



# North-West Syria

## Protection Analysis Update

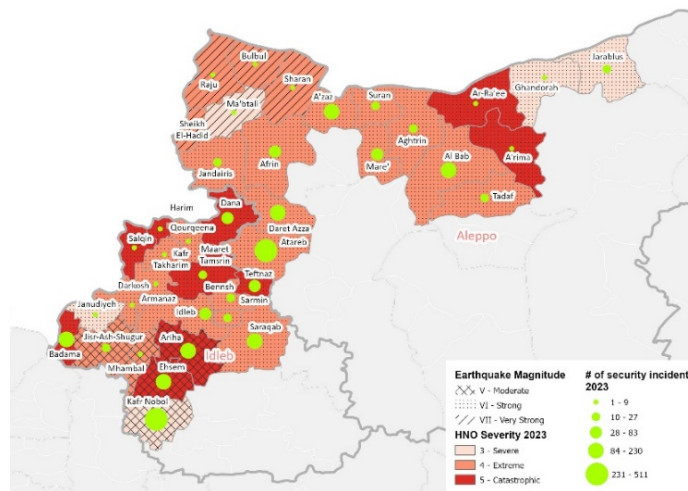
CRITICAL PROTECTION RISKS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE  
EARTHQUAKE AND THE ONGOING WAR

October 2023

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to rights in has become increasingly challenging for crisis-affected communities in North-West Syria amidst the ongoing conflict and protection crisis which began 12 years ago<sup>i</sup>. The earthquakes in February 2023 further compounded humanitarian needs, while exacerbating existing protection risks, including the access to legal identity and the related intensification of gender-based violence, family separation, trafficking, recruitment, evictions and statelessness.

Due to the instability and uncertainty, particularly since July when confrontations escalated, in security incident reports<sup>ii</sup> fear was found to be the most dominant factor influencing the population's consideration of moving to a different place, with 82% of respondents expressing it as a primary concern. Nearly a third of the respondents considered moving beyond Syria's borders. Later on, in the first ten days of September, and as a result of increased military hostilities 2,776 households (15,264 individuals) were displaced from Gandorah, A'rima and Ariha subdistricts of Aleppo and Idlib governorates<sup>iii</sup>. In October, some 68,000 people were newly displaced following the significant escalation of hostilities that impacted more than 1,400 locations across Idlib and western Aleppo<sup>iv</sup>.



**People in Need (PiN): 3,761,691**  
**EXTREME: 1,618,183** | **CATASTROPHIC: 2,042,945**

Protection risks requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. **Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice**
2. **Child and forced family separation**
3. **Gender based violence**
4. **Presence of mine and other explosive ordnance**
5. **Psychological/emotional abuse or inflicted distress**

### URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- Provision of protection services in at heightened risk areas, particularly front line communities where the Protection Cluster has reduced or no presence, particularly Ehsem, Jisr-Ash-Shugur, Badama, Ariha, Saraqab, Bennis, Teftnaz, Atareb and Sarmin subdistricts in Idlib governorate; Jarablus, Gandorah, Ar-Ra'ee, A'rima, Al Bab in the Aleppo governorate.
- Increased legal provision of services on domestic violence, custody and guardianship, children under detention or in conflict with the law, inheritance, confiscation of property, land grabbing and civil documentation.
- Demarcation and clearance of contaminated areas as a result of the earthquake, the floods and the recent confrontations.

### UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISKS SEVERITY | March – Sept 2023

SEVERE	EXTREME	CATASTROPHIC
Armanaz, Kafr Takharim, Qourqeena	Bulbul, Ghandorah, Idlib, Janudiyeh, Jarablus, Kafr Nobol, Ma'btali, Mhambal, Raju, Sharan, Tadaf	Afrin, Aghtrin, Al Bab, Ariha, A'rima, Ar-Ra'ee, Atareb, A'zaz, Badama, Bennis, Dana, Daret Azza, Darkosh, Ehsem, Harim, Jandairis, Jisr-Ash-Shugur, Maaret Tamsrin, Mare', Salqin, Saraqab, Sarmin, Sheikh El-Hadid, Suran, Teftnaz
SEVERITY VARIATIONS COMPARED TO PREVIOUS ANALYSIS <sup>v</sup>		
<b>INCREASE</b>	<b>20</b>	Afrin, Aghtrin, Al Bab, Atareb, A'zaz, Bennis, Daret Azza, Darkosh, Ghandorah, Jandairis, Janudiyeh, Jarablus, Jisr-Ash-Shugur, Kafr Nobol, Ma'btali, Mare', Saraqab, Sarmin, Sheikh El-Hadid, Suran
<b>STABLE</b>	<b>16</b>	Ariha, A'rima, Ar-Ra'ee, Badama, Bulbul, Dana, Ehsem, Harim, Idlib, Maaret Tamsrin, Mhambal, Raju, Salqin, Sharan, Tadaf, Teftnaz
<b>REDUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>	Armanaz, Kafr Takharim, Qourqeena

## CONTEXT

EARTHQUAKE CASUALTIES

14,900

GBV INTERVENTIONS

104,275

ORDNANCES DISPOSED

220

ESTIMATED POPULATION  
EVICTIONS NOTIFICATION

11,336

### THE ABSENCE OR DISRUPTION OF THE RULE OF LAW DRIVES PROTECTION RISKS

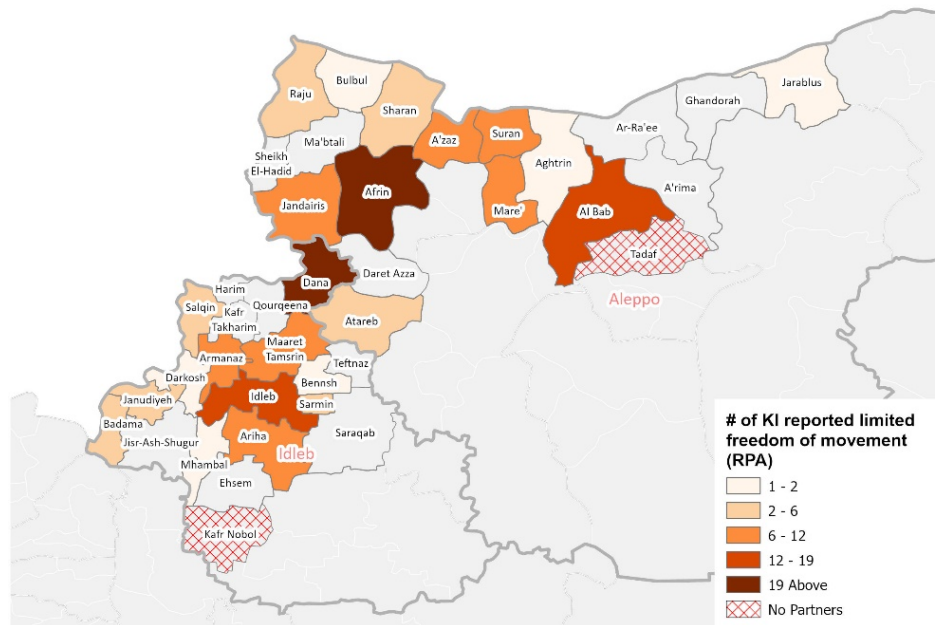
Lack of rule of law and recurrent changes on property laws increase people's exposure to exploitation, impacts on house, land and property rights, risks of communal conflicts and disputes, and forced evictions. Access to justice is currently challenged by coordination issues between different judicial systems. There are three governing bodies in North-West Syria, including the Government of Syria, in the western countryside of Aleppo, and two DeFacto authorities: the interim government in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch area, northern Aleppo countryside, Afrin and Jandairis; and the Salvation Government in Idlib and its countryside and the western countryside of Aleppo. Both Defacto Authorities issue identity papers with their own seals and do not acknowledge/recognize each other's documents. Additionally, the Syrian government does not recognize the documents issued by the Defacto Authorities and considers them fake papers. Furthermore, the Government of Syria holds people accountable if they do obtain identify documents from Defacto Authorities, including for example birth, death, and divorce certificates.

After the earthquake loss of personal documentation was identified as one of the most relevant impacts, creating obstacles to access humanitarian aid, reception centers, etc. Loss of documentation in the context of lack of rule of law, multiplies exponentially existing protection risks. In the escalation of confrontations report<sup>vi</sup>, 53% of the KIs expressed losing their documents had been one of the most significant impacts when forced displacement occurred. This loss can have severe consequences, as individuals may struggle to access essential services, prove their identity, or claim their rights:

- The intervention of security and military authorities affects impartiality. Even when decisions are made by judicial authorities.
- The direct linkages between the Defacto Authorities and security/military authorities means that judicial decisions and documentation are not recognized by the GoS or external Governments which can result in, for example, statelessness and detention.
- There are no areas where access to justice is non-existent, however, improvements are required in system coordination, independence, impartiality, recognition and enforcement of legal decisions, education, and resource allocation.
- The general problem is not about the non-existence of laws, but about their application. This is complicated by the fact that traditionally in Syria the population relies on tribal mechanisms, before approaching courts. In addition to this, partners also reported a lack of trust in the judicial system from the community, especially concerning legal remedies for GBV survivors whose access to legal services is further hampered by fear of retaliation.
- Land grabbing, confiscation, occupation and destruction of property have affected, particularly ethnic groups, increasing tensions and stigmatization of entire communities.
- As identified in the eviction monitoring tool<sup>vii</sup> run by the NWS PC in 16 reception centers, more than 11.000 people face risks of eviction related to the temporary acceptance from landlords for families to stablish temporarily after the earthquake. Notification of evictions has been received in 48% of the assessed sites, here 100% of the people are residing in tents. Even though many of the evictions are legitimate requests from the owners, issues of intimidation (50%), threats of cutting off humanitarian assistance (19%), deprivation of basic services (19%), violence and threatening with violence (13%) were also identified. Homelessness (94%), exploitation (75%), family separation (56%) were identified as the main protection risks evicted persons will face. Regarding most affected population groups, pregnant and lactating women (88%), destitute older persons (75%), widows (50%), unaccompanied and separated children (44%) and person with disabilities (44%) where also identified as the ones exposed to at heightened risk.

## LIMITED MOBILITY AND RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT, AFFECTING VARIOUS POPULATION GROUPS

The absence and general disruption of the rule of law and security threats, compounded with intersectional factors such as gender, age, displacement and marital status, are impacting people's ability to move freely. This has severe impacts on the protection risks affecting the population, and more specifically on their capacities to mitigate or cope with the coercive environment. Already before the earthquake people's freedom of movement was compromised due to hostilities, risks posed by explosive ordnances and the inability to secure access to civil documentation. While the rapid protection assessment<sup>viii</sup> did not highlight a high percentage of people communicating limitations (12%), further engagement with the population through focus group discussions and observation by protection partners is showing a wide array of restrictions that are integrally impacting people in NWS:



- Communities where access of humanitarian workers is not allowed as a result of increased confrontations, demarcated military areas, and presence of explosive ordnance (Karf Nobol in the Idlib governorate; Tadaf, in the Aleppo governorate);
- Communities and areas that are widely affected by shelling and bombing where protection partners face security constraints and challenges to access, including Sarmin, Saraqab, Ehsem, Mhabal, Jisr-Ash-Shugur, Badama in the Idlib governorate; Gandorah, Ar-Ra'ee, A'rima, Al Bab, Mare, Suran, Atareb in the Aleppo governorate).
- Limitations to movement related to high cost of transportation (Ariha), restrictions imposed by camp managers / guards ( Harim) contamination of explosive ordnance (Sharan), land and property grabbing and confiscation (Afrin).
- Individuals, particularly men and young adolescents without civil documentation that cant move through particular areas (Azaz and Idlib, Afrin and Idlib, Afrin and Azaz) where checkpoints are located and could face arbitrary detention and other violations if perceived as affiliates or members of any of the fractions.
- Communities are confined to the locations in which there are and the civil documentation that has been provided by the DeFacto authorities in control of each of the areas.

Risks of harassment, sexual abuse, detention, disappearance, recruitment have also affected the right to freedom of movement, particularly on specific population groups including women, widows, men, ethnic groups, young adolescents and IDPs from government held areas.

Widow camps are highly affected by limitations of movement. Restrictions are not only imposed by camp management, but also by parents and care givers specifically on adolescent girls due to the fear of abuse and exploitation. These restrictions have an impact as well to humanitarian activities, with NGO obliged to negotiate multiple times the provision of assistance or simply the access to the camps. The multiple displacement faced by IDPs has further eroded their networks and social ties, adding an additional barrier to their ability of moving and improving their situation. As reported by respondents in Voices from Syria 2023<sup>ix</sup>, women, particularly widows and divorcees, and adolescent girls experience movement restrictions imposed by husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Limitation of movements is often justified due to fear of violence in public spaces as well as the societal customs and traditions concerning women's engagement in public spaces.

## RISKS FACED BY ETHNIC MINORITIES IN NWS

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The Kurdish community is a minority in North-West Syria that has faced discrimination and exclusion even before the Syrian civil war. In the 1960s, a decree was passed that limited the registration of Kurds in the /census, leading to a significant decrease in their numbers. Discrimination extended to various aspects of life, including employment opportunities and access to services, they were not allowed to speak their language, civil servants were not allowed to practice their rituals, and there were cases of attempted assassination or refusal to give up property. Many Kurds lacked legal documentation and rights, which affected their citizenship and ownership of property.

The earthquake added an extra layer of suffering to their already challenging situation. The Kurdish community was identified as one of the most affected groups after the earthquake. Two-thirds of the population lost their houses, with children and women particularly affected by these circumstances. The FDG revealed that during the earthquake response, the Kurdish communities experienced discrimination when aid was distributed and interference by military factions causing further fear. There is a lack of confidence in existing institutions and structures of authority, particularly due to their affiliation with military factions. This lack of confidence negatively affects access to justice and legal remedies as they fear confiscation of property or arrest.

Particularly children of families affected by the earthquake have faced significant challenges in terms of civil records and access to education. After the earthquake children were separated from partners and caregivers and for many this resulted in the loss of their civil records and identification documents. This has created difficulties in enrolling children in schools, as educational institutions typically require identification or civil records.

There is a strong fear within the communities of speaking out against the military factions as it is believed that it could result in arrest or confiscation of property, including land and housing, arrest and property confiscation. HLP rights violations, such as confiscating lands and looting the agricultural corps, are also major challenges for the Kurdish community. Since several IDP camps were set up on private lands after the earthquake, this worsened the situation since also the owners of these lands could not restore their rights to their properties. The fear of confiscation of property and arrest by military factions exacerbates the vulnerability and suffering of the Kurdish communities. During the FGD men in particular expressed fear of property confiscation or arrest by military factions if they speak out against them. This fear also extends to the safety and security of their families.

The Kurdish community in northern Syria, particularly in the aftermath of the earthquake, experienced higher level of persecution and forced recruitment by military factions. There were instances where individuals affiliated with the factions attempted to marry Kurdish girls and threatened those who opposed. There were also cases of sexual exploitation and financial abuse against the Kurdish community, particularly when passing through military checkpoints.

One account from a participant in the FGD described how a member of a military faction asked to marry a Kurdish girl, but her family denied the proposal due to cultural differences. In response, the member threatened the father with harm if he could not marry the girl. The story highlights the risk of forced marriages and the control exerted by military faction members over the personal choices and freedom of Kurdish women in the region.

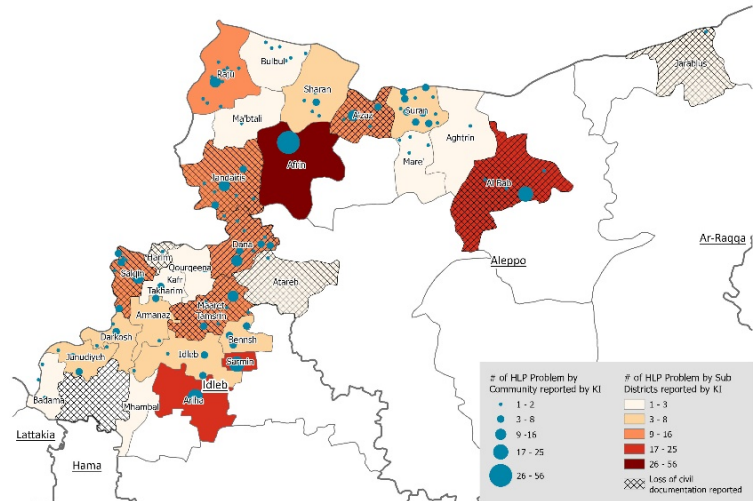
Priority concerns raised by the communities include:

- The importance of addressing land confiscation and illegal activities by military factions, particularly in relation to setting up informal camps on private lands. They stress the need for restoring rights and properties to the original owners and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.
- The identification of impacts on lands owned by Kurdish communities that were flooded for agricultural purposes or turned into waste lands, for future compensation/restitution processes.
- The challenges faced by children who have lost their families and whose civil records were lost after the earthquake. The need for tailored support in terms of identification documentation, access to education, and ensuring the well-being of these vulnerable children is highlighted.
- Access to Justice. The Kurdish community lost access to entities, structures, and authorities after the earthquake, aggravating their exposure to protection risks. They face difficulties in seeking justice due to interference from military factions that control the regions they live in, lacks trust and fear for persecution, stigmatization and discrimination in existing institutions hindered access to legal protection and remedies.

## PROTECTION RISKS

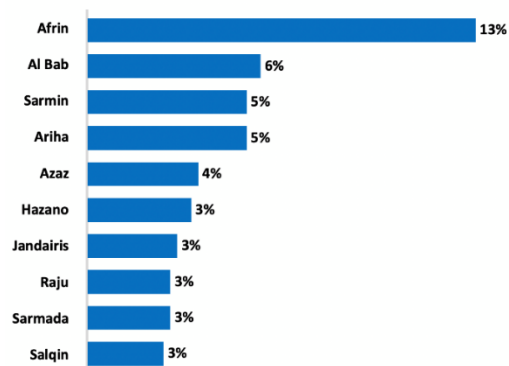
### RISK 1 Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice

Conflicting AD-HOC legal frameworks have affected tenure security and could activate new cycles of violence related to property ownership. This environment affects freedom of movement and increase the exposure to risks of trafficking, smuggling and exploitation. The challenges related to obtaining birth certificates also increase the risks of statelessness. During the recent escalations family separation was caused by fear to lose property and belongings, men and adolescents were left behind to protect the family belongings despite the exposure to impacts by the bombing and shelling, the absence of mechanisms to protect property in a ongoing war and the recurrent displacements in NWS has affected, in a systematic manner the capacity families have to rebuild their lives.



This distortion has fueled the consolidation of parallel systems, procedures and instances that do not recognize any other bodies and affect access to civilians. Issues related to costs, administrative fees, transportation, clarity on roles and procedures constitute a daily challenge to families went trying to access basic documents (personal identification). The Rapid Protection Assessment (RPA) led by the Protection Cluster\* showed that 72% of the 1,579 Key Informants (KIs) had been recently displaced to their current location, 34% reported there were unaccompanied children, without either parent, in their displacement communities, 27% were facing HLP related issues including evictions and homelessness, and 12% restrictions to freedom of movement. A separate report led by a PC partner organization showed that 84% of the KIs had lost their civil documentation and faced challenges in accessing humanitarian assistance as well as obstacles in accessing collective and reception centers due to absence of documentation. Some also expressed facing risks of eviction. Before the EQ access to CD and provision of legal services had been identified as a gap, however, the EQ added additional challenges for population without documents to access services and prevent evictions and other HLP related issues.

Provision of legal services as well as access to justice has been a challenge in the NWS context due to politically related issues, operational capacity, and funding. Domestic violence (70%), disappearance (60%), power of attorney (40%), divorce/alimony (40%), inheritance (30%), birth certificates (20%), guardianship/custody (20%) were the top legal services requested by IDPs and not provided by legal partners, according to the legal assessment run in May. Institutional gaps and conflicting institutional structures based on AD-HOC legal frameworks not recognized by the different parties to the conflict. The escalation of tensions reported in July also showed that for 53% of the KIs, the loss of personal documentation had been the most significant impact from previous displacements, 13% the loss of property related information; regarding new displacements, 41% expressed legal support as the most pressing need to be addressed<sup>xi</sup>.



from previous displacements, 13% the loss of property related information; regarding new displacements, 41% expressed legal support as the most pressing need to be addressed<sup>xi</sup>.

The multilayered impacts and the absence of access to justice mechanisms has also endangered community engagement and ownership on issues related to the rule of law and the possibility to engage with transitional justice mechanisms. Minimum conditions to address these discussions are not in place, considering that all 12 years of humanitarian response have been based on a lifesaving principle that has not included concrete response to the overall reconstruction of the rule of law and the connections with community networks. The absence of effective and confidential channels to

access justice, the rooted lack of trust and fears of repercussions have affected, not only the possibility of restitution of rights, but the overall interpretation of rule of law.

**RISK 2** Child and forced family separation

Before the earthquake child and family separation was already a recurrent effect due to several forms of coercion and deliberate deprivation. The constantly increasing numbers of displaced individuals, reaching high levels due to the compound effects of conflict, COVID pandemic and research of better solutions for their families, often in unsecure conditions have left children without families, or forced family members to separate. According to the report on Security Escalation, 40% of respondents have identified family separation as one the top protection risks affecting directly children and family. The mid year child protection monitoring data show the following as major sources of separation, which also mirrors to the early reports.

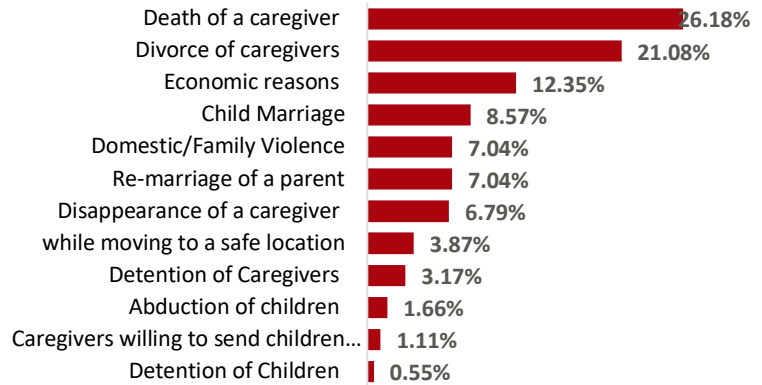


Figure 1 - Causes of family separation [Child protection monitoring mid-year, 2023]

The dissolution of marriage or the loss of a parent leading to a female-headed household is noted as some of the key reasons for family separation in NWS. Female-headed households - because of a divorce or separation, because the husband went missing while searching for better opportunities or because of the death of a partner – is a key driver for mothers to separate from their child/ren. Mothers are challenged to meet the various new responsibilities, often connected with financial instability. In cases in which the mother wants to marry again, children at times become an “obstacle” to the new relationship. The mother decides to move into the new marriage without her children. Sometimes the new partner or his family members might also not accept children from previous marriages and refuses to provide for them. Furthermore, children born out of marriage find themselves at increased risk of being abandoned. Unmarried women and girls abandon their babies rather than risk rejection or physical violence from family members, such as honor crimes that could result in death.

Family separation is also caused by the lack of recognition of the legally defined childhood till the age of 18 years. Community perception is not in line with this definition as adolescent boys are expected to be independent already at an early age, such as 12 years, without being adequately guided nor prepared. Boys living with their female family members in window camps are even forced to move out of the camp by the age of 12 years leaving their family behind in the camp. The community sees them as young adults with no need for special protection for children, instead, they are harshly pushed out of care institutions once they reach puberty. With limited access to education, training or work, these unsupported adolescents are taking up unsafe survival strategies and dangerous low-paid jobs. All of which increases their susceptibility towards radicalism or armed groups, creates a barrier for social cohesion, weakens family ties and undermines social cohesion.

Following the earthquake displacement has increased, alongside a further worsening of living conditions, lack of proper shelters, direct threats and the disruption of community-based protection networks, forcing parents to separate from their children and exposing them to additional risks of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Displacements to and from communities were reported to be relatively high. Only 110 of the communities assessed in the rapid protection assessment indicated that there had been no displacement from their area. In 34% of the assessed communities there are children without parents or family members taking care of them.

There are communities where this number is higher e.g., in Jandairis community in Afrin 82% of the respondents indicated that there are children separated from their parents or family members. In the same community 65% of the respondents indicated that there are also children who head households adding a layer of vulnerability and exposure. Concerning children who have been separated from their parents, respondents indicated four main categories with whom the children are staying. These included relatives, grandparents, their uncle/aunt, and others, which included living in hospitals and with neighbors.

**Types of Labor**

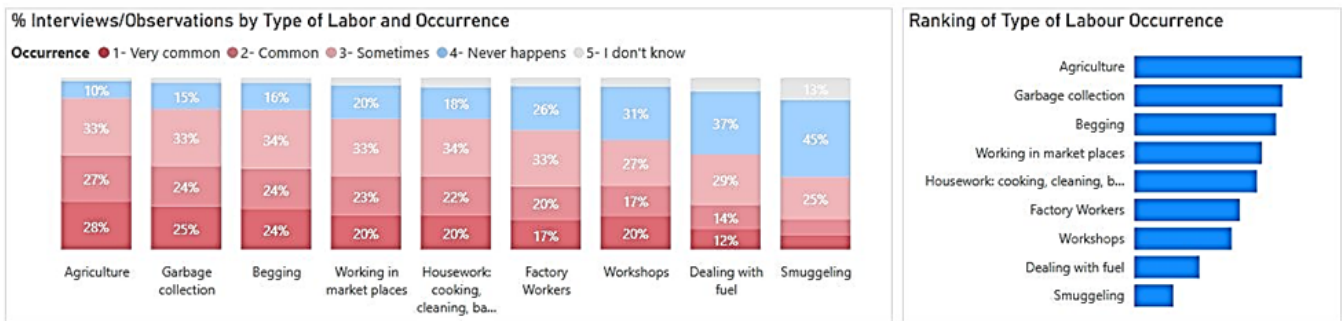


Figure 2 - Observation of child labor (by type), and ranking of occurrence of the different type of child labor – CP Assessment – Aug 2023

The Child Protection Assessment led by the CP AoR in August 2023<sup>xii</sup>, showed that child labor was identified by the communities as the most relevant risk children faced (99%), followed by children behavioral and psychological problems (96%), child marriage (95%), and caregivers with severe mental health problems (97%).

The separation of children from their families has made children more vulnerable to exploitation and more exposed to recruitment and trafficking. Military forces and people with authority are exploiting individuals' financial needs, poverty and the socio-psychosocial vulnerabilities linked to the widespread lack of employment and job opportunities. This is the main driver of exploitation. In particular, forced recruitment, trafficking and exploitation have reached levels that cannot be met by existing assistance and programs.

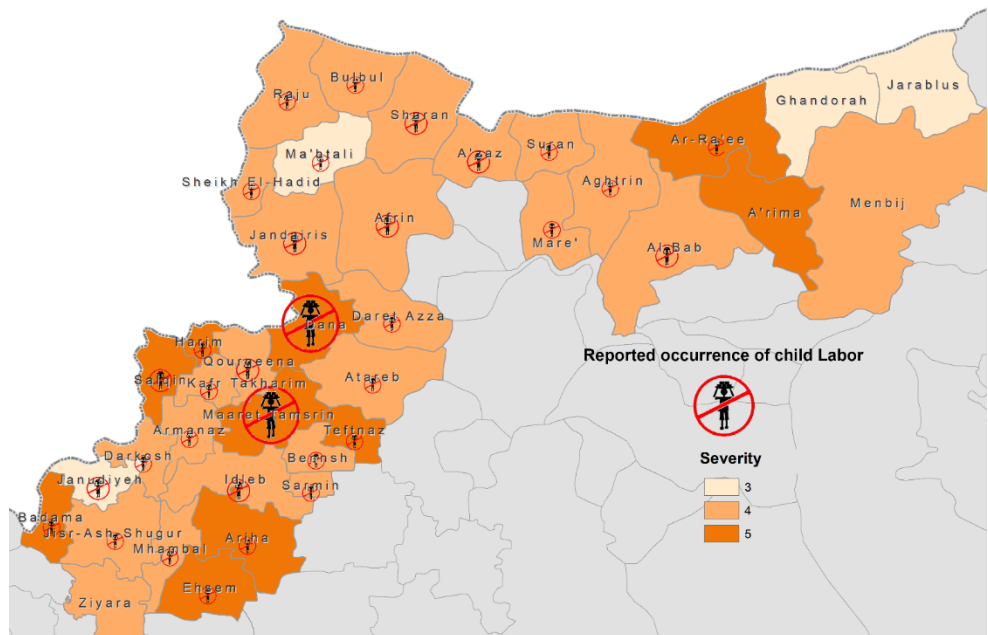


Figure 3 - Reported occurrence of child labor in NWS Sub-Districts – By all types of work, Ovrlp. CP Severity – CP Assessment – Aug 2023

Signs of human trafficking were reported in 41 communities. In communities where the respondents indicated signs of forced recruitment, 63% responded that children are included and 29% that other population groups besides children are included. In the Afrin community, 67% of respondents reported that children were included. In the focus group discussions, it was confirmed that separated children are more vulnerable to exploitation, including by caregivers in begging, illicit trade, and theft, and are more exposed to recruitment and trafficking.

Separated children often stay with relatives (62%). However, the compound effects of conflict and earthquake disrupted all existing social and families' networks within the majority of the communities. Communities have reported that children who lost



their parents have been given to other families without any verification or appropriate documentation, as well as reports of an increase request of irregular adoption requests coming from countries like Jordan, the Gulf or European countries. The disruption of the primary safety networks of separated children has also impacted some of the community engagement and support initiatives provided by protection partners which must be re-calibrated. The recently conducted assessment by CP AoR, almost 33% of the separated children were staying in institutional care. These institutions are not well monitored to ensure acceptable care for children.

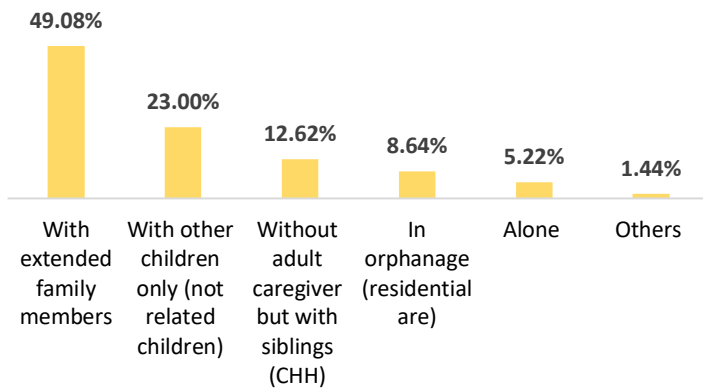


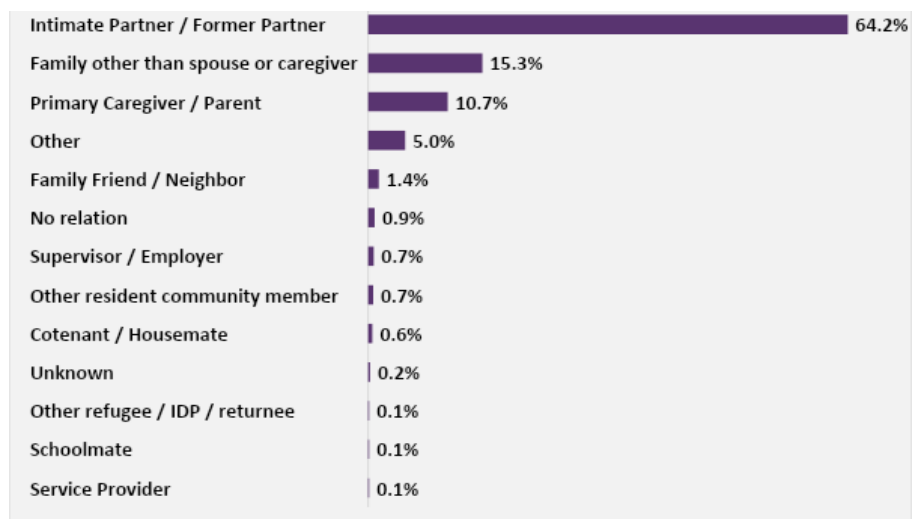
Figure 4 - Ranking on type of care arrangements

Agriculture, garbage collection, begging and working in marketplaces are the more frequent types of labor including children in NWS. As the main driver for child labor poverty and economic insecurity, coping mechanism for displacement caused by conflict and lack of access to education were identified. Child marriage was also identified by communities as a negative coping mechanism in 82% of the areas. Neglect and beatings were also identified as the most common forms of violence, followed by domestic violence and inequality between males and females. According to the mid-year child protection monitoring over 41% of the children are living without primary caregivers. The data shows increased number of children who are staying alone.

This category of children is prone to a number of child protections risks such as those mentioned above

### RISK 3 Gender-based violence

GBV has been a pervasive feature of the situation in NWS. As confirmed in the findings of “[Voices from Syria 2023](#)” physical violence (hitting beating, including ‘honor killings’ , psychological abuse, sexual assault, denial of opportunities , early and forced marriage, and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) are consistently reported, while new trends, such as various forms of technology-facilitated GBV, have been observed in recent years. The most recent [GBVIMs+ quarterly report](#) indicate that 99.6% of the reported incidents were female survivors of GBV while the most common forms of GBV experienced by survivors are physical assault (41.5%), followed by psychological/emotional abuse (27.4%), and denial of resources, opportunities, or services (22.4%). The report also indicates that cases of GBV are mostly perpetrated by intimate partners, families and care givers showing the need to invest more on social norms and behaviour change initiatives particularly



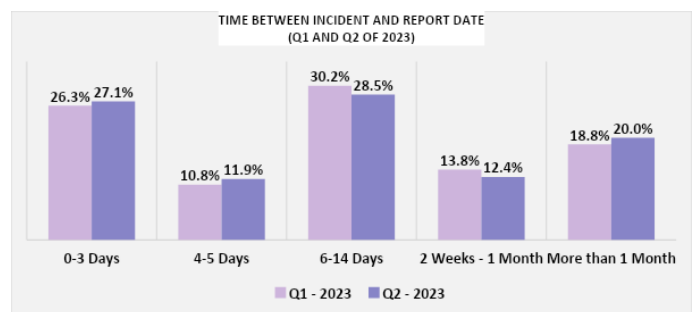
for men and boys engagement. Reports of IDP sites exclusive to widowed and divorced women and girls, so called "Widows' camps", have emerged since 2014. The latest data available indicate that at least 42 sites are in Idleb and four (4) in Aleppo, hosting an estimated population of 12,715 women and children. Evidence shows that segregating divorced and widowed women contribute to intensified stigmatization and heightens their vulnerability to gender and age-specific violence. Data shows that widowed and divorced women are among the groups, particularly at risk of GBV and other protection violations. Moreover, widows have been identified as the group most at risk of being excluded from humanitarian aid and services (Voices from Syria, 2023). In North-West Syria, to date, according to the 2023 HRP, an estimated 3 million women and girls are in

urgent need of accessing GBV services. The earthquake that hit the area on the 6th of February has further exacerbated the pre-existing protection needs, exposing women and girls to an increased risk of GBV, especially sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment, and intimate partner violence, particularly at the reception centers and existing camps.

The [EQ- Rapid Protection Analysis \(RPA\)](#) highlighted that female heads of households, pregnant and lactating women, and persons with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups affected by the earthquakes. As reported by the GBV service providers who took part in the [post-EQ GBVIMS+ survey](#) launched by the AoR, the average number of monthly cases after the EQ increased by 29% from the average number before the EQ. During a series of FGDs conducted by the GBV AoR with GBV service providers in NWS, a participant reported that *“the earthquake increased the cases of exploitation and abuse, taking advantage of women’s needs for aid and the lack of privacy in the recently established camps, which led to a rise in cases.”* A series of safety audits conducted in pre-existing IDP camps and newly established reception centers confirmed the need to improve living conditions for residents due to the overcrowding, lack of gender-segregated latrines, and adequate lighting system, all elements exposing women and girls at risk of GBV. The EQ added to recent increased confrontation and forced displacement, also exacerbated families’ precariousness in terms of financial stability which translated into a lack of job opportunities, especially for women, already marginalized within the labor market, and the inability to afford housing costs for many families. GBV service providers from Idleb and Aleppo who participated in FGDs fear an increase in negative and dangerous coping mechanisms, such as resorting to early marriage, exchange and selling of sex, and begging. In this context, GBV service providers found that women and girls’ resilience is eroding and that accessing GBV services remains their often-unique lifeline. Women and girls’ safe spaces are often considered as one of the few available positive coping mechanisms women and girls can rely to that support them in avoiding negative coping mechanisms, including suicide attempts and other extreme acts. Additionally, unaddressed GBV threats will not only affect survivors but will have spillover effects, leading to social and economic implications for individuals, families, and entire communities in the longer term.

Regarding Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during Displacement, KIs in the security incidents reported that increased exposure to labor exploitation (82%), increased domestic violence (68%), and early forced marriage (64%) were the most significantly impacts of during forced displacement<sup>xiii</sup>. Displacement often disrupts livelihoods and economic stability, leaving women and girls vulnerable to exploitative labor practices, including hazardous or low-paying work. The potential increase in domestic violence in camps or reception centers is a serious concern raised by 68% of respondents. The cramped and stressful living conditions in displacement settings, coupled with the breakdown of social support structures, can escalate tensions and contribute to higher incidences of domestic violence. The risk of early and forced marriage is a pressing concern during displacement, with 64% of respondents expressing worry. In crisis situations, families may resort to marrying off their daughters at a young age due to perceived safety concerns or economic hardships. This places young girls at risk of enduring early motherhood, limited education, and increased vulnerability to abuse.

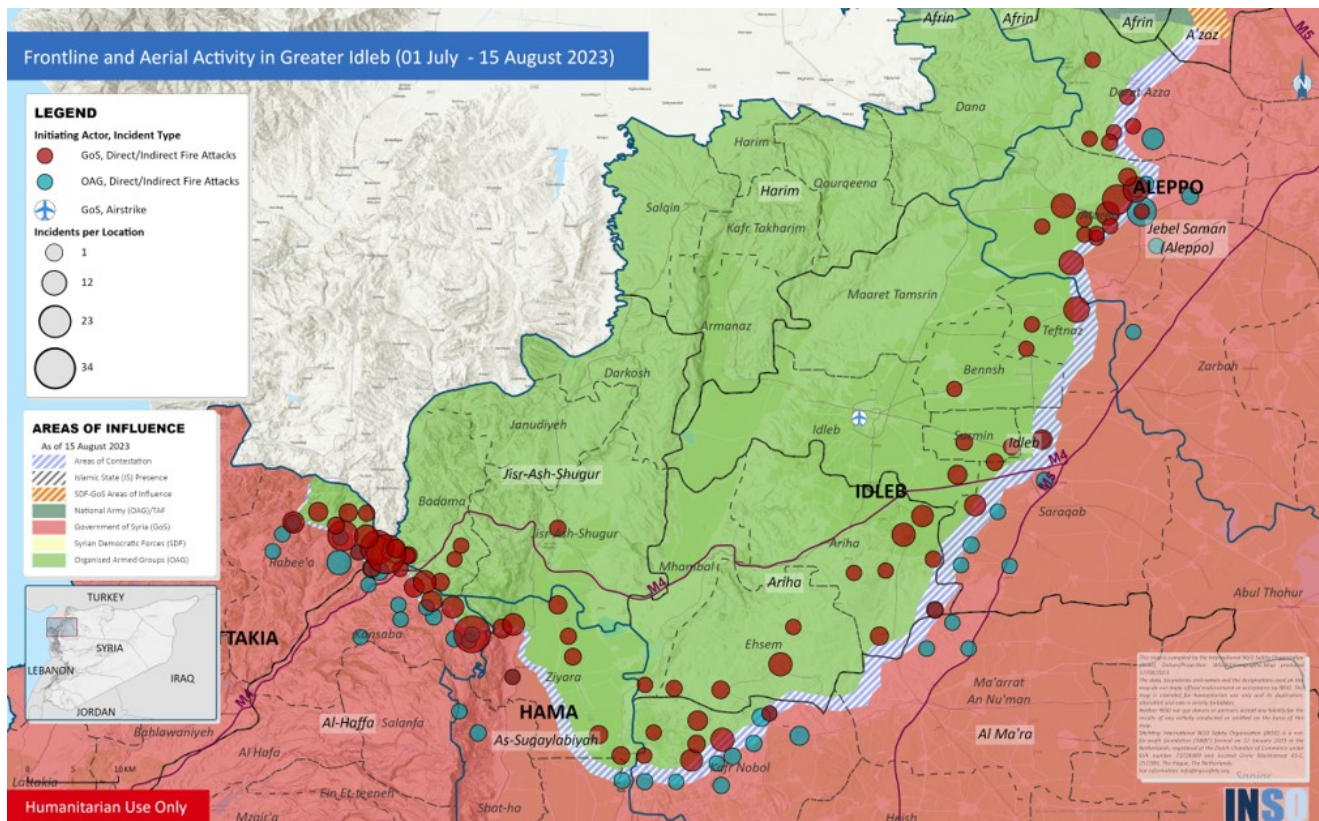
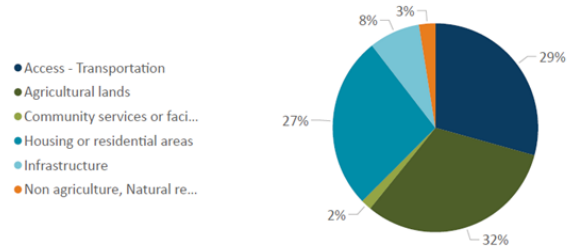
GBV programming is struggling to keep pace with the exacerbation of risks and resulting humanitarian needs, mainly for insufficient financial and human resources available in a context of lack of rule of law and mistrust on authorities. Particularly, current capacity for safe identification and referral is minimal impacting risk mitigation and prevention. While health facilities can serve as entry point, capacity are limited and the negative attitude from both health and non-health staff as well as the wrong perception of mandatory reporting to authorities in cases of rape is a barrier to access services for many GBV survivors.



## RISK 4 Presence of mine and other explosive ordnance

The conflict in NWS has been characterized by widespread and indiscriminate use of weapons, namely explosive ordnance, airstrikes, heavy weapon fire, and IEDs. Ongoing active hostilities are further expanding the scale of explosive hazard contamination, compounding the risk and impact on civilians and their communities. There are 42 communities where contamination was reported. A population of 730,000 people lives in these communities and is at risk of explosive ordnance accidents. Although the extent of contamination has been assessed through impact survey of over 1000 communities, detailed survey, disposal and clearance is still only in its early stages and taking place on a very small scale due to funding constraints. In the meantime, explosive ordnance incidents continue to occur. The detrimental impact extends beyond physical safety and the right to life. Freedom of movement is impacted, with 45% of households in NWS reporting movement restriction in or close to their current locations because of the risks posed by explosive ordnances. Moreover, the destruction or contamination of key infrastructure, such as hospitals, has deprived civilians of basic services. The existence of contamination also hampers safe delivery of humanitarian aid and services. With the vast majority of contamination reported on agricultural land, explosive hazard contamination has also affected the ability of individuals to engage in livelihood activities and reduced their capacity for economic recovery. The early days of September marked a significant surge in crossfire activities between GoS and OAGs, with an average of 38 daily attacks, compared to 24 attacks during the last week of August. (INSO UPDATE REPORT 21/08/2023) The typical failure rates of the munitions used in these exchanges mean that there is ongoing new contamination in addition to legacy hazards from the previous decade of fighting.

Blockages Due to Presence of ERW



## **RISK 5** Psychological/emotional abuse or inflicted distress

The earthquake's devastating impact, compounded by ongoing conflict and increased confrontation, and the absence of adequate response from authorities, has caused intensive mental health and psychosocial risks and distress to the population. The extensive child and family separation has fractured support systems, amidst a breakdown of crucial social services, making it a collective responsibility to address the mental health and psychosocial well-being of the affected population. Additionally, the lack of livelihood opportunities, economic hardships, fear of violence, and barriers to accessing essential services further worsen the psychological distress, emphasizing the critical necessity for comprehensive and coordinated humanitarian interventions.

The survey on impacts of security Escalation revealed that displacement itself is a traumatic experience for children, 44% found that there are children showing signs of psychological distress. The RPA the ongoing violence, loss of homes, and separation from family and friends can lead to psychological distress. In NWS, access to mental health and psychosocial support services is limited due to the challenging humanitarian situation, making it harder for children to cope with the trauma they have experienced. The assessment conducted by the CP AoR is august, showed 89% of the children with behavioral and psychological related problems with 67 % indicating they had severe condition. In addition, almost 83% reported caregivers with severe mental health problems. This further complicates the healing process for the children.

The mental health impacts are having a multitude of consequences, severely impacting the life and possibility of recovery of the population in North-West Syria. These include: Increased exposure to acute protection risks including trafficking, smuggling, exploitation and forced displacement, suicide, mental and psychological vulnerability to abuse and exploitation, drug abuse and addiction, family disruption, increased prevalence of depression, anxiety and specific mental health illnesses, higher risk of domestic violence and gender-based violence, particularly affecting women and children, as the breakdown of social services and support mechanisms exacerbates tensions and vulnerabilities.

Contextually, ongoing conflict and insecurity in the region impeded the logistical aspects of delivering mental health services, including the transportation of personnel, equipment, and supplies to affected areas. Deep-rooted stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health issues represent a significant impediment as well. This societal stigma may deter individuals from seeking help or disclosing their mental health concerns, thus compounding the problem.

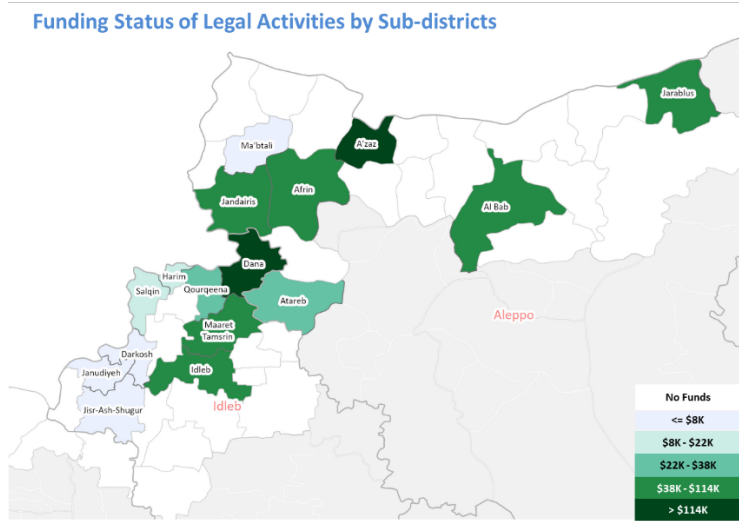
There are limited measures in place to mitigate the intensifying psychological distress including provision of specialized MHPSS and psychiatric services, functional referral systems and accountability measures, addressing of the underlying conditions related to people's vulnerability, and ensuring access to judicial processes. In addition, the existing capacity to provide MHPSS is not sufficient to cover the additional demands follow in the earthquake, including lack of financial and material support, lack of capacity to provide legal services and reduce capacities to address the situation of IDPs. There is a heightened need for specialized mental health related services including trauma management and psychiatric support. According to the RPA, 65% of all respondents reported that there is a need for MHPSS in their community and that the services are currently not available. In some communities the request for MHPSS services was even higher.

In addition, the scarcity of skilled personnel is a significant obstacle to addressing the escalating mental health needs within the affected population, and there is no unified MHPSS structured curricula from MHPSS Technical Working Group in order to train existing response teams.

## RESPONSE

### PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION

The Protection Cluster through the HLP/CD WG launched its legal strategy<sup>xiv</sup> to guarantee harmonized approach, increased provision of legal services and, therefore, effective mitigation of protection risks. The allocations from the SCHF and AFNS for the second semester of the year helped the Cluster to increase its operational capacity on the ground, amplify the issues in which the provision of legal services was been provided and, also, guarantee an integrated response addressing child protection and gender based violence related needs, these includes: Legal awareness, legal counselling including civil documentation or HLP and Legal assistance etc. 39 GBV AoR partners in Idlib and 28 northern Aleppo, (82% national NGOs) continue to deliver GBV interventions through 65 women and girls safe spaces with 25 of them located in Aleppo, while 40 in Idlib). As of May 2023, there are 29 members of the mine action AoR, of which 8 have conducted some mine action activity this year in NWS. Approximately 70 000 people (15% men, 17% women, 64% children) were reached between January and April 2023 in risk awareness activities, 70% in Idlib and 30% in Aleppo. Only one partner had resources to conduct removal of explosive hazards.



### ACCESS-RELATED CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS

The Rabaee'a and Kansaba in Lattakia governorate; Ziraya in Hama governorate; Karf Nobol (idlib), Tadaf (Aleppo) and Darkosh (border with Türkiye) in the Idlib governorate have no presence from protection partners; same with Menbij (border with northeast Syria).. Protection monitoring in these areas is not possible, despite information related to confrontations from social media the Protection Cluster is not able to assess the needs or mobilize teams to provide response. In the recent weeks confrontations in Menbij (Aleppo) and Kafr Nobol (Idlib), have been reported, however the Cluster hasn't been able to verify the situation on the ground or provide any protection services.

### CRITICAL GAPS IN FUNDING AND POPULATION REACHED

Operational presence in the areas affected by the recent confrontations leading to forced displacement is significantly low. Particularly in communities closed to the front lines such as Ghandora, A'rima, Ar-Ra 'ee and Albab in the Aleppo governorate; Ehsem, Mhambal, Jisr-Ash-Shugur and Badama in Idlib. Only 12% of the secured funds are covering the provision of legal related needs. In 50 Reception Centers and found that 33 of them has received an eviction notification. More than 24,000 individuals could be evicted before the end of the year with no relocation alternatives. 17 Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) have closed over the last 4 months while an additional 25 are likely to close by the end of this year if funding is not guaranteed. The disposal of EO by a specialist international operator in Idlib only started in mid-2022, and minefield clearance only started in 2023. This is a new and vital expansion of mine action activities that had not previously existed in one of the worst contaminated areas of the country. Secured funds for disposal of EO and minefield clearance are less than \$500k for 2024 and must be doubled to enable this highly specialized capacity to be fully funded for 2024.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### RISK 1 Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice

#### GOVERNMENT and AUTHORITIES

- Ensure equitable access to legal identity, remedies, and justice by facilitating the functioning of registration centers, addressing mobility restrictions and checkpoints issues, and enhancing legal awareness and counseling services for affected populations. Additionally, promote and support programs that focus on property registration and protection, and engage in dialogue with local councils and shura councils to strengthen legal frameworks related to ownership and property rights.
- Increase capacity to guarantee the provision of civil documentation regardless of place of origin, gender related issues or ethnic background to prevent exposure to abuse and risks if statelessness.
- Guarantee recognition to the right of civil documentation as part of the humanitarian environment, without politization or obstacles for civilians, particularly those exposed to disproportionate impacts such as single HHs, UASC, adolescents, ethnic minorities, PwD, children born in prisons and in conflict with the law, widows.

### RISK 2 Child and forced family separation

#### PROTECTION SECTOR and PARTNERS

- Develop and implement robust family reunification procedures, including thorough verification and documentation processes to ensure the safe reunification of separated children to their families when possible.
  - Establish and expand child-focused support services for children who have experienced family separation, trauma, and exploitation, including counseling and psychosocial support. These services should be readily accessible and culturally sensitive.
  - Link children with opportunities for education, vocational training, and skill development programs to empower separated children and adolescents, enabling them to build a better future and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.
  - Launch community-based awareness campaigns to challenge harmful cultural norms, perceptions about childhood, and the value of education. Emphasize the importance of keeping children with their families and ensuring their well-being.
  - Reinforce community-based child protection committees to prevent further family separations and provide early intervention in cases of risk. Train community leaders, teachers, and local authorities to identify and report protection concerns.
  - Support the comprehensive CP monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track the well-being of separated children, assess the quality of care in institutions and temporary shelters for UASC, and ensure that their rights are protected.
  - Strengthen coordination and collaboration among child protection partners to ensure a unified and effective response to child separation issues.
  - Encourage and facilitate the timely registration of births to ensure that children have legal documentation, providing a foundation for the protection of their rights.
  - Develop and implement emergency preparedness plans that specifically address the protection and well-being of children during and after insecurity that leads to displacement and natural disasters, such as earthquakes, to minimize family separations and associated risks.
  - Advocate for policy changes and reforms that address the root causes of family separation, such as limited job prospects and poverty, to create an environment where families can stay together.

### RISK 3 Gender-based violence

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#### GOVERNMENT and PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT

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- Adapt and implement the sectorial and inter-sectoral action plans developed to mitigate GBV risks and support inter-cluster monitoring efforts.
- From the protection standpoint, the practice of "Widows Camps" is discriminatory and has been shown to increase protection risks. All humanitarian stakeholders involved in funding, site administration, or service delivery at those locations share the common obligation of protecting widowed and divorced women, girls, and their children's safety and rights, in adherence with the [Guidance Note to mitigate protection risks in IDP Sites Exclusive to Widowed and Divorced Women and Girls](#).
  - Promote partnerships and access to funds for local women-led and women's rights organizations, to further build their technical and organizational capacity, to provide protection and assistance to affected populations, including vulnerable groups.
  - Maintain and increase the funds available for Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) and the essential and lifesaving GBV interventions provided within them. Donors should ensure multi-year, predictable funding for existing WGSS, including through direct support to local partners and support the establishment of new WGSS in underserved areas, to improve access to safe, quality, and comprehensive GBV services accessible through both static and mobile WGSS modalities.
  - Strengthen GBV prevention interventions by employing innovative and gender-transformative approaches to address the root causes of GBV.

### RISK 4 Presence of mine and other explosive ordnance

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#### DONORS

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- Now that international trained Syrian technical specialists are deployed on EO disposal and minefield clearance for land release, using techniques that have not previously been used in NWS, it is essential that these activities receive the support needed to continue. This is the only way to permanently reduce the risk of disablement and death from EO to vulnerable communities.  
Ensure that risk education and victim assistance continue, integrated where appropriate into other protection activities.

### RISK 5 Psychological/emotional abuse or inflicted distress

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#### HCT

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- Expand MHPSS services with specialized training, unified curriculum, and financial support. Prioritize trauma and psychiatric support, raise awareness, and offer transportation assistance to improve access.
- Advocate for increased allocation of funds for specialized MHPSS, particularly addressing mental health illness, closure of mental health facilities and increased exposure to protection risks.  
Enhance the advocacy at the regional level and with key stakeholders on the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, guaranteeing compliance with IHL and human rights frameworks.

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> The security incidents and information presented in this report have been sourced from the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO). While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, the authors of this report do not guarantee the completeness or timeliness of the information provided by INSO. The authors, as well as INSO, are not liable for any inaccuracies, errors, or omissions in the information presented herein.
- <sup>ii</sup> [Protection Cluster Northwest Syria \(Türkiye\): Impacts of Security Escalation and Humanitarian Constraints on Protection and Recovery, July 2023 - Syrian Arab Republic | ReliefWeb](#)
- <sup>iii</sup> CCCM Cluster, displacement report (September 2023)
- <sup>iv</sup> [North-west Syria: Escalation of Hostilities - Flash Update No.3, 13 October 2023](#)
- <sup>v</sup> Severity calculation is done based on 1). security incident data from INSO, 2). Earthquake affected sub-districts, 3). Protection Partner presence, 4) Recent security escalation
- <sup>vi</sup> [Ibid 1](#)
- <sup>vii</sup> [Eviction Monitoring Dashboard | ReliefWeb Response](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> [Rapid Protection Assessment: North-West Syria \(June 2023\) - Syrian Arab Republic | ReliefWeb](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-gender-based-violence-area-responsibility-voices-syria-2023-assessment-findings-humanitarian-needs-overview-enar>
- <sup>x</sup> [Rapid Protection Assessment Dashboard 2023 | ReliefWeb Response](#)
- <sup>xi</sup> [Impacts of Security Escalation and Humanitarian Constraints Dashboard | ReliefWeb Response](#)
- <sup>xii</sup> Conducted by 25 CP AoR partners in 204 communities (35 subdistricts) with participation of 1195 Kis/observations.
- <sup>xiii</sup> [Ibid 1](#)
- <sup>xiv</sup> [NWS Protection Cluster Legal Strategy. 2023.pdf - Google Drive](#)

## Methodology

For the development of this Update the NWS Protection Cluster ran 29 focus group discussions with support from partners in northwest Syria. Findings from the Rapid Protection Assessment, the Security Escalations Report, the Eviction Monitoring Tool, the Child Protection Assessment and the GBVIMS+ tools were also included. All these tools and reports can be found here: [Türkiye Cross-border: Protection | ReliefWeb Response](#)

## Limitations

All surveys and reports in Syria are done through key informants due to the nature of the cross-border operation and response where the coordination team is based in Gaziantep/Turkiye, not in Syria. This methodology is closer to perception rather than evidence and can also be based on subjectivity, not necessarily on evidence-based sources. Sensitive issues cannot be addressed directly as all tools, surveys must be validated and approved by the authorities.



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