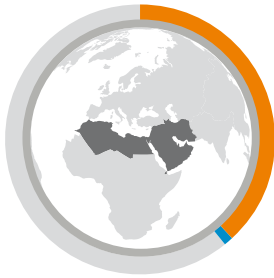
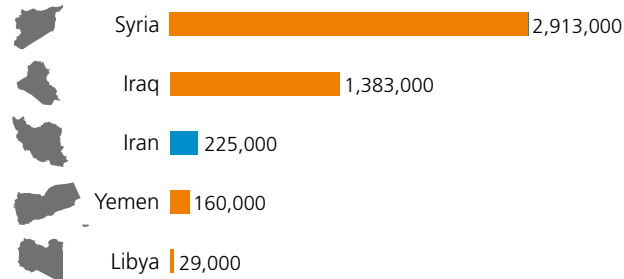


MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



CONFLICT 38.1%
DISASTERS 1.3%
OF THE GLOBAL
TOTAL

5 COUNTRIES WITH MOST NEW DISPLACEMENT (conflict and disasters)



The Middle East and North Africa accounted for 38 per cent of new displacements associated with conflict and violence worldwide in 2017, with almost 4.5 million recorded. New displacement in the region was concentrated in **Iraq**, **Syria** and **Yemen**, all of which the UN classified as L3 emergencies.⁸⁷ The three countries also figure among the ten with the largest stock figures globally, accounting between them for 11.4 million people living in displacement as of the end of 2017. Syria and Iraq had the first and fourth-highest figures at almost 6.8 million and 2.7 million respectively, and Yemen the sixth-highest at 2 million.

The fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) caused much of the new displacement in **Iraq** and **Syria** during the year. The battle to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul led to more than 800,000 displacements in 2017, while in Syria, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) drove ISIL out of its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa, causing the displacement of the city's entire population of about 230,000 people.⁸⁸ Syrian government forces also retook Deir Ezzor from ISIL, causing more than 800,000 new displacements in the process.

We also estimate that there were over 1.8 million returns in Iraq in 2017, most of which to areas previously held by ISIL. People trying to return have experienced a number of significant obstacles, including unexploded ordnances, mines and booby traps, as well as complex administrative processes and new local dynamics. This

has left them unable to achieve durable solutions, meaning we still consider them internally displaced and count them as such.

Returns are also being discussed in **Syria**, both to areas previously controlled by ISIL and opposition enclaves where de-escalation zones were set up in 2017, particularly in Idlib and Daraa governorates. Unsafe conditions in the former and ongoing conflict in the latter, however, continue to displace people and prevent those returning from achieving durable solutions. Return conditions and obstacles in both countries will be important to monitor in 2018 (see spotlight, p.24).

Conflict continued to be the main trigger of displacement in **Yemen** in 2017. The launch of Operation Golden Spear by pro-government forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition and airpower led to new displacement early in the year, with at least 41,000 people fleeing the most affected coastal areas in the immediate aftermath of the operation, followed by many more. Blockades throughout the year caused severe shortages of food and basic medicines, forcing people to move in search of basic services and humanitarian assistance. They have even forced homeless, destitute and hungry IDPs to return to what may have been left of their homes in frontline areas. 160,000 new displacements were recorded in Yemen over the year, a number that should be considered an underestimate (see spotlight, p.26)⁸⁹.

More people returned in **Libya** than were displaced in 2017, but conflict between local militias in several areas of the country still led to about 29,000 new displacements. In **Palestine**, about 700 new displacements were recorded. Demolitions, forced evictions, settler violence and the illegal expansion of settlements continued to force Palestinian families from their homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Discriminatory laws that systematically deny Palestinians building permits and access to basic services are also an underlying driver of displacement.

The Middle East and North Africa region faces significant challenges in protecting and assisting people displaced by conflict. **Yemen** adopted a national policy on internal displacement in 2013, but the lack of government capacity and legal framework for its implementation along with the state of paralysis the government has found itself in since 2014, places responsibility for responding to the country's IDPs primarily in the hands of the international community.⁹⁰ Other countries also have policies, but they are reactive in that they are mainly a framework for land and property restitution for a specific past event, such as the pre-March 2003 Baathist era in **Iraq** and the 1975 to 1990 civil war in **Lebanon**.⁹¹ They were not designed as a foundation for the management of future displacement crises.

Despite the relatively low disaster displacement figure, the region is not spared from disaster risk. Drought, desertification, sand storms, flooding and earthquakes are the most common hazards affecting the region, some of which have put a considerable number of people to move. Rapidly growing and increasingly dense urban populations, poor urban planning and low construction standards heighten people's exposure and vulnerability to hazards.

Disasters displaced about 234,000 people across the region, 225,000 of them in **Iran**. The country is prone to seismic activity, and a series of earthquakes caused displacement throughout the year. The largest, of magnitude 7.3, struck western areas in November, reducing whole neighbourhoods to rubble and destroying almost 80 per cent of the infrastructure in the cities of Sar Pol Yahab and Ghasr Shirin.⁹² Storms and flooding also displaced as many as 21,000 people in Iran throughout the year.

The Arab League adopted an eight-year DRR strategy in 2012, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) committed to developing a risk reduction roadmap.⁹³ The Arab League's DRR strategy is one of only a few that explicitly mention the need to prioritise vulnerable groups, including IDPs. Such initiatives demonstrate political will, but many challenges remain, chief among them increasing the capacity of national bodies, clearly delineating their roles and developing standardised data collection methods to inform decision-makers.

Displacement has reached unprecedented levels in the Middle East and North Africa, and the dearth of national or regional policies or legal mechanisms tackling the phenomenon reflects a lack of political will to protect IDPs and address root causes of displacement, in particular the conflicts that plague the region. These conflicts are characterised by blatant disrespect for human rights and international humanitarian law. The international community has sometimes been complicit in, and has otherwise largely failed to address such violations. Without renewed efforts by states in the region, and the wider international community to resolve these political crises, engage in reconstruction and build stability, internal displacement will continue to grow.

SPOTLIGHT

SYRIA

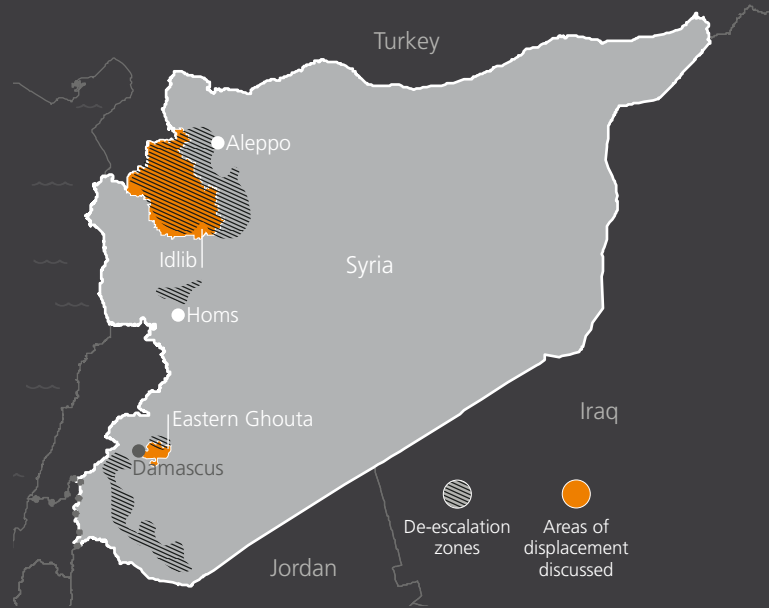
No let-up in displacement despite new agreement

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.

SPOTLIGHT

YEMEN

Insecurity and shrinking humanitarian space



Unrelenting violence and shifting insecurity propelled Yemen to several bleak milestones in 2017: 1,000 days of war, a million suspected cases of cholera, two million people displaced by conflict as of end of year and a humanitarian crisis now widely regarded as the world's most acute.¹⁰⁶

Conflict continues to be the primary driver of displacement, as a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in support of Yemen's government battles Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement. Of the 3.1 million people forced to flee their homes since the violence escalated in March 2015, two million were still living in internal displacement as of the end of 2017. People have been displaced across 21 of Yemen's 22 governorates, but the overwhelming majority of IDPs come from Taiz, Hajjah, Amanat Al Asimah and Amran.

The new displacements of 160,000 over the course of the year is a relatively small figure, but it masks much larger fluctuations and dynamics in which families flee and return as violence flares and subsides. An escalation of the conflict, including sustained airstrikes and ground clashes has also hampered access to various parts of the country for humanitarians, the media, researchers and data collectors, making it impossible to get a full picture of displacement in the country.

Much displacement takes place locally, and movements across frontlines are rare. Forty-four per cent of IDPs remain within their governorate of origin.¹⁰⁷ Their main consideration when they flee is to move toward areas where they are able to access humanitarian assistance and potential livelihood opportunities, which for many means urban rather than rural areas. Family ties, security concerns and financial restrictions are also factors in deciding where to seek refuge. Movement is prohibitively expensive for most, and fraught with safety risks for all.

The situation in Taiz city illustrates this point clearly. It is an active frontline, and movement in and out of the

old city, which is home to around 600,000 people, is considered very dangerous. The frontline has moved little in the past year, but there has been significant artillery shelling and sniper fire. Movement within the old city, which is held by affiliates to the Saudi-led coalition, is also heavily controlled by checkpoints. Family, tribal and political allegiances also dictate the extent to which people are able to move in and around the area.

Fewer than 200,000 people have crossed Yemen's borders into neighbouring countries in search of protection since the conflict escalated, amounting to less than ten per cent of the overall displaced population.¹⁰⁸ The country's geography and conflict dynamics restrict the options of people trying to flee abroad, effectively trapping them between a hostile party to the north, extensive and highly insecure terrain to the east and impoverished neighbours reachable only via a perilous sea journey to the south. The country's main airport has also been closed to civilian traffic since August 2016. The fact that relatively few people have fled outside the country is likely to have played a significant role in keeping Yemen's crisis off the radar.

Blockades on the import and transport of basic supplies, including food and fuel, have led to shortages and spiralling inflation, further reducing the purchasing power of people with very few resources left. The price of the average food basket has been driven up by more than 40 per cent since the escalation of the conflict, and 8.4 million people are on the edge of starvation.¹⁰⁹ The irregular or non-payment of salaries to around 1.25 million civil servants since August 2016 has led to a breakdown in services and further economic deterioration. Fewer than 50 per cent of Yemen's health facilities were still fully functional as of the end of 2017, and 16 million people struggled to access safe water.¹¹⁰

Displaced people are among the most vulnerable to the worsening humanitarian and food security conditions.¹¹¹ Yemen's government adopted a national policy on IDPs

in June 2013 that provides a principled foundation for preventing displacement, protecting those affected and promoting durable solutions, but the breakdown in central governance since has impeded its implementation.¹¹²

Eighty per cent of the country's IDPs live in private dwellings, most commonly with family or in rented accommodation, a potentially protective factor that reflects longstanding trends and the fact that the national policy on IDPs allows for the establishment of displacement camps only as a last resort. The remaining people are accommodated in collective centres and spontaneous settlements established in repurposed schools and health facilities, religious buildings, abandoned premises and makeshift shelters. In some cases, community leaders have actively encouraged such settlements in an effort to ensure IDPs' access to humanitarian assistance and relieve pressure on struggling hosts.

Women and children constitute 75 per cent of Yemen's displaced population, and their protection concerns are particularly acute.¹¹³ Their safety, access to services and livelihoods opportunities are compromised by entrenched inequalities, which puts them at increased risk of abuse and exploitation. Despite social norms that

discourage the reporting of gender-based violence, a 36 per cent increase in access to related services was reported in 2017.¹¹⁴ Displaced children are at extremely high risk of falling out of education and many become embroiled in negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, recruitment into armed groups and child marriage. A survey conducted across three governorates with large displaced populations in late 2016 found that 45 per cent of marriages involved girls under the age of 15.¹¹⁵

As the fighting continues, Yemen has also suffered large-scale outbreaks of preventable diseases. The country hovers on the brink of famine, and 22.2 million people out of the total population of 29.3 million are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance or protection.¹¹⁶ Meaningful steps to revive peace talks offer the only hope of preventing what already constitutes an unprecedented crisis from deteriorating further into a situation that the UN's emergency relief coordinator has said "looks like the apocalypse".¹¹⁷



Internally displaced people living in the Al-Zuhra district of Al-Hudaydah governorate, Yemen. Photo: NRC, January 2017