

Ar-Raqqa Crisis Overview: November 2016 - October 2017

Syria, November 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between November 2016 and October 2017, the campaign to expel the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from Ar-Raqqa governorate led to an escalation of conflict across the area. Conflict resulted in multiple phases of significant displacement of civilians and resulted in high levels of need of both the displaced and those that remained in areas of direct conflict. Furthermore, the ability of host communities across Ar-Raqqa governorate to absorb internally displaced persons (IDPs) became increasingly stretched as their number grew. With conflict reducing across the governorate at the time of writing, thousands of IDPs will return to their communities of origin, likely to locations in need of post-conflict reconstruction and with severely limited basic services. Additionally, significant challenges are arising as displacement flows into Ar-Raqqa from Deir-ez-Zor governorate increase with a corresponding escalation of conflict.

- **It is estimated over 300,000 persons were displaced within and from Ar-Raqqa governorate between November 2016 and September 2017.**² Although many displacements were temporary or within the governorate, a portion of IDPs have left Ar-Raqqa governorate, primarily to Aleppo or Al-Hasakeh governorates, followed by Damascus, with smaller numbers leaving Syria entirely. Generally, as conflict progressed, IDPs fled to territory that came under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in previous phases of fighting, rather than further into ISIL-held territory.
- **The population of Ar-Raqqa city dropped from an estimated 229,000³ in late 2016 to fewer than 3,000 persons in October 2016.**⁴ Although clashes within the city did not begin until June 2017, there were significant outflows of people as early as April in anticipation of increased conflict.
- **Conditions within Ar-Raqqa city deteriorated significantly as conflict progressed from outer semi-urban neighbourhoods to the city centre.** As main supply routes to the city were cut off and the population departed, many markets and bakeries closed, causing food shortages and reducing fuel supplies. This limited the number of hours of electricity per day and thus also availability of water pumped through the main network; electricity was completely unavailable by October 2017. In addition, shelter damage increased, as did direct threats to the safety of civilians.
- **Following the cessation of fighting in Ar-Raqqa city and complete evacuation of civilians in mid-October 2017, it is likely that tens of thousands of IDPs will seek to return to areas of origin with limited access to livelihoods and in severe need of de-mining and repairs to shelters, roads and other infrastructure.** As of November 2017, a limited numbers of returns have been observed in the outskirts of Ar-Raqqa city, though larger scale returns are being prevented prior to clearance operations. Additional returns can be expected as rubble and UXO are removed.
- **Concurrently, resources and basic services in host communities outside of Ar-Raqqa city are strained due to the continued presence of IDPs.** With new significant waves of displacement from

Map 1: Ar-Raqqa Governorate and Sub-districts¹



Deir-ez-Zor already reaching Ar-Raqqa governorate, particularly in Ein Issa, it is possible that gaps and needs will be exacerbated further.

- **As of October 2017, the majority of IDPs in Ar-Raqqa were living in apartments or houses made available to, rented to, or shared with them by the host community, with smaller numbers in collective shelters.** In areas close to frontlines, IDPs have stayed in informal tented settlements, often nearby to their villages of origin to facilitate returns following de-escalation of conflict. Finally, since conflict escalated, a number of managed camps in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh have served as transit sites for IDPs. The population of these sites has fluctuated, and, with recent influxes of IDPs from Deir-ez-Zor, now greatly exceeds planned capacity.
- **Conditions are better in sites located in areas with better humanitarian access, or where host communities have been able to provide shelter to IDPs within collective centres and houses.** Nevertheless, in many areas, water, sanitation and health services are major concerns. In tented sites and collective centres, IDPs frequently access untreated water or organize their own water trucking. With the exception of host communities, most sites lack sufficient numbers of latrines, sometimes resulting in open defecation. Additionally, most IDPs must travel significant distances to access adequate medical care.

1. Areas of control taken from syria.liveuamap.com

2. CCCM statistics as of 31 October 2017.

3. "2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," OCHA, December 2016.

4. "[Ar-Raqqa City Situation Overview VI](#)," REACH, 13 October 2017.

OVERVIEW: Key indicators⁵ across geographic locations

Location	Primary shelter type	Electricity sources	Water sources and reported issues	Available health facilities	Food distributions, market functionality, food availability	Reported protection concerns
Ar-Raqqa City	Abandoned and damaged houses	No electricity (due to exhaustion of fuel supply)	Boreholes; water tastes bad and causes sickness	No functioning health facilities	No distributions; no functioning markets and severe food shortages	Threat from conflict (mines, airstrikes, errant gunfire), forced recruitment
Managed camps: Ein Issa, Mabruka, Areesheh, Al Hol	Tents provided to arriving households	Main network, private generators	Water trucking, boreholes; no quality issues reported	Mobile clinics and care points provided by NGOs, private clinics, some public facilities	Distributions reaching all locations; markets are functioning but some reported food shortages	Confiscation and/or loss of identification documents; some exposure to scorpions and snakes
Ein Issa / Tell Abiad / Suluk sub-districts	Collective centres, shared and rented apartments/houses	Main network, generators, batteries; some sites without coverage	Main network, water trucking, boreholes; at some sites, water quality is poor and causes sickness	Main hospital, primary care facilities, NGO-run clinics, private clinics	Distributions reaching some locations; markets are mostly functioning but some food shortages reported	Some threat from disputes between residents, exposure to scorpions and snakes, confiscation and/or loss of identification documents
Ar-Raqqa sub-district	Collective centres, shared and rented apartments/houses, tents	Private generators, batteries, many sites without coverage	Water trucking, untreated water from rivers and irrigation canals; at some sites, water quality is poor and causes sickness	Private clinics; most sites with no access to healthcare	Distributions reaching many locations; markets frequently not functioning but food shortages reported	Some threat from conflict (UXO), disputes between residents, exposure to scorpions and snakes
Jurneyyeh sub-district	Collective centres, shared and rented apartments/houses, tents	Private generators	Boreholes, water trucking; some quality issues at informal site	Private clinics; some sites with limited access to healthcare	Distributions reaching all sites; markets are functioning but some reported food shortages	Disputes between residents, exposure to scorpions and snakes
Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) / Mansura sub-districts	Collective centres, shared and rented apartments/houses, unfinished buildings	Community generators, some sites without coverage	Main network; no quality issues reported	Hospitals, private clinics	Distributions reaching all sites; markets are functioning and no reported food shortages	None
Karama sub-district	Shared and rented apartments/houses, tents	Private generators	Untreated water from rivers, water trucking; water causes sickness	No health facilities available	Distributions reaching most sites; markets are functioning and no reported food shortages	Disputes between residents, threat from conflict (mines, UXO), exposure to scorpions and snakes
Maadan / Sabka sub-districts	Personal, makeshift, and mass tents, significant numbers without shelter	Private generators, batteries	Untreated water from rivers, water trucking; water quality is poor and causes sickness	No health facilities available	No distributions; no functioning markets and common food shortages	Threat from conflict (armed actors, UXO, airstrikes), disputes between residents, exposure to scorpions and snakes

INTRODUCTION

Between 2014 and early 2017, the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) controlled the majority of Ar-Raqqa governorate. Humanitarian access, as well as information on the humanitarian situation of civilians in ISIL-held areas across Ar-Raqqa governorate, has been extremely limited due to strict movement restrictions and controls on information flows. Following the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) November 2016 announcement of the start of their offensive to take control of Ar-Raqqa governorate, escalating conflict has led to complex displacement within and from the governorate to locations across northern Syria. The context is volatile, leading to substantial information gaps regarding priority needs, particularly of the thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in host communities, collective centres, camps and informal settlements.

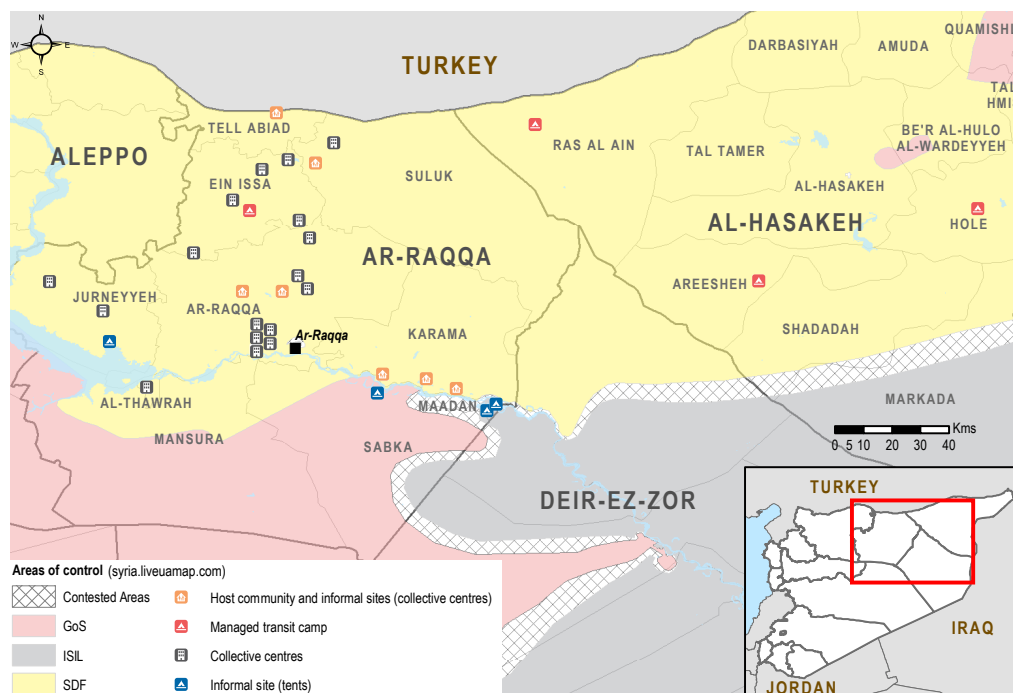
To fill these information gaps, REACH has conducted regular rapid assessments aiming to monitor and highlight developments in the humanitarian situation in Ar-Raqqa city, covering population movements, access to food and markets, shelter, non-food items (NFIs), water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and health services, and the protection situation. Additionally, in partnership with Syria Relief Network (SRN), REACH has produced site profiles aiming to provide an overview of IDP camps and informal settlements in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates, as well as information on the situation of IDPs in host communities. This crisis overview seeks to further consolidate and contextualize these findings, incorporate information from secondary sources, and provide a summary of how displacement flows, needs and gaps have changed over time.

Methodology

For this overview, REACH reviewed secondary data sources and combined findings with regular REACH research cycles: six Ar-Raqqa city rapid assessments and three IDP site profiles. For Ar-Raqqa city rapid assessments, neighbourhood level information was collected through direct qualitative interviews and participatory mapping exercises with Key Informants (KIs) who had recently left the city. For the IDP site profiles, data collection consisted of a combination of direct and remote KI interviews with community leaders, camp managers, site residents and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Different questionnaires were used to assess IDPs in camps / informal settlements / collective centres and IDPs in host communities to account for the differing natures of these sites. Assessed IDP sites and host communities were selected on the basis of accessibility and did not constitute a comprehensive list. This overview is based on data from these past assessments and other secondary sources. Therefore, findings are indicative and relevant only at the time of publication of referenced sources.

DISPLACEMENT OVERVIEW

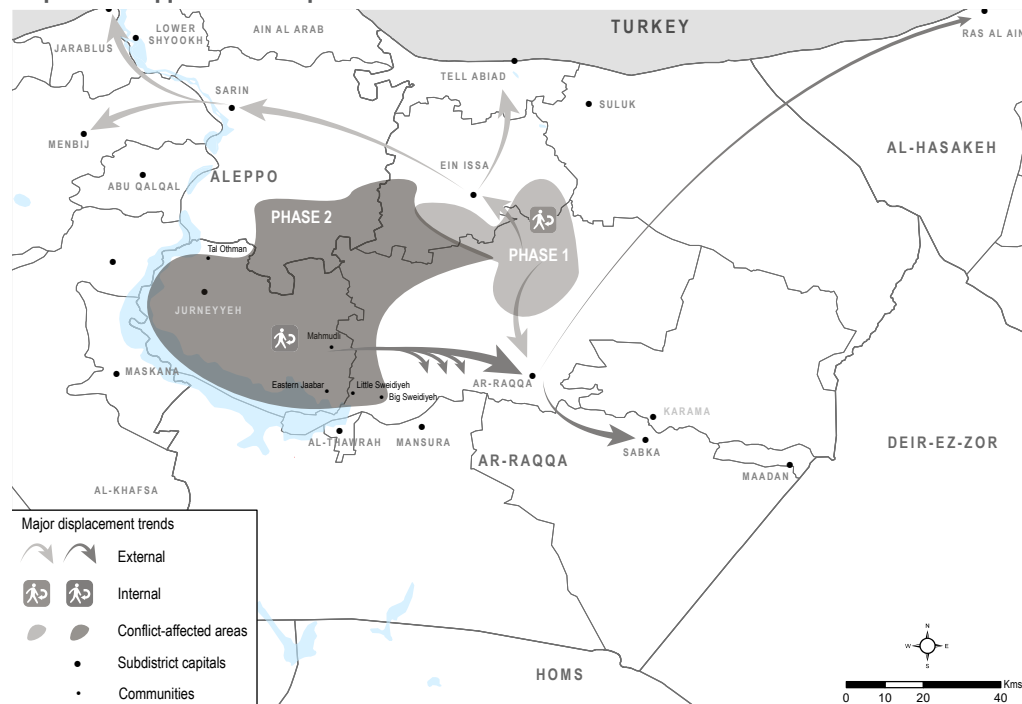
Map 2: IDP sites and host communities in NE Syria and areas of control as of 15 September 2017



Since the commencement of the offensive to take control of Ar-Raqqa governorate from ISIL in November 2016, conflict has gradually escalated over five announced phases of military operation and corresponding waves of civilian displacement. When high-paced military activity affected areas with lower population density, such as in villages to the north of Ar-Raqqa city, displacement was limited in volume, duration, and the distance IDPs travelled. However, when longer term and larger scale operations affected major population centres, such as Ar-Raqqa and Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) cities, displacements numbered in the tens of thousands per month along established displacement routes.

Additionally, there has been a general pattern of territories recently controlled by the SDF (in which conflict has abated) serving as destinations for IDPs fleeing new areas of direct conflict. Examples include Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) city serving as a destination for Ar-Raqqa city IDPs and Karama serving as destination for IDPs fleeing conflict in Maadan and Sabka. IDPs choose destinations not only because of geographic proximity (to enable a swift return) and the safety/security situation, but also because of access food, water, health services and humanitarian assistance.

Map 3: Ar-Raqqa Crisis - Displacement Phases I and II



Phases I and II: November 2016 – January 2017

Up to 42,000 IDPs displaced when fighting escalated to the north of Ar-Raqqa city and in areas in western Ar-Raqqa governorate.⁶

Primary IDP movement patterns:

- Phase I: Out of ISIL-controlled areas to the north toward Ein Issa camp with some IDPs moving onward to Tell Abiad, Menbij, Jarablus or other areas, and to the south, away from conflict lines and deeper into ISIL-controlled territory towards Ar-Raqqa city.
- Phase II: Eastwards to Ar-Raqqa city and further east to Karama; as well as inside Jurneyyeh sub-district with near-immediate returns.

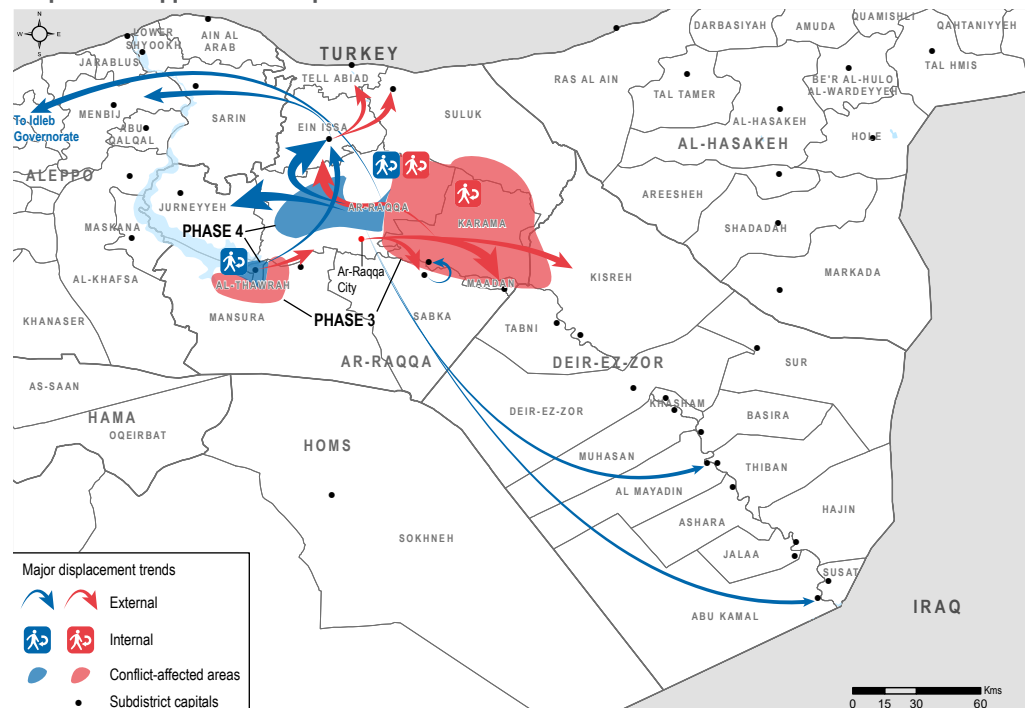
Phases III and IV: February – June 2017

With fighting reaching major populated areas, such as Al-Thawrah (Tabqa), Mansura, Ar-Raqqa and Karama sub-districts, displacement increased substantially to more than 200,000 persons. More than 160,000 people reportedly displaced in May alone.⁷

Primary IDP movement patterns:

- Phase III: Departures from Ar-Raqqa city in three directions: east to Sabka and Maadan sub-districts and Deir-ez-Zor governorate; north to Ein Issa, Suluk and Tell Abiad sub-districts; and west to Jurneyyeh sub-district. Others displaced internally within Al-Thawrah district or moved east toward Ar-Raqqa city. Additional civilians were locally displaced around Karama.
- Phase IV: Continued and increased departures from Ar-Raqqa city to villages surrounding the city and along major displacement routes described in Phase III.

Map 4: Ar-Raqqa Crisis - Displacement Phases III and IV



6. "Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa – Situation Update No. 2," OCHA, 6 March 2017.

7. "Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa – Situation Update No. 7," OCHA, 3 June 2017.

Phase V: June – October 2017

On June 6, SDF operations reached Ar-Raqqa city and those civilians that had not already fled the city left in the ensuing weeks and months as neighbourhoods were captured by the SDF. An estimated over 100,000 civilians departed from Ar-Raqqa city between June and September via SDF-facilitated departure routes with less than 3,000 estimated to remain in ISIL-held areas at the time of the most recent REACH assessment in early October.⁸ In late October, the city was reportedly entirely empty of civilians; however, in early November 2017 returns were reported in one outer neighbourhood of the city.⁹

Primary IDP movement patterns:

- To the north to Ein Issa, to the west to Al-Tabqa city (Al-Thawrah), to the east to Karama before traveling north to Suluk sub-district or Al-Hasakeh governorate.

Government of Syria Advance: Southern Ar-Raqqa: June – October 2017

As SDF operations progressed in Ar-Raqqa city, Government of Syria (GoS)-aligned forces advanced east into ISIL-held territory along the southern bank of the Euphrates river. This caused a wave of civilian displacement and an estimated 29,000 individuals were displaced in August from Maadan and Sabka alone.¹⁰ Later, GoS forces advanced directly into Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

Primary IDP movement patterns:

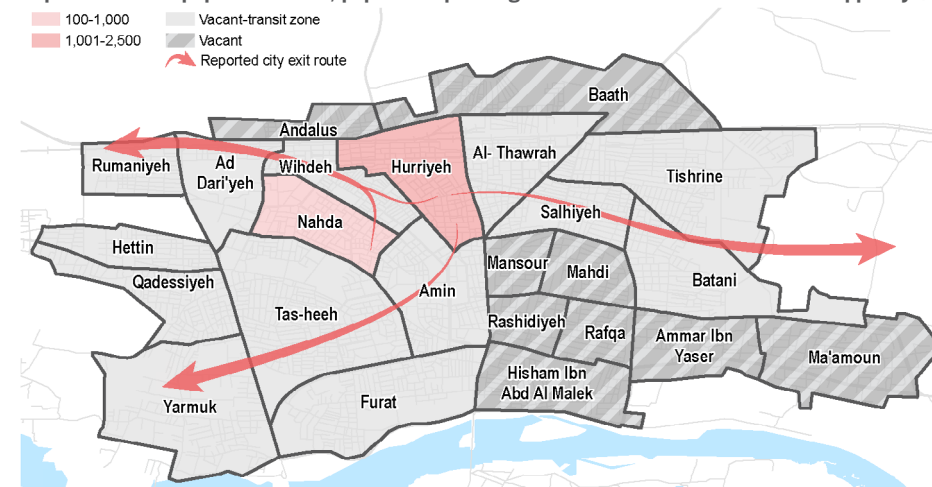
- North, crossing the Euphrates river into Karama sub-district at great risk; East and South into Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

Map 5: Ar-Raqqa Crisis - Displacement Phase V



HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW: Ar-Raqqa City

Map 6: Estimated populated areas, population per neighbourhood and exit routes in Ar-Raqqa city (Oct. 2017)



The escalation of conflict in and around Ar-Raqqa city that began in May 2017 (Phases IV and V) resulted in near complete depopulation of the city. In November 2016, the estimated population of the city was 229,000.¹¹ Just after the start of SDF operations in the city in June, there were an estimated 100,000 residents left.¹² In mid-October, only 2 of the city's 24 neighbourhoods were still inhabited and it was estimated that no more than 3,000 persons remained. Following the subsequent takeover of the city, it was entirely evacuated at the end of October 2017.

Many IDPs indicated that they hope to return to their neighbourhoods of origin as soon as possible, situation permitting. In some areas, the SDF has facilitated limited daytime visits for displaced residents to check on the status of their property. However, thus far, due to the security situation and extensive presence of mines, permanent returns have generally been prevented by authorities. Nevertheless, a small number of returns was reported in early November.⁹

According to KIs, the situation in Ar-Raqqa city at the time of the most recent REACH assessment was severe across all humanitarian sectors. Those in the city remained directly at risk from the conflict, facing threats such as airstrikes, sniper fire, mines and improvised explosives. There were no functioning bakeries or markets (though a lone shop was selling exclusively rice and bulgur). Remaining residents were reportedly taking food from the abandoned houses of those who had fled. Health services were not available, as the one facility that was functioning previously, the National Hospital, was not providing services. Boreholes were the sole source of water, but were not providing sufficient volumes to meet needs. The water was of poor quality and reportedly led to sickness. There was no electricity because diesel fuel supplies for running generators had run out and there was a high level of shelter damage across the city, especially in central areas.¹³

8. "Ar-Raqqa City Situation Overview VI," REACH, 13 October 2017.

9. "Residents of 1st neighborhood liberated in al-Raqqa return," ANHA, 5 November 2017.

10. "Syria Crisis: North East Syria – Situation Report No. 14," OCHA, 15 August 2017.

11. "2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," OCHA, December 2016.

12. "Ar-Raqqa City Situation Overview," REACH, 23 June 2017.

13. "Ar-Raqqa City Situation Overview VI," REACH, 13 October 2017.

AR-RAQQA CITY SECTORAL OVERVIEW: Key Indicators and Humanitarian Gaps

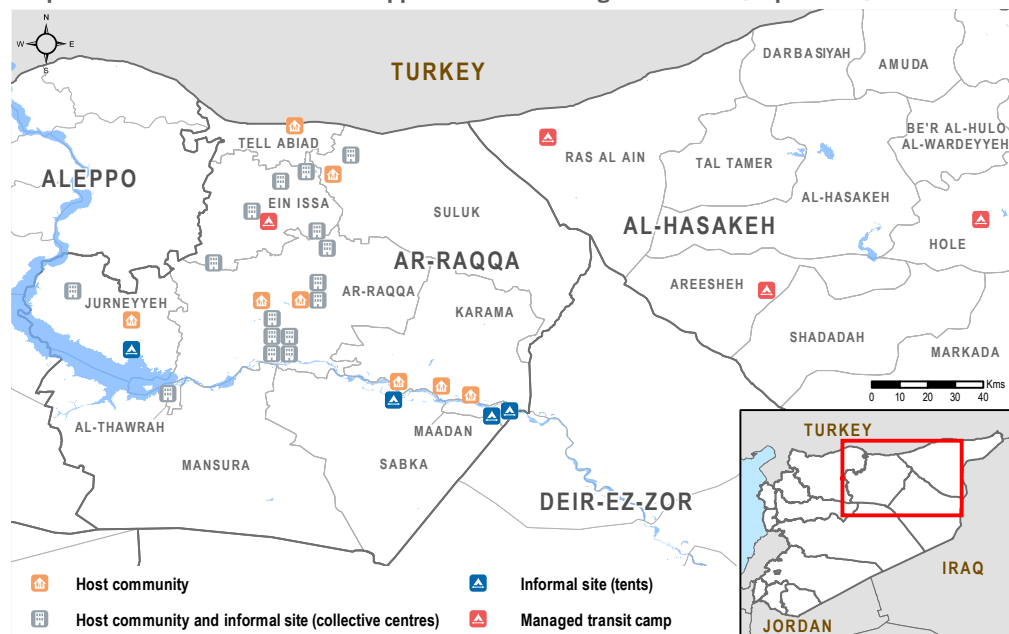
Sector	Humanitarian Situation	Gaps and Needs
Food	At the onset of ground fighting in Ar-Raqqa city, food markets were functioning and reasonably supplied. Markets have since closed as residents have departed the city and as food stocks have depleted with the cutting off of supply routes. So-called “conflict traders” continued to sell some food supplies for months, however, as of September, residents were reportedly relying exclusively on stored food or food taken from abandoned homes.	With no markets functioning in the city due to threat from conflict, lack of demand and blocked supply routes, basic markets may resume functioning as conflict de-escalates. However, demining, rubble clearing and building repairs will be critical for reopening supply routes and resuming major commercial activity. Likewise, with many bakeries destroyed by conflict, machinery will be needed to restore bread production to pre-conflict levels. There will likely be a significant need for emergency food aid immediately after the cessation of fighting. This will minimize the likelihood of secondary displacements caused by insufficient access to food.
WASH	In June 2017, the main water network was functioning every few days, though water was reportedly of poor quality throughout much of the city. However, as conflict escalated, municipal water pumps stopped functioning (reportedly due to limited access to electricity) and residents began relying on water taken directly from the Euphrates river or from neighbourhood boreholes. In early October, residents remaining in the city reportedly exclusively relied on a dwindling number of functioning boreholes for water.	With important water infrastructure reportedly not fully functional even before the escalation of conflict, ¹⁴ significant assessments and repairs to the water network will be needed in order to restore full functionality – in 14 out of 24 neighbourhoods the water network is reportedly in need of repairs. Neighbourhood boreholes, many of which were reportedly dug during conflict and subsequently booby-trapped prior to ISIL retreat from certain areas, cannot be relied on to provide for water needs of returnees.
Health	The number of trained medical staff in Ar-Raqqa city has decreased since ISIL took control in 2014. In June 2017, National Hospital was reportedly functioning, though not commonly accepting civilians, along with a number of informal clinics running in peoples’ homes. Since then, the hospital has been severely damaged by conflict, there are reportedly no longer any functioning informal health points, and the majority of trained medical personnel have left.	In addition to demining and repairing damage to numerous health facilities that have not functioned for months, as conflict deescalates, the severe shortages of medicine, medical supplies and equipment, and trained medical personnel will have to be addressed.
Shelter	Although reports of shelter damage in June were limited, as fighting has progressed in the city, destruction has reached high levels. While initially residents were reportedly sheltering in their own homes or in undamaged buildings that had been abandoned by neighbours, by August, remaining residents were reportedly living in basements and sometimes in severely damaged homes in the hope of evading airstrikes.	Damage to buildings in the city is extensive – in 16 of 24 neighbourhoods, more than half of shelters are reportedly unsafe to live in. With current residents already sheltering in damaged buildings, it will be important for actors to provide potential returnees with shelter kits and other assistance to ensure that they are not sheltering in unsafe conditions.
NFIs	Electricity from the main network has not been available since Al-Tabqa Dam stopped producing power in May. As conflict in Ar-Raqqa city increased, limited and intermittent access to electricity from private generators steadily decreased. Additionally, although most non-food items were available in markets in June 2016, albeit at inflated prices, all such markets have since closed.	There has reportedly been significant damage caused to electricity infrastructure by conflict and looting of transformers and wiring. Even with repairs, the restoration of main network power will depend on the pace of repairs to damaged turbines at Al-Tabqa and Al-Baath Dams upriver. For the foreseeable future, therefore, steady access to electricity for Ar-Raqqa city residents will likely depend primarily on the presence of private and community generators and the availability and affordability of fuel to run them. The availability of other non-food items will, like food, depend on the status of commercial supply routes and demand.
Protection	Prior to the escalation of fighting in June, residents of Ar-Raqqa city reportedly faced significant protection concerns such as forced and early marriage, family separation and conscription. Although these concerns remain, as conflict increased, primary threats to civilians reportedly shifted to mainly come from mines, UXO, aerial bombardment and errant gunfire. ¹⁵	One of the greatest challenges in the city post-conflict is the extensive presence of mines, UXO and booby traps. However, returnees may face additional protection concerns, similar to those faced elsewhere in the governorate, including child labour, forced conscription, disputes between residents and psychological trauma.

14. “Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa – Situation Update No. 6,” OCHA, 23 May 2017.

15. Aerial bombardment and errant gunfire ceased to be an issue following de-escalation of conflict in mid October 2017.

HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW: Displacement outside of Ar-Raqqa city

Map 7: Assessed IDP sites in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates (Sept. 2017)



There are four main types of IDP sites across northeast Syria where IDPs have gathered since the onset of the crisis: managed camps, informal tented settlements, collective centres and host communities.

Managed camps are sites managed by humanitarian actors and local authorities, to which IDPs are taken for screening before obtaining the necessary sponsorship to reside in a host community nearby, or relocating to areas elsewhere in Syria. International organizations have been providing services in these camps.

Informal tented settlements, though sometimes overseen by local authorities, are open spaces where IDPs may arrive and depart without restrictions. Humanitarian access is more limited at these sites due to their relative insecurity, resulting in significant needs gaps, and site populations are often highly variable. Others are staying in collective shelters usually within villages, most commonly schools or government buildings.

Within host communities, IDPs can be found sheltering in homes that have been made available to, rented out to or shared with them. There are far more IDPs living in host communities than anywhere else in Ar-Raqqa. These IDPs lie frequently beyond the reach of humanitarian actors simply because they are difficult to identify and provide assistance to.

Collective centres, on the other hand, are more easily accessed. However, because they are often public facilities normally used for other purposes, the time period IDPs will be allowed to stay in these centres is often uncertain. In northern Ar-Raqqa governorate, many IDPs have recently departed schools used as collective centres due to the start of the school year in September.

Current displacement outside of Ar-Raqqa city can be divided into seven main geographic areas: the managed transit camps in Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa governorates; northern Ar-Raqqa governorate across Ein Issa, Tell Abiad and Suluk sub-districts; the villages in the countryside around Ar-Raqqa city; Jurneyyeh sub-district; Al-Tabqa (Al-Thawrah)/Mansura sub-districts; Karama sub-district; and Maadan/Sabka sub-districts.

Across these areas, conditions for IDPs are better in sites that have not seen recent conflict and lie in areas with higher levels of humanitarian access or where host communities have been able to provide shelter within collective centres. For example, areas like Karama and Maadan/Sabka have significant humanitarian gaps – including extremely limited access to adequate shelter, food, clean water and health services. Humanitarian actors have generally not been able to fill these gaps because the security situation at these sites does not allow it. In other areas, such as northern Ar-Raqqa governorate and the managed camps, the presence of administrative authorities means that water and electrical networks are partially functioning and a multiplicity of international actors and NGOs are actively providing assistance and services. For a full breakdown of demographic information, humanitarian assistance and needs across assessed IDP sites in northeast Syria, see the most recent REACH assessment [here](#).

Managed camps: Ein Issa, Mabruka, Al Hol, Areesheh

In Al-Hasakeh governorate, Mabruka has served as a transit site since the beginning of the year, as has Al Hol, which is primarily a refugee camp for Iraqis, and Ein Issa in northern Ar-Raqqa governorate. Areesheh, in southern Al-Hasakeh is newer and has grown quickly, with thousands of IDPs arriving from Deir-ez-Zor since June 2017. From these four camps, people seeking to remain in SDF-controlled areas must have sponsorship from a guarantor, who must be a resident of the intended destination. Those who would prefer to leave SDF-controlled areas to Aleppo or Damascus are permitted to do so. However, these limited movement options have sometimes resulted in IDPs staying in camps for extended periods of time.

The sites are relatively accessible to humanitarian actors and provision of assistance and services has improved over time. UN agencies and NGOs are providing a variety of services across the camps. The sites have access to water, health services, regular food distributions, and communal latrines and showers (though the number of showers and latrines is reportedly insufficient). However, gaps have widened following the large influxes of IDPs to all sites after conflict escalation in Deir-ez-Zor at the end of August 2017. At the time of writing there were more than 90,000 IDPs in these four camps, which have an intended combined capacity of just over 35,000 people,¹⁶ the majority from Deir-ez-Zor governorate who will likely be unable to return to their areas of origin in the near future.

16. "Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 17," OCHA, 20 October 2017.

Map 8: Assessed managed camps in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates (Sept. 2017)



Map 9: Assessed informal tented sites in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates (Sept. 2017)



Informal tented settlements: Karama, west Ar-Raqqa city, Twahine

Beyond managed camps, IDPs have gathered in a number of informal tented settlements during the Ar-Raqqa crisis. These ad hoc sites have formed as a result of persons departing direct conflict zones but hoping to stay close to their areas of origin and return as soon as possible. The populations of tented sites have fluctuated significantly. For example, in April 2017 the tented sites in Karama held up to 80,000 people,¹⁷ before emptying in July and then subsequently repopulating following GoS activity in southern Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates.

Access to many of these sites has been limited due to their proximity to conflict lines. However, local council representatives reportedly oversee the sites and some international actors and NGOs have been able to distribute assistance, such as at Twahine.¹⁸

Map 10: Assessed collective centres in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates (Sept. 2017)



Collective centres: Ar-Raqqa, Tell Abiad, Suluk, Ein Issa, Al-Tabqa (Al-Thawrah) and Jurneyyeh sub-districts

Collective centres, such as schools and government buildings, have been used as shelters for IDPs since the onset of displacements in November 2016. The many known sites are in cities and towns across northern Ar-Raqqa governorate. Due to the start of the school year in September 2017, many IDPs who had been sheltering in schools have had to seek shelter elsewhere or return to their areas of origin (or nearby). The number and needs of IDPs recently displaced from these collective centres are a current information gap. Nevertheless, KIs reported that some schools may continue to serve as collective centres indefinitely, although the exact number is currently unknown.¹⁹

17. "Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa – Situation Update No. 4," OCHA, 1 May 2017.

18. "IDPs in Sites and Host Communities," REACH, September 2017.

19. "IDPs in Sites and Host Communities," REACH, September 2017.

Many collective centres are receiving food assistance from humanitarian actors. However, the adequacy of shelter varies considerably across locations, as does access to water and electricity. Collective centres in towns that have seen minimal conflict in recent years, such as those in the northern sub-districts of Ar-Raqqa, have access to medical facilities. Nevertheless, IDPs at many of these sites also must organize and pay for their own water trucking. Other types of assistance, such as hygiene kits, are distributed on an ad hoc basis and reportedly reach only a handful of sites in northern Ar-Raqqa sub-district.

Host communities: entire Ar-Raqqa governorate

Since the beginning of the crisis, IDPs have stayed in homes or on the property of host communities, or have rented out vacant rooms and homes. The majority of IDPs in northeast Syria are sheltering in host communities – REACH recently assessed²⁰ approximately 220,000 IDPs in host communities across Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates, with more than 90,000 in Al-Tabqa city (Al-Thawrah) alone.²¹ Additional tens of thousands live in areas across Jurneyyeh, Karama and northern Ar-Raqqa.

The living conditions of these IDPs vary significantly and, due to their large numbers, difficulties identifying priority locations and persons, and the geographically dispersed nature of the displacement, the ability of actors to provide assistance to these IDPs in host communities is limited.

Gaps

With the exception of locations in which IDPs are sheltering in buildings, shelter numbers are frequently insufficient and conditions are inadequate. In many areas, shelters are insecure and reportedly expose residents to scorpions and snakes.

Access to clean drinking water also remains a serious concern. At many sites, but particularly in the Maadan/ Sabka and Ar-Raqqa countryside areas, although water is available (from irrigation canals or the Euphrates river), water quality is low and frequently causes diarrhoea or rashes. Open defecation is also a concern, and reportedly most frequently practiced at overcrowded tented sites and collective centres with limited numbers of functioning latrines.

The availability of health facilities and medicine remains extremely low. Medicine for vulnerable groups (such as pregnant women and wounded persons) is nearly completely unavailable except in managed camps. Nearly all IDPs must travel significant distances (an expensive and difficult prospect) to access medical services.

Food is available to purchase from basic markets within or nearby to many sites. Additionally, although standard food baskets are reaching the majority of IDPs across northeast Syria, assistance is urgently needed in Maadan and Sabka sub-districts, where markets are not functioning, IDPs are reportedly eating only one meal per day and the security situation has prevented food distributions.

Finally, there is little to no information on the estimated 50,000 persons thought to have departed Ar-Raqqa governorate to Menbij (Aleppo governorate) and onwards since November 2016, or the small numbers of people fleeing deeper into ISIL-held territory in Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

CONCLUSION

As the battle for control of Ar-Raqqa city and anti-ISIL military activity across the governorate comes to an end, significant humanitarian gaps remain – not only in the heavily damaged neighbourhoods of the city, but also in strained communities hosting thousands of displaced people. Many IDPs are in need of adequate shelter, particularly in informal tented settlements, where IDPs are using makeshift shelters or are sleeping in the open. Likewise, Ar-Raqqa city, which has sustained significant damage due to conflict, will need extensive shelter repairs. Access to clean water and electricity is severely limited throughout the governorate. Medical facilities are available only in major population centres far from recent conflict lines. In addition, although food distributions are reaching all but the most conflict-affected areas, it may prove a challenge reopening adequate post-conflict supply routes, particularly in light of the extensive presence of mines and UXO.

In the months ahead, thousands of IDPs are expected to depart collective centres, informal settlements, camps and host community homes to return to their areas of origin. These waves of returns may occur regardless of the status of services and the availability of critical supplies in destinations like Ar-Raqqa city. Meanwhile, many areas have started to receive new waves of IDPs from Deir-ez-Zor, where conflict has been ongoing since August. There are significant challenges associated with providing assistance in such a complex and insecure environment. However, unmet needs of the populations both inside and outside of Ar-Raqqa city may not only prolong the humanitarian crisis, but also spark a second wave of displacement. IDPs may seek basic supplies and services in host communities and informal sites spread across the governorate, which are often difficult to identify and access. This will only exacerbate gaps as potential displacement sites are already receiving tens of thousands of additional IDPs from conflict-affected areas in Deir-ez-Zor and elsewhere.

About REACH

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts.

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20. "IDPs in Sites and Host Communities," REACH, September 2017.

21. These figures solely represent the estimate number of IDPs living in assessed areas and are not comprehensive.