

Situation Overview: Displacement from Northern Aleppo

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Introduction

Since January 31st, intensified conflict in Aleppo Governorate has prompted large scale displacement from rural villages north of Aleppo city. In the anticipation of armed clashes, up to 50,000 individuals fled north towards the border with Turkey, reportedly leaving their villages deserted. With the border closed, two nearby villages, A'zaz and Bab al-Salame, have received the majority of IDPs.

Estimates for the number of displaced persons have been increasing rapidly. On February 6th, Turkish officials estimated that approximately 35,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) had gathered along the area near the border.¹ The following day, figures were revised upward to some 45,000² or 50,000³ people, with an additional 70,000 predicted to arrive at the border in the following days.⁴

REACH conducted a rapid assessment to provide information on displacement patterns to date, the likelihood of future displacement, and the humanitarian needs of displaced populations. Information presented in this document was drawn from qualitative interviews with a total of sixteen key informants, nine in Bab al-Salame, and seven in A'zaz. Key informants included local council members, activists, journalists, and Syrian NGO workers.

Key Findings

Estimates by key informants confirm figures reported by mainstream media: approximately **36,000 individuals have fled to Bab al-Salame and approximately 9,000 have sought refuge in A'zaz** since February 1st. Key informants also confirmed that almost all IDPs fleeing to Bab al-Salame and A'zaz arrived from the villages of Retyan, Hardatnin, Diar Ajman, Mare, Manaq, Tal Refaat, and Bayanoun—all reported to be severely affected by the recent intensification of conflict.

Displacement

Located in direct proximity to active fighting, all IDPs are reported to have fled their homes in anticipation of conflict. Keen to avoid active front lines to the east, IDPs travelled north towards the border with Turkey.

IDPs left their homes quickly, taking little with them aside from winter clothing. Deteriorating security along the highway between Aleppo City and the Bab al-Salame border crossing forced many IDPs to use rural roads that run parallel to the main highway. In many cases, local councils are reported to have provided transportation to those fleeing the conflict: approximately one-fifth of IDPs in A'zaz and Bab al-Salame are reported to have used buses provided by local councils from their



Newly-assembled emergency shelters in an informal IDP camp in Bab al-Salame

place of origin. The remainder used a variety of transport methods, generally minibuses and private cars. The majority, approximately four-fifths of IDPs, travelled in groups, typically with six or seven other households, while the rest travelled as individual households.

Demographics

The vast majority of IDPs arriving in Bab al-Salame and A'zaz are women, children, and elderly people. Together, women and

children make up approximately two-thirds of new arrivals, with the elderly making up approximately one-fifth of those displaced. IDPs were already vulnerable prior to displacement, many of them reliant on farming or daily labour prior to the conflict, with stretched resources after four years of civil war. **Approximately a quarter of new arrivals had been displaced before, the majority from urban Aleppo or other rural communities in Aleppo, Homs, and Hama governorates.**

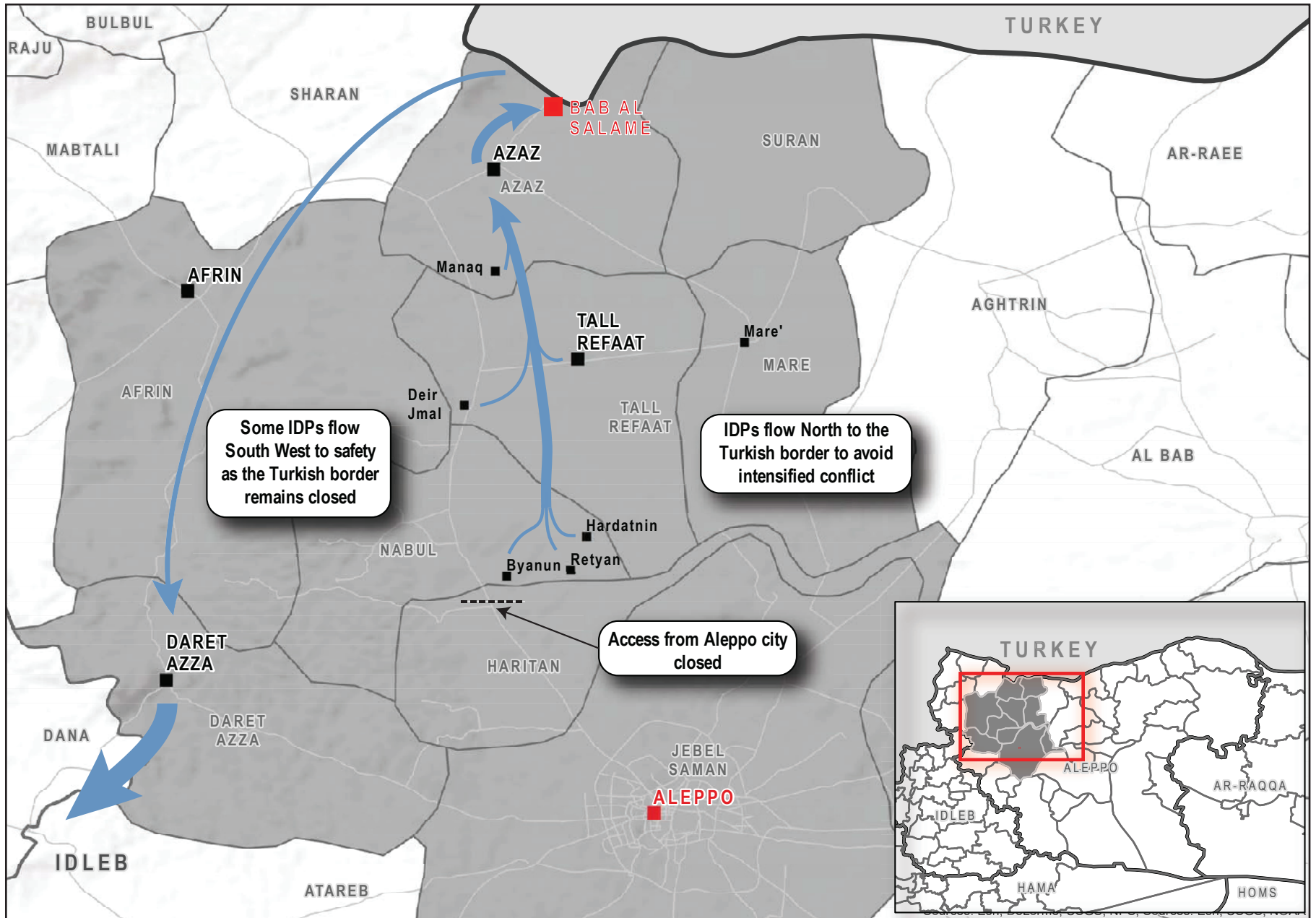
¹ "Turkish border remains closed as thousands of Syrian refugees flee Aleppo fighting." CBC News. 6 February 2016.

² "Türkiye Sınırına 45 Bin Suriyeli Dayandı" Haberler. February 7, 2016.

³ "Thousands head to Turkey fleeing Syrian offensive." Al Jazeera. February 5, 2016.

⁴ "Sınırdaki bekleyen Suriyeli Türkmen: Başka çarem yok." BBC Türkçe. February 7, 2016.

Map 1: Reported displacement routes from northern Aleppo Governorate



Intentions

While all IDPs reportedly perceive their current location to be safer than areas further to the south, the decision to seek refuge in Bab al-Salame or in A'zaz was reportedly taken at household rather than community level. **IDPs reportedly chose Bab al-Salame due to its proximity to the border, enabling the quickest passage to Turkey in the event that the border opens. Almost all these households have expressed an interest in leaving Syria as soon as possible.** While the majority of IDPs displaced to A'zaz are also interested in crossing to Turkey, approximately one-third reportedly intend to stay there until the conflict subsides. **In contrast to IDPs in Bab al-Salame, many of the new arrivals to A'zaz reportedly shared kinship ties with the local community and have been able to secure rented accommodation.** While reaching Turkey remains the primary objective of most IDPs in both locations, demands to cross may abate as alternative options and aid become available.

Humanitarian Needs

Bab al-Salame and A'zaz have a limited capacity to absorb the current influx of IDPs. Before the most recent influx, both villages were already home to a high proportion of IDPs: approximately half of the residents of A'zaz were reportedly IDPs; while Bab al-Salame's seven IDP camps already stood at full capacity.

IDPs in Bab al-Salame slept under trees and in open areas when they first arrived. With no protection from the harsh winter weather, these

IDPs were initially more vulnerable than those in A'zaz, where a larger proportion of IDPs had managed to secure rented accommodation. Thanks to the provision of tents, IDPs in Bab al-Salame have recently been able to move to informal camps, while displaced households in both locations have reportedly received blankets and food.

Despite the provision of some assistance, **new arrivals in Bab al-Salame and A'zaz remain highly vulnerable. Having fled quickly from their homes, IDPs took few resources with them and require lifesaving assistance** such as food, blankets, mattresses and other non-food items to protect them from the winter weather. Formerly reliant on rural livelihoods and unstable labour, displaced families have few savings following years of civil war, and as a result, a reduced ability to cope with their displacement. **The high proportion of women, children and the elderly represents a particularly vulnerable group, together with those who have experienced secondary or multiple displacement.** In addition, IDPs lacking family or kinship ties are likely to have less access to support networks within the host community, where resources are already stretched.

Conclusion

Should conflict continue to spread within Aleppo governorate, further large-scale displacement is considered likely.⁵ In the case of further displacement from neighbouring areas in northern Aleppo, IDPs would be likely to take similar routes, avoiding active

frontlines to travel northwards towards Turkey and placing additional pressure on services and assistance in A'zaz and Bab al-Salame.⁶ As a result, **it is vital that humanitarian actors address immediate needs in A'zaz and Bab al-Salame,** and consider pre-positioning supplies in the case of future large-scale displacements. In addition, the facilitation of new routes to provide safe passage away from active conflict areas could reduce strain on these already-stretched border communities. One example of this is an agreement on February 6 between authorities in Afrin and local councils in Aleppo, which allowed 170 displaced families to travel through Afrin to Daret Azza (see map 1, opposite). Since arriving in Daret Azza, these families have been staying with host families and in temporary collective shelters, while awaiting more permanent accommodation.

In addition to displacement in the north of the governorate, residents of eastern Aleppo city are reportedly preparing for an escalation in conflict or potential siege, with the local council instructing residents to reduce their consumption of food and medical supplies.⁷

Should large-scale displacement from Aleppo city occur, IDPs would be likely to face different options than those who have already fled from rural villages to the north. Conflict in the north would be likely to cut off access to Bab al-Salame and A'zaz, likely forcing IDPs to travel towards Daret Azza, and eventually onwards to Idlib. Humanitarian actors should therefore consider the possibility of future displacement to the south and pre-position essential supplies

accordingly, while continuing to monitor the changing situation.

About REACH Initiative

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. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, you can write to our global office: geneva@reach-initiative.org.

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5 Displacement in Aleppo, Briefing note, ACAPS, February 7, 2016.

6 "Sınırdaki bekleyen Suriyeli Türkmen: Başka çarem yok." BBC Türkçe. February 7, 2016.

7 "Thousands head to Turkey fleeing Syrian offensive." Al Jazeera. February 5, 2016.