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Glossary

AOG	Armed Opposition Group
GoT	Government of Turkey
GoS	Government of Syria
GoR	Government of Russia
IS	Islamic State
KSA	Kurdish Self-Administration
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Political wing of YPG and leading political party in Hasaka's 'Self-Administration')
PiN	People in Need
YPG	Peoples Protection Unit
SDF	Syrian Democratic Force (mostly made up of and led by YPG forces, approximately 10% are from Arab tribes)
SDC	Syria Democratic Council (political wing of the SDF)
SNA	Syrian National Army (An alliance of 'moderate' AOGs supported by Turkey)
NLF	National Liberation Front (Arabic - Jabhat Tahrir Suriya. An alliance of 'moderate' AOGs supported by Turkey)
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (alliance of 'extreme' AOGs, notably Jabhat al-Nusra)

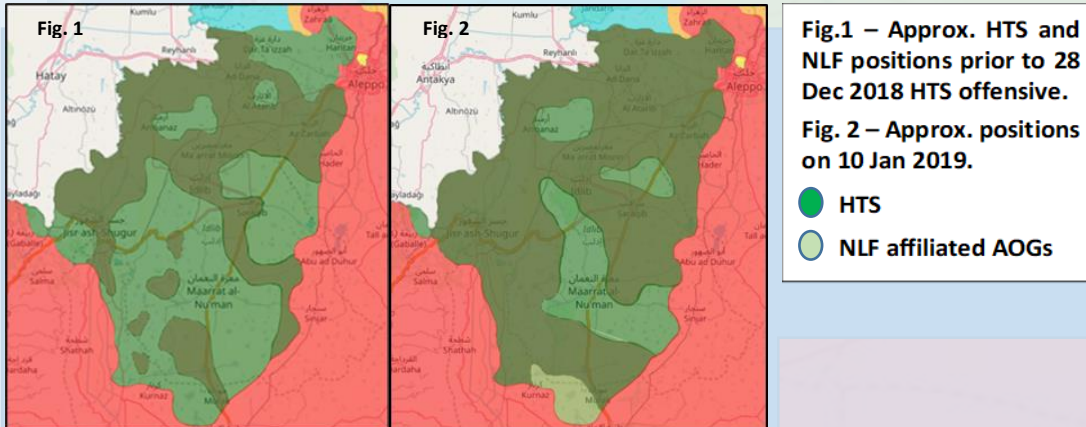
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Much of the text in this report is in *italic*. This is to illustrate that the contents are conjecture. Whilst the report reflects the current situation in northwest Syria, the analysis, views and opinions expressed are those of the author.

Disclaimer: The aim of this document is to give information and make analytical comment. Japan Platform is not responsible for any actions taken by the reader.

1. HTS SEIZE CONTROL OF IDLIB (Map source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

From 28 Dec 2018 to 10 Jan 2019, the extremist armed group HTS launched a widescale offensive against the more moderate National Liberation Front (NLF) across Idlib governorate, west Aleppo and north Homs. The offensive started in west Aleppo where HTS expelled an NLF affiliated armed group from its strongholds. As the NLF tried to reinforce west Aleppo with armed groups from south Idlib, HTS attacked several points on the M5 highway in Idlib. By 6 Jan HTS had full control of west Aleppo. Ceasefire talks



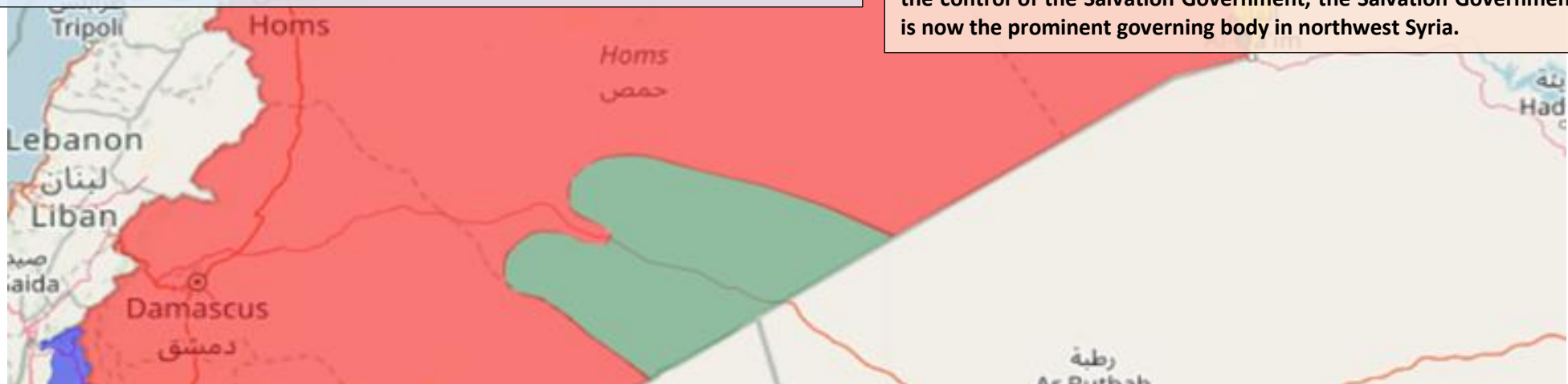
between the two failed with the NLF refusing to disband. HTS immediately attacked other NLF affiliated groups in central and south Idlib. Over the next 3 days HTS had successfully defeated the groups. Some NLF groups withdrew to Afrin, surrendering their positions to HTS, whilst others joined HTS. By the 10 Jan HTS controlled all crossing points and the majority of transit routes in northwest Syria.

Comment: The NLF is composed of armed opposition groups (AOGs) backed by the GoT, but Turkey failed to support the group throughout the HTS offensive. Reportedly it was Turkey's intervention that persuaded the HTS to stop its advance on the 9 Jan. However, Turkey's intervention was late and muted, suggesting they were taken by surprise or had decided not to oppose the HTS offensive. Probably the former because an HTS controlling Idlib is of little benefit to Turkey. Turkey's plan for an NLF controlled Idlib, free of HTS, is now unattainable.

A Syrian Government offensive, supported by Russia, on Idlib is now increasingly likely. HTS is not part of the Demilitarise Zone agreement, or any other agreements made at Astana, and controlling most of Idlib has given the GoS the excuse it needs to start an offensive.

Afrin is controlled by another AOG supported by Turkey, the Syrian National Army (SNA), who Turkey is also intending to use for its threatened attack on the YPG and Kurdish Self-Administration (KSA) in Menbij and northeast Syria. A possible benefit for Turkey is the number of SNA numbers will significantly increase if the NLF fighters displaced to Afrin decide to join them.

Significantly for INGOs and local NGOs the NLF's administrative body handed-over governance to the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government. Whilst some administrative bodies dissolved rather than fall under the control of the Salvation Government, the Salvation Government is now the prominent governing body in northwest Syria.



2. TRUMP'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO WITHDRAW US TROOPS FROM NORTHEAST SYRIA

President Trump's announcement on 19 Dec 2018 that the US would in one month pull its troops out of northeast Syria, was unexpected and heightened the geopolitics in the region. However, subsequent statements by US Secretaries of State and National Security Advisor contradicted Trump by saying the withdrawal would be more gradual and reaffirmed US support for the SDF. Regardless, Trump's announcement left the region's leading actors contemplating how they could fill the vacuum.

The GoT initially saw this as permission from the US, to launch a future offensive against the KSA and YPG in northeast Syria; reportedly Trump made the announcement after a phone meeting with Turkey's President Erdogan. However, when the announcement was all but retracted by the US Secretaries of State and National Security Advisor, this worsened the already bad relations between the two countries with divisive rhetoric coming from both. Another reversal came on 14 Jan 2019 after a second phone meeting between Trump and Erdogan. Reportedly, Trump reaffirmed US troops would pull-out and discussed the establishment of a Turkey run 20-mile-deep 'Safe Zone' in Syrian on the border with Turkey.

The GoR was less overt in its reaction, but reportedly held meetings with Syrian and Iranian counterparts following Trump's initial announcement. In recent weeks all three have reportedly been building up their forces on the west bank of the Euphrates in southeast Syria for a future offensive to retake the rich oil fields currently held by the SDF in the area. Following the 'Safe Zone' announcement, Russia's Foreign Minister stated the GoS must control north Syria.

Comment: For the GoS this is an opportunity to return the KSA areas to its control without a fight. For some time, negotiations have been ongoing between the KSA and the GoS concerning the return to central rule, but now with Turkey threatening there is an urgency for the KSA. If Syrian forces were to deploy to the border it would dissuade Turkey from attacking. However, this puts the KSA in a much weaker negotiating position and undermines their hope to maintain some form of autonomy.

US Syrian policy is evidently in disarray and it's unclear what their future intent is. A US troops withdrawal from northeast Syria is undoubtedly a leading objective for the GoR, no other country would be able to challenge Russia in their role as the senior power in the region. However, a total US withdrawal is unlikely, and it is unclear if there is an intention to also stop US led coalition airstrikes supporting the SDF in the battle against IS.

A Turkish offensive would likely be at two points; Menbij west of the Euphrates, and the Arab-majority region around Tel Abyad, east of the Euphrates. For Turkey to be successful it will need air support, and this will only be forthcoming if Russia allows Turkey's military planes to fly west of the Euphrates and if the US allows flights east of the Euphrates. Both seem unlikely. President Erdogan is now in a difficult position on how to proceed, despite his rhetoric. This is made more difficult by recent events in Idlib and the successful HTS offensive against the Turkey-backed NLF. Allowing Syrian forces back onto the border is not a solution for Erdogan – the GoT has supported the fight against the GoS since the start of the civil war 8 years ago.

How a US/Turkey 'Safe Zone' on the Syrian side of the Turkish border could be implemented is difficult to envisage. However, it would undermine Russia's attempts to pull Turkey away from the US and reduce US influence in the region. It would also give Erdogan a way forward and a success prior to the local elections on 31 Mar 2019. Erdogan and Russian President Putin meet on 23 Jan; Putin must offer Erdogan a plan which gives him a way out of the difficult situation Turkey finds itself in Idlib, removes the Kurdish YPG from the border with Turkey and also keeps Syrian forces away from the border.

There are currently 25 INGOs and more than 150 local NGOs operating in the areas governed by the KSA. All are at risk should the US pull out and destabilise the region. Even if conflict is avoided and the GoS returns to govern the region, the INGOs and local NGOs will probably be unable to continue operating. Few if any are registered with the Damascus government to operate in the northeast of Syria and are operating illegally in the eyes of the Syrian regime. The situation would be similar if Turkey controlled parts of the region. Recently Turkey has been hostile towards INGOs operating in KSA controlled areas, expelling several from Turkey.

For more analysis on the situation from a humanitarian perspective, see:

https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2019/01/16/trump-pullout-plan-leaves-aid-groups-northeast-syria-scrambling?utm_source=IRIN+-+the+inside+story+on+emergencies&utm_campaign=e9aabd639a-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_06_22_11_22_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d842d98289-e9aabd639a-75523769

3. Elsewhere in Syria (Map source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

SUICIDE BOMB KILLS 4 AMERICANS IN MENBIJ

On 16 Jan 2019, 4 Americans were amongst 19 killed in an IS suicide attack in Menbij city. Two of the Americans were US soldiers, the other 2 were a civilian employee and a military contractor. They were eating at a restaurant. *Comment: The incident might hasten or delay the withdrawal of US troops from the region. The incident evidently shows that IS are not beaten – the reason Trump gave for his decision to withdraw US troops.*

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES

Israel conducted airstrikes against Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria on 30 Nov 2018, 26 Dec 2018 and 11 Jan 2019. Most targets were weapons depots in the Damascus area. All the strikes have been conducted despite Russia upgrading the Syrian air defence in Nov 2018.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT RESISTANCE IN THE SOUTH

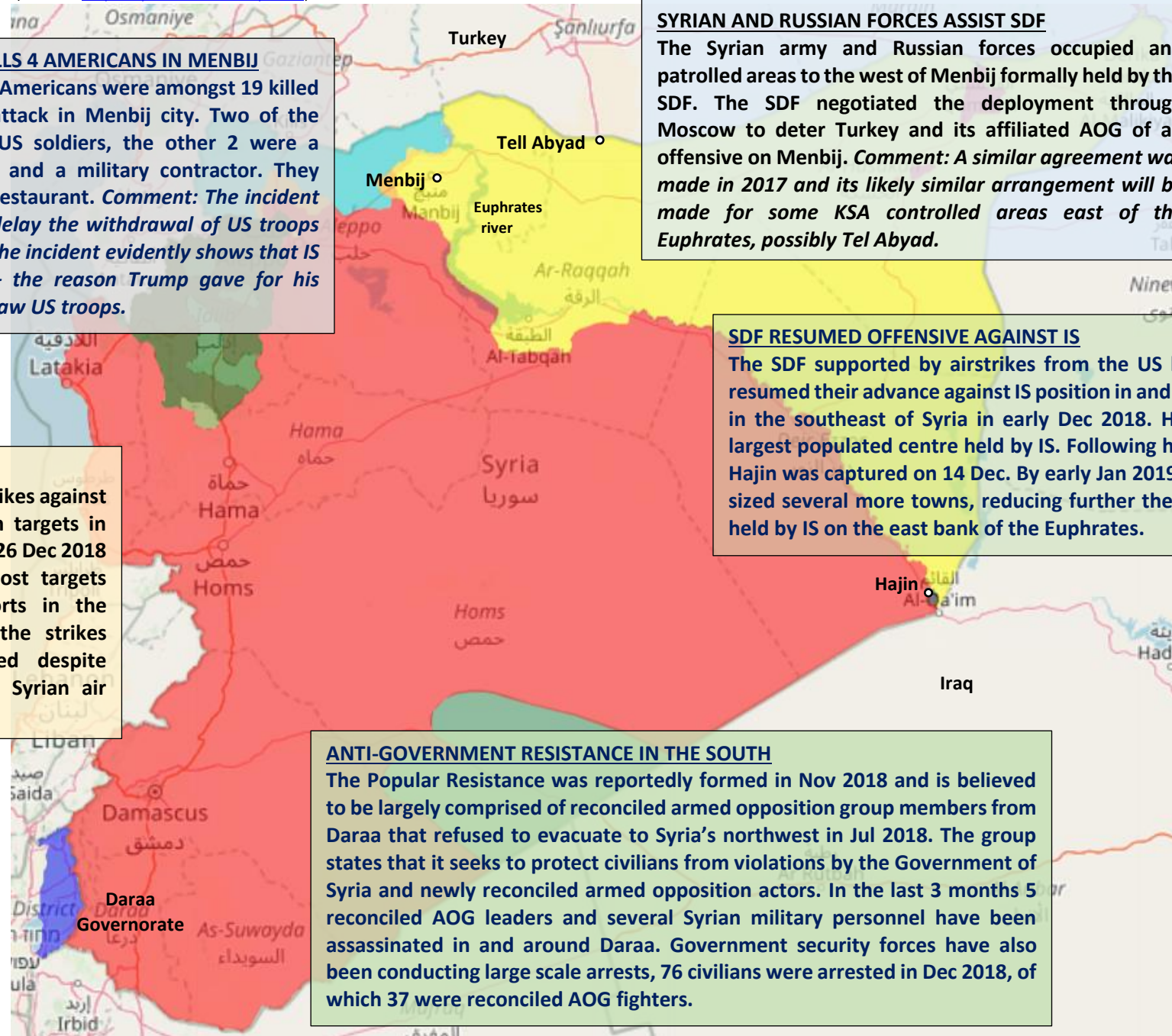
The Popular Resistance was reportedly formed in Nov 2018 and is believed to be largely comprised of reconciled armed opposition group members from Daraa that refused to evacuate to Syria's northwest in Jul 2018. The group states that it seeks to protect civilians from violations by the Government of Syria and newly reconciled armed opposition actors. In the last 3 months 5 reconciled AOG leaders and several Syrian military personnel have been assassinated in and around Daraa. Government security forces have also been conducting large scale arrests, 76 civilians were arrested in Dec 2018, of which 37 were reconciled AOG fighters.

SYRIAN AND RUSSIAN FORCES ASSIST SDF

The Syrian army and Russian forces occupied and patrolled areas to the west of Menbij formally held by the SDF. The SDF negotiated the deployment through Moscow to deter Turkey and its affiliated AOG of an offensive on Menbij. *Comment: A similar agreement was made in 2017 and its likely similar arrangement will be made for some KSA controlled areas east of the Euphrates, possibly Tel Abyad.*

SDF RESUMED OFFENSIVE AGAINST IS

The SDF supported by airstrikes from the US led coalition, resumed their advance against IS position in and around Hajin in the southeast of Syria in early Dec 2018. Hajin was the largest populated centre held by IS. Following heavy fighting Hajin was captured on 14 Dec. By early Jan 2019 the SDF had sized several more towns, reducing further the strip of land held by IS on the east bank of the Euphrates.



4. Humanitarian Situation

SYRIAN CRISIS SUMMARY

- Eight years of war.
- Life-threatening needs continue to grow.
- 13.1 million people require humanitarian assistance.
- 2 million people in hard-to-reach areas, exposed to severe protection threats.
- Number of IDPs in Dec 18: 45,224
- **Total number of IDPs: 5,689,095**
- Number of Returnees in Dec 18: 48,205
- **Total number of Returnees in 2018: 1,250,956**

NFI

Winterization Total Number of PiN: 1.7M
Total Number Assisted: 585,000

SHELTER

Winterization Total Number of PiN: 1.9M
Total number Assisted: 50.000

PROTECTON

Concerns are now growing on vulnerabilities related to child-headed households, school dropouts, exploitative child labor, trauma care, physical injuries and disabilities, family tracing and reunification. More work needed to improve access of children at risk to education, food, shelter and health services, psychosocial and livelihood support. Critical gap in specialized services or inclusive services for groups with specific needs, e.g. persons with disabilities or older persons. GBV survivors need to be prioritized for assistance and supported to access basic services.

KEY DOCUMENTS

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operation/s/stima/infographic/syria-protection-cluster-turkey-response-snapshot-30-november-2018>

The Intentions of IDPs in Syria - H NAP Thematic Report
<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operation/s/stima>

IDPS

45,224 this month 5,689,095 in total

PRESENT SHELTER TYPES



34%

in rented accommodation



24%

with host families



16%

in self-settled camps

HIGHLIGHTS

REASON FOR DISPLACEMENT

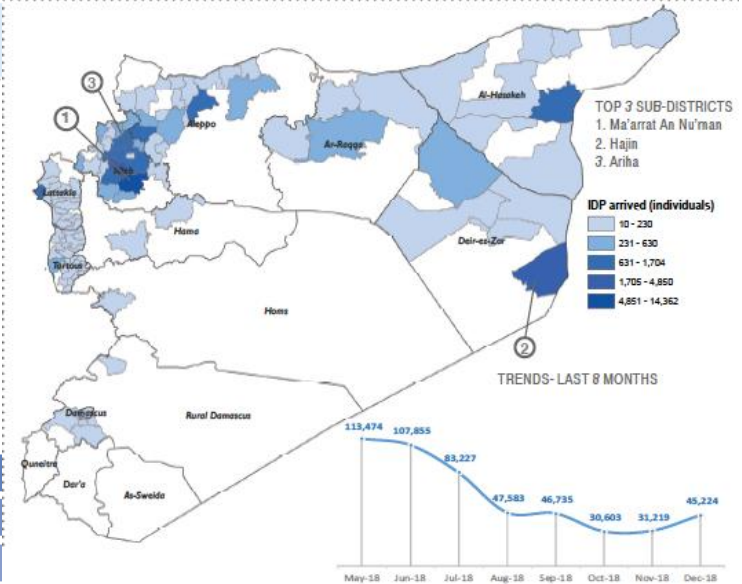
AVAILABILITY OF BASIC SERVICES	83%
BETTER SECURITY SITUATION	83%
BETTER LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES	81%

TOP PRIORITY NEEDS FOR THE MONTH

LIVELIHOODS	44%
BASIC SERVICES	32%
FOOD	28%

NUMBER OF DISPLACEMENTS

ONE	33%
TWO	30%
MORE THAN 2	37%



SURVEY ON IDP INTENSIONS - SUMMARY

- Displacement is likely to continue until the end of 2019
- 76% of households (816,322) expected to remain at current location for the near future of which 44% (534,693) not actively planning to return.
- 20% of households (238,444) indicated their intention to integrate at their current location of displacement.
- 12% of households (43,185) intended to return to their place of origin after 2019.
- 4% of households (47,931) indicated their plans to move to a third location within Syria.
- 2% of households (22,276) reported their intention to leave Syria.

RETURNEES

48,205 this month 1,250,956 in 2018

PRESENT SHELTER TYPES



89%

in their own house



6%

with host families



3%

in rented accommodation

HIGHLIGHTS

REASON FOR RETURN

BETTER SECURITY IN THE PLACE OF ORIGIN	88%
IMPROVING ECONOMIC SITUATION IN PLACE OF ORIGIN	79%
NEED TO PROTECT ASSETS	75%

TOP PRIORITY NEEDS FOR THE MONTH

LIVELIHOODS	52%
BASIC SERVICES	51%
HEALTH	46%

DEPARTURE LOCATION

Within Syria	38% from Dar'a
From other countries	43% from Lebanon
	90%
	10%

