

NORTHWEST SYRIA - SITUATION OVERVIEW

16 MARCH 2020

Context

This Situation Overview provides an update to the [previous REACH publication on 27 February](#), focusing on humanitarian developments between 28 February and 10 March 2020. **Overall, the humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate in the opposition controlled enclave of Idlib, and 'Olive Branch' and 'Euphrates Shield' areas of northern Aleppo.** The area which already hosted an estimated 1.12 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in November 2019,¹ many of which are dependent on humanitarian assistance, has seen the further **displacement of an estimated 959,000 people in just under three months.**² Most of those have been displaced to the relative safety of Azaz, Afrin and other sub-districts in northern Aleppo, as well as to Dana sub-district in Idlib.

Access to food has become an increasing concern due to diminishing availability in markets and rising prices, leading to more reliance on humanitarian assistance and other negative coping strategies. Increasing numbers of new IDP arrivals have added further strain to host community infrastructure. Local service providers and humanitarian actors lack the required resources, and are facing significant logistic and security challenges, to meet the growing needs of the population. **Inadequate land for the formation of new camps and sites leaves many new IDPs in overcrowded conditions without formalised camp support.** Of particular concern



is northern Aleppo, where many IDPs continue to reside without shelters or in makeshift structures.

Regional actors met in Moscow on March 5 to agree on a ceasefire with immediate effect. The ceasefire allowed a general cessation of hostilities and a suspension on aerial military activity, despite ongoing sporadic conflict in southern Idlib. The agreement creates a jointly patrolled Turkish and Russian security corridor on the M4 Highway, and acknowledges much of the territorial gains made by the Government of Syria. **Despite this general halt in conflict, many displaced persons are reluctant to return to the areas from where they were displaced due to concerns over a renewal of conflict.**⁴

Overview of key REACH findings

The Situation Overview aims to support humanitarian planning in northwest Syria through providing an update to the [previous overview produced by REACH on 27 February 2020](#). Key changes since 28 February are highlighted in conjunction with overall trends since the escalation of conflict in December 2019. Among the key findings highlighted in the following pages:

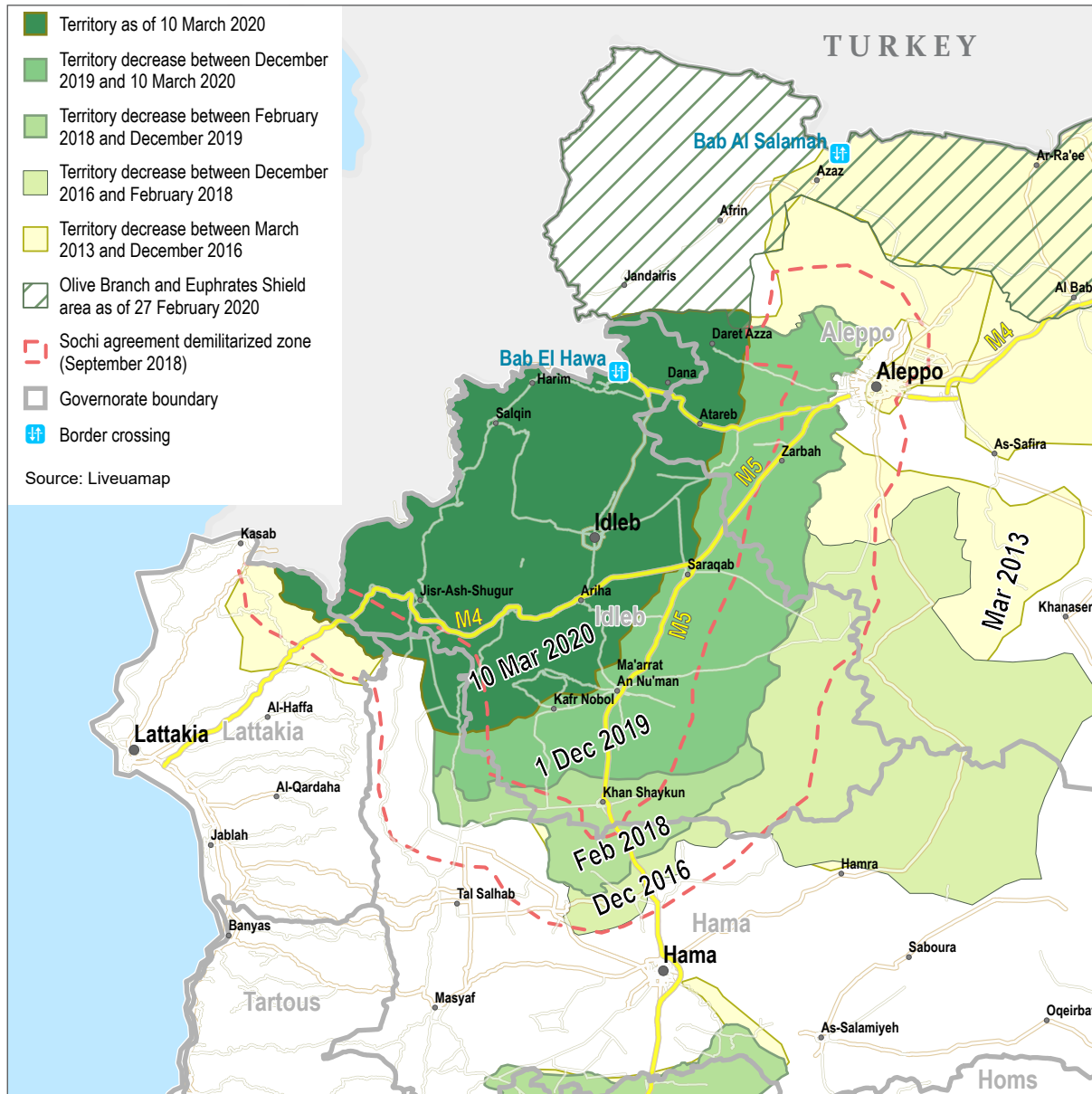
- **Since the escalation of conflict in December 2019, an estimated 959,000 people (60% of them children) have been displaced**, of which 549,000 are within Idlib and western Aleppo and 410,000 in northern Aleppo.³ Mass displacement has continued between 23 February and 8 March, with an estimated additional 11,170 IDPs. The overall increase in numbers of IDPs has led to overcrowding in camps and sites, causing substantial strain on available resources and humanitarian assistance (see part 3.1 of this report for further information).
- Data collected on 9 March shows that **the most common intended destinations of IDPs is to northern Aleppo, suggesting a significant need to focus on the current response capacity and gaps in this region.** 'Olive Branch' and 'Euphrates Shield' areas host an estimated 63% of IDPs from the total 1.40 million population (see part 3).
- **The displaced population is highly vulnerable and many basic humanitarian needs are still unmet.** Vulnerable groups were reported among new IDP arrivals in 89% of the communities in northern Aleppo and 99% in Idlib on 9 March, most of which were female and elderly headed households. Living conditions of new arrivals remain dire, as basic shelter needs (such as new tents and plastic sheeting) remain the most severe need⁴ (see part 4).
- **High inflation and continued depreciation of the SYP against the USD have led to a significant decline in the purchasing power of households since the escalation of conflict in December 2019.** Market Monitoring (MM)⁵ shows a 23% increase in the value of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) between the start of the escalation of conflict (mid-December) and mid-February. Food now ranks as the second highest priority need for newly arrived IDPs after shelter (see part 5).
- **Humanitarian support remains limited due to barriers in access and misalignment with key priority needs.** As of 9 March, 75% of assessed communities in Idlib and northern Aleppo reportedly received some form of humanitarian assistance, yet assistance has been limited for shelter, which ranks as the highest priority need. Further, barriers to humanitarian access in northern Aleppo are reported in 54% of communities mostly due to restrictions from the actors controlling the area (see part 4).

In part 6, the reader will find an annotated list of relevant information products used for this situation overview. All REACH products are available on our resource centre (<https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/syria/>).

1) HNP Population Baseline November 2019; 2) HNP IDP Snapshot 8 March 2020; 3) HNP IDP Snapshot 8 March 2020

4) REACH Emergency Need Tracking (ENT) 9 March 2020; 5) REACH and Cash Based Response Technical Working Group (CBR-TWG) Market Monitoring (MM)

Change in opposition-controlled areas



Timeline

- **March 2011:** Protests in southern Syria begin, spreading to Idleb governorate in September and intensifying in Aleppo the following year.¹
- **Early 2013:** Opposition-controlled areas include most of Idleb and northern Aleppo governorates (including east Aleppo city), as well as parts of Hama and Lattakia governorates.²
- **Mid-2014:** So-called ISIL starts expanding its areas of control in northern and eastern Syria. By May 2015, the territory under ISIL control includes large parts of northern and eastern Aleppo governorate.³
- **December 2016:** The Government of Syria retakes control of the entire city of Aleppo, following six months of besiegement.
- **March 2017:** Turkish-backed opposition forces conclude operation 'Euphrates Shield', controlling areas between Afrin and Menbij districts in northern Aleppo.
- **October 2017 - February 2018:** The Government of Syria makes significant territorial gains in Hama, Aleppo and southern Idleb governorates.
- **January - March 2018:** Turkish forces and Turkish-backed opposition groups enter Afrin in operation 'Olive Branch'.⁴
- **September 2018:** The Sochi agreement leads to the announcement of a demilitarised zone around the front line, guaranteed by Russia and Turkey.⁵ Idleb and surrounding areas of western Aleppo and north-western Hama are some of the last remaining opposition-held areas in Syria.
- **18 December 2019 - 4 March 2020:** Conflict intensifies, leading to a significant reduction in opposition-controlled territory.
- **5 March 2020 - present:** Conflict stabilizes after peace treaty signed between Turkey and Russia on 5 March, which solidified significant territorial gains by the Government of Syria in Idleb and western Aleppo.

1) [Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2013](#)

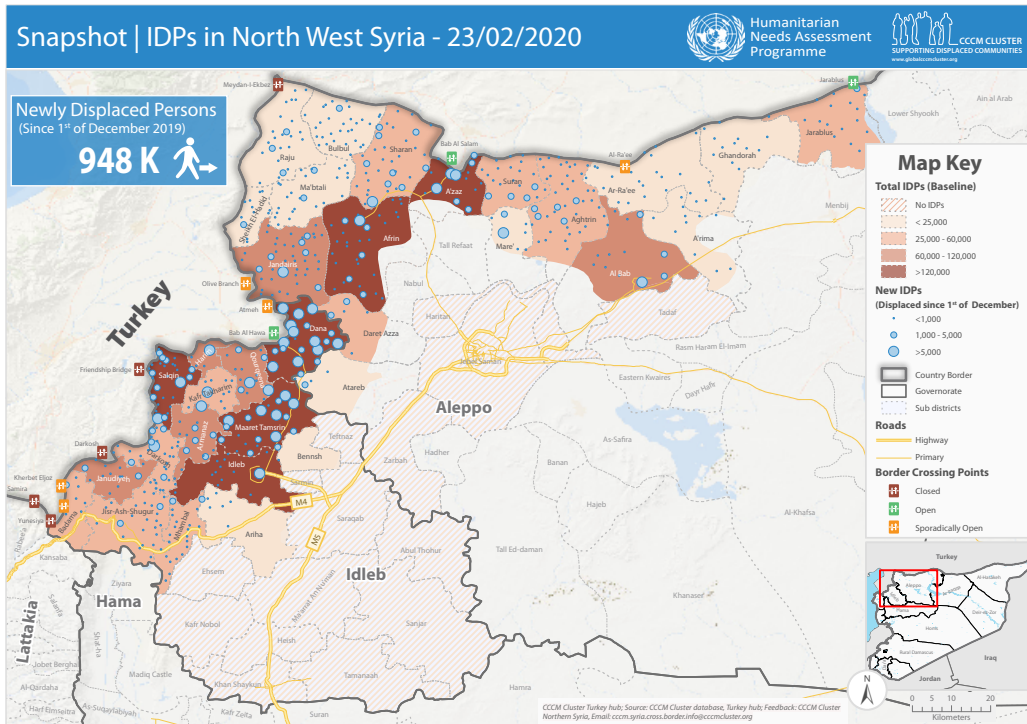
2) [The New York Times, 28 October 2019](#)

3) [Wilson Centre, 28 October 2019](#)

4) [OCHA, 15 June 2018](#)

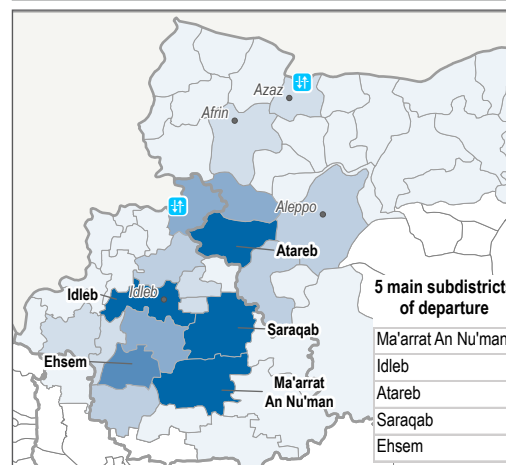
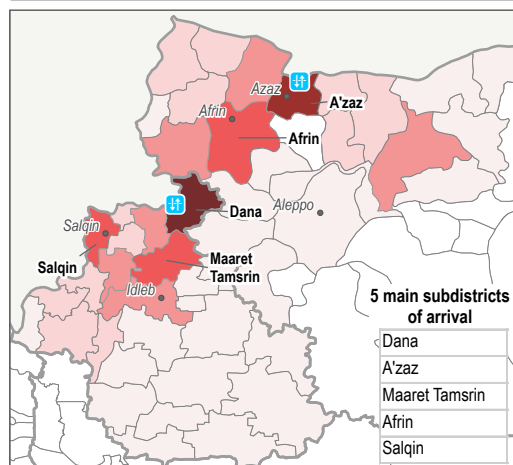
5) [OCHA, 8 May 2018](#)

3. DISPLACEMENT TRENDS



Main sub-districts of arrival (1 Dec 2019 to 8 Feb 2020)

Main sub-districts of departure (1 Dec 2019 to 8 Feb 2020)

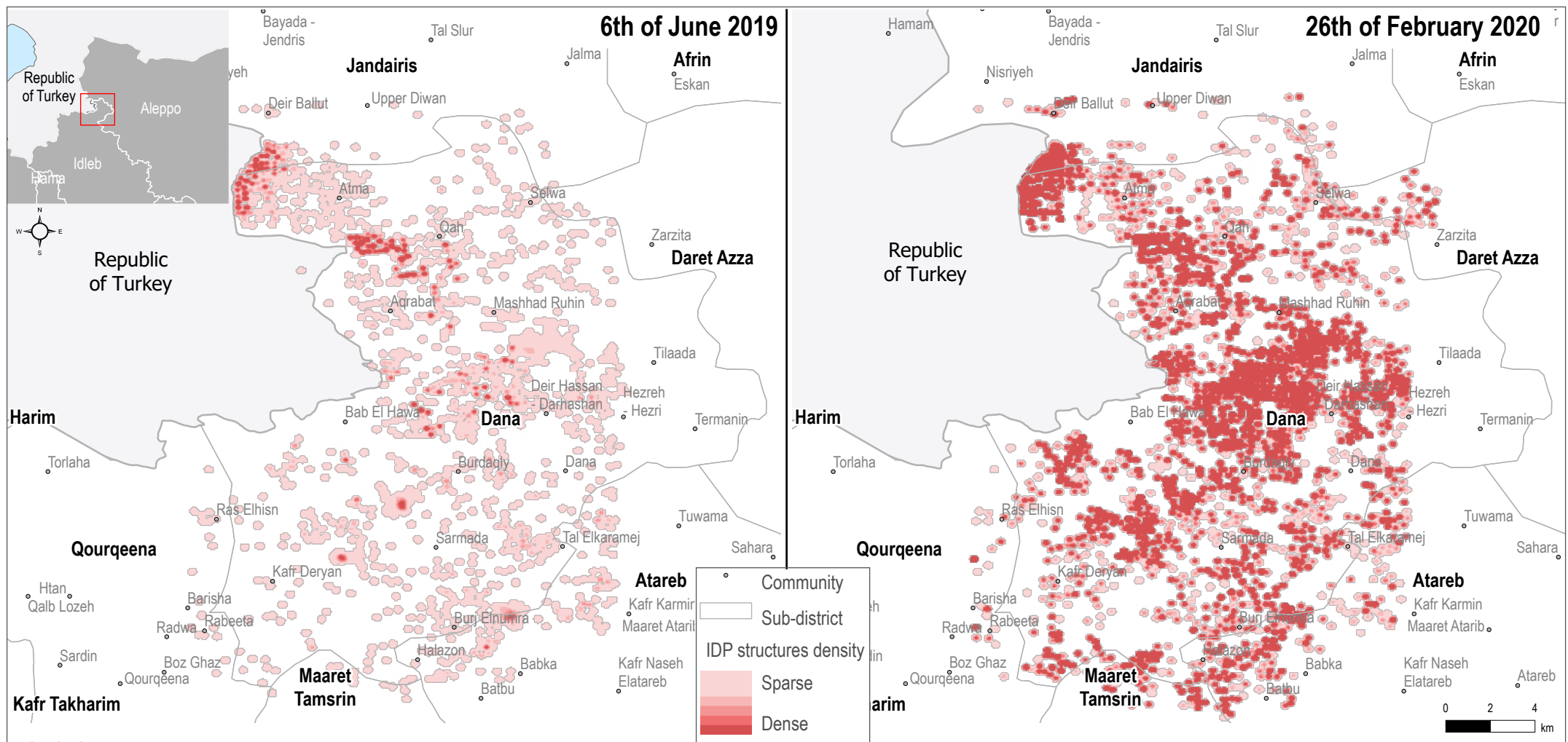


- **Displacement was widespread throughout Idlib and northern Aleppo prior to the recent escalation of conflict in December 2019.** In November 2019, the opposition-controlled area of Idlib and western Aleppo had a total population of approximately 2.5 million, including just over 1.12 million IDPs (45% of the total population). The population within the 'Olive Branch' and 'Euphrates Shield' areas of northern Aleppo was approximately 870,000 with 370,000 IDPs (42% of the total population) (HNAP Population Baseline).
- **As of 8 March 2020, the total estimated IDP population is 549,000 within Idlib and western Aleppo and 410,000 in northern Aleppo.** Between 23 February and 8 March 2020, an estimated 11,170 additional people were newly displaced in opposition held northwest Syria. It is estimated that among the newly displaced, 60% are children and 50% or more had already been displaced at some point before December 2019 (HNAP Snapshots).
- **Throughout February, the number of IDP arrivals in northern Aleppo reached unprecedented levels, with approximately 250,000 IDP arrivals reported between 2 February and 1 March (HNAP Snapshots).** The total population in northern Aleppo is now approximately 1.40 million, an estimated 873,500 (63%) of whom are IDPs (HNAP Population Overview).
- **Within the shrinking opposition-controlled area of Idlib, the increase in displacement has caused significant overcrowding.** The total population remaining in Idlib is now at approximately 2.80 million, an estimated 70% (1.98 million) of whom are IDPs (ENT). In a territory of just 3,460 km², the current population density now sits at approximately 800 inhabitants per km² as compared to 600 inhabitants per km² in the last situation overview. More than half of the total IDP population within this area are concentrated around the border crossing of Bab Al Hawa (see satellite imagery in part 3.1) (HNAP Population Overview).
- **The most common intended destinations of newly displaced IDPs throughout northwest Syria is northern Aleppo.** A'zaz and Afrin districts were stated as the most common intended destination for IDPs among 71% of assessed communities in Aleppo, and 40% of communities in Idlib. However, 24% of assessed communities in Idlib stated that the most common intended destination of IDPs is Dana sub-district, which is located in northern Idlib and could therefore act as an entry point into northern Aleppo. **The most common areas of departure for IDPs displaced since December include Idlib, Ma'arrat An Nu'man, Saraqab, Ehsam and Atareb sub-districts (ENT).**

Data sources (for more information on the methodology, please refer to part 6):
Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program (HNAP) snapshot, 2 February 2020; 1 March 2020; HNAP Population Baseline, November 2019; HNAP Population Overview of northwest Syria, 6 March 2020
REACH Emergency Needs Tracking (ENT), 9 March 2020
IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI), 23 February 2020

3.1 IDP SHELTER COUNT COMPARISON: DANA

IDP Shelter Count Comparison in Dana Sub-District between 6 June 2019 and 26 February 2020



Analysis:

Rapid analysis of satellite imagery from June 2019 and February 2020 has pointed to considerable expansion of IDP settlements in Dana sub-district in northwest Syria. Initial calculations indicate a **95% increase** in the number of shelters between the two dates within Dana sub-district, from over 44,000 structures in June 2019 to over 86,000 February 2020.

Note: This analysis should not be considered exhaustive or comprehensive as it aims to provide a cursory look at easily identifiable areas demonstrating the greatest change.

Data sources:

Shelter count: UNOSAT and REACH

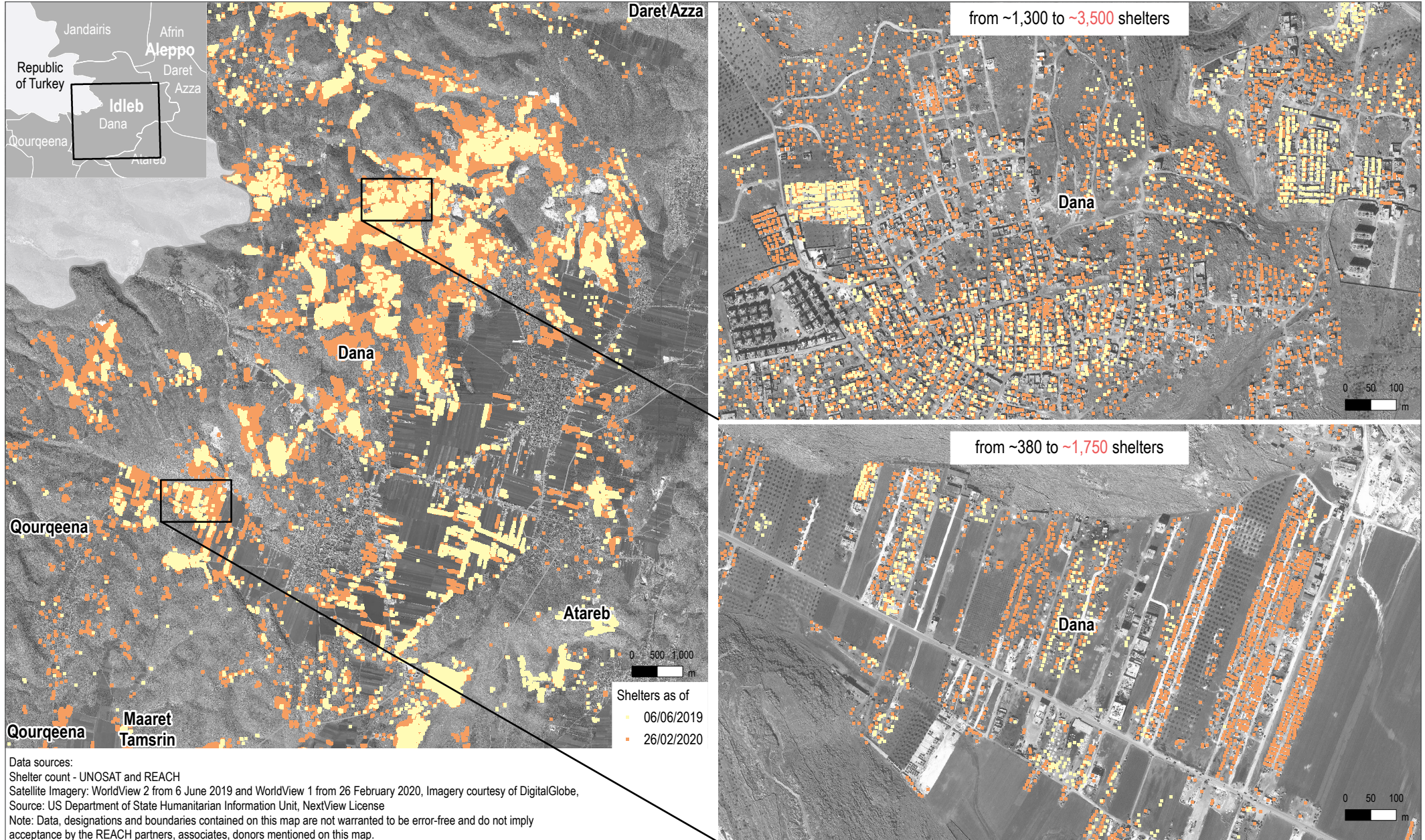
Satellite imagery: WorldView 2 from 6 June 2019 and WorldView 1 from 26 February 2020. Imagery courtesy of DigitalGlobe,

Source: US Department of State Humanitarian Information Unit, NextView License

Note: Data, designations and boundaries contained on this map are not warranted to be error-free and do not imply acceptance by the REACH partners, associates, or donors mentioned on this map.

3.2 IDP DETAILED SHELTER COMPARISON: DANA

IDP Shelter Count Detailed Comparison in Dana Sub-District between 6 June 2019 and 26 February 2020



4. NEEDS AND VULNERABILITIES

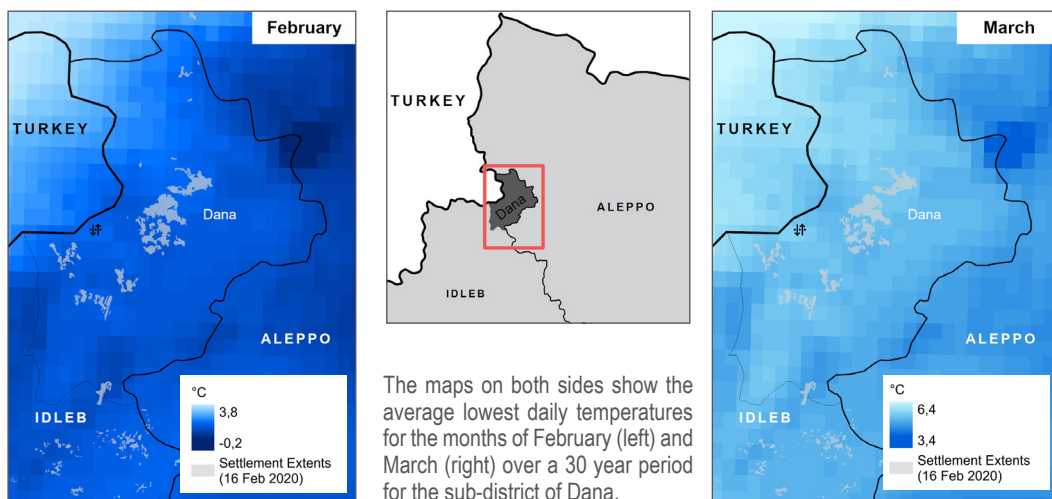
- Prior to the escalation of conflict in December 2019, **the population of opposition-controlled areas of Idlib was already extremely vulnerable**, hosting large numbers of IDPs, and dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs (ENT).
- **On 9 March 2020, vulnerable groups – with specific humanitarian needs – were reported among new IDP arrivals in 89% of assessed communities in northern Aleppo and 99% of assessed communities in Idlib.** Women-headed households were the most prevalent, as reported in 85% and 94% of communities in northern Aleppo and Idlib, respectively. The arrival of elderly-headed households (77%) and orphans (78%) was also commonly reported among communities in the assessed areas (ENT).
- **Living conditions are dire as shelter needs remain severe among new IDP arrivals in Idlib and northern Aleppo.** Shelter was selected as a top three priority need among KIs in 64% of communities in northern Aleppo and 79% of communities in Idlib. Within these communities, additional tents (89%) and plastic sheeting (61%) are the most common needs (ENT).
- **Humanitarian assistance and borrowing were reported as top three food sources in 49% and 36% of communities in northern Aleppo and Idlib,** showing that many IDPs rely on precarious means to source food. KIs also estimated that 18% of newly displaced IDPs are eating one meal a day or less (16% in Idlib and 23% in northern Aleppo) (ENT).
- **Lack of access to shelter, coupled with anticipation of future conflict escalation, are likely**

to trigger further displacement. According to the latest ENT assessment, the two most common reasons for intending to leave to a new community were in order to access improved shelter and humanitarian assistance. Of IDPs intending to remain in their current locations, an inability to pay for transport was cited as the second most frequent reason to remain after family/relative ties to the community (ENT)

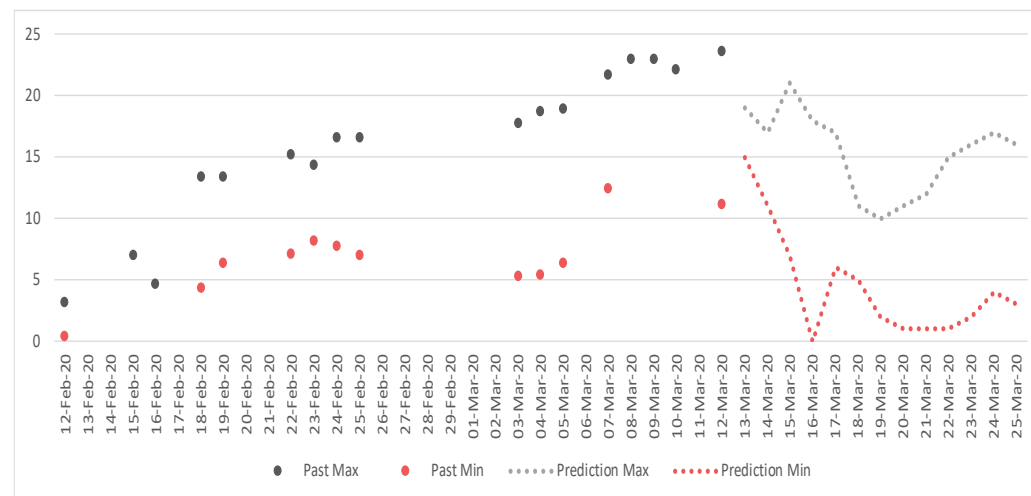
- **Humanitarian support remains limited both as a result of barriers in access and misalignment with key priority needs of vulnerable populations.** In northern Aleppo, the primary stated barrier for further humanitarian assistance was due to restrictions from actors controlling the area (54% of communities), and infrastructure or physical barriers was reported as the key challenge in Idlib (72% of communities). Further, few KIs reported shelter or NFI assistance being provided in their communities, despite shelter and NFI ranking as a top three priority need in 64% of communities in northern Aleppo and 79% of communities in Idlib. Humanitarian assistance for shelter to newly displaced IDPs was reported in only 7% of communities in northern Aleppo and 14% of communities in Idlib (ENT).

Data source (for more information on the methodology, please refer to part 6):
REACH Emergency Needs Tracking (ENT), 9 March 2020

Historical average monthly minimum temperatures for February and March (WorldClim)



Daily temperatures (past and predicted) northwest Syria, 12 Feb - 25 March 2020¹

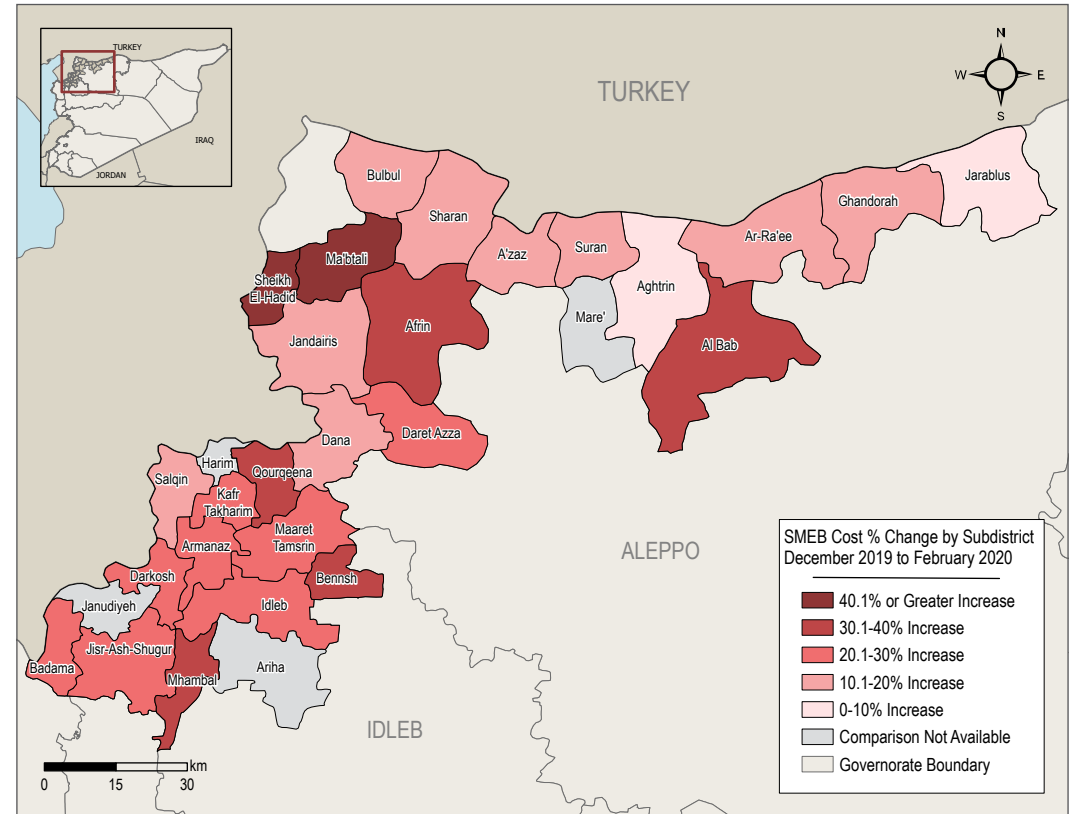


1) Data on temperatures from [World Weather Information System](https://www.worldweatherinformation.com/) (WMO). Note that temperatures have not been collected for all days in February 2020 due to access restrictions.

5. MARKETS

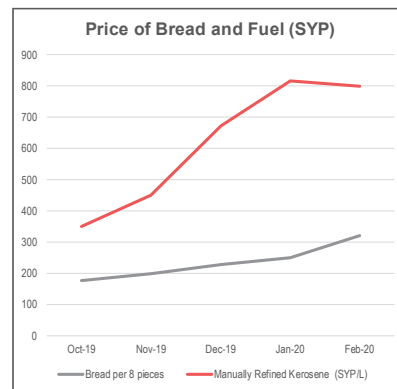
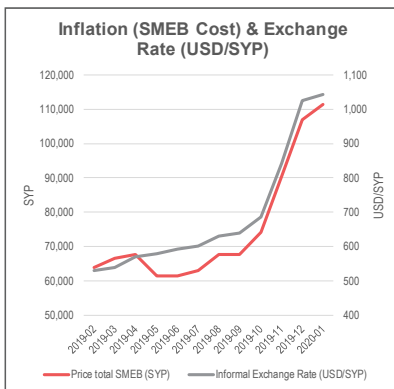
- **Markets are still operating and functional across northwest Syria.** According to the 9 March ENT assessment, IDPs reportedly relied on stores and markets as their main source of food in 89% of assessed communities in Idlib and 87% in northern Aleppo.
- **High inflation coupled with further economic disruption has caused the purchasing power of households to significantly decline.** It would take a head of household roughly 64 working days to earn the equivalent of the mid-February Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) to cover basic needs for one month, based on an average daily wage of unskilled labour of 1,742 SYP recorded in January (DWESA).^{1,2}
- **The inflation has been paralleled by a rapid continued depreciation of the SYP against the USD.** Since the start of the escalation in conflict in December 2019, the SYP has depreciated against the USD by 33%.³ The median unofficial USD/SYP exchange rate in northern Aleppo and Idlib was recorded at 1,120 SYP to the USD on 1 March, representing a further 7% increase from data collected in mid-February⁴ (MM).
- **Prices of basic necessary items have significantly increased since the escalation of the conflict.** There has been a 23% increase in the value of the SMEB between the escalation of conflict in December and mid-February (the most recent period with comparable data) (MM).
- **Food prices have witnessed a sharp increase,** which likely contributed to food ranking as the second highest priority need for newly arrived IDP populations in northwest Syria (ENT). The

Cost change of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) by Sub-District



Rapid Market Monitoring (RMM) on 1 March recorded a 5% increase in the prices of basic food items in the SMEB in 20 assessed markets compared to the recorded prices across the same markets in mid-February (increase from 73,590 SYP to 77,515 SYP).

- **Heating/cooking fuel is reported as a key priority need of IDPs, but is either unavailable or only available at increasingly unaffordable prices.** During the ENT on 9 March, KIs reported that winter items were the fourth overall priority for newly arrived IDPs, with heating fuel as the main concern. Moreover, IDPs rated non-food items (NFIs) as their third overall priority need, with cooking fuel as the primary gap. However, the RRM on 1 March showed that manually refined kerosene (used for cooking and heating) was unavailable at 75% of the vendors, or only available at an increased price of up to 900 SYP/L.



Data sources (for more information on the methodology, please refer to part 6):
 REACH Emergency Needs Tracking (ENT), 9 March 2020
 REACH/Cash Based Response Technical Working Group (CBR-TWG) Market Monitoring (MM), February 2020
 REACH Daily Wage and Employment Sector Assessment (DWESA), January 2020
 Rapid Market Monitoring (RRM), 1 March 2020

1) Median daily wage of unskilled labour recorded at 1,200 SYP in January 2020.
 2) Data referred to here is from the most recent DWESA as of January 2020. REACH has not conducted another assessment of this sort since.
 3) As reported by assessed informal exchange shops in northwest Syria.
 4) In the February 2020 MM, the unofficial USD/SYP exchange rate was recorded at 1,043 SYP to 1 USD.

REACH Emergency Needs Tracking (ENT):

The ENT mechanism is activated following large displacement waves. Assessment coverage is determined by IDP arrival numbers from the IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI), which tracks displacement in northwest Syria on a 24 to 72-hour basis. The threshold for determining whether a community is assessed is contingent on the number of IDP arrivals witnessed in a given timeframe. As of 24 February, the threshold for determining coverage is whether a community has witnessed over 300 individual IDP arrivals since 15 January when the most recent conflict escalation began.¹ Data collection is conducted remotely through REACH's network of key informants (KIs) in Northwest Syria with one KI interviewed per community (communities also refers to camps and sites where there are sites within or near the community). KIs are chosen based on their knowledge of IDP populations and their needs.

Round 1 (3 February 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

Round 2 (10 February 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

Round 3 (18 February 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

Round 4 (24 February 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

Round 5 (2 March 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

Round 6 (9 March 2020): [Aleppo](#); [Idleb](#)

REACH Daily Wage and Employment Sector Assessment:

Following requests from humanitarian partners for up-to-date data on the average daily wage for unskilled labourers in northwest Syria and the most common employment sectors, REACH conducted an ad-hoc assessment across 158 accessible communities in opposition-controlled areas in northern and western Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Enumerators conducted interviews remotely with one KI per assessed community. KIs were chosen based on their knowledge of economic conditions in the assessed community. Data was collected on 22 January 2020.

[January 2020](#)

REACH and Cash Based Response Technical Working Group (CBR-TWG) Market Monitoring (MM)

To inform humanitarian cash programming, REACH, in partnership with the Cash-Based Responses Technical Working Group (CBR-TWG), conducts monthly MM exercises in northern Syria to assess the availability and prices of 36 basic commodities that comprise of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), that are typically sold in markets and consumed by average Syrian households, including food and non-food items, water, fuel, and cell phone data. Each enumerator aims to assess three to five shops of each type in the main market in their assigned sub-district, using surveys to collect information about the three cheapest prices of each item. In sub-districts where direct surveying by enumerators is not possible, data collection is conducted remotely through KIs such as shop owners, suppliers and consumers.

December 2019: [Northwest](#); [Northeast](#)

January 2020: [Northwest](#); [Northeast](#)

February 2020: [Northwest](#);

Rapid Market Monitoring (RMM):

On 1 March 2020, REACH conducted a RMM of 20 major markets in northwest Syria in response to the rapidly depreciating Syrian Pound (SYP) against the US Dollar (USD) and reports of fuel types being unavailable. Markets were selected based on if they had witnessed significant price increases, or are reportedly supplying key commodities to a large number of communities. This RMM assessed the availability and prices of the 18 items that comprise the SMEB. Enumerators attempted to collect three minimum price points per item per market. Data collection was conducted both remotely and directly through market vendor KI interviews in markets which are usually covered by the MM. Comparisons were made to the February MM for northwest Syria (data collection 10-17 February). Findings should only be considered as indicative of the current prices and reported unavailability of items in the assessed markets as reported by market vendor KIs. [21 October 2019](#); [4-5 December 2020](#); [1 March 2020](#)

Market Network Analysis (MNA):

In order to gain an understanding of the interdependencies between markets and communities, REACH conducted a MNA in Idlib and Aleppo governorates on 12-13 February 2020. The analysis illustrates the market locations that communities rely on and thus which market prices likely determine the purchasing power of households within smaller communities. The assessment aims to inform actors in humanitarian cash and voucher programming in the quick identification of communities that would likely be affected should a market fall out of service. Data collection was conducted through a network of Syria-based enumerators in accessible locations. 813 in-person interviews with KIs (one per community) located in the communities for which they are reporting on were conducted; when security concerns prevented in-person data collection, phone interviews were conducted instead. KIs were asked where individuals in their communities go to purchase four items types: hygiene items, fuel, fresh food and bulk food. KI reports of people from one community traveling to another community to access markets indicate a market network "connection" between the respective communities. The analysis is not representative of all market communities, but is rather indicative of the market networks reported by community KIs.

Information products and analysis are available upon request.

Supply Route Analysis:

As part of the northwest Syria MM, REACH and partners conducted a supply route analysis through interviews with market vendor KIs between 10-17 February 2020. The analysis provides a general overview of the market distribution in northwest Syria, market dependencies, as well as the importance of markets for specific item types. To be included, markets had to be permanent in nature, large enough to support at least two wholesalers, and diverse enough to provide a sufficient variety of goods and commodities. Shops surveyed within each market had to be housed in permanent structures and sell SMEB items to be eligible for inclusion. In total, 1,894 KIs in 59 communities across 30 sub-districts in northwest Syria were surveyed. Market vendor KIs specific to the four monitored item types (fuel, bulk food, fresh food and hygiene items) in these markets were asked about the number of vendors in their markets, about change in demand/supply after

1) Although there has been more than 300 IDP arrivals reported since 15 January in a given community, it is possible that the current number of IDPs in this community is below 300 due to the fluid movements of IDPs.

October 2019, which currencies they accept in their store, main procurement challenges, current and previous supply routes and whether they expected for demand/supply to change in the coming six months. The analysis is not representative of all markets nor all supply routes but is rather indicative of supply routes and procurement challenges as reported by market vendor KIs.

Information products and analysis are available upon request.

REACH Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS):

HSOS is a monthly assessment that provides comprehensive, multi-sectoral information about the humanitarian conditions and priority needs inside Syria. Data is collected for the HSOS through an enumerator network in accessible locations throughout Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama governorates. Data for this assessment is collected over a 10 day period at the beginning of the month, and refers to the situation in the previous month.

REACH enumerators are based inside Syria and interview, either directly or remotely (via phone) depending on security, KIs located in the communities that they are reporting on. KIs are chosen based on their community-level and sector-specific knowledge. The HSOS project has monitored the situation in Syria since 2013, and its methodology and procedures have evolved significantly since that time.

[October 2019](#); [December 2019](#)

Findings from all aforementioned assessments are indicative rather than representative, and should not be generalised across the region.

IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI):

ISMI is an initiative of the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, implemented by REACH, which tracks displacement movements in northwest Syria on a 24-72 hour basis. Following a baseline assessment conducted at the end of 2016, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, and now daily rapid displacement monitoring (RDM) data collection cycles were initiated. Displacements are identified through an extensive KI network, either from alerts initiated by KIs or from follow-up by enumerators. At least two KIs are interviewed in each assessed community, and collected information is further triangulated through other sources, and humanitarian updates.

[September 2019](#); [October 2019](#); [November 2019](#)

Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program (HNAP) IDP snapshot

In response to rapid displacements following an increase in hostilities HNAP conducts population assessments in northwest Syria, using a team of enumerators to collect data at the community level. This data is disaggregated by those displaced since 1 December 2019 as well as total IDP stock. Findings referenced in this situation overview are from [23 February 2020](#); [1 March 2020](#) and [8 March 2020](#) as well as the November 2019 Population Baseline and Population Overview of northwest Syria, 6 March 2020 (available through HNAP).

About REACH

REACH Initiative 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. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).