

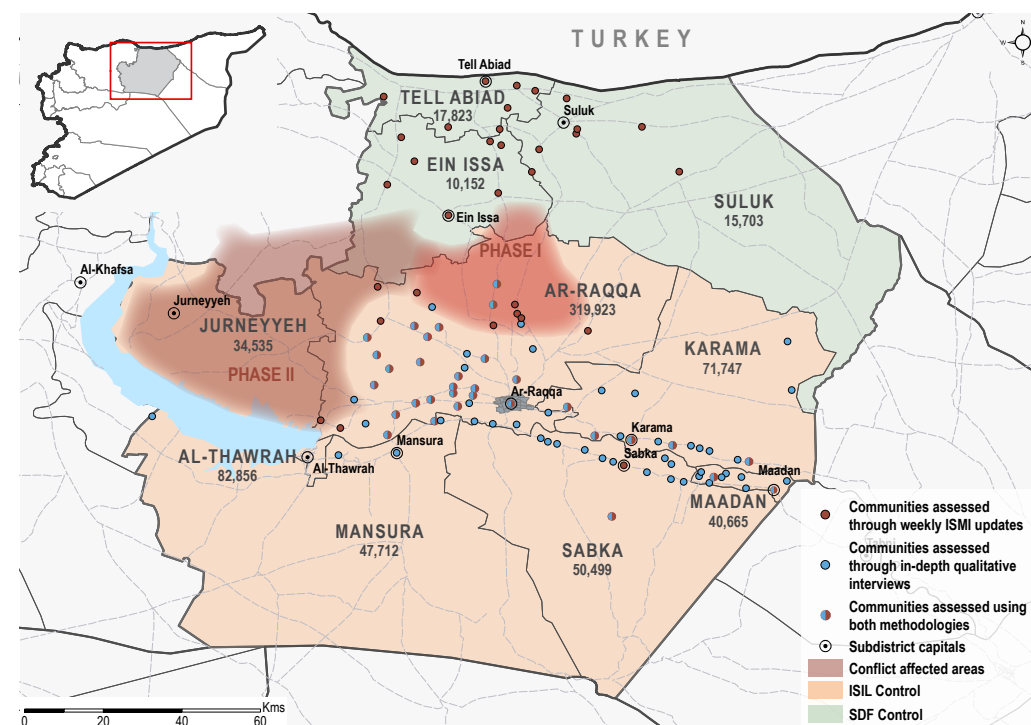
Ar-Raqqa Governorate Situation Overview: Displacement and Intentions

February 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since early November 2016, the Ar-Raqqa offensive has led to displacement both within and outside of the governorate, predominantly entailing movements into nearby non-conflict affected communities with the intention to return once security improves.
- During Phase I of the offensive (Nov 2016-early Dec 2016), an estimated 17,000 people were displaced toward north of Ar-Raqqa, southwards toward the city and northwards out of ISIL-controlled areas.
- During Phase II (Dec 2016-Feb 2017), an estimated 18-25,000 people were displaced from the areas to the west and north of Ar-Raqqa city, eastward toward unaffected villages. A large proportion were able to return to their communities of origin in a short period of time.
- As Phase III of the offensive commences, intended destinations of displacement within the next month were primarily elsewhere in Ar-Raqqa governorate (the most popular sub-districts being Tell Abiad, outside of the ISIL-controlled area, as well as Jurneyyeh, recently taken from ISIL control), followed by areas in Aleppo (most commonly A'zaz and Jarablus).
- Displacement has been influenced by restrictions in moving outside of ISIL controlled areas, as well as barriers to enter SDF controlled areas due to the requirement of a guarantor.
- Interviewees indicated a preference for localised, temporary displacement irrespective of movement restrictions, desiring to return as soon as conflict subsides both due to family ties and to protect assets and property.
- Further anticipated movements will depend on the evolution and severity of the conflict, as well as stabilisation in areas of origin.

Map 1: Coverage and population (HNO 2017 figures)



BACKGROUND

On the 6th November 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the start of an offensive to capture Ar-Raqqa city and the surrounding area. The offensive is currently in the third phase: the first phase (November- early December 2016) consisted of a push southwards from Ein Issa towards

Ar-Raqqa city, and the second (December – January 2016) a push south-westwards in Jurneyyeh sub-district around Lake Assad (see Map 1). Both phases led to displacement estimated at 17,000 people during the first phase and 18-25,000 in the second.¹ The third phase, targeting Ar-Raqqa city, where 35% of the 655,097 people in Ar-Raqqa

¹ Syria: Flash update on recent events, 25 January 2017; CCCM, IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI) data

governorate reside², has led to predictions of further large-scale displacement requiring humanitarian response to assist conflict-affected populations: the Whole of Syria Inter-Sector-Cluster Coordination Group scenario indicated expectations of 400,000 individuals displaced.

Current humanitarian access to much of Ar-Raqqa governorate is extremely limited due to security constraints and opposition from ISIL, severely hindering the response. Furthermore, since 2014, information on the humanitarian situation of people in the area has been limited due to movement restrictions, poor communication network, and controls on outward and inward flows of information. As such there is a lack of clarity regarding movement patterns and intentions of civilians currently residing within Ar-Raqqa governorate, further inhibiting humanitarian planning ability. **This assessment aims to inform humanitarian response planning by identifying current and intended displacement trends across Ar-Raqqa governorate, as well as the factors and nuances affecting people's intended destinations and decision to move.**

The assessment uses a combination of data sources, primarily from: a) in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 focal points reporting on displacement and intentions of populations in 82 communities in Ar-Raqqa, Sabka, Maadan and Karama sub-districts, conducted between 30th January and 7th February 2017, and b) displacement data from the ongoing CCCM

IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI) covering 68 communities across Ar-Raqqa governorate, collected between 28th October 2016 and 22nd January 2017. Findings are specific to communities assessed and cannot be generalised further (see Map 1).

CURRENT MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

Control of Ar-Raqqa governorate (Map 1) is split between the SDF-controlled sub-districts of Ein Issa, Tell Abiad and Suluk in the north, and ISIL-controlled sub-districts in the south; this ISIL-controlled area extends into Deir-ez-Zor and into Iraq to the east, and parts of Hama, Homs and Aleppo governorates in the west.

In general, civilians are permitted to travel within all areas controlled by the ISIL, whilst permission to move outside is heavily restricted. **Interviewees indicated that formal permission to leave the wider contiguous area is only granted to men over the age of 45-60 who require critical medical treatment and who have the required documentation.** Females and children do not typically apply for permission due to difficulties travelling alone. It was commonly reported that the number of approvals being granted has decreased significantly over the last 3 months and now permission for any members of the civilian population to leave ISIL-controlled areas is almost impossible to obtain, even with the necessary medical documentation. While it was reported that ISIL had previously allowed

people to leave the wider area in exchange for assets such as cars and properties, interviewees across all sub-districts indicated that this system had ceased over one year ago.

As a result of these restrictions, all outward population movement from ISIL-controlled areas is conducted through highly dangerous informal channels. Whilst the vast majority of assessed communities (76%) reported that there were no risks faced by people leaving through formal routes, because no one attempted to do so without permission, **interviewees widely stressed the risks associated with leaving through informal routes, including: the presence of landmines on agricultural roads, extortion, gunfire and shelling, as well as the increased risk of death or detention if intercepted by ISIL.** As a result, populations would generally prefer to leave with permission through formal routes due to the increased levels of safety and security, as well as the associated costs and risks involved when leaving informally.

In order to leave ISIL-controlled areas via informal routes, interviewees reported that people commonly travel to Ar-Raqqa city, or further north-west within the contiguous area. From these locations, departing populations travel by foot, on motorbikes or in trucks via sub-roads and through agricultural areas in order to avoid military presence of parties to the conflict. Across assessed areas, it was estimated that people are required to pay between \$200-250 USD each to leave.

Since the recent offensive began, some IDPs who have attempted to move out of conflict-affected areas and into non-ISIL controlled parts of Syria have faced barriers entering into other regions. In particular, populations intending to leave ISIL-controlled areas of Ar-Raqqa into SDF-controlled areas are travelling to a reception centre in the community of Ein Issa. Here IDPs are required to spend a few days until a guarantor residing in the area is able to accompany them to settle in surrounding communities. However, this is not always possible for IDPs without contacts in the area. There is reportedly one camp Ein Issa where approximately 180 families are currently living. The population of the camp is fluid as IDPs wait for guarantors to enable onward movement, or to return to their communities of origin once security has improved. Concerns about challenges of entering other regions was a commonly reported barrier for IDPs that seek safety in non-ISIL controlled areas in the north of the country.

DISPLACEMENT PHASES

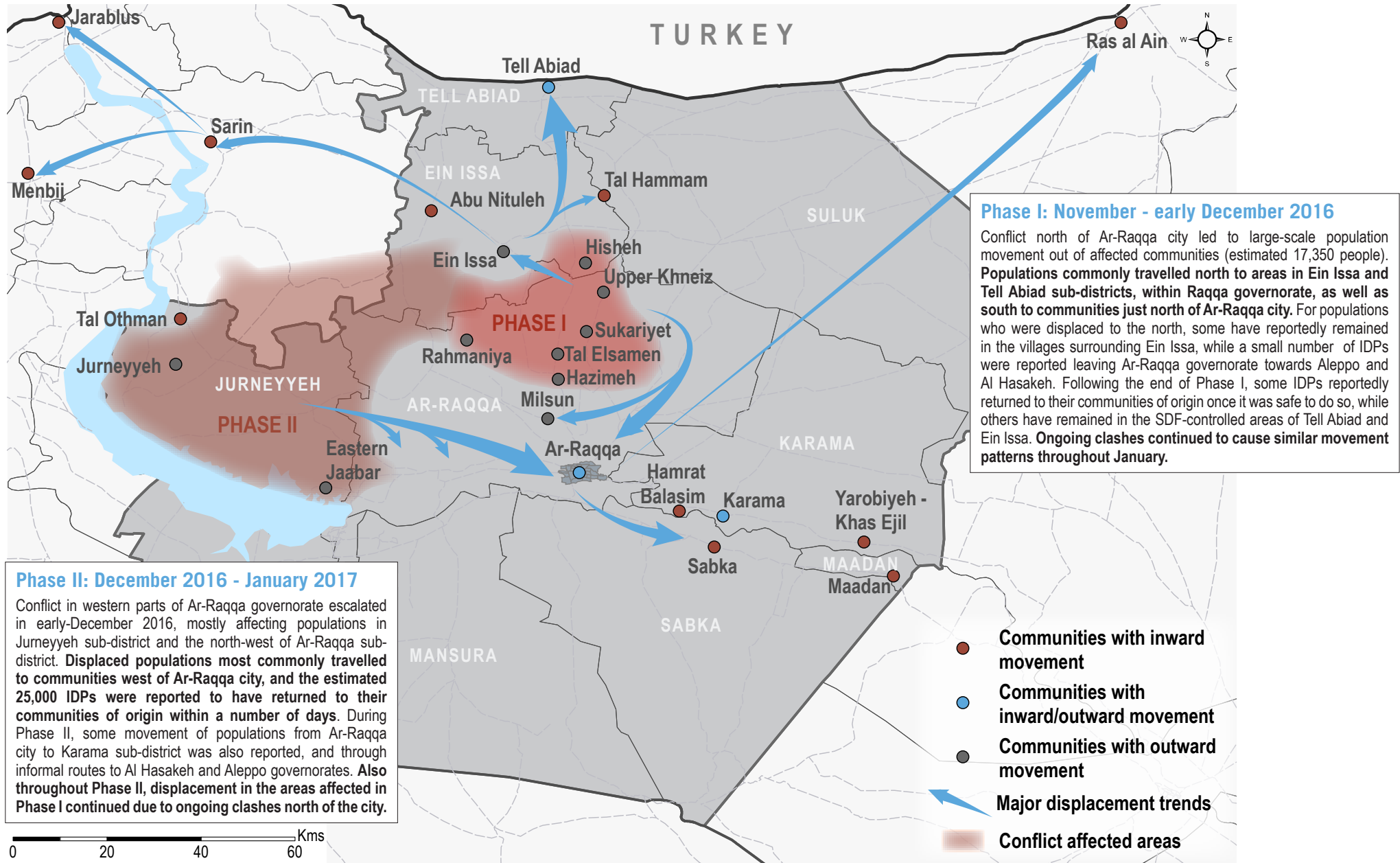
Phase I: November - early December 2016

Phase I of the offensive commenced in early November 2016, affecting populations in communities between Ein Issa in the north of the governorate and Ar-Raqqa City (Map 2). As a result of the escalation of conflict, approximately 17,000 IDPs were estimated to have been displaced³ with two major patterns of movements observed: south towards communities surrounding Ar-Raqqa city and north into Ein Issa and Tell Abiad sub-districts.

² Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017

³ IRC, Situation Update Tell Abiad, 5 December 2016

Map 2: Displacement overview



A majority of IDPs were reported to have moved north from affected communities towards Ein Issa and the surrounding villages, with those able to pass through the reception centre sites heading further north to Tell Abiad and onwards, whilst others remained in nearby communities. Additionally, smaller numbers were reported moving south from affected communities (most commonly from Sukariyet Tal Elsamen, Abbara and Hazimeh) into communities surrounding Ar-Raqqa city in early December.⁴ Where the security situation permits, many have since returned to their villages of origin.

Phase II: December 2016 - January 2017

Phase II of the offensive commenced on 10 December 2016, with heavy ground fighting and airstrikes affecting populations in the west of the governorate, particularly in Jurneyyeh and Al-Thawrah sub-districts and western parts of Ar-Raqqa sub-district (See Map 2). In total, an estimated 25,000 people were displaced⁵, primarily east towards communities west of Ar-Raqqa city, with the majority returning following stabilisation of the situation. Additionally, the threat of escalating conflict as well as ongoing clashes to the north of Ar-Raqqa city continued to cause ongoing additional movement in the areas affected during Phase I.

During December and January, the majority of IDPs affected during offensive Phase II travelled east from affected communities in Jurneyyeh and Al-Thawrah sub-districts to nearby communities, whilst others

continued further east towards Ar-Raqqa city and areas in Sabka, Karama and Maadan (see Map 2). Smaller numbers of people were reported entering Tal Othman in the north. **The majority were reported to have returned to their communities within a week once the security situation had improved.**⁵

In parallel, the previously observed patterns of displacement continued for areas affected by Phase I; over 1,600 IDPs were reported moving south towards Ar-Raqqa city from Abbara, Hazimeh, Rahmaniya and Sukariyet Tal Elsamen. Similarly, some northward movement continued, with people either staying in the Ein Issa area in nearby villages or a camp set up for IDPs, or, if able to move onwards past Ein Issa, heading towards Tell Abiad, areas in the north-west (Sarin, Jarablus, Menbij) and Ras al Ain in Hasakeh governorate.

During Phase II, minor population movements were reported to areas outside of ISIL control using informal routes. **Whilst it was reported that IDPs heading northwards most commonly travel to the registration center in Ein Issa before continuing onwards with a guarantor, it was also reported that IDPs are moving north-west within ISIL-controlled areas to other governorates through informal routes**, before using sub-roads and agricultural areas to leave. People reportedly reached Jarablus and A'zaz (Aleppo governorate) through these means, and some movement was also reported though agricultural roads towards the north east of the country and into Al Hasakeh governorate.

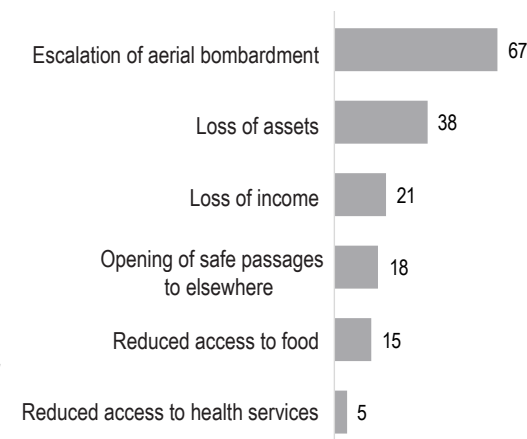
INTENTIONS

Intention to leave

Interviewees estimated that if there were no movement restrictions, up to 25% of the remaining population may prefer to leave to locations outside of the ISIL-controlled area due to the current and anticipated escalation of conflict, as well as anticipation of loss of income and assets. It was reported that movement would primarily be families (married couples with their children), as well as smaller numbers of extended families travelling in groups. However, **as a result of current movement restrictions and general insecurity, interviewees estimated that without escalation of conflict within the next month, fewer than 10% of the population would leave their homes to areas outside of ISIL-controlled area.** Leaving through informal methods has reportedly become more difficult due to increased restrictions, as well as the rising cost of using these methods. The cost per person is estimated at \$200-250, and people prefer to leave in family groups, resulting in a total cost of approximately \$1500 for a family of six people.

Despite movement restrictions, **in the case of intensified conflict in assessed communities, interviewees estimated that approximately 25-50% of people would leave their homes to locations deemed safe and accessible, either within or outside of ISIL-controlled area.** It should be noted that this refers to populations in or near directly targeted areas, as such, the

Figure 1: Most commonly reported factors to trigger population movement (# of assessed communities)



ultimate scale of movement will depend on the level of conflict faced. Further, **interviewees indicated that approximately 75% of those leaving would prefer to subsequently return once conflict was over if possible**, with the length of time of displacement as well as distance travelled highly dependent on the security situation of surrounding areas. **Such localised, temporary displacement is reportedly preferred by many due to a lack of alternative travel destinations, family ties, and a strong desire to protect current property from expropriation or looting**, which has been a common theme in the governorate for those leaving their houses to outside the area in the past.

Within Ar-Raqqa city, respondents indicated that a larger proportion of the current population compared to elsewhere (surrounding villages and sub-districts)

⁴ CCCM, ISMI Monthly Report, December 2016

⁵ Syria: Flash Update on Recent Events, 25 January 2017

may leave their homes in the cases of intensified conflict and the opening of safe passages to areas either within or outside of the ISIL-controlled area. This is likely linked to the population structure of Ar-Raqqa city in comparison to the surrounding areas. Ar-Raqqa city comprises a much higher proportion of IDPs compared to elsewhere⁶, and pre-conflict populations commonly have assets to protect and family ties to the area, whereas IDPs would be less inclined to remain for these reasons. Interviewees indicated that much displacement from Ar-Raqqa city would be to unaffected areas in the surrounding countryside, with movement further afield strongly dependent on access to money and ease of movement elsewhere.

Reasons for leaving

Escalation of conflict was overwhelmingly the most commonly reported trigger factor for reported future movement (see Figure 1). In the event of an escalation of conflict, populations would prefer to stay temporarily in nearby areas and return as soon as possible, though prolonged conflict and increased access to elsewhere would likely cause longer-term movement. Immediate movement in response to conflict is also affected by fear of persecution and a lack of knowledge on the intentions on incoming forces, which were stated to increase expected levels of displacement.

Interviewees indicated that direct loss of assets and income would be secondary triggers provoking movement, as currently

many are staying to protect assets as well as to maintain access to current income sources.

Interviewees generally did not consider loss of electricity and water to be an immediate threat. However, were cut-offs or severe reductions to occur, populations would reportedly wait a short period of time to determine whether the situation would continue. In the case that the situation becomes untenable, populations would reportedly prefer to relocate to the closest area with some level of service availability, with the intention to return as soon as possible once electricity and/or water become available again.

Similarly, markets are reportedly currently functioning across Ar-Raqqa governorate (with limitations on availability of specific items); however, if access to fuel, food and essential NFIs were severely restricted or prices increased significantly, the limited resources of the existing population would render movement essential. In this case, interviewees indicated that people would move outside of ISIL-controlled areas, but still largely with the intention of returning if the situation were to normalise.

Finally, it was reported that some families with school-aged children may be more likely to leave than others if it became affordable and safe to do so, in order to access education opportunities. The formal schooling system in Ar-Raqqa governorate has not been functioning since 2014 and there are an estimated 83,000 children not attending school within Ar-Raqqa city alone.⁷

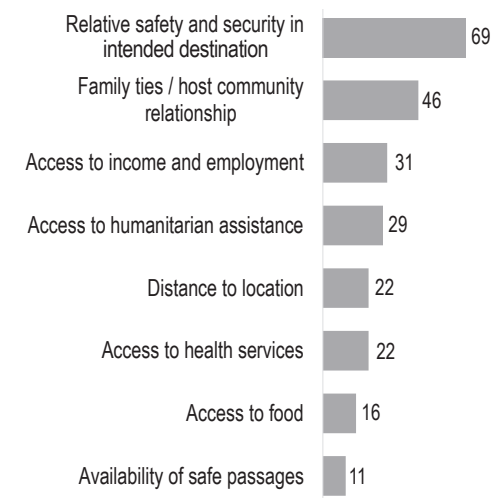
Preferred and intended destinations

Intended destinations within the next month were primarily elsewhere in Ar-Raqqa governorate, likely reported based on the current movement restrictions and general security situation (with the most popular sub-districts being Tell Abiad, outside of the ISIL-controlled area as well as Jurneyyeh, recently taken from ISIL control and nearer to the west of the country, with smaller proportions reporting to prefer Ein Issa), followed by areas in Aleppo (most commonly A'zaz and Jarablus).

Interviewees reported that smaller proportions of people would head towards Al-Hasakeh governorate due to movement restrictions and perceived challenges in entering without the support of friends or relatives in the area. However, a change in such restrictions as well as an increase in the ease of travel to the governorate by informal methods could reportedly potentially increase movement, particularly towards Ras al Ain.

Finally, although Deir-ez-Zor and specific parts of Hama, Homs and Aleppo are within the wider area controlled by ISIL and movement to these locations is possible, only a minority of interviewees reported these as intended destinations. This is due to the preference of many for staying within the nearby area in the case of conflict in order to protect assets and return when conflict subsides; though if the scale of conflict intensifies and this is not possible, there may be increased movement towards these areas.

Figure 2: Most commonly reported reasons for choosing intended destinations (# of assessed communities)



In terms of preferred destinations within the country, if there were no movement restrictions, locations within Aleppo governorate would be the most popular preferred destination, followed by elsewhere in Ar-Raqqa governorate with smaller proportions reporting preferences for Hama and Al-Hasakeh governorates. Specifically, within Aleppo, A'zaz sub-district is by far the most preferred potential destination, followed by Jarablus and Menbij. In Ar-Raqqa governorate, preferred locations are Tell Abiad sub-district, followed by Ein Issa and Jurneyyeh.

⁶ Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017: 47% IDPs in Ar-Raqqa sub-district compared to 24% in Suluk, 23% in Mansura and Jurneyyeh sub-districts and below 10% in all other sub-districts

⁷ Urban Community Profiling 2016

Pull factors

When considering destination locations, **interviewees indicated that people strongly take into account the current movement restrictions out of the ISIL-controlled area as well as the barriers faced moving into other locations.** This explains the popularity of locations such as Jarablus, Tell Abiad, A'zaz, Menbij and Ras al Ain, as these are the current destinations possible to reach through informal methods. Once people have arrived in these destinations, they then consider onward movement based on the availability of shelter, services and livelihoods opportunities.

The most important factors causing people to select their intended destinations were reportedly the safety and security situation, as well as family ties (Figure 2). Secondary reasons were access to income and employment as well as access to humanitarian assistance; **the latter in particular would reportedly act as a stronger pull factor in the case of sudden onset displacement caused by conflict.**

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the offensive in Ar-Raqqa governorate, observed displacement patterns have been reactive, with populations most commonly moving out of conflict-affected areas to nearby communities with the intention to return once the security situation has improved. As Phase III of the offensive commences, displacement of populations

is expected to increase, both within the governorate and to areas outside.

Future displacement will continue to be influenced by the changing conflict dynamics in the governorate. The escalation of conflict is the most likely event to trigger movement out of communities, however the general preference for localised, temporary displacement, as well as the current movement restrictions faced by populations out of the ISIL-controlled area and into other areas, will affect the intended locations and lengths of displacement of affected populations.

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.

Displacement was identified through an extensive network of focal points, either through alert initiated by focal points or follow-up by enumerators. A range of 2-3 focal points were interviewed in each community, while collected information was further triangulated through other sources, including CCCM member data and humanitarian updates. This approach allows for regular updates on IDP movements at a community level across ISMI coverage areas. However, movement updates are limited to areas covered by ISMI and there are, therefore, potential displacements not reported here.