

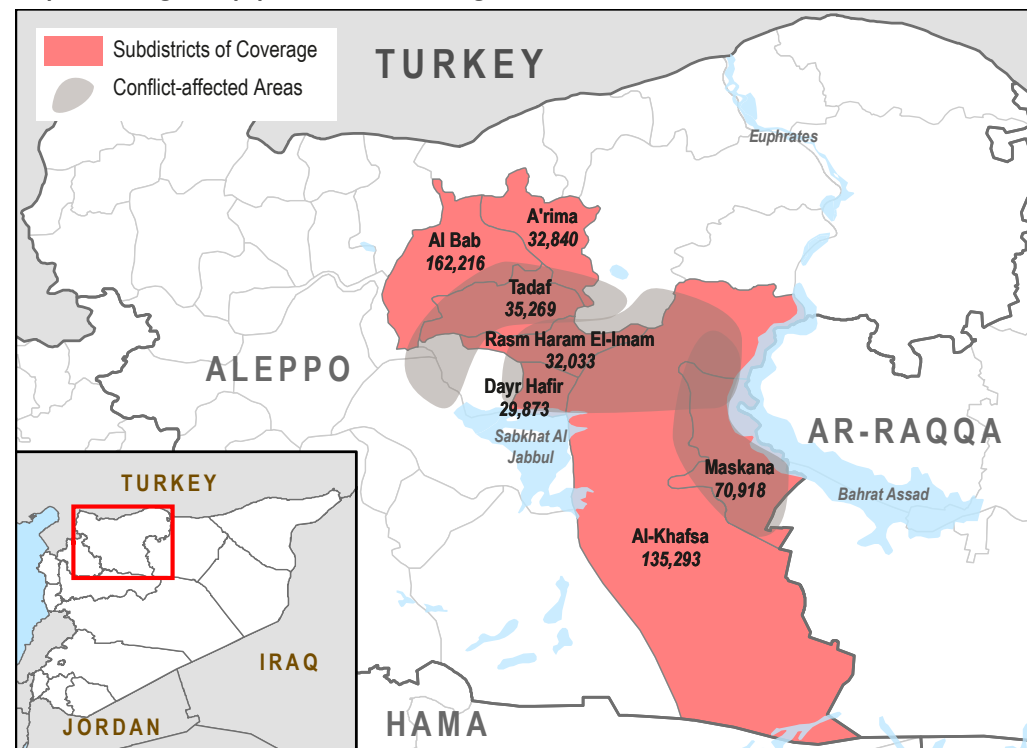
Eastern Aleppo Governorate Situation Overview: Displacement and Intentions

March 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since late February 2017, the escalation of conflict in eastern Aleppo has resulted in wide-spread displacement both within and outside of the governorate. Three main displacement patterns have been observed since 25 February:
 - IDPs from **Al Bab and Tadaf sub-districts** most commonly travelled north to Menbij and Jarablus; a total of 32,000 IDPs arriving in Menbij by 5 March.
 - IDPs from **Al-Khafsa, Dayr Hafir and Rasm Haram El-Imam sub-districts** commonly travelled north to Menbij, as well as to northern Al-Khafsa and Abu Qalqal sub-districts; approximately 20,000 IDPs travelling to Menbij and 11,000 IDPs displaced to northern Al-Khafsa.
 - In early-mid March, following increased movement restrictions in the areas of Maskana, Dayr Hafir and Al-Khafsa controlled by the group known as ISIL, and limitations on entry into Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled Menbij, 53,000 IDPs from Al-Khafsa and Maskana travelled south through ISIL-controlled areas, and eastwards into northern Ar-Raqqa governorate.
- **Further outward movement is anticipated from sub-districts in the south-east of the affected area (Dayr Hafir, Al-Khafsa and Maskana), northwards towards Menbij as well as continued movement eastwards into Ar-Raqqa, dependent on increased conflict in Ar-Raqqa governorate.**
- While small numbers of IDPs have returned to Al Bab (approximately 3,000), elsewhere, the security situation remains highly volatile, particularly in Dayr Hafir, Maskana and Al-Khafsa, and immediate returns are not anticipated.
- In order of importance, factors affecting populations' decision to leave are the severity of conflict, fear of parties involved in the conflict, destruction of infrastructure, loss of income and employment opportunities and reduced access to food.
- Factors causing people to remain in conflict-affected areas include positive perceptions of parties expected to take control of the area, existence of movement restrictions, a lack of safe outward routes and a desire to protect property.
- Returns are expected to areas in which conflict has subsided and authorities are

Map 1: Coverage and population (HNO 2017 figures)



not perceived to be a threat to personal safety and security, in particular to Al Bab and A'rima sub-districts. Populations are reportedly less willing to return to Rasm al Haram and Tadaf sub-districts due to the presence of military groups in the area.

Information in this assessment comes from **primary data collection through in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 interviewees residing in affected areas of eastern Aleppo governorate, as well as a secondary data review of relevant sources; interviews were conducted between 23 and 26 March 2017.** Findings are indicative and specific to areas assessed (see Map 1) and should not be generalised further.

BACKGROUND

In November 2016, fighting escalated in and around the city of Al Bab (eastern Aleppo governorate) as part of the ongoing offensive against ISIL¹. Conflict rapidly intensified during late February 2017 following the capture of Al Bab city by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs), spreading to the areas of Tadaf, Al-Khafsa, As-Safira, Dayr Hafir, Maskana, Rasm Haram El-Imam and southern Menbij by early March². Between 23 February and 16 March, over 60,000 people had been displaced across the area³. Complex patterns of displacement across northern Syria have been observed so far, and as the conflict continues to move eastwards across Menbij district and towards Ar-Raqqa governorate, displacement in the area is expected to continue. **This assessment aims to inform humanitarian response planning, providing an overview of current and intended displacement and factors affecting decisions to leave.**

DISPLACEMENT

DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS (Map 2)

Pattern 1: Movement north from Al Bab and Tadaf sub-districts (25 February – early March 2017)

Conflict escalated in Al Bab and Tadaf sub-districts in 25 February, prompting large-scale outward movement.

- **Between 25 February and 5 March, an estimated 66,000 people were displaced, most commonly north-eastwards into the areas of Menbij, Jarablus and A'rima, as well as limited movement north-west into A'zaz⁴.** In total, approximately 32,000 IDPs had been reported arriving in Menbij sub-district during this period⁵.
- As conflict in Al Bab sub-district has since decreased, small numbers of IDPs have reportedly left Menbij and returned to their communities of origin. **Since early March, a total of 3,187 IDPs were recorded leaving communities in Menbij sub-district to return to Al Bab.**
- Interviewees most commonly reported that IDPs have returned due to the perceived reduced levels of insecurity at their place of origin, as well as to protect assets

Pattern 2: Movement north and north-east from Al-Khafsa, Dayr Hafir and Rasm Haram El-Imam sub-districts (early – mid March 2017)

In early March, conflict began spreading eastwards from Al Bab, resulting in outward displacement from communities in Rasm Haram El-Imam, Dayr Hafir and Al-Khafsa sub-districts.

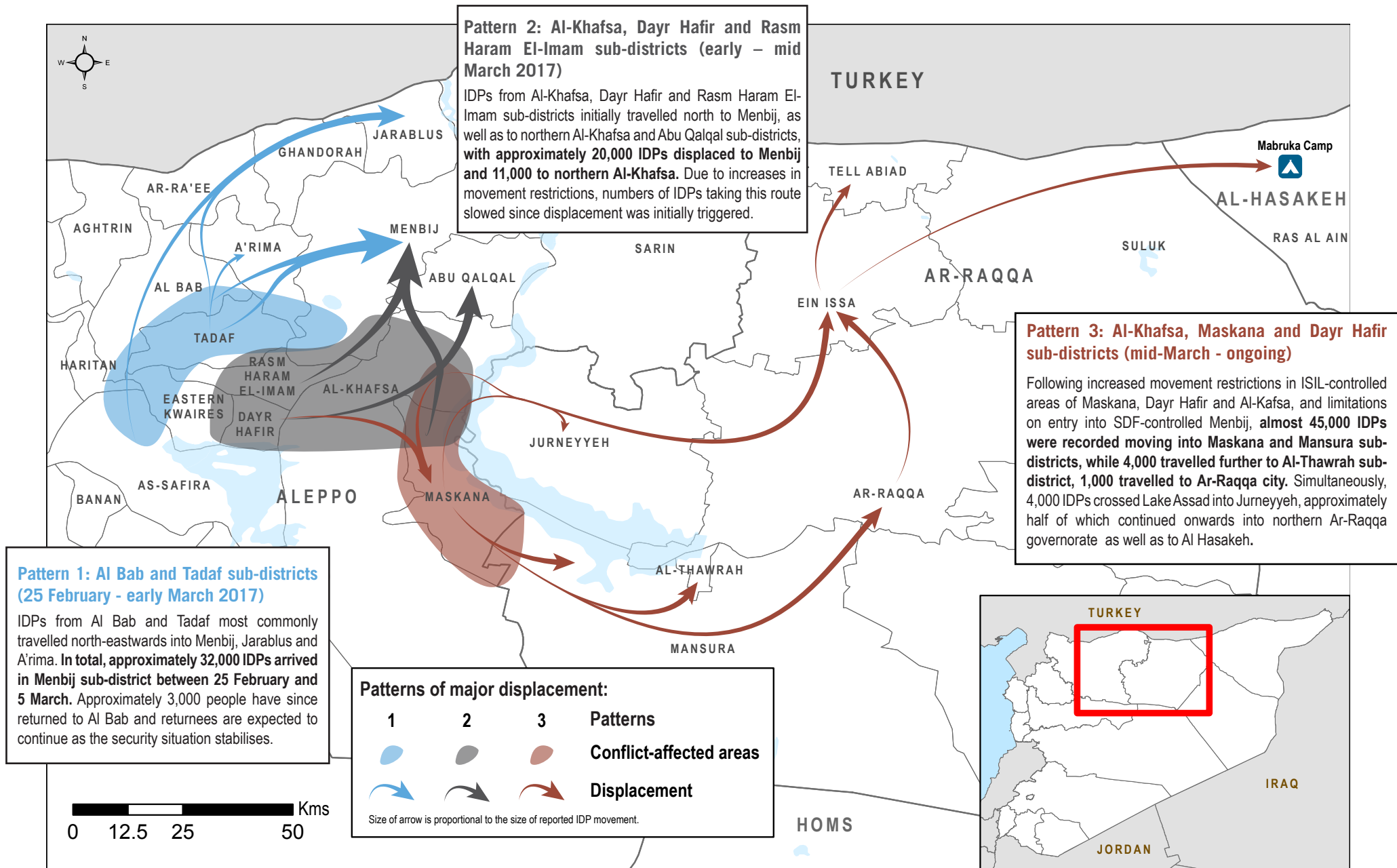
- As was the case during late February, IDPs from conflict-affected areas travelled northwards towards Menbij, with an estimated 20,000 IDPs arriving between 1 - 7 March⁶.
- Additionally, 10,830 IDPs were displaced into the north of Al-Khafsa sub-district from Al-Khafsa city⁷, while 1,500 IDPs were recorded arriving to communities in Abu Qalqal sub-districts⁸.
- However, interviewees reported that numbers of IDPs taking this route slowed since initial movement was triggered, as movement restrictions increased for displaced populations.

Pattern 3: Movement south-east from Al-Khafsa, Maskana and Dayr Hafir sub-districts (mid-March - ongoing)

During early-mid March, conflict continued to affect communities in Al-Khafsa and Dayr Hafir sub-districts, as well as extending into Maskana sub-district. In contrast to previous displacement patterns, IDPs began moving south and eastwards into neighbouring Ar-Raqqa governorate.

- **Between 8-9 March, a total of 44,750 IDPs were recorded moving into Maskana and Mansura sub-districts, while 4,000 travelled further to Al-Thawrah sub-district and 1,000 to Ar-Raqqa city⁹.** This movement within ISIL-controlled areas was commonly reported to have been caused by increased restrictions of movement imposed on civilians.
- Additionally, interviewees reported that IDPs trying to enter SDF-controlled areas of Menbij sub-district faced increased limitations, and consequently displaced populations began moving eastwards into Jurneyyeh sub-district (Ar-Raqqa governorate). **Between 8-9 March, 4,000 IDPs were recorded crossing Lake Assad into Jurneyyeh⁹.**
- For IDPs who travelled eastwards to Jurneyyeh, approximately half travelled onwards to the cotton centre camp in Ein Issa and 1,300 IDPs had arrived to the camp by 13 March¹⁰. It is estimated that of the 1,700 IDPs currently residing at the cotton centre, 800 are IDPs from eastern Aleppo governorate.
- Following screening processes at the Ein Issa camp, some IDPs continued onwards, with approximately 270 people arriving in Mabrouka camp (Al Hasakeh governorate) by 20 March. Recent field reports from organisations working in the area estimate that between 1,000 - 2,000 IDPs originating from eastern Aleppo sub-districts had been stopped during transit and brought to Mabrouka camp between 20 and 30 March.
- At the time of data collection, interviewees in these sub-districts reported that none of the IDPs who left due to the escalation of conflict, had since returned to their communities of origin due to the ongoing fighting.

Map 2: Overview of major displacement patterns in eastern Aleppo governorate (late February 2017 - present)



DISPLACEMENT DYNAMICS

IDPs have generally moved together in large groups of families using cars, trucks, tractors, motorbikes and by foot. **In addition to the direct ground clashes and shelling, interviewees reported that travel between areas of different control had been a restricting factor for IDPs.**

For populations trying to leave ISIL-controlled areas, movement has been prevented across affected sub-districts. Simultaneously, reported barriers to movement into SDF-controlled areas were associated with lengthy and uncertain screening processes, and reported risk of detention for those unable to present identification documents (IDs). Interviewees reported that IDPs arriving to Menbij who did not have appropriate IDs had been detained. As is the case for IDPs arriving to northern Ar-Raqqa governorate¹¹, the need to secure a guarantor residing in the area was an additional barrier to movement into Menbij, although in some instances, guarantors included other IDPs from the same area of origin. In other cases however, those that had arrived for screening subsequently fled southward due to uncertainty of waiting periods during the screening process. Further, while in transit interviewees reported that IDPs commonly faced the risk of landmines, shelling, gunfire, detention and conscription by military groups.

Populations that have remained in conflict-affected areas, are reportedly commonly prevented from leaving by military actors, either through the threat of gunfire and detention, or because of conscription of family members. Additionally, some members of the population had remained because they did not have enough money to pay for movement, as well as to protect their housing and land assets from expropriation.

INTENTIONS

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DECISION TO LEAVE

Proportions of displaced populations differed across sub-districts and are most often dependent upon a combination of the following factors, in order of importance:

1. **Severity of conflict:** areas particularly affected by airstrikes and heavy ground offensives have experienced more outward movement; particularly notable in Al Bab, Deir Hafir, Al-Khafsa and Maskana.
2. **Parties involved in the conflict:** involvement of certain actors reportedly results in greater outward movement; particularly involvement of forces associated with conscription, direct personal security threats and imposition of taxes at checkpoints lead to greater displacement.

3. **Destruction of infrastructure:** large-scale destruction acts as a push factor, as observed in Al Bab and Dayr Hafir (i.e. homes, government buildings, schools, roads)
4. **Loss of income and employment opportunities:** this has occurred primarily due to conflict across the assessed area, particularly affecting those who are involved in agriculture and trade.
5. **Reduced access to food and increased market prices:** this has been observed in Dayr Hafir, Tadaf and Rasm Haram El-Imam sub-districts.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DECISION TO REMAIN

The likelihood of remaining is also affected by the severity of conflict and trust in parties involved in the conflict, as well as:

- **Movement restrictions:** military activity has directly restricted movement (initially seen in Al Bab and Tadaf) due to fighting and road closures; authorities have prevented populations leaving through increased risk to life including fear of detention (Maskana), and have encouraged populations to stay through incentives such as provision of salaries for military service (Rasm Haram El-Imam).
- **Perceived safety of routes:** reports of UXOs and armed groups on routes out of communities restricts willingness to leave, particularly noted for northward routes out of Maskana and Al-Khafsa towards Menbij.
- **Desire to protect property:** common across all areas assessed; with many elderly people remaining for this reason.

ANTICIPATED MOVEMENT: FURTHER OUTWARD MOVEMENT

Interviewees indicated that further outward movement was expected in the next two weeks from areas that are facing ongoing conflict. Expected movement reflects conflict dynamics, with little further movement expected from areas in the west such as Al Bab and A'rima, as well as from Tadaf and Rasm Haram El-Imam, whilst movement is anticipated from:

- **Dayr Hafir sub-district:** estimated 30-50% of the remaining population; dependent on movement restrictions.
- **Al-Khafsa sub-district:** estimated at 50-90% of the remaining population depending on the area; with greater movement expected from areas with presence of militia.
- **Maskana sub-district:** estimated at 50-80% of the remaining population depending on the area; higher in the northern countryside compared to the main city, and dependent on potential fortification and movement restrictions from the city.

ANTICIPATED MOVEMENT: DESTINATIONS

North of Aleppo is expected to continue to be the primary area of future displacement for remaining populations, with an on-going smaller number of people heading east towards Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates.

Reports from areas affected by on-going conflict (Dayr Hafir, Maskana and Al-Khafsa) indicate that **Menbij remains a desired destination location due to its proximity, perceived safety and access to assistance**, yet a number of factors may lead to reductions in displacement flow:

- From Al-Khafsa and Maskana, it is currently difficult to go northwards towards Menbij due to the safety and security situation on the road; interviewees reported concerns about military presence and unexploded ordinance (UXOs).
- There is a requirement for IDPs to have sponsorship from someone in Menbij to enter the area, and interviewees indicated that reports of lengthy waiting periods during screening processes had been a deterrent for some IDPs.
- There is a perception that there is a greater access to livelihoods opportunities in northern parts of Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates, in particular due to the presence of agricultural land.

However, the increasing conflict in Ar-Raqqa governorate and potential subsequent movement of IDPs out of conflict-affected areas (northwards towards Ein Issa, or southwards towards Deir ez Zor) is likely to affect willingness to move to these locations, as is the reception and humanitarian assistance available to IDPs currently moving to these areas.

MOST COMMONLY REPORTED PULL FACTORS TO AREAS OF DISPLACEMENT

1. Safety and security in departure destination as well as during transit
2. Familial and social ties in destination
3. Proximity of location to area of origin
4. Improved access to food and water
5. Increased access to basic services (i.e. healthcare, WASH, education)

ANTICIPATED MOVEMENT: IDP RETURNS¹²

At the time of writing (30 March 2017), some community members have returned to Al Bab and A'rima where conflict has subsided, while elsewhere **patterns of future movement** are linked with the security situation which remains highly volatile, particularly in Dayr Hafir, Maskana and Al-Khafsa where the outcome of conflict is not yet certain.

- **Al Bab and A'rima sub-districts:** an estimated 50% of IDPs are hoping to return to Al Bab and A'rima as these areas are currently perceived relatively safe and under the control of the SDF. Small numbers of IDPs are returning to these sub-districts on a daily basis; commonly men return first to check security and property with the rest of the family following later, if deemed safe to do so. Some populations have already started making basic repairs to damaged homes. However, given that the security remains volatile, these returns should not be considered as a long-term pattern.
- **Rasm Haram El-Imam and Tadaf sub-districts:** although the situation is currently stable, significant returns are not expected, reportedly primarily due to fear of militia in the region. If control were to change, and safety and security were guaranteed, people were expected to return.
- **Dayr Hafir sub-district:** returns are not anticipated as the outcome of conflict is unclear. A fear of being caught in direct conflict and risk of conscription has furthered reduced likelihoods of return, as well as significant damage to infrastructure and looting of property in the area.
- **Maskana and Al-Khafsa sub-districts:** few returns have been observed due to ongoing conflict. Future returns are dependent upon the outcome of conflict; interviewees indicated that populations would be more likely to return were AOGs to gain control. There is also a current unwillingness to return to northern parts of the sub-district due to the presence of UXOs, and for fear of ongoing airstrikes, particularly in Maskana.

Interviewees indicated that proportions of people returning are affected by the following factors:

1. Exit of armed groups and particularly militia
2. Establishment of safe zones to allow safe return, including clearing areas from UXOs
3. Guarantee or perception that conscription will not be enforced
4. Restoration of damaged infrastructure
5. Establishing councils which supervise basic services

¹² For the purpose of this assessment, 'returns' is used to refer to sub-district of IDP origin and may not guarantee IDPs returning to their specific household of origin.

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of conflict in eastern Aleppo in November 2016, complex displacement patterns have been observed across northern Syria, primarily to elsewhere in Aleppo governorate with subsequent smaller movements eastwards into Ar-Raqqa governorate. Following the escalation of conflict in late February 2017, widespread displacement has been observed, with a recorded 74,600 new displacements from Aleppo governorate during March 2017¹³.

Outward movement is expected to continue from the current conflict-affected areas of Dayr Hafir, Al-Khafsa and Maskana, most likely northwards towards Menbij and eastwards into Ar-Raqqa. However, IDPs continue to face a number of movement restrictions, most commonly in the form of direct fighting and road closures, UXOs, as well as increased risk to life and fear of detention.

Although small numbers of IDPs have been able to return to Al Bab, further movement will depend on the evolution of the security situation. The situation remains highly volatile, and the ability to return to homes across all sub-districts will be affected by the exit of armed groups, the establishment of safe zones including the clearing of UXOs, reduced perceived risk of conscription by military groups and the restoration of damaged infrastructure.

Finally, a combination of movement restrictions, perception of authorities in control of particular areas, and perceptions of the safety, security and assistance available in alternative locations will affect intended destinations as well as the length of time that people remain displaced.

About ISMI

The IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI) is an initiative of the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, implemented by REACH and supported by Syria Relief Network (SRN) and other cluster members. Following a baseline assessment conducted between 23 October and 21 November 2016, weekly data collection cycles have been initiated to provide regular updates on IDP movements.