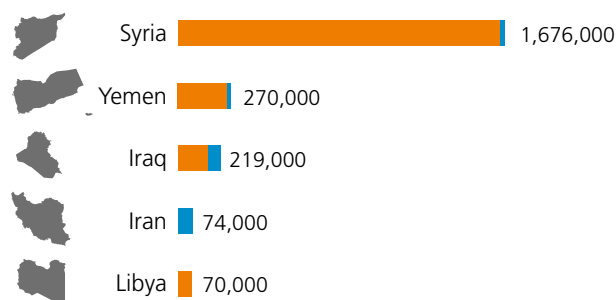# MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Conflict 2,137,000
Disasters 214,000
8.4% of the global total

5 COUNTRIES WITH MOST NEW DISPLACEMENT
(conflict, violence and disasters)

Syria	1,676,000
Yemen	270,000
Iraq	219,000
Iran	74,000
Libya	70,000

Conflict and violence continued to drive internal displacement in the Middle East and North Africa. More than 2.1 million new displacements represented a drop of more than 50 per cent on the previous year, but almost 11 million people were living in internal displacement in the region at the end of the year, accounting for more than a quarter of the global total. The decrease in new displacements was mainly the result of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria winding down as both countries' armies consolidated their hold on territory recovered from Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and other armed groups. Disasters triggered more than 200,000 new displacements.

Despite the decline in conflict and displacement in **Syria** during 2018, the country's civil war, in its eighth year, continued to trigger some of the largest population movements in the world. More than 1.6 million new displacements were recorded, the highest number in the region for the fourth year running. Government offensives to retake areas of Idlib and Dara'a governorates and the Damascus suburbs led to the majority of new displacements. The battle for Dara'a triggered more than 285,000, the largest single displacement event of the war.

Large-scale returns were also recorded shortly after each offensive, and these are likely to continue in the coming months. It will be important to monitor such movements closely to better understand the conditions to which people are returning (see Syria spotlight, p.24). Heavy rains and flooding, which were

particularly intense in 2018, displaced as many as 27,000 people in Al Hasakeh, Idlib, Aleppo and Ar Raqqa governorates, all of them IDPs already living in precarious conditions in camps.

The conflict in **Yemen** escalated significantly in the second half of 2018 as the Saudi-led coalition stepped up its offensive to take control of Hodeidah port, which is controlled by the Houthi movement. Residents began to flee the city pre-emptively in early June, when fighting appeared imminent, eventually leading to mass movements. At least 64,000 new displacements could be verified, but several unvalidated media reports cited hundreds of thousands of displacements and the true figure is likely to be much higher. There was subsequently a temporary lull in the fighting, but it escalated again in October and November, raising serious humanitarian concerns.

The parties to the conflict met in Stockholm in December and agreed to mutually redeploy their forces, swap prisoners and discuss de-escalation along the Taiz frontline.[74] Many details of the agreement were still to be ironed out as of early 2019 and exchanges of fire continued to threaten the fragile ceasefire, but it succeeded in preventing a major humanitarian crisis.

Across the country as a whole, 252,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded and at least 2.3 million people were living in internal displacement as of the end of the year. These figures are considered underestimates, due to chal-

lenges in data collection caused by access constraints. More than 18,000 new displacements associated with disasters were also recorded, the result of cyclones that struck southern governorates in May and October.

Around 1.1 million returns were recorded in **Iraq** in 2018, outnumbering new displacements. At 150,000, the number of new displacements was at its lowest since 2014 when the war against ISIL began. Despite the official end of the conflict on 9 December 2017 and the high number of returns, almost two million people were still living in displacement as of the end of 2018. Their living conditions are generally difficult, and many of those in camps have to make do with inadequate shelter and services, and struggle to meet their most basic needs.[75]

Whether those who have tried to return have been able to achieve durable solutions is unclear. Almost 9,000 people deemed to have returned actually returned to displacement, but not enough information is available to determine the situation of the vast majority. Potential obstacles to durable solutions include bureaucratic procedures, damage to homes and basic infrastructure, a lack of livelihood opportunities and the presence of

landmines and unexploded ordnance.[76] These factors have combined to slow the pace of returns as IDPs choose to remain in displacement until conditions in their areas of origin improve.

Flooding and drought triggered the majority of the 69,000 new displacements associated with disasters recorded in Iraq last year. Flooding affected the north of the country particularly hard, triggering more than 35,000 in Ninewa, Salah al Din, Dahuk and Kirkuk governorates in late November and early December. A significant number of IDPs were displaced again from camps when their tents were destroyed. Drought triggered 20,000 new displacements in the south of the country as people fled their homes in search of livelihoods, particularly in Thi Qar, Missan and Qadissiya governorates.[77]

The situation in **Libya** deteriorated significantly in 2018, with 70,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence recorded, more than double the number for the previous year. New conflict in the urban centres of Tripoli, Derna and Sebha led to the destruction of infrastructure and breakdown of basic services, triggering more than 63,000 new displacements. Migrants

Children play at the Al Habbari informal camp for displaced people in Sana'a, Yemen. Photo: NRC/Becky Bakr Abdulla, August 2018

and refugees whose detention centres were caught in the crossfire were also affected (see Libya spotlight, p.26). Fighting and displacement also took place in the districts of Jufra and Murqub and the cities of Sirte and Sabratha, and across large swathes of the south, where foreign armed groups continued to establish safe havens and fuel insecurity.

Military offensives in **Egypt** against an ISIL affiliate led to evictions and the widespread destruction of homes, commercial buildings and farms in North Sinai governorate. More than 15,000 new displacements were recorded, but that is likely to be an underestimate given that the area is inaccessible and the figure was compiled using satellite imagery and eyewitness accounts.[78]

More displacements associated with sudden-onset disasters were recorded across the region in 2018 than in previous years. **Iran**, which is prone to a range of natural hazards, was worst affected. Snow storms in January and February triggered 24,000 new displacements, while floods led to more than 1,400 throughout the year. In November, an earthquake struck the western province of Kermanshah, in particular Sar Pol-e Zahab, triggering almost 47,000 new displacements.

Urban perspectives

More than 65 per cent of the region's population lives in urban areas, in a region where cities have historically been key hubs of trade and development.[79] Much of the region's conflict and displacement in recent years has also taken place in towns and cities.[80] Examples include Aleppo, Dara'a, Idlib and Raqqa in Syria, Aden, Hodeidahand Taiz in Yemen, Benghazi and Tripoli in Libya and Mosul in Iraq.[81] Some of the conflicts are ongoing, and among those that have concluded or stabilised, reconstruction and recovery challenges have impeded the achievement of durable solutions.

Some conflicts have involved sieges being laid to entire neighbourhoods, trapping civilians in their homes or immediate surroundings. Eastern Ghouta in Syria is a case in point. Home to a million people, it was under siege for five years. Repeated airstrikes and mortar fire disrupted the provision of basic services and blocked the entry of food and humanitarian aid. When the siege was broken in March 2018, more than 158,000 people moved out.[82]

In cities such as Aleppo, Mosul and Taiz, intra-urban displacement patterns have been observed as residents move to safer neighbourhoods in search of safety and services.[83] In Aleppo, Baghdad and Damascus, power struggles influenced such movements, with conflict and violence used to reorganise and divide populations into ethnic and religious groups, dictating where people are able to go and whether or not they are able to return.[84]

Urban conflict is not a new phenomenon, but it creates specific challenges for IDPs. Unexploded ordnance, landmines and booby traps constitute an important security threat for people wanting to return to previously densely populated areas.[85] The destruction of infrastructure and disruption of essential services have direct, indirect and cumulative impacts that have the potential to render whole neighbourhoods and entire towns or cities uninhabitable.[86] Once the fighting is over, the extent of the destruction and damage may mean recovery takes years. More than a year after its liberation from ISIL, most of Raqqa still lies in ruins and unexploded ordnance litters the town.[87]

De-escalating protracted urban conflict is key to promoting long-term stability and development in the Middle East and North Africa. Reconstruction is essential for peace-building and to ensure those affected are able to re-establish their lives. Delays may destabilise cities and countries, fuelling future conflict and displacement. Beyond immediate and much-needed humanitarian assistance, the setbacks caused by urban conflict and displacement will not be overcome unless the development sector engages in implementing longer-term recovery initiatives. Reinvigorating local economies will be key to reducing poverty, and robust urban planning will be equally important in supporting recovery and reducing the underlying drivers of insecurity and conflict across the region as a whole.[88]

Displaced people in Al-Areesha camp in Syria were severely affected by heavy rains and widespread flooding in December 2018. Photo © UNHCR/Hisham Arafat, December 2018
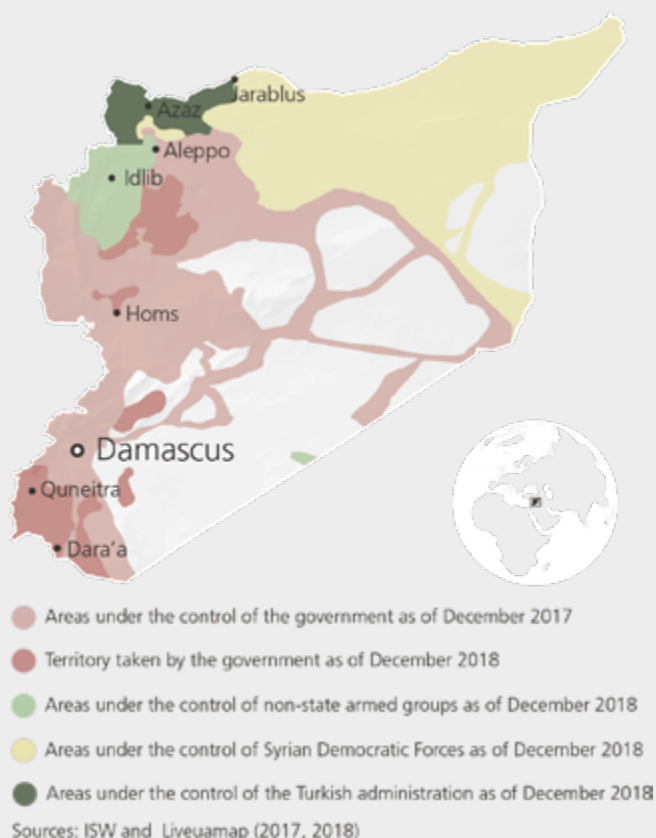
SYRIA

A decisive year for the conflict, but not for those displaced

The Syrian government brought large swathes of territory back under its control in 2018, making it a decisive year in the country's civil war. Non-state armed groups suffered severe losses as the government and affiliated forces retook Eastern Ghouta, Dara'a and Quneitra governorates, the southern Damascus suburbs and the city of Homs and its surrounding countryside. Only Idlib governorate remains in the hands of non-state actors.

As the conflict nears its end, discussions about post-conflict reconstruction and returns have begun. The government passed a new law in April which designates reconstruction zones across Syria. Law No. 10 also gives landowners in those areas a year to prove ownership or risk losing their land with no compensation.[89] This law has been criticised for its potential to create significant obstacles to return (see Spotlight, p.96).[90]

The year began with government forces advancing toward the north of Hama and west of Aleppo governorates northern areas of rural Hama and western areas of rural Aleppo, triggering more than 325,000 new displacements over a six-week period.[91] An offensive launched in February to retake the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta lasted seven weeks and triggered more than 158,000 new displacements between 9 March and 22 April.[92] Around 66,000 people were displaced to areas of north-west Syria including Idlib and Aleppo, which were still under the control of non-state armed actors. These areas have received large numbers of displaced fighters and their families over the years as a result of local ceasefires.[93]

Heavy fighting also broke out in the southern governorates of Dara'a and Quneitra in June and July, culminating in an agreement that restored government control. The offensive led to the single largest displacement event of the war.[94] The month-long campaign triggered at least 285,000 new displacements, the majority over a period of just two weeks.[95]

Areas under the control of the government as of December 2017

Territory taken by the government as of December 2018

Areas under the control of non-state armed groups as of December 2018

Areas under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces as of December 2018

Areas under the control of the Turkish administration as of December 2018

Sources: ISW and Liveuamap (2017, 2018)

A similar fate seemed to await Idlib governorate in late August and early September. The build-up of government and affiliated forces along the conflict line in the north of Hama and west of Aleppo governorates and a subsequent increase in aerial bombardments prompted an international outcry and calls for restraint. The UN, international NGOs and governments around the world warned that further escalation would result in a humanitarian disaster.[96] The area is home to 2.3 million people, almost half of them IDPs, who would have had nowhere to flee because Turkey has shut its border.

Idlib is the largest host of displaced people in the country relative to population size, both in and outside camps, and repeated displacement within the governorate is commonplace. Aid agencies on the ground report that families have been displaced an average of three or four times, and some as many as a dozen times.[97] Many may have chosen to flee abroad had Turkey not closed its border. The proliferation of armed groups has further destabilised the region, with occasional clashes between factions and criminality disrupting daily life and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Turkey and Russia brokered an agreement on 17 September to establish a demilitarised zone between 14 and 19 kilometres wide along the contact line and extending into north-eastern areas of rural Latakia. Turkish military police have been stationed to monitor

High levels of damage, destruction and displacement in Aleppo.
Photo: UNHCR/Antwan Chnkdji, October 2018

compliance, which includes the withdrawal of all heavy weaponry. The agreement may have averted a humanitarian disaster for now, but reports of violations by all parties are a cause for concern.[98] The initial stability it has introduced should be built on to establish a more lasting solution which genuinely protects Idlib's civilians.

Many of the IDPs who fled their homes in 2018 have since returned to their areas of origin, particularly in the south. About 695,000 people have been reported to have returned to their homes in 2018. However, given the extent of the damage caused by the fighting, ongoing insecurity and lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities, it is unclear how many of these will have reached durable solutions. An unknown number have been unwilling to return, preferring to wait and see what life will be like in their areas of origin under government control.[99]

Southern residents who want to remain in their homes, including former fighters, have been told to "regularise" their status with the government, which involves visiting a local registration centre to begin a reconciliation process and be granted amnesty. What this will mean for the many people who previously lived in areas beyond government control remains to be seen, but there have been some initial reports of former fighters and other young men being arrested.[100]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the security situation in the south has improved somewhat. Basic services are still lacking, however, particularly in rural Dara'a and Quneitra, and restrictions to humanitarian access means little aid has been delivered. Unemployment is also a problem, particularly for low-skilled workers and those suspected of being anti-government activists, ex-combatants or former officials in non-state armed groups.[101] Many government employees who have not been directly affiliated with armed groups have reportedly returned to their jobs.

As the conflict apparently nears its end, important post-conflict questions remain. It is unclear who will fund the reconstruction of major urban centres such as Aleppo and Raqqa so that those displaced are able to return in safety and dignity.[102] Nor is it clear how north-eastern Syria and Idlib governorate will be administered, a situation that has the potential to reignite conflict.

In a country where nearly half of the population has been displaced, managing the safe and sustainable return of refugees and IDPs will be a huge challenge. Pressure should be put on the Syrian government to address its displacement crisis with comprehensive policies in line with the Guiding Principles to prevent the country from descending into conflict again.[103]

LIBYA

Urban displacement driven by escalating conflict and insecurity

Tripoli

Derna

Sebha

There was hope in 2017 of a decrease in fighting and displacement in Libya, but clashes escalated in several areas of the country in 2018. Fighting took place particularly in the urban centres of Tripoli, Derna and Sebha, triggering 70,000 new displacements. Around 221,000 people were living in displacement nationwide as of the end of year, suffering dire conditions and unable to return because of destroyed housing, ongoing insecurity and a lack of resources.[104]

In Tripoli, the seat of the internationally recognised government, the deteriorating economic situation fuelled new conflict. Militias from outside the city attacked its southern neighbourhoods in late August, and the intense clashes continued until early October. The fighting was sparked by a push to gain greater control over economic institutions based on the perception that a small number of rival militias and interest groups in the capital have disproportionate access to the country's wealth.[105]

Almost 33,000 people were displaced as a result, and many others were trapped in their homes without access to basic goods and services. The Libyan Red Crescent received more than 2,000 calls from families asking to be evacuated, of whom only ten per cent had their request granted. The use of heavy weaponry caused severe damage to homes, roads, telecommunications and utilities infrastructure and health and education facilities. Most of those displaced sheltered with family or friends, though about 200 families sought refuge in five schools across Tripoli.[106]

Libya continues to be the main point of departure for people attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe and a final destination for economic migrants from West Africa. Thus, the fighting also affected the lives of around 8,000 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

held in detention centres in the city. Humanitarian access to the areas affected by conflict was severely restricted, leaving thousands of detainees without food or water for several days.[107] Hundreds more were evacuated to safer locations or simply released and left to find their own way to safety through the conflict zone. Others were pulled out of the detention centres by militias, who then forced them to take part in the hostilities.[108]

The coastal city of Derna has been under siege by the Libyan National Army (LNA), linked to the authorities in the east of the country, since July 2017. It was controlled by a coalition of local fighters and Islamists known as the Derna Shura Council, and was the only city in the east resisting LNA control.[109] A renewed offensive to take the city began in May 2018 and heavy fighting and shelling continued into June, triggering almost 24,000 new displacements. Electricity and water supplies were cut and the provision of basic services disrupted. Markets ran short of food and non-food items, and only one hospital was left working at severely reduced capacity. Entry points to the city were initially closed, hindering the delivery of life-saving assistance, but the authorities opened a humanitarian corridor and began allowing families to leave the city at the end of May.[110]

Conflict in southern city of Sebha erupts periodically between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman tribes over the control of smuggling and trafficking routes, and fighting in 2018 triggered almost 7,000 new displacements. Those who fled the southern and eastern districts of the city were initially housed in schools that were on holiday, but they have since been moved on to allow them to reopen.[111] Civilians' freedom of movement was also restricted and severe shortages of basic goods and services were reported.[112] Very few reports mentioned the plight of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, but given that Sebha was named the world's human traf-

ficking capital last year, they are very likely to have been affected. Assessments undertaken in Sebha's districts report the presence of refugees and migrants in every assessed area.[113]

The violence in Sebha was further testament to the government's lack of control over southern Libya. The region's porous borders aggravate insecurity, allowing foreign armed groups to establish safe havens in the area, and facilitate the trafficking of people heading north. The combination of mounting lawlessness and deteriorating basic services mean conditions are dire for many residents in the south, including the displaced.[114] IDPs in the area are in desperate need of adequate shelter, food and basic household items, but prevailing insecurity across the south means humanitarian access is sporadic at best.[115]

The internationally recognized government in Tripoli adopted the first package of economic reforms since the 2011 fall of Muammar Gaddafi in September 2018, but fighting over resources is likely to remain a central feature of the country's crisis, particularly in coastal and urban areas where economic activity is concentrated.[116] The government also recognises the importance of improving security in the south, but the vastness of the territory makes doing so a daunting task with relatively little promise of a political dividend.[117]

There is hope that presidential and parliamentary elections due to take place in 2019 may break Libya's political gridlock. Yet divisions remain between the rival governments in the east and west, and national reconciliation conferences have been delayed, leaving the way open for fighting to continue.[118] It will likely be some time before the country is safe, for Libyans and for those migrants and refugees who continue to pass through the country.

Members of the Tawergha ethnic minority gather their belongings after their homes were demolished by a local militia near Tripoli. Photo © UNHCR/ Tarik Argaz, August 2018