

Highlights

- Between 20 January and 18 March, Turkish Armed Forces and allied Free Syrian Army groups launched the “Olive Branch” military operation against Syrian Democratic Forces in Afrin district.
- As of the end of May, 136,000 individuals are estimated to remain in Afrin district; whereas 134,000 individuals remain displaced in the Tall Refaat sub-district, Nabul and Zahraa towns and surrounding communities.
- Some limited return movements to Afrin district took place between 21 and 26 May. Unverifiable information indicates that between 3,000 to 5,000 individuals may have returned using the Tanab – Ibbin crossing. For unknown reasons, the crossing was closed on 26 May which stopped return movement.
- A multi-sectoral rapid needs assessment was carried out in Afrin district between 3 and 8 May 2018. The sectoral findings of the assessment show that the humanitarian situation in the district is worse than what was initially expected. Many service providers were displaced to areas outside of Afrin during the hostilities. The explosive remnants of war contamination is an issue of concern to both civilians and humanitarians. Access to services and markets is limited.
- The Afrin assessment coverage map (180 out of 220 communities assessed) is shown below.



Situation overview

On 20 January, the Turkish Armed Forces and allied Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups launched the “Olive Branch” military operation against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Afrin district. Following almost two months of hostilities, the majority of Afrin district came under the control of the Turkish Armed Forces and allied FSA groups. In the days prior to the takeover of Afrin town by the Turkish Armed Forces and allied FSA groups, the SDF-affiliated authorities reportedly allowed civilians to move out of Afrin district.

Current estimates indicate that 134,000 IDPs remain displaced outside of the district in the Tall Refaat – Nabul area. Humanitarian organizations registered some 53,000 IDPs in Tall Refaat and surrounding communities. Some 33,500 people are estimated to reside in the Fafin area, where humanitarian partners registered 9,000 people in four IDP camps and nearby farms, and it is estimated that some 24,500 people were displaced to the seven villages in the Fafin areas, where no registration has taken place to date. Some 30,000 people are estimated to be in Nabul and Zahraa towns, while 15,500 IDPs reached Aleppo city in the early phase of displacement. Finally, some 2,000 IDPs moved to Menbij and north-east Syria. Presently, freedom of movement of these people displaced outside of Afrin district remains restricted, including for them to move to Aleppo city – despite some IDPs having family links and properties there. High level advocacy with the Government of Syria continues to lobby for their freedom of movement.

The protection situation for the displaced population in Nabul and Zahraa towns, Tall Refaat and surrounding rural areas remains dire. Before and after leaving Afrin, families had faced multiple displacements due to lack of suitable accommodation or unaffordable rental costs. Such conditions continue to impact their security and resilience and leads to the loss of economic and financial assets. The depletion of resources, the precarious accommodation situation and the fear of recruitment increase anxiety amongst the IDP population. The displaced population communicated frustrations on the lack of information about the situation in Afrin district, on the duration of stay in the current location, and on the perceived likelihood of involuntary relocation to other areas. The fear of evacuation from temporary accommodation, particularly for IDPs currently living in schools, is a push factor for returns to Afrin district.

The provision of civil status documentation, largely left behind or lost during the flight, and the registration of vital events occurring during displacement, are amongst the major gaps identified. Lack of infrastructure in areas of displacement is an obstacle to implement such services, while IDP access to the existing civil registries in Afrin is unfeasible following the change in control in Afrin district. Protection actors are trying to address this gap through the mobilization of groups of national lawyers finally authorized to conduct legal awareness and interventions in Tall Refaat and surrounding areas, where civil registries are not functional. Mobile registration efforts remain difficult, due to lack of stable connections, access and coordination amongst the Government of Syria-affiliated institutions.

The United Nations continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced population of Afrin in Tall Refaat and surrounding areas. Despite the increase in the presence of humanitarian partners in these areas, assistance and services remain insufficient, particularly for people in rural areas and in the IDP sites of Tall Refaat, Fafin and Wahshiyeh. Facilities in IDP sites are sub-standard and inadequately arranged for the dignity and the safety of women and children.

While the current situation in Afrin district poses limitations in terms of obtaining accurate population figures, data collected by a humanitarian organization in April 2018, indicated the presence of over 136,000 individuals across the district. The largest population figures were reported in Afrin town, where over 40,000 individuals were residing. Since the takeover of Afrin district by the “Olive Branch” forces in March 2018, attempts by people who displaced to return to the district have been ongoing. IDPs wishing to return have faced several challenges. Restrictions imposed by the parties to the conflict on movement continue. Many choosing to try to return choose to use unofficial means, with the risk of exploitation, injury or death by the explosive remnants of war along the way. Some reported their view that the return process is risky once inside Afrin district due to the fear of retaliation of attributed political profile or opinion.

The lack of a tracking mechanism of returns makes it challenging to obtain accurate figures on returnees. Unverified information indicates that between 3,000 to 5,000 individuals returned to Afrin district through the Tanab – Ibbin crossing, between 21 and 26 May. For unknown reasons, the crossing was closed on 26 May, and reports indicated that the return movement stopped. An estimated 200 people were stranded between the crossing for several days following its closure, before being allowed to return to Tall Refaat sub-district, reports indicated.

Reports indicate that displaced people from East Ghouta, southern Damascus, and other locations, where local agreements resulted in the evacuation of large numbers of people, moved to Afrin district after arrival in northern Syria. A number of these IDPs are residing in camps established by the authorities; while some IDPs occupy empty houses. It is unknown if this occupation is with the permission of the original owner.

In the wake of the takeover of most of Afrin district by Turkish Armed Forces and allied FSA groups in March 2018, reports emerged indicating the involvement of allied FSA group members in acts of looting and arbitrary arrests. While anecdotal information indicates a reduction in the occurrence of such incidents, it is deeply concerning that

such incidents continue to be reported. On 24 May, the Syrian Islamic Council – a group of Syrian religious scholars – issued a statement which affirmed the prohibition of looting of property of civilians in Afrin district, irrespective of the pretexts used to justify such actions. The statement called on the leaders of the battalions to maintain security in the areas under their control, and respond to the violations committed by fighters. The statement demanded the return of stolen property to their rightful owners.

At present, the humanitarian access situation in Afrin district continues to improve. While Damascus-based UN agencies and their partners have not been granted the permission to deliver assistance to Afrin district by the Government of Syria, at least 10 cross-border humanitarian organizations, some of whom are partners of UN agencies based in Turkey, continue to implement humanitarian activities. The Government of Turkey continues to classify Afrin district as an area of active military operations, cross-border humanitarian organizations use a deconfliction mechanism to coordinate the movement of their staff and humanitarian shipments. This mechanism serves to ensure that the armed actors on the ground are aware of the movement of humanitarians, which enhances the safety of staff and commodities.

Afrin Rapid Needs Assessment:

At the request of the humanitarian leadership, a multi-sectoral rapid needs assessment was carried out in Afrin district between 3 and 8 May 2018. Humanitarian organizations collected the data through interviews with either generalist and/or specialized key informants. A total of 788 interviews were conducted, out of which only 79 (10%) were female and 708 were males. Out of the 220 communities in Afrin district reachable by the cross-border humanitarian organizations, 180 communities were covered. The main challenges faced during the data collection process included the under representation (10%) of women among the key informants and the cumbersome deconfliction process. Despite these limitations, findings from this initial assessment are indicative of the general situation in Afrin district, and thematic detailed assessments are required to pursue comprehensive findings.

A most pressing issue found was the prevalence of ERWs, which impacts humanitarian organizations' safe access to the affected population and access of the population to the services. Marking and clearing operations of contaminated areas remains a matter of high priority along with conducting a systematic survey. There are currently no ongoing humanitarian ERW clearance operations. 47% of the key informants reported that ERW clearance activities by non-humanitarian actors had taken place in their communities in the past three months.

Findings indicated the gap in service provision in Afrin district due to the absence of critical service providers, such as medical personnel and teachers, who fled in the wake of the Turkish Armed Forces and allied FSA groups advances. Facilitating the voluntary return of service providers remains key for the re-establishment and provision of critical services to the affected population.

Key informants reported restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians inside Afrin district. 80% of the key informants reporting that their movement was restricted. They reported this restriction was due to the presence of a large number of checkpoints, the security screening procedures, and the ERW contamination.

The sectoral findings of the assessment show that the humanitarian situation in Afrin district is worse than expected. Most key informants reported extensive damage to civilian infrastructure, such as water supply systems, electricity networks, schools, hospitals, bakeries, and roads. The repair of infrastructure was a high priority for the interviewed individuals. According to the key informants, the damaged infrastructure, coupled with the lack of raw materials, adversely affected economic activities, particularly for home-based enterprises and for skilled and unskilled wage employment. In the short and medium term, business and economic recovery could be improved through the provision of electricity, raw material, and cash-based assistance.

For the education sector, key informants reported that a high number of school-aged children are not attending schools, and only three of the seven sub-districts in Afrin report children attending formal or non-formal education services. Required activities to enable schools functional again include conducting structural repairs, provision of school furniture, equipment and operating costs, provision of teaching and learning supplies, and hiring and retention of teachers and education personnel.

In four of the seven sub-districts, 95% of the respondents reported non-food item (NFI) issues. Some 45% of respondents reported that NFIs are not available in the market, such as the most critically needed items of clothing, mattresses, and jerry cans for water. This shortage is possibly related to the disruption of the commercial supply lines to Afrin district. 24% said that available NFIs do not correspond with their needs, while 22% said the available NFIs are not sufficient. Concerning shelter needs, the findings of the assessment roughly match anecdotal information about low shelter damage with 69% of the interviewed individuals reporting no damage to their shelter. Meanwhile, 31% reported varying degrees of damage with 5% reporting full destruction of their shelter.

The food security of the affected population in the district is worrying. 73% of the respondents reported food to be unavailable in the nearest market and 82% reported food markets to be inaccessible. The low availability of food and the inability to access markets caused prices to soar significantly, 60% of the interviewed individuals reported a major increase in prices of basic commodities. Bread production remains low, 77% of the respondents reported that the nearby bakeries were not functional. Consequently, over 50% of the informants reported relying on less preferred and less expensive food and over one third reported resorting to reducing the number of meals or portions.

Prior to the “Olive Branch” military operation, agricultural activities played a major economic role in Afrin district. The four main economic activities were food production, cash crop production, olive and olive oil production, and planting fruit trees. The assessment showed that food and cash crop production remain the main economic activities, while petty commodity production, along with wages from unskilled labor which replaced olive oil production. This change is indicative of a shift towards more informal economic activities due to the disruption of markets and economic institutions. Given the importance of agriculture in the district, providing support to agricultural activities is key to ensure the revitalization of economic activity.

Data on the health situation found that 153 of the 180 assessed communities have no access to health services. The low number of health facilities was the main obstacle to accessing health care, followed by the lack of medicine, health staff, transportation and specialized services. Very limited health care options are available for patients with tuberculosis and leishmaniasis. No mental health or physical rehabilitation centers were available. Family planning activities need to be enhanced. The current referral system is suboptimal as it refers patients on a case by case basis, rather than in a systematic way. Addressing these issues is key to improving the health care situation for people in the district.

The nutrition sector findings indicate that the lack of infant and young child feeding (IYCF) services have contributed to the large percentage of reported infants (53%) and young children (47%) with feeding problems. The availability of nutrition services (IYCF, CMAM and stabilization centers) across the district is very low. Bulbul, Jandairis, Ma’batli, Sharan and Sheikh El-Hadid sub-districts have no nutrition centers, while Raju sub-district has one IYCF center. The situation for children in Afrin sub-district as there are three types of centers. Recommendations to improve the nutrition situation in the district include scaling up IYCF through a variety of approaches, including group or individual counselling sessions, integrating IYCF messaging with the health, education and protection activities.

The key findings of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector indicated an inadequate supply of water through the water network, forcing 70% of the population to rely on water trucking services. 39% of the population live on less than 20 liters of water per day [Sphere minimum standard is 15 liters per person per day]. The absence of municipal services was noticeable in the district with 88% of the respondents reporting accumulation of solid waste in their areas. 49% reported increased presence of rats and pests. Solid waste removal activities are essential to reduce public health risks. Strict water quality monitoring measures are essential to avoid the spread of waterborne diseases.

In terms of child safety and wellbeing, the main three problems according to the key informants were ERW contamination; violence against children at the household and community level; and child recruitment. The main child protection concerns are child labour, forced and early marriage, and family separation. Among the community, some of these issues may be poorly understood or not seen as protection concerns, hence, unlikely to be reported. Some 15% of the respondents were aware of children who were separated from their parents since the conflict. The majority of respondents (80%) reported that separated children are living with other family members and relatives. Recommendations of the Child Protection Sub-Cluster include establishment of child-friendly spaces, provision of psycho-social support, and recreational normalizing activities for distressed children.

Humanitarian assistance to people within Afrin district continues, and is facilitated through the cross-border response from Turkey. Different actors, including Syrian NGOs, continue to provide a range of critical life saving services to people in need. Efforts are underway to review how the response can be stepped up, given the assessment findings to ensure that people’s needs can be served more effectively.

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