

SYRIA

Behind borders, under siege and out of reach

SPOT
LIGHT

The sixth year of Syria's civil war brought no respite for civilians, who continued to bear the brunt of extreme levels of violence committed by all parties to the conflict with unprecedented humanitarian consequences. People fled their homes across the country, many of them displaced more than once to areas of steadily diminishing safety. The hostilities were relentless throughout 2016 and included gross violations of international humanitarian and human rights law as all parties repeatedly targeted densely populated areas and civilian infrastructure.

Two cessation of hostilities agreements brokered by the US and Russia in February and August led to temporary lulls in the fighting and a drop in the rate of internal displacement, but hostilities

and their impact on the civilian population flared again after each agreement. Intense fighting in and around eastern Aleppo in December caused the temporary displacement of at least 100,000 people from and within the city.

Offensives against ISIL took place on various fronts. Turkish forces crossed into Syria to launch an operation with allied local forces in August, and the opposition Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) went on the attack in Raqqa governorate in November. Both campaigns caused waves of displacements across northern Syria. Between 35,000 and 40,000 people were displaced in the north of Raqqa, most for short periods of time.³²

Displaced residents from eastern Aleppo rest at Mahalej centre. Photo: © UNHCR/ Mohamed Jertila, December 2016



As battle lines shift, people run the risk of being displaced repeatedly or prevented from fleeing at all. Syria's international borders were effectively closed in 2016, with around 330,000 IDPs living in camps and informal settlements near the Turkish border in the north of the country.³³

Against a backdrop of conflict, a deteriorating local economy and dwindling personal resources, both IDPs and host communities struggle to meet their basic needs. The destruction of property and infrastructure has left 1.1 million people living in makeshift housing and "last-resort settlements" such as collective centres, often set up in schools and other public buildings.³⁴ Living conditions are poor. Fifty-seven per cent of collective centres are without enough water, 50 per cent have inadequate sanitation facilities and 54 per cent are overcrowded.³⁵

Other IDPs are forced to settle on land to which they have no legal claim or to rent accommodation informally, leaving them vulnerable to eviction.³⁶ Those living in informal settlements are also more likely to be exposed to security threats and the prospect of repeated displacement.

Access to education is a major concern. One in three schools are damaged, destroyed, used as collective centres or in inaccessible areas. Displacement also disrupts school attendance, hampering children's ability to complete academic cycles and take exams. Children face serious protection risks, including underage recruitment, child labour, early marriage and gender-based violence.

Humanitarian access remains difficult, despite five UN Security Council resolutions demanding that all parties to the conflict allow "rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for UN humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners, including across conflict lines and across borders."³⁷ As of December 2016, around 4.9 million people were living in "hard to reach" areas, of whom almost a million were besieged, often without access to food, water or medical services.³⁸ The numbers of people living in besieged or hard-to-reach areas fluctuated over the year as the conflict unfolded.

The use of sieges as a weapon of war in eastern Aleppo and several areas of rural Damascus left civilians with no protection and little or no access to humanitarian assistance.³⁹ Those in ISIL-controlled areas face a similar situation.

Returns are registered, but they are difficult to track. It is often unclear whether people return because the situation in their area of origin has improved, or because it was unsustainable in their place of refuge. As the conflict shifts, it will be of utmost importance to ensure that any returns are safe, voluntary, assisted and monitored. Returnees' housing and property rights and civil documentation issues will require particular attention. Without documents, people are less able to exercise their rights and may become legally invisible or stateless.

Returns to areas formerly controlled by ISIL raise protection concerns that require immediate and sustained attention, including the widespread presence of improvised explosive devices ISIL fighters left behind.⁴⁰