists and key informants. Primary data collection was conducted through interviews with equal numbers of local residents and IDPs in the sub-districts of Azaz, Albab, Afrin, Rajo and Jenderes. A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were held, 20 of them with women, in addition to four interviews with members of local governance entities (local councils). Interviews were conducted during August and September 2018 by a field team of researchers composed of both local residents and IDPs, so as to ensure ease of access to information and respondents.

Following a backward content analysis strategy, data from the interviews was coded into distinctive categories as a means of data reduction. This was followed by an axial content analysis linking information across established categories and with secondary resources to draw correlations and conclusions.

The subsequent “Main Findings” section of the report presents the main findings of this analysis based on the following established categories: residence and housing, livelihood and job markets, civic documentation and social relations. The last section of the report, on the other hand, aims to highlight policy recommendations that various stakeholders can implement/pursue to address the many issues identified in this study.

3. Contextual Background



3.1. On-the-Ground developments

Starting from late 2016, the region north of Aleppo, has witnessed radical control and military changes resulting in mass demographic changes, and subsequent economic, social and legal alterations at a very local level. This case study report aims to provide a more substantial understanding of the daily living situation for residents of the Afrin, Albab and Azaz districts.

Albab and Azaz towns are two of the major urban strongholds in the northern Aleppo countryside, and they constitute two of three main districts under the area currently called Euphrates Shield, whose name follows the name of the Turkish-led military operation that drove ISIL from the region and was concluded in early 2017. The Government of Syria (GoS) lost control over both towns in mid-2012. While Azaz was under the control of ISIL for only several months between October 2013 and February 2014 and then fell under the control of armed opposition groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) at that time, Albab was under ISIL control for a longer period, specifically from November 2013 until ISIL forces were completely expelled after the completion of the Euphrates Shield operation by February 2017. During 2016, both towns were subjected to several control attempts by Government of Syria forces through the Northern Aleppo Offensive; the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) aiming to bridge their areas of control in the east with the Afrin enclave in the west; and Turkey which considers the control of the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the border stretch as a threat to its national security. By early 2017 the 'Euphrates Shield' operation by the Turkish army and allied armed opposition groups (AOGs) had been concluded and managed to secure control over most of the Aleppo northern countryside, except for the Afrin district. Another operation, euphemistically named operation "Olive Branch", was launched by the same forces in January 2018 to capture Afrin. This operation was concluded by mid-March 2018, when assaulting forces took control over the whole district.

Concurrently with the Olive Branch Operation, March 2018 also witnessed the collapse of the De-escalation Zones (DEZ) ³ in different parts of Syria, leading to the forced displacement of approximately 118,000 people to northwest Syria over a span of under two months, 23% of whom resettled in the Afrin district alone ⁴. According to statistics provided by the Humanitarian Response Team ⁵, almost 95% of IDPs who resettled in the Afrin district came from Eastern Ghouta, while the remainder were from the northern Homs countryside or southern Syria in later periods ⁶. These include former opposition fighters as well as civilians who were forcibly displaced as part of the surrender deals ending the DEZs. Between March and May 2018, Albab was one of the primary destinations for IDPs under these surrender deals. However, not all IDPs who arrived in the town remained there. According to an estimate from the Humanitarian Response Team, slightly fewer than 3,000 IDPs actually settled in the town ⁷.

3 A deal agreement signed in Astana, Kazakhstan in May 2017 to establish four zones of de-escalation of hostilities between GoS and opposition groups. <https://bit.ly/2HLfEwl>

4 Assessment report of IDP movement in northwest Syria, Orient Policy Center & Humanitarian Response Team

5 Also known as Syria response coordinators, a team of volunteers spread across the north of Syria, aiming at coordinating efforts for response and publishing reports about displacement waves in and to northern Syria.

6 Forced displacement campaigns in Syria, Humanitarian Response Team, 5/8/2018.

7 Assessment report of IDP movement in northwest Syria, Orient policy center & Humanitarian Response Team

In tandem, UN-OCHA estimates⁸ that 137,000 persons have been displaced from the Afrin district (mostly Kurds) as a result of operation “Olive Branch operation” in the period between 20 January and 18 March 2018. Other reports estimate these figures to be higher, reaching 200-300,000 IDPs as per the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights⁹. These figures only provide a fragmented picture of the many consequences these drastic changes have had on the region’s demographics and social fabric. It is worth mentioning that even prior to recent developments, IDPs constituted a significant percentage of the area’s total population. According to available statistics, Albab’s population has more than doubled from 63,000 in 2004¹⁰ to 146,000 in 2017¹¹. The town of Azaz witnessed an almost four-fold increase in population from 31,000 in 2004 to 125,000 in 2017 (ibid), with IDPs constituting 19% and 47% of the population in Albab and Azaz respectively in 2017 (ibid). Meanwhile the population of Afrin district reached 323,000, 33% of them being IDPs¹².

3.2. Further developments

This report is based on data collected between August and October 2018. Yet, some further developments on the ground after that period are worth mentioning,, including the launch of an National Army campaign against corruption. Thus, the main findings of this report might not reflect completely such developments or the impact thereof.

In November 2018, the Turkish-supported National Army, a military umbrella that includes most of the AOGs active in the region, launched a campaign against “corrupt groups”. The campaign started in Afrin and was expanded to include Azaz and Albab as well as other locations in the Euphrates Shield area. According to campaign statements, legal actions such as warrants and trials before military judges were to precede any military actions¹³, however the area witnessed violent clashes and artillery shelling mainly targeting strongholds of “corrupt groups” under a complete curfew until the first phase of the campaign had been concluded¹⁴.

Despite the campaign intended to control security breaches in the area and to limit human rights violations, reports about such violations are still emerging¹⁵, as well as security incidents such as explosions and armed attacks against civilians and private properties¹⁶.

8 <https://bit.ly/2J4bX2s>

9 <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=102951>; <https://bit.ly/2Ewqvsvr>

10 <https://bit.ly/2dOqEV3>

11 <https://bit.ly/2VSHmPC>

12 <https://bit.ly/2PTfR34>

13 <https://bit.ly/2TFglsi>

14 <https://bit.ly/2CbqPeo>

15 <https://bit.ly/2uOMphw>

16 <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=309194>

3.3. Local governance

The region's changes in security and control powers have also led to changes in the structure of local governance. Local councils in these areas officially follow the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and are connected to the Aleppo provincial council, with direct administrative, logistical and financial support from Turkish authorities, mainly the governors of Gaziantep, Killis, and Hatay in southern Turkey. In the eyes of many local citizens, this has undermined their impartiality and authority, as detailed in later sections of this report.

The Euphrates Shield area is managed by 10 local councils working at the district level, including local councils in Albab and in Azaz¹⁷. In August 2018, hundreds of residents in Azaz town demonstrated against the corruption and inefficiency of the Azaz local council. The council was then dissolved and a new council was established during the same month¹⁸.

In April 2018, seven interim local councils were formed in the towns of the Afrin district¹⁹, including three in Afrin City, Rajo and Jenderes. Each council comprises 15 to 20 members of local residents, elected through a system of local electoral committees and based on ethnic quotas (Afrin's local council consists of 11 Kurds, seven Arabs and one Turk). The councils were established under the supervision of the Syrian Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the Syrian interim government (SIG), and are connected to the local council of Aleppo.

However, the authority given to local councils in Afrin district is highly restricted. For example, a member of the local council in Jenderes stated that "our role is restricted to orders issued by the Turkish Wali²⁰, and we can't do anything without their permission. There are many things we should be doing, but the real authority here is for the armed groups in control and the Turkish side won't let us interfere". Such concerns were also echoed by members of local councils in both Afrin and Rajo.

In addition to the local council, the Stabilisation Committee, a committee that has been part of the Aleppo Provincial Council and was established in late 2015 to provide services in areas recently liberated from ISIL forces, has been active in the Euphrates Shield areas directly after ISIL forces were expelled from it. According to its official website²¹, the committee provides basic services such as education and health, in addition to capacity building for the local councils in its areas of operation. The committee is also responsible for collecting fees on behalf of the local councils in some locations where its projects are operating. The committee presents itself as an independent entity, although it has strong ties to Turkish authorities. In October 2018 the committee organised the first conference of its kind on "Reconstruction in Northern Syria" in the town of Akhtreen in the northern Aleppo countryside. This confer-

17 The rest being in Jarablus, Alraii, Mare'a, Akhtreen, Soran, Baza'ah, Qabaseen, and Ghandoura districts.

18 <https://goo.gl/v2H7uA>

19 <https://bit.ly/2Jrlm7P>

20 The provincial Governor in the Turkish local administrative system.

21 <https://stabilizationcom.org/ar/>

ence was attended by a Turkish delegation²², in addition to representatives of the local councils and SIG, which clearly indicates the growing Turkish influence in discussions about the future of the area.

Most recently, in February 2019, with direct Turkish support, the local councils in the Afrin district announced the establishment of a chamber for industrialists and merchants in Afrin to regulate the trade and industry movements in the area, as well as commercial relations with Turkey²³. Members of the chamber will also have exclusive access to Turkey and Turkish markets²⁴. However, several requirements to join the chamber de facto exclude small workshops and industries and small and medium businesses to be part of the chamber. This grants members of the chamber unparalleled socio-economic advantages and the possibility to monopolise certain aspects of Afrin's market.

3.4. Civil Society and humanitarian access

Humanitarian efforts in the region are mostly coordinated either by: 1) the Turkish Red Crescent and The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD), or 2) UN agencies through partnerships with several large and well-known Syrian or non-Syrian humanitarian NGOs (including Turkish NGO IHH and Qatari Red Crescent Society QRCS). In addition, several charities which have been active in different geographical areas are expanding their operations, albeit not without limitations, to the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas.

Aside from providing humanitarian aid, civil society organisations are mostly active in the provision of services in both the education and health sectors. However, most of these interventions are held by big well-known NGOs who operate remotely, mostly from Turkey. In a mapping exercise of 514 Syrian CSOs conducted by the IMPACT field team between August and March 2018, IMPACT was able to identify 61 CSOs who listed Euphrates Shield area in their area of operations, the vast majority of them (53 CSOs) based in Turkey. CSOs are only allowed to work in the area if they are officially registered in Turkey or possess a work permit that is specifically obtained for this purpose from the Wali of Hatay or Gaziantep. The space for CSOs to independently operate has also been affected by a Turkish crackdown on international and Syrian CSOs operating from Turkey, mainly in the southern province of Gaziantep in 2017²⁵.

On the other hand, local grassroots CSOs are largely absent, except for a few voluntary teams and initiatives operating on a small scale and without adequate support. This is attributed to difficulties in obtaining the abovementioned licenses or work permits.

22 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/259164>

23 <https://bit.ly/2Tt90IS>

24 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/283596>

25 <https://bit.ly/2we2kZD>

4. Main Findings



4.1. Residence and housing

4.1.1. Albab and Azaz

Although the towns of Albab and Azaz have witnessed an enormous influx of IDPs from other parts of Syria, and despite the changes in control in the past couple of years, most local residents have remained in the area or have returned to their areas of origin/residence. During the time of ISIL control, many families fled the area and then came back once ISIL forces had been driven out of the region. According to official Turkish sources, in early 2017, an estimated 50,000 refugees returned from Turkey after the Euphrates Shield operation had been concluded²⁶. Based on interview data, most local residents in both towns still own their homes. People who don't own property have sought rental properties, mostly through personal acquaintances or local real estate agents. Nevertheless, the effects of battles and shelling in the area can be seen from partial or complete property damage. One interviewee from Albab stated that his house had been demolished as a result of shelling, forcing him to reside in a relative's house, which hindered the durability and stability of his living conditions.

As for IDPs who fled or were displaced to either one of the towns, IDP camps or rental properties are the most common residence options. Some families have been reportedly staying in unoccupied, mostly unfinished houses obtained through personal contacts with local residents and landlords. The choice of residence is highly influenced by the family's financial status, since rental properties range in cost between 20,000 and 45,000 SYP (45\$ - 100\$), placing them out of reach for low-income households. Interviewees also referred to a shortage in listed rental properties in Azaz, and mentioned that most rental properties in Albab are located on the outskirts of the town. This presents movement challenges for those who work in the town centre, especially in light of high transportation costs and poor public transport services. In the words of the head of the relief office of Albab local council: "the main challenge facing IDPs is instability, they might have to relocate several times according to availability and location of jobs, or might in the end resort to living in the camps if they can't find a job to afford living outside the camp".

4.1.2. Afrin district

The situation appears to be different in Afrin, as discrepancies between local residents and IDP communities in Afrin district are predominantly demonstrated in the housing sector. While most local residents, who either remained in the district or returned once the clashes had subsided, still reside in their homes, they live under constant threats of eviction and/or expropriation of their houses and properties. Residents interviewed for this study reported that their houses had been recurrently subjected to raids

26 <https://bit.ly/2Yb7vGO>

and lootings, mostly attributed to AOGs active in the area. AOGs arbitrarily raid residents' houses, supposedly in search of YPG affiliates and/or to investigate property ownership documents. "We don't even dare to leave our windows open", stated one interviewee from Afrin in reference to the general lack of security.

Local residents who have no means of proving property ownership usually reside with relatives or resort to renting property if they wish to remain within the district. They have been subjected to increased interference and raids from AOGs who have questioned their property ownership documents or the validity of their rental lease agreements. Rental prices range between 20,000 and 35,000 SYP (43 to 77 USD) for two or three bedroom apartments.

Damaged properties and a lack of financial means to conduct restorations force many families into inappropriate living conditions. An interviewee from Jenderes stated that their house was partially demolished when Turkish authorities were reconstructing a road, yet the family has never been compensated for their loss.

In the rural areas around Afrin, mainly in Rajo, wild animals also pose a threat to residents' safety. After nearby forests were burned down by AOG actors, wild animals have been moving closer to inhabited areas.

On the other hand, many IDPs who fled to the area from other parts of Syria reside in unoccupied houses. "Finding a house is easy if you are acquainted with the military factions controlling the area," explained one interviewee from Rajo. It is very common for IDPs to reside in unoccupied houses whether with the direct support of AOGs or simply by searching for empty houses, a phenomenon which has been widely described by activists and reports as "resettlement".

Contrary to their treatment of local residents, AOGs have often either directly facilitated the "resettlement" of IDP families or have chosen to overlook IDPs residing without legal contracts or the consent of property owners. None of the eleven interviewed IDPs living in unoccupied houses reported any issues with AOGs regarding their residence. One interviewee, however, listed the lack of a rental lease agreement as one of the primary challenges facing their residence situation. Apartments for rent can also be found through real estate offices, albeit strictly for those who can afford it, or those who have no other options for housing.

Local councils in Afrin, Rajo and Jenderes play a very trivial role, particularly when it comes to housing. Their authority has been substantially diminished by the de facto authorities who have assumed control over the district. A local council member mentioned in an interview that the local council could potentially play a larger and more constructive role in resolving housing issues, but is neither given the space nor authority to do so as a result of constant AOG interference in the matter. The marginalisation of local councils has also effectively limited their capacity to provide their constituents with essential services.

Across the region, both local residents and IDPs are suffering from inadequate access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity and waste management. Despite the announcement of a pro-

ject to deliver drinking water to the area by the Stabilisation Committee in March 2018, interviewees in this study unanimously stated that the tap water was not drinkable. Drinking water, however, is sold on the market, thereby restricting its availability to those who can afford it. Difficulties in obtaining drinking water were mentioned by 30 out of 50 interviewees when asked about daily life challenges and most recurring needs. IDPs residing in camps, however, are provided with drinking water regularly through water trucking provided by humanitarian NGOs. An Al-Scharqiyah camp manager near Albab also mentioned that the camp included a well that was dug at the expense of private donors to provide camp residents with water. Similarly, Shamareen camp near Azaz depends on a well to extract water, however, electricity needed for the pumps is not always available.

Electricity networks across the region have been almost completely damaged, whether as a result of fighting and shelling or due to looting and vandalism incidents. Residents in the past have depended on subscriptions to private merchants to receive electricity. In August 2018, the local council in Albab announced a project supported by the Turkish Ministry of Energy to provide electricity to the town²⁷. Concurrently, the Azaz local council announced a similar project that was to be implemented in cooperation with a Turkish energy company²⁸. Due to the large-scale damage to the network reaching 70% in Azaz (ibid.), both projects have not yet been completed and residents in both towns still rely on private subscriptions to obtain electricity. Similarly, the local council in Afrin announced in January 2019 on its official Facebook page²⁹ a plan in coordination with the Turkish Ministry of Energy to restore electricity services. However, the council was unable to provide any details about the timeline of such plans.

27 <https://bit.ly/2XLKWcz>

28 <https://bit.ly/2Cb3REc>

29 <https://bit.ly/2HmUDbr>

4.2. Livelihood and job market:

4.2.1. Albab and Azaz

The towns of Albab and Azaz have historically been underdeveloped areas. Official employment has long been a challenge for the residents of both towns. According to statistics provided by the Central Bureau for Statistics in the 2004 census ³⁰, more than 50% of male residents, and over 85% of female residents in both towns were unemployed (51.6% of males and 85.4% of females in Albab, and 56.5% for males and 93.4% of females in Azaz), with agriculture being the main type of work for women (75.2% in Albab, and 53.2% in Azaz). For men, however, the most common occupation was either agriculture or basic engineering work.

At present, agriculture, small businesses and daily-waged jobs are still considered the main sources of sustenance. This is especially the case for men, while trade, small businesses and education are more common for working women.

As for IDPs, two main categories can be identified. Firstly, IDPs who had previous careers before their displacement and are able to practice it in their new area of residence. This mainly applies to trade and expertise-based professions such as education. Secondly, IDPs who have lost assets necessary for them to maintain their previous careers, which can mainly be seen among those who depended on agriculture or location specific vocations.

Based on data from interviews, IDPs in the former category are better equipped for maintaining a sustainable income for the household, while those in the latter category live under the burden of providing a sustainable livelihood.

While some residents interviewed in this study stated that the labour market had not really changed over the past years, some of them referred to an increase in job opportunities due to the increased population and the recent relative stability in the region. The IDPs interviewed all shared the notion that there are no restrictions on work for IDPs, including women. However, in general residents (both locals and IDPs) are still facing financial burdens due to the general increase in prices of basic goods and basic services such as water and electricity.

30 <https://bit.ly/2WyxnMi>

4.2.2. Afrin district

In Afrin district, agriculture, trade and manufacturing have been the main sources of income for the majority of residents throughout the years³¹. According to statistics provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics in the 2004 general census, up to 60% of Afrin's population worked in the private sector³²; more specifically, 47.4% of the district's population worked in agriculture and livestock³³. Local residents' means of financial sustenance have significantly narrowed following recent developments. Financial means of subsistence currently vary but, based on interview findings, mainly include small businesses, daily-waged labour (mainly in construction and olive harvesting), as well as savings and remittances from family members living abroad. The availability and stability of such a source of income is considerably influenced by security conditions, movement restrictions and market dynamics. Agriculture and livestock farming are more widespread in rural areas, both for household use and trading. However, owners of such assets (agricultural yields or livestock) are recurrently subjected to exploitation or harassment by armed actors, who reportedly impose arbitrary taxes on local residents or, extort civilians into paying bribes. Such exploitative practices disproportionately affect families that depend on livestock or agriculture for their sustenance. Since olives constitute the main agricultural crop in the region (with the Afrin district alone containing an estimated 18 million olive trees), olive harvesters and owners of olive orchards are the most affected by such exploitation. In September 2018, the general staff of the National Army announced a decree that the management of the harvest season will be controlled by the local councils. Under this decree, local councils are allowed to collect a tax ranging between 10–20% of the harvest from farmers, while AOGs are instructed to give back any olive harvests they had appropriated³⁴. However, several subsequent reports have provided evidence of continued appropriation, looting and smuggling of harvests. Some of these reports estimated the amount of olive oil being looted and smuggled from Afrin through Turkey at over 50,000 tonnes, amounting to an overall value of approximately 70 million euros (78 million USD)³⁵. This was also confirmed by the Turkish Agriculture Minister in November 2018³⁶.

Notably, the general lack of security and the forced eviction and/or displacement of many local families has also affected overall job conditions. Most small and medium sized business entities have permanently closed following the displacement and/or eviction of most business owners. The ability of local residents to open new businesses has been significantly hampered by AOGs' nepotism and extortive practices.

31 <https://bit.ly/2JaBaws>

32 <http://www.cbssyr.sy/people%20statistics/popman.pdf>, table 13

33 <http://www.cbssyr.sy/people%20statistics/popman.pdf>, Table 14A

34 <https://bit.ly/2zUr9wY>

35 <https://bit.ly/2DbMX9B>

36 <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-46937595>

Women have been disproportionately affected by these conditions. AOGs' conservatism and gender-based discriminatory practices have severely hindered women's means of financial subsistence and movement. Additionally, and in the light of the general decline in job availability, jobs that were locally deemed suitable for women have almost perished. A member of the local council in Jenderes noted that "job opportunities are limited for men, but they barely exist at all for women".

Livelihood opportunities for IDPs in Afrin are also mostly unstable or non-existent. An overwhelming majority of displaced families rely strictly on aid and foreign remittances, while others work as daily labourers to sustain their families. Many displaced breadwinners used to have sources of income prior to their displacement. This mostly applies to those who worked in agriculture or within governmental institutions. Being the breadwinner in the household falls mostly to men, in part due to the scant job opportunities available for women. IDP interviewees in this study unanimously stated that there were no legal or official constraints preventing them from finding reliable sources of income, but that the situation was linked to several factors including the lack of resources (i.e. financial capital) to start a business, the lack of required qualifications such as academic degrees or specific vocational skills, and the inadequacy of available job opportunities due to the overabundance of the labour force.

Locals and IDPs hold noticeably different perspectives regarding women's ability to obtain jobs. As mentioned above, locals perceive that opportunities for women to find jobs are almost impossible, while IDPs referred to job opportunities for women being restricted to a specific range of fields. According to interviewed IDPs, women can either work in agriculture (mainly in olive-gathering during the harvesting season), in some skill-specific jobs such as sewing or hairdressing, or in education.

Despite the disparate perceptions about livelihood opportunities, some factors affect all inhabitants of the region. The shortage of raw materials and essential household needs in the local markets and the concomitant rise in prices have had a direct negative impact on the availability and affordability of household staples, especially in light of inadequate sources of income. 29 out of 50 interviewees in this study listed food as one of the three most important needs for their households.

4.3. Legal situation and civic documentation:

Personal and family identification documents are the most essential civic documentation for both locals and IDPs across the region. Based on interview data, most residents have basic personal identification documents. However, some locals from Afrin district mentioned that their documentation had either been lost or damaged during the Turkish military operation in Afrin. In the event of documentation being lost, alternatives can be obtained either through GoS entities in Aleppo (through regime-affiliated brokers) or through local governance bodies operating under the SIG. Nevertheless, some interviewees from the Afrin district expressed scepticism about the credibility and reliability of SIG-administered local governance bodies, since they are "neither official nor hold any official character" according to an interviewee from Afrin. Some interviewees suggested that some AOGs were issuing fake legal documents for their affiliates. Nevertheless, such documents are not recognised outside of Afrin according to local council members in Afrin and Rajo.

In addition to identification documents, proof of property ownership is considered one of the most essential documents. This is particularly important in Afrin district since, as previously mentioned, original residents have been disproportionately prone to AOG raids and property appropriations. Furthermore, both residents and IDPs in Afrin district are required to obtain special travel permits to be able to move both within the district and to other regions. The permit can be obtained from local councils or from AOG factions, albeit strictly for those who have direct access to armed actors. Although disproportionately affecting locals and displaced communities, the failure to present a valid permit (validity does not usually exceed one month) might lead to detainment or abuse. A local resident from Rajo reported that some checkpoints would not even recognise documents issued by local councils, while another stated that “this condition [fixed-term travel permit] is restricted to locals, while IDPs can easily attain such documents and sometimes don’t even need it”. In addition to travel permits, Turkish authorities (represented by the Wali of Hatay) have been issuing temporary Turkish IDs in Afrin city known as “Kimlik” which are similar to the temporary protection cards given to Syrian refugees in Turkey. The card functions as both proof of identity and proof of residence in Afrin and is mainly recognised by Turkish officials. It is worth noting that this card is issued for local and IDPs alike and is required by both to move within their localities³⁷.

In Albab and Azaz, personal and family identification documents are sufficient for both local residents and IDPs to move around the area freely. However, people are required to obtain special permits for travel outside the area, in particular for commercial trips. It is worth mentioning that travel documents and passports remain the hardest to obtain due to the absence of authorities able to regulate them, thus limiting movement ability outside Syria. “The only way to get a passport is from the Turkish consulate, and it is not that easy,” stated one resident from Azaz.

Recently, local councils in Albab and Azaaz and in Afrin district started issuing identity cards for both local residents and IDPs³⁸. The new ID cards, which bear personal information relating to the holder in both Arabic and Turkish, replace both the old ID cards issued by the GoS and the previously mentioned temporary Kimlik cards, and are now mandatory for all residents. They are considered essential for movement within the area and for access to all kinds of public services, from aid to education and health.

Civic and personal status issues are regulated through local councils and local courts in Albab and Azaz, which are responsible for issuing marriage certificates, birth certificates and other documentation. A local council member in Albab confirmed in an interview that it was the council’s responsibility to issue civic documentation for both locals and IDPs through direct coordination with the court. The council member described the process as follows: “the local council certifies and documents birth and

37 The district of Afrin has been divided into ‘security squares’ with each square consisting of one or more villages, towns and neighbourhoods and controlled by different armed groups (OHCHR Monthly Human Rights Digest, June 2018).

38 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/266541>

death certificates that are issued by local hospitals, while marriage contracts and divorce agreements are issued by the court and certified by the local council". The process is similar in Afrin district, although members of the local councils in Afrin, Jenderes and Rajo stated that the local council was not involved in civil registration processes and that they fall directly under the responsibility of the local justice court and the general attorney's office that follow the SIG.

In addition to basic civil documentation, IDPs require a special document to prove displacement and eligibility for receiving aid, known as an assistance card. However, these cards can be easily obtained through the local council, according to interviewed IDPs. There are no legal restrictions against local residents obtaining such cards, though it is not very common.

4.4. Social dynamics:

4.4.1. Albab and Azaz

Despite the overwhelming effects of displacement, relationships between IDPs and local residents in Albab and Azaz seem to be stable. Both locals and IDPs interviewed in this study described the relationship as "good", describing each other as brothers who should remain in solidarity to endure the harsh circumstances. Only one interviewed local resident said, "I am afraid of new IDPs just because I don't know them very well". Several interviewees referred to similarities in traditions and customs as a factor in bringing the two communities together. Several interviewees mentioned that changes in traditions and customs were minimal and related to economic conditions more than the effects of displacement and demographic changes. Two interviewees from Azaz even went further, claiming that they had witnessed positive changes in social structures due to the increased population in the town.

In terms of relationships between residents and local authorities such as local councils, a slight discrepancy was identified between the towns in terms of locals' and IDPs' perceptions. In Albab, both locals and IDPs expressed satisfaction with the work of the local council as a local authority. In contrast, in Azaz the situation seems different. Few local residents mentioned disputes with local councils due to tribal affiliations, but for IDPs the weak perception of the local council is based on the low level of services provided to them. It is worth mentioning that at the time of the interviews, the Azaz local council was dissolved following local protests that accused the local council of corruption³⁹. A new council was elected in late August 2018.⁴⁰

39 <https://goo.gl/BK5Ben>

40 <https://goo.gl/v2H7uA>

4.4.2. Afrin district

In the Afrin district, the situation is significantly different. Social relationships between local residents and IDPs in the district are characterised by a general lack of trust. Many local residents reported that they feel inferior and that they are being marginalised and alienated within their own locality. The lack of social cohesion is rooted in the discriminatory practices carried out against locals and the relative social, legal and administrative privileges and/or favouritism enjoyed by IDPs. Such social divergences can sometimes be understood in cultural terms due to the clear ethnic demarcation of social hierarchy. However, perceptions of this tension and its underlying divergences vary significantly according to stances adopted on different subjects. Actual or potential affiliation with AOGs, with its concomitant authority and authoritative practices, is a primary barrier to social cohesion as well as a discernible source of how locals perceive displaced communities. This manifests itself in various degrees of hostility, from scepticism to total rejection. When asked about the relationship with IDPs, an interviewee from Jenderes responded, “in Jenderes, we certainly don’t deal with the AOGs and their families from the IDPs, and our relationships with civilians are limited to those who are certainly not connected to them [the AOGs]”.

AOG practices significantly contribute to reifying social antagonisms, which have largely been drawn along ethno-religious and provincial lines. AOGs have attempted to hegemonise their own understanding of Islamic jurisprudence by imposing the hijab on women and prohibiting men and women from mingling in public spaces such as restaurants, cafes and so on. While some local residents see these changes as temporary, others hold more cynical views. An interviewee from Rajo fears that “all Kurdish traditions will be wiped out”.

On the other hand, IDPs mostly view social tensions as resulting from a failure to properly integrate. Several IDP interviewees consider mistrust as the main obstacle to social cohesion. This lack of trust is to be understood neither as ideational nor inherent, or even inherited, but is mostly attributed to social, economic and administrative discrepancies largely drawn and implemented by AOGs and Turkish authorities alike. In addition, the lack of efforts to handle such issues is highly notable, or as an IDP residing in Afrin said, “there are no initiatives by NGOs to build trust between the two sides”.

Perceptions of local governance entities, mainly local councils, seem to be less divergent. “Our relation with the local council is good as they come from the area, but they don’t have any actual authority,” said one local resident from Jenderes. Many local residents share this view, as local councils are perceived to be willing to do their best but lack the power to be effective. This view is also shared by many IDPs who believe that local councils are doing their best in light of their diminishing authority.

5. Policy Recommendations



5.1. To Turkish authorities:

Humanitarian access: allow for full and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout Northern Syria, by intensifying cooperation and coordination with UN agencies, local NGOs and INGOs. To this end also simplify procedures for obtaining licences and work permissions for local grassroots CSOs, Syrian NGOs and INGOs.

Ensure safe, voluntary and dignified return of IDPs and refugees: minimize restrictions on freedom of movement and open crossing points for IDPs who fled the area. Ensure that Syrian refugees residing in Turkey are not forced to return to Northern Syria, in line with UNHCR's Thresholds and Parameters for Return.

Effective complaint mechanism: establish a transparent complaint mechanism where residents, both local and IDPs, can register complaints regarding violations committed by AOGs, and ensure that allegations are investigated and that those responsible are held accountable.

Maximize efforts on Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights: start exploring the possibilities to establish a local and transparent mechanism to address HLP issues, and ensure respect to HLP right by all actors.

Adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL): intensify efforts to guarantee that all armed actors operating in Northern Syria strictly adhere to IHL principles.

demilitarisation of residential neighbourhoods: push towards the withdrawal of armed forces, groups and individuals from residential areas and to limit their presence to the outskirts of the districts. Maintenance of security issues should be handed over to a civil authority such as a local police force.

Inclusive governance: intensify efforts to ensure inclusive and responsive civil local governance that serves local residents as well as IDPs.

5.2. To donors and civil society actors:

Social cohesion: international and local NGOs, who are registered in Turkey or have access to the region, should include social cohesion in their programming and increase their advocacy efforts regarding this matter.

Livelihood and economic empowerment: intensify support for local communities, whether IDPs or local residents. Pay particular attention to sustainable livelihood interventions such as vocational trainings or financial support to small businesses.

Provision of basic services: direct more efforts and resources to the provision of basic services, through collaboration and support to local entities whether local councils or local CSO's.

More space for local action: intensify efforts to seek collaboration with local grassroots organizations and foster more conflict-sensitive and community-driven programming.

Additional research: conduct or commission more area-specific research that focuses on thematic areas of relevance such as education, HLP issues, refugee return and reconstruction. Such research data, if widely available, would enable all actors to take data-driven measures towards minimizing the effects of displacement.



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