

SPOTLIGHT

SYRIA

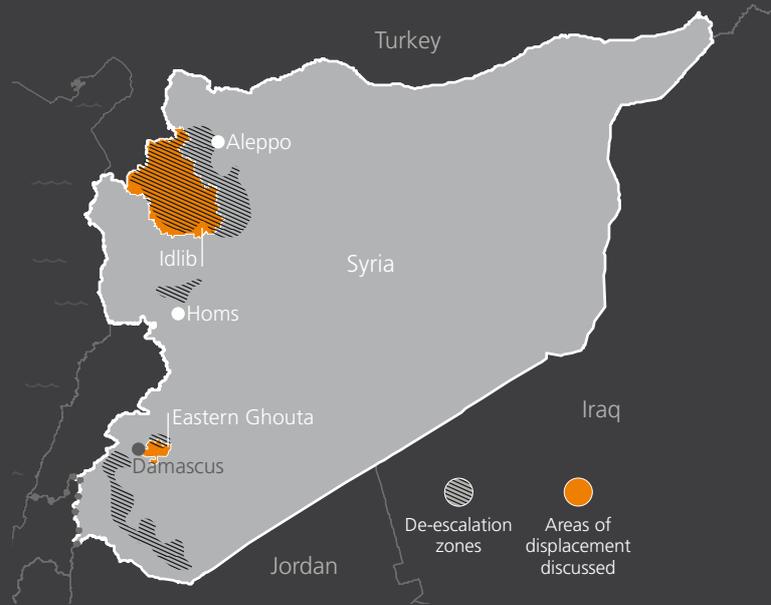
No let-up in displacement despite new agreement

An end to the conflict in Syria is still nowhere in sight, but 2017 may have marked the opening of a new chapter. The government now controls more territory than it has since mid-2012, and de-escalation zones were negotiated and briefly put into operation. Despite signs of a potential improvement in the security situation, however, there were still 2.9 million new displacements in 2017, the highest figure in the world.

An initial agreement signed by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana, Kazakhstan, in May 2017 led to arrangements for a ceasefire and the establishment of de-escalation zones, and subsequent meetings reiterated the parties' resolve to uphold and expand it. The four zones covered by the final agreement signed in September primarily include non-government controlled areas of the southern governorates of Daraa and Quneitra, besieged pockets around Damascus and Homs, all of Idlib province and portions of Aleppo, Hama and Lattakia governorates.⁹⁴ The deal envisages unhindered humanitarian access, the restoration of basic services and the cessation of ground assaults and airstrikes.⁹⁵

If upheld, this could greatly improve the lives of a large number of people, prevent further displacement and prompt a significant wave of returns. More than 2.5 million people currently live in these areas.⁹⁶ The displacement figures, however, tell a very different story. More than 130,000 new displacements were recorded in Idlib in the first half of the year, and another 150,000 in the second half, while implementation of the agreement was in full swing. In other provinces and areas covered by the deal, conditions have deteriorated severely.

The situation in eastern Ghouta, a besieged area of the Damascus suburbs, was particularly dire in the latter part of 2017. Aid workers said they had less access to the almost 400,000 civilians living there than before the de-escalation zones were agreed.⁹⁷ The already extremely high cost of basic foodstuffs skyrocketed, making it difficult for most inhabitants to afford even



one meal a day, and the proportion of children suffering from acute malnutrition shot up from 2.1 per cent in January 2017 to 11.9 per cent in early November.⁹⁸ An assessment published in December also noted that infant deaths caused by lack of food had been reported for the third consecutive month, and that some people had resorted to going days without eating since November.⁹⁹

The UN and other aid agencies compiled an evacuation list of 500 patients in need of urgent medical attention, but as of March 2018, the evacuations had not been approved and 12 people on the list had already died while the agencies stood by waiting.¹⁰⁰ The UN's special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, told a press conference in December there was "no reason whatsoever to have this medieval type of approach regarding civilians, patients, children, women, particularly if the conflict is getting close to the end, one reason more to consider this unacceptable".¹⁰¹

Against this backdrop, an unprecedented number of returns was also recorded in 2017. More than 800,000 IDPs and about 56,000 refugees were said to have made their way back to their places of origin during the year.¹⁰² The bulk of the returns have been to places still hosting high numbers of IDPs, putting added pressure on already overstretched communities. Detailed information about returnees' situations and the push and pull factors that prompted their decisions is still unavailable, however, making it impossible to draw a direct correlation between return movements and implementation of the de-escalation zones.

*An internally displaced couple look after their eight grandchildren at a camp in Hasakeh, Syria.
Photo: NRC, 2017*



Continued displacement as an outcome of their implementation would not be unexpected. Similar dynamics were seen when so-called local ceasefires or evacuation agreements were agreed in Daraya in Rural Damascus, eastern Aleppo city, Al Waer in Homs and Four Towns in Idlib in 2016 and 2017. Russia and Iran sponsored the arrangements and the Syrian government framed them as reconciliation efforts, but in reality they involved prolonged sieges and bombardments that concluded with the displacement of the populations in question.¹⁰³

The previous arrangements differ from those of the Astana agreement, but there are fears that the establishment of the de-escalation zones will prove to be another political rather than humanitarian initiative. During the drafting of this report, the Syrian government began a full-fledged offensive in southern Idlib, northern Hama and southern Aleppo to retake key areas, leading to the displacement of as many as 385,000 people in the first quarter of 2018.¹⁰⁴

The government was also leading an unprecedented offensive to retake the besieged enclave of eastern Ghouta, which led to the displacement of at least 85,000 people within the enclave in March when the siege was partially breached.¹⁰⁵ It appears that despite new agreements, de-escalation zones and ongoing international peace efforts, heavy fighting and significant displacement are set to continue.