

Regional Flash Update #5

Syria situation crisis

19 December 2024

Key Highlights

- Even as relative calm falls over many parts of Syria since the fall of the former government, humanitarian needs remain acute. Collective centers host tens of thousands of people; people lack access to basic necessities including water, food and health care. Many IDPs report that their houses in return areas are damaged or destroyed. Safety and security remain key concerns for displaced people as they consider going home or not.
- The IDP Taskforce reported some 225,000 IDPs have also returned to their areas of origin, primarily in Hama and Aleppo governorates, significantly reducing the number of newly displaced individuals from 1.1 million to 882,000 as of 15 December.
- UNHCR is engaging with thousands of refugees in neighboring countries, often with daily contact through helplines, surveys, focus group discussions, and other communications channels, listening to their concerns, providing up-to-date information, and understanding their perceptions and intentions around return. While many indicate a cautious optimism about returning home, most are waiting to see what happens next in Syria. Questions span from safety and security to practical considerations, such as documentation, schooling for children, transportation costs, and the state and availability of housing back home.



UNHCR meets families returning from Türkiye at Bab al-Hawa crossing in Syria (16 December). © UNHCR

Country updates

Syria

As of 17 December, Syrians in several key urban centres, including Homs and Hama, are returning to a semblance of normal life. Shops and markets have opened, public transportation is operating, and banks have partially resumed services.

UNHCR and partners have re-established presence and monitoring at key Syrian border points with Lebanon - an important development in the last week.

In north-west Syria, the overall security situation remains relatively calm, with no major incidents reported and all UNHCR activities continuing unimpeded. The UNHCR-led CCCM Cluster have recorded the departure of approximately 8,000 IDPs from IDP sites since 3 December. In Idlib, all IDPs have evacuated reception centres, while in Aleppo, three centres continue to host a few dozen families, primarily from the Afrin area. In Homs, two centres are still hosting several hundred displaced people.

The CCCM Cluster is conducting rapid assessments and referrals to other sectors. Some displaced families who visited their areas of origin have returned to camps due to the lack of essential services. Others are unwilling to leave camps until their areas of origin are cleared of explosive remnants of war or until they can afford to rehabilitate their damaged homes. Safety concerns persist, particularly in eastern regions.

In north-east Syria, more than 44,000 people are still living in Emergency Collective Centres (E-CCs), which provide temporary relief, but the needs remain high. Efforts are underway to identify and implement provisional mitigation measures and develop an exit strategy for E-CCs. Despite these efforts, gaps and constraints persist across all sectors. The fluid security context has impacted service delivery, particularly in Al-Hol camp, where life-saving services are being prioritized. Access to Menbij area remains restricted. UNHCR activities include support to displaced families with core relief items, legal aid, and awareness raising sessions on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse reaching more than 16,000 people across Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hassakeh governorates.

In southern Syria, UNHCR-run community centres have resumed operations. In Dar'a, 177 partially damaged houses are being rehabilitated by UNHCR through partners.

Lebanon

Return traffic from Lebanon continues at a low but steady pace to Syria through official border crossings of Masnaa and Qaa in Bekaa and Arida in the north, as well as reportedly by irregular means. As of last week, the number of Syrian returns through official border crossing points stood at around 10,000 people. New official figures are expected shortly.

As of 17 December, a few hundred Syrians were estimated to be waiting to cross into Lebanon through Masnaa. About half of these met entry requirements and others returned back to Syria. UNHCR and partners have been and remain on standby in the area to respond to the needs of those who may be stranded in the coming days.

In Hermel area of Baalbek governorate, the Government's Disaster Risk Management Unit estimates that 90,000 people have arrived from Syria, including an estimated 38,000 hosted in 159 informal collective shelters (mostly Syrians), 20,000 Lebanese returnees from villages along the Syria/Lebanon border, and 32,000 Syrians outside collective shelters. The situation is still fluid as the population is highly mobile. The humanitarian response includes food assistance provided in shelters; basic assistance (blankets, mattresses, and pillows) in half of the shelters; water and hygiene kits; and primary health satellite units. While the overall response aims to ensure immediate, life-saving support over the next three months, there are still gaps in terms of winter items, sanitation facilities, medicine, diapers, and infant formula.

On coordination, Public Works Minister Ali Hamieh released a statement noting that "the government emergency committee, in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, UNHCR, and in cooperation with international organizations" will follow up on "the humanitarian response on the needs of the Lebanese who moved from Syrian territories and border areas as a result of recent events, and that matters related to the affairs of displaced Syrians remain within the scope of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, and UNHCR."

Türkiye

UNHCR continues to increase its capacity to monitor return interviews and to expand presence at active border crossings. UNHCR is monitoring return interviews in 12 provinces and at five border crossing points in the southeast (Cilvegözü / Bab al Hawa, Zeytindalı / Jinderes, Yayladağı / Keseb, Öncüpınar / Bab al Salama and Karkamış / Jarablus). Government processing of voluntary returns continues in provinces and at six border crossings: the five in the southeast as well as Akçakale / Tel Abyad.

Based on the return interviews monitored, more than one-third of returnees are individuals, returning alone due to absence of dependent family members in Türkiye or the intent to assess conditions in Syria before facilitating their family's return. Some female-headed households are among the returnees.

The primary drivers for return are tied to the evolving situation in Syria: improved security and political changes are the dominant factors, reflecting a cautious optimism among returnees about conditions back home. Emotional and familial ties also play a role, with some returning to reunite with family or attend family events. Aleppo, Idlib, and Damascus are the most common destinations for returnees, with the majority seeking to go back to their pre-conflict residences. Whether family is present in these areas is a strong influence, alongside perceptions of improved security. However, not all returnees are able to return directly to their original homes because their family was displaced or moved, safety concerns, inadequate infrastructure and property destruction. Social and economic challenges, along with fears of conscription, also shape their decisions.

Jordan

According to information available to UNHCR, issuance or renewal of passports for Syrians through the Syrian Embassy is currently suspended but Syrians holding old or expired passports can still travel to Syria. Reportedly, there is an option to request issuance of a travel document from the Syrian Embassy for a fee.

On 16 December, UNHCR Jordan convened the inter-agency return coordination group (Durable Solutions Working Group), attended by 42 representatives from UN agencies, civil society organizations, donors, and other partners. The meeting provided situation updates, an overview of refugees' perceptions, and border monitoring reports. The forum agreed on further steps to coordinate communication with communities, advocacy, research, data collection, and other areas of common action.

UNHCR conducts regular focus group discussions in camps and communities and keeps contact with refugees through social media, helplines, and other channels. Refugees living in camps are optimistic about returning to Syria at some stage. However, they noted that the situation is uncertain, and they may need more time before they feel comfortable to make an informed decision about return. Some refugees in communities expressed a preference to migrate to or resettle in a third country rather than return to Syria. On the possible timeframe to return, some respondents mentioned the Ramadan period after winter, as the weather will be better in the absence of housing in Syria, or June when the school year ends. Refugees in camps and communities expressed concerns about ongoing security issues and the lack of proper infrastructure in Syria, referring to information received from relatives or refugees who have already returned.

Iraq

Since 8 December, the border crossing at Al-Qaim has been officially closed for entry to and exit from Iraq. Only exceptional cases of Iraqis in Syria entering Iraq and Syrians in Iraq crossing to Syria are being approved after clearance from authorities.

Over the past week, movements of Syrians through the Peshkabour border crossing between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), remained as normal. Most Syrians crossing into Iraq through the border crossing, who are required to have pre-approved visas, indicate that they are only visiting KR-I temporarily, mostly to visit family, and will return to Syria thereafter.

Useful links

- [Regional Flash Update #4, Syria Situation Crisis](#)
- [UNHCR Syria Situation Crisis Prioritized Response \(17 December\)](#)
- [UNHCR Director for MENA Briefing note \(17 December\)](#)
- [UNHCR Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic \(16 December\)](#)
- [Syria Situation Data Portal](#)

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