

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TEAM

RESEARCH SERIES ON THE MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT OF THE 6 FEBRUARY EARTHQUAKE  
ON NORTHWEST SYRIA



## Volume 1.

### A TAXONOMY OF EARTHQUAKE-DRIVEN DISPLACEMENT IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
RESPONSE ACTORS AND IDP SITES	3
GOVERNANCE MODALITIES WITHIN IDP SITES	4
VULNERABILITY, STABILITY AND ACCESS TO SERVICES	5
FUTURE OUTLOOK OF IDP CENTERS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA	6



*Earthquake response , Bseniah village, northwest Syria. Source: Mercy Corps, 2023.*

*Cover Photo: Rains flood IDP camps in northwest Syria. Source: Syria Civil Defence, 2023.*

# INTRODUCTION

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Displacement has been an ongoing, intricate and sensitive dynamic faced by humanitarian response actors operating in northwest Syria. The destruction and subsequent waves of internally displaced persons (IDPs) caused by the 6 February earthquake added a significant layer of complexity for both IDPs seeking refuge, and humanitarian actors attempting to provide assistance. In the three months after the earthquake, over 100 sites were established in response to the drastic increase in IDPs – many of these have weak governance structures and poor access to essential services, in a context described by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster as ‘highly fluid’. Through analyzing [data](#) provided by the CCCM Cluster and utilizing a network of field researchers, this report aims to create a general framework through which these IDP sites are understood by placing them in different categories and identifying their weaknesses. This report also aims to shed light on the differences between cohorts of IDPs and the shortcomings of weak existing governance modalities within certain IDP sites, before outlining the future trajectory of these camps should the status quo remain.

## RESPONSE ACTORS AND IDP SITES

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In response to new waves of displacement, more than 100 new sites for housing IDPs were established in six main districts in northern and western Aleppo and Idlib. They were distributed in 39 villages and cities in 15 subdistricts, many of which were heavily impacted by the earthquake. Overall, [201,834 people](#) were displaced by the earthquake, representing [10.1%](#) of the total number of IDPs in northwest Syria. The new sites host more than 15,773 IDP households (80,000 individuals) with a planned capacity of 19,176 households. While most of these sites were established in response to the earthquake, eight others established in previous years also received IDPs. Overall, the response led to a [12.81% increase](#) in the total number of shelters housing IDPs in northwest Syria.

The CCCM Cluster characterized IDP movements as highly fluid, stressing that, at any time, IDP numbers might significantly change. According to local sources, different ‘cohorts’ of IDPs emerged after the earthquake, namely:

- IDPs who were significantly affected by the earthquake, were displaced and then made their way to shelter sites. Despite the lack of accurate figures, this cohort of IDPs is expected to be the majority.
- IDPs who were only at these shelters for a limited amount of time. According to local sources, these are; (i) IDPs who were affected by the earthquake and initially made their way to IDP camps, but were economically better off in comparison to the rest and left after securing private housing, (ii) those who arrived at the IDP site, but later left to join their relatives and family members whose properties remained intact, and (iii) those whose houses were not affected but initially made their way to IDP shelters in fear of aftershocks (as a pre-emptive measure) but later returned to their properties.
- Finally, local sources also reported that some people who were not affected by the earthquake, made their way to IDP shelters to benefit from the aid that would be distributed.

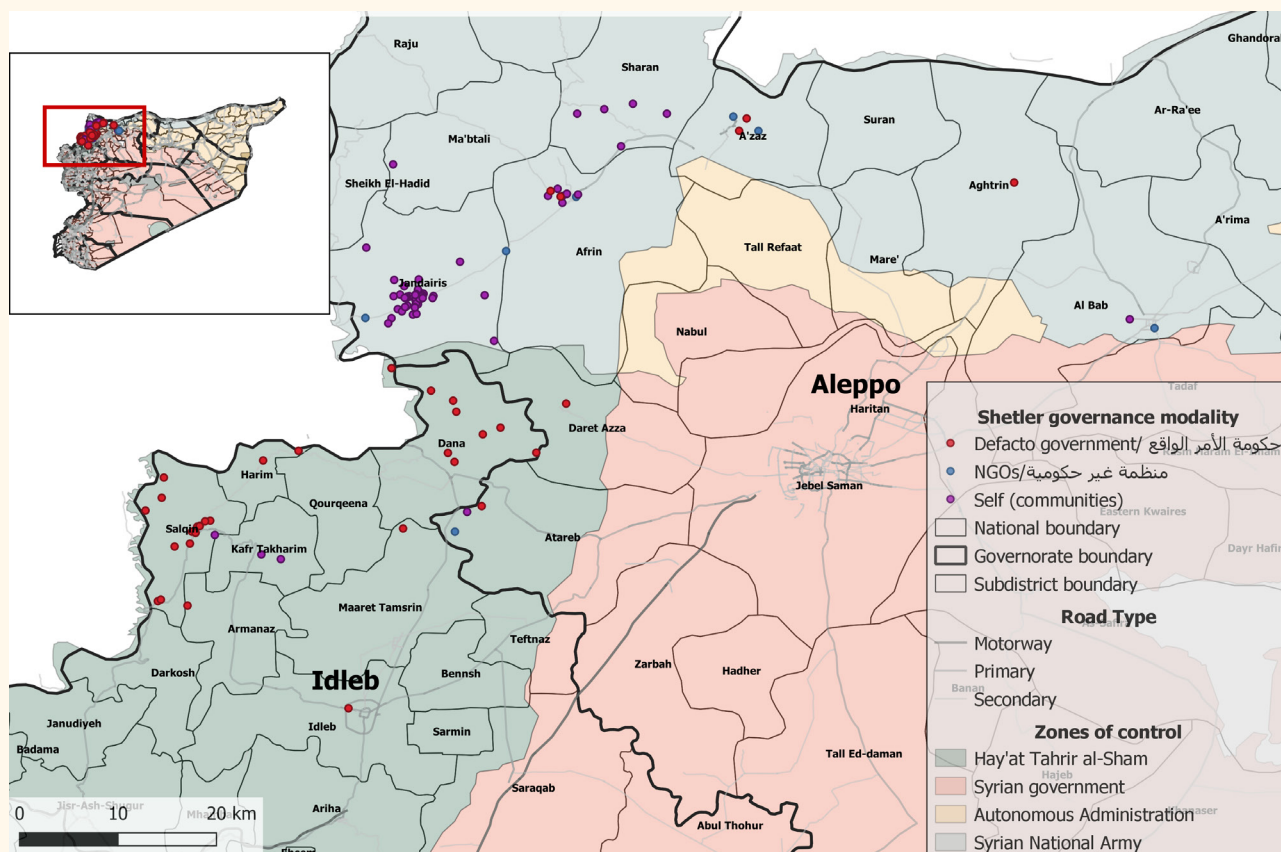
According to CCCM Cluster data, 109 IDP sites were established in the wake of the earthquake. There are six different types of IDP sites: informal sites, reception centers, collective centers, planned camps, hospitals and schools, delineated as follows:



Informal sites were the most common, with 43 recorded, mainly in Aleppo. Reception centers were next, with 41 recorded (32 in Aleppo). Idleb houses 15 of the 17 collective centers, the third most common type of IDP shelter recorded. Planned camps (a total of 6, all of which are in Idleb), hospitals (1 in Aleppo) and schools (1 in Aleppo) were also reported to house IDPs, however at a much lower rate.

Four different categories of actors responded to the crisis: Authorities representing the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in northern Aleppo and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idleb, NGOs, local partners, and local communities. NGOs had the greatest contribution to mitigating displacement, establishing 62 out of the 109 sites, mostly in northern Aleppo (49). Local communities responding to the crisis were the second most active, establishing 24 sites also predominantly in northern Aleppo – areas in northern Aleppo were the hardest hit by the earthquake, sustaining the most damage and with the highest levels of displacement recorded. Despite this, SSG authorities in Idleb were significantly more active than their SIG counterparts, reportedly establishing 18 sites in comparison to SIG’s four. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, local sources reported that IDPs generally headed toward the nearest shelter sites, prompting the establishment of informal sites. A few days after the earthquake, local sources in SSG-held areas reported that authorities were attempting to organize IDP flows by creating lists of the displaced and allocating them to specific shelter sites. SIG authorities reportedly made no efforts to document or organize the IDPs, who headed towards sites they perceived to be best suited for them in terms of proximity to their homes.

## GOVERNANCE MODALITIES WITHIN IDP SITES



Map 1. IDP shelter sites disaggregated by governance modality

Three different modalities of governance and administration were reported within the IDP sites. The sites are reportedly governed either by SSG or SIG authorities, NGOs, or the IDPs themselves. Interestingly, while NGOs were most active in establishing camps to house those affected by the earthquake, they are the least active in terms of managing and governing the sites, with only nine reportedly being managed by NGOs, the majority of which (7) are in northern Aleppo. SSG authorities were much more effective in Idlib in comparison to the SIG in northern Aleppo: The most common modality of management reported in Idlib was by government authorities. Of a total of 32 IDP sites in SSG-held areas, 27 are directly managed by SSG authorities in comparison to eight managed by the SIG in northern Aleppo. In northern Aleppo, the most common modality of governance within sites was self-governance, mostly by a person identified as the camp ‘manager.’ Sixty-two of the 77 IDP sites in SIG-held areas are reportedly governed and managed by ‘self-governance’ schemes.

Limited efforts to establish governance structures within IDP sites are likely to limit the effectiveness of the humanitarian response. While some sites are reportedly managed by SSG and SIG authorities, local sources indicated that representatives are not always present within the camps. This risks information available to authorities with regards to IDP numbers and the immediate risks being inaccurate or, in light of the fluidity of IDP movements, redundant, negatively impacting humanitarian response in these camps. This issue is compounded further in camps with self-governance structures. Within these sites, the CCCM Cluster reports that the site is managed by a ‘manager.’ However, the CCCM Cluster reported that generally, these managers are largely working off their own resourcefulness, with the majority lacking committees or structures to help support their work. According to local sources, similar to sites governed by government actors, these managers are likely to only have largely outdated information on site residents. Only 15 out of 65 sites with self-governance schemes, all of which are in Aleppo’s Jendaris subdistrict, were reported to have regular coordination meetings with committees that were created inside these sites.

## VULNERABILITY, STABILITY AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

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### Shelter

The CCCM Cluster reported different types of housing structures in the IDP sites. Despite one site (in Idlib) housing IDPs in caravans, and four sites (two in Idlib and two in Aleppo) housing IDPs in some form of concrete buildings, the vast majority of IDPs are currently housed in tents. While IDPs were able to find some form of shelter, most remain vulnerable to external shocks: Northwest Syria experienced heavy rainfall and storms in mid-March. The most notable districts affected were Dana, Ma’arrat Tamasrin, Jandairis, Mhambal, Armanaz and Idlib. The heavy rains reportedly flooded 30 displacement sites leaving some 600 tents destroyed and 897 others damaged.

### Food and WASH

Since the earthquake, donor agencies, states and communities have pooled funds to respond to IDPs’ needs. Food assistance was the most frequent form of support provided to the vast majority of IDP sites, with 100 out of 109 reported to have received food assistance (ie, RTE food, food baskets, hot meals) and supplementary food support (bread and cooked meals) on a regular basis. Similarly, though to a lower extent, emergency water for drinking, cooking, personal hygiene and domestic purposes (standard 25L per person per day) was reported to be generally available – of the 109 IDP sites, IDPs

in 79 sites reportedly had access to water. The 30 remaining IDP sites that do not have access were all in Aleppo, established either by NGOs or by local communities, but all managed through community self-governance mechanisms.

## Education

Access to and resumption of education is also expected to be limited, while not necessarily due to humanitarian actors not responding to this need, but rather due to the sheer number of children that are currently not attending school. A total of 10,126 children are reportedly out of school, 8,351 of which are currently in IDP sites in Aleppo. The issue was reportedly largest in Aleppo's Afrin and Idleb's Harim districts, where 1,200 and 1,465 children were reported to be out of school as a result of their displacement respectively. Worryingly, the vast majority of IDP children in Aleppo (7,496) currently out of school are living in camps with self-governance modalities. As a result of the likelihood that such sites are likely to have outdated information, and therefore, outreach difficulties to site residents, education responses targeting those children are likely to be more difficult. The opposite is true for IDP children out of school in Idleb, where the majority (1,585 out of 1,775) currently live in sites governed by SSG authorities, making responses to child education needs relatively easier.

## Protection

The majority of IDP sites were reported to have some general protection services. Specifically, 64 IDP sites, split almost equally between Idleb and Aleppo (31 and 33 respectively), were reported to have general protection services. However, 45 other sites were reported not to have general protection services, 44 of which were in Aleppo. Surprisingly, over half of these sites (25) were established by NGOs. Unsurprisingly, however, 38 of the total sites that were reported not to have any general protection services are governed by self-governance modalities.

# FUTURE OUTLOOK OF IDP CENTERS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

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In the medium term, IDPs displaced by the earthquake are likely to have to remain in their temporary shelters. Attempts at resolving housing shortages are ongoing; according to local sources, the SSG has attempted to garner Arab support to build sustainable housing projects for the IDPs, as it attempts to maintain its 'no tent' policy<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, charities such as Qatar Charity, volunteer teams such as Molhem and quasi-public entities such as the Free Syrian Chamber of Commerce and Industry have pooled funds and pledged to help build housing projects. However, due to the scale of the displacement, the funds are reported to be insufficient to provide housing to all those in need. Additionally, any large-scale housing project will take a long time to complete – the existing conditions of multiple temporary shelters housing the IDPs are likely to continue.

## Social cohesion

Difficulties maintaining the existing IDP sites risk a gradual deterioration of living standards. Although households most impacted by the earthquake have had access to some form of shelter, CCCM Cluster

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<sup>1</sup> A source in the SSG unofficially stated that the SSG will not approve requests from NGOs to set up new tents in its areas.

data also indicates that many are living in overcrowded, unsafe conditions (less than 3.5m<sup>2</sup> per person). The risk of social tension is very high; people within the sites do not share the same culture or ideologies, and have vastly different backgrounds. Economically, thousands have lost their livelihoods and are without work, while a lack of coordination and official monitoring, whether by government administrations or in self-governed sites, risks some households being overlooked for aid – these factors could cause friction between residents, making cooperation or coordination strained.

## Vulnerable groups

Despite the availability of general protection services in most IDP sites, the prospects of preventing gender-based violence (GBV) are also likely to be bleak. According to an OCHA [report](#) from 23 March, GBV experts indicated that GBV-related crimes increased by an average of 29% in northwest Syria. While the report does not provide data indicating where these exact incidents took place, the report notes that the increases are mostly present in areas with an influx of IDPs affected by the earthquake. Only 31 IDP sites were reported to have GBV protection services. The majority of IDP sites (78) were reported not to have any services. Over half of these sites (48) were in Aleppo, established by NGOs and managed by self-governance mechanisms. In Idlib, the majority of camps (30 out of 32) were reported not to have any form of GBV protection service.

In terms of child protection, only 45 sites were reported to have child protection services available for IDPs. The remaining 64 camps were mostly found in NGO-established camps with self-governance modalities in Aleppo. In Idlib, the majority of camps without child protection services were reported in sites established by the SSG authorities, with SSG governance modalities in place. Despite Idlib's SSG-managed sites seemingly better suited to deal with child protection due to the presence, albeit limited, of local authorities (in comparison to Aleppo's self-governance sites), the lack of permanent presence by authorities within the camps also risks cases of targeting of children – through physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect – going underreported.

## Security

There are a limited number of shelters that are secured with lockable doors from the inside, posing a risk to personal security (including physical abuse), and increasing the potential for theft. According to the CCCM Cluster data, only 49 IDP sites have shelters with lockable doors from the inside. Shelters in 60 sites split between Aleppo and Idlib (40 and 20 respectively) lack this feature. In Aleppo, this issue is most prevalent in sites that were either established by NGOs and managed by self-governance mechanisms, or established and managed by self-governance mechanisms. Meanwhile in Idlib, the lack of these features within shelters is more prevalent in IDP sites created and managed by government authorities.

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The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT), was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. HAT's most important function is to collect and analyze data and information. Since 2015, our analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict. CA-SYR is a team within Mercy Corps, and is part of the Mercy Corps response to the Syrian crisis.