Regional Flash Update #3

Syria situation crisis

13 December 2024

Key Highlights

- Since the HTS offensive in late November, an estimated 1.1 million people have been internally displaced in Syria, primarily from the governorates of Aleppo, Idleb, Hama and Homs. Displaced people are arriving largely in Idleb, Hama, Rural Damascus, Aleppo and Tartous. In parallel, over five thousand IDPs have left IDP camps in north-west Syria in the last week, intending to return back to their homes.

- While the overall security situation in most areas of the country is improving, the situation across northeast Syria (NES) remains volatile following major territorial and political shifts. In Ar-Raqqa, clashes between armed groups, blockades and civil unrest have disrupted operations. Additional displacement and access challenges have strained humanitarian operations in the sub-region.

- While Syrian refugees are optimistic and interested in return, they also express concern and caution. Relatively small numbers of Syrian refugees are crossing from Türkiye and Jordan to Syria. The Government of Lebanon has indicated that just under 10,000 Syrians have returned from Lebanon to Syria since 8 December. At the same time, tens of thousands of Syrians and Lebanese are reportedly crossing back from Syria into Lebanon, especially into Hermel-Baalbek Governorate. Over one thousand Syrians have arrived in Iraq in the last few days, with a peak of 800 individuals on 11 December.

- Regarding refugee returns, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has reiterated that any returns must be voluntary and made in safety and dignity. Given the situation in Syria, it is crucial that planning for returns should be pursued with patience and centred on the refugees' own well-informed choices. Maintaining funding to host countries and refugee programmes is crucial at this time of uncertainty; and is a key element in ensuring the voluntary character of return, allowing refugees to make choices free from pressure to return.



Cars carrying mattresses and suitcases wait to cross into Syria at Lebanon's Masnaa border crossing on 8 December. © UNHCR

Country updates

Syria

On 11 to 12 December, the UNHCR Representative in Syria led an interagency mission from Damascus to Aleppo on behalf of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC). The mission engaged with UN staff and the new authorities to assess humanitarian needs and establish coordination mechanisms. In a briefing at the UN Palais in Geneva, the Representative noted that this initial contact with the new authorities was constructive.

On 9 December, the Syrian National Army (SNA) seized control of Menbij city, located in the north-eastern part of Aleppo governorate in northern Syria, following intense clashes with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which resulted in dozens of reported fatalities on both sides.

UNHCR and its partners are gradually resuming some humanitarian activities responsive to the situation on the ground, despite logistical and security challenges. In Tabqa, emergency shelter support and non-food item (NFI) distribution are ongoing. As of 11 December 2024, 82 out of a total of 114 UNHCR community and satellite centres are operational across Syria, providing crucial protection services and assistance.

As of 12 December, the overall security situation in north-west Syria remains relatively calm, with no major incidents reported. All UNHCR activities in north-west Syria continue unimpeded. However, there are an increasing number of reports of families moving being affected by explosive remnants of war. While over 5,400 individuals have left IDP camps in north-west Syria since 8 December, some IDPs express concerns about insufficient services and infrastructure in their hometowns; and some have visited their homes but returned back to the camps. Furthermore, many families cannot

afford to cover the costs of rehabilitating destroyed homes. The harsh winter conditions and school schedules are also cited as reasons for delaying return. For IDPs from eastern regions, including Deir Ezzor, Al-Raqqa and eastern Aleppo, families are reluctant to leave the camps until military operations cease.

Meanwhile, UN cross-border missions resumed on 9 December. On 10 December, 25 trucks carrying aid, including nine by UNHCR, through Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salameh. UNHCR transported 1,500 core relief item kits to Ma'aret Tamsrin, Idleb.

Lebanon

Three official Lebanese border crossings with Syria are now open: Arida in the north opened on 13 December, Qaa in the Bekaa opened on 11 December, and Masnaa bordering crossing also in the Bekaa was opened immediately following the change of authorities in Damascus.

On refugee returns, the Government of Lebanon has indicated that, since 8 December, less than 10,000 Syrians have returned from Lebanon. Movements continue on a daily basis through both official and unofficial border crossing points. Some movements back to Syria appear temporary, primarily to check on property and family members.

On arrivals to Lebanon, both Syrians and Lebanese continue to cross, including Lebanese who were residing in Syria as well as those who had fled as refugees into Syria during the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah since late September. Syrians who meet specific entry criteria are able to cross into Lebanon through official crossing points, such as if they hold residency permits or onward tickets for transit purposes through Beirut.

At the Masnaa border crossing point in the Bekaa, crowds of Syrians have moved past the empty Syrian immigration posts, resulting in bottlenecks at the Lebanese side of the border, especially for those who do not meet the above criteria for entry. Those unable to cross are staying in the open, exposed to dropping temperatures. UNHCR, other UN agencies and partners have provided lifesaving assistance, including thermal blankets and winter jackets for children, medical support and assistance for persons with disabilities. It is crucial that a solution is found for those stranded at the border.

In the Hermel-Baalbek Governorate, Lebanese authorities estimate that around 30,000 people - mostly Syrians - have reached the area. Local authorities have provided interim shelter at a number of locations for those without means. In addition, approximately 25,000 Lebanese are known to have returned and are being hosted in private homes. Government and humanitarian assessments are ongoing. Some preliminary life-saving assistance has already been provided with a view to putting in place a more comprehensive response.

Türkiye

From Türkiye, the main return processing points are Cilvegözü border crossing (Bab al Hawa) and Öncüpınar border crossing (Bab al Salama). At all border points the situation is calm and stable with relatively small numbers of people going back to Syria.

The UNHCR Representative joined the President of Migration Management in a visit to border crossings in Hatay (Zeytindalı, Cilvegözü, and Yayladağı), during which officials explained the process for voluntary repatriation. The group also visited facilities where UNHCR teams are present to monitor the return process.

Returnees have been predominantly male heads of families returning to make arrangements (housing, finding a job, etc.) so that their wives and children can eventually join them. However, in the last few days there has been an increase in the ratio of families returning with young children. The primary reasons for return include improved security conditions, changes in political circumstances, joining family members or attending family events. Some indicated they were not returning to their pre-conflict residences, including because their family has moved to another location in Syria.

Similar observations were made by UNHCR partners operating in north-west Syria of families crossing from Türkiye and heading towards Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Damascus and Idleb governorates. Several reported that they would not immediately return to their homes due to the volatile security situation, lack of services and their homes being uninhabitable.

The UNHCR Türkiye Counselling Line continues to be a key source of information for refugees. Most calls received from Syrian refugees were related to concerns over changes in procedures and protection in Türkiye or the processing of resettlement cases.

Jordan

The situation at the Jordanian border remains quiet compared to the average traffic. A few buses reportedly entered the border centre carrying Syrians, mostly traveling under different visa statuses. UNHCR understands that a bus service is being put into place from the Syrian side of the border to Damascus.

UNHCR maintains regular contact with refugees online and in-person. In the last few days, refugees' views have shifted from initial euphoria to cautious realism. In general, many intended to wait and see how the situation in Syria develops and, especially, how the new government is formed.

UNHCR's Returns Hotline has seen a fluctuating number of calls in recent days, including an up-tick on 12 December. Some refugees expressed interest to return without sharing any fears or concerns, with many intending to reunite with family members. A smaller number of callers indicated they might return because of high living costs and a lack of livelihood opportunities in Jordan. Some expressed a preference that one family member be able to return alone first to assess the situation in Syria. They were concerned if, in this case, family members waiting in Jordan would still be able to receive cash assistance and if children could continue their education in Jordan in the meantime. Several asked UNHCR how to cover the cost of transportation and documentation for returns.

Iraq

On 12 December, UNHCR and partners observed 450 Syrian visa-holders arriving in Iraq through the Peshkabour border crossing, a drop from the peak of 800 persons crossing on 11 December. Al-Qaim border crossing in Federal Iraq remains fully closed for entry to and exit from Iraq.

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