FRAGILE PROGRESS
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND THE STABILIZATION OF NORTHEAST SYRIA

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Cover Photo: Internal displacement camp in Manbij, Syria.
The international community—and the United States, in particular—has an important opportunity to consolidate significant but fragile gains in northeast Syria. This part of the country has largely emerged from the crisis fomented by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and hundreds of thousands of people have begun to return home. However, significant humanitarian challenges remain. Tens of thousands are still displaced. Major population centers like Raqqa must be cleared of mines, health care systems must be rebuilt, and access to clean water must be restored.

In the face of these challenges, in March, the United States froze $200 million in funding for recovery and stabilization in Syria, pursuant to a policy review process. This includes support for the White Helmets—the lauded civil defense group. On June 14, the State Department announced that $6.6 million would be released to continue supporting the White Helmets, along with funding for war crimes investigations in Syria. However, there is still no clarity on how much more money will be released, and there are strong indications that much of the $200 million may be cut permanently.

During Refugees International’s (RI) recent mission to Syria, local authorities, humanitarian groups, and displaced people all expressed serious concerns over the March funding freeze. They were also deeply worried about the implications of President Donald Trump’s recent announcement that he would soon pull U.S. troops out of northeast Syria.

There was general agreement that an abrupt disengagement by the United States would create a power vacuum. Others—including the Assad regime, regional powers, and even remnants of ISIS—would then compete violently to fill this vacuum. Indeed, President Bashar al-Assad recently declared his willingness to use force to retake the areas currently being administered by the Kurds in northeast Syria. Renewed fighting would drive new displacement and potentially create another humanitarian disaster. Despite the gravity of this scenario, there appears to be no real contingency plan in place to respond to the potential consequences.

Furthermore, a series of obstacles stand in the way of meeting the region’s immediate humanitarian needs. To begin with, there is no widely recognized and unified authority governing the territory. A loose system of local self-administration has emerged in Kurdish-majority areas and in areas recently liberated from ISIS. These local authorities—many with little or no formal experience—are laboring to provide for the populations that are struggling to recover. In some cases, these authorities lack the resources and capacity to meet needs. In others, administrative procedures are creating obstacles to an effective humanitarian response.

In addition, only a handful of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) are operational in northeast Syria. Those that are present often lack a footprint in the areas that have been hardest hit by the conflict—like Raqqa city—or have yet to access those areas closest to the front lines, like Deir ez-Zor. The United Nations has a minimal presence, and limits its operations out of deference to the regime in Damascus. A small group of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide services in some of the most challenging environments,

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1. For the purposes of this report, northeast Syria refers to the governorates of al-Hassakeh, ar-Raqqah, and Deir ez-Zor, in conjunction with the areas outside these governorates claimed by the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) as part of its administration. Where necessary, the text differentiates individual cities with the same names as governorates.
but they are under-resourced and often are learning as they go.

As a result, humanitarian assistance is inadequate for returnees and also for the internally displaced people (IDPs) in the region’s camps and informal settlements. And though returns are happening, they will not be sustainable without substantive humanitarian aid. Both these facts are already fostering community tensions that threaten the fragile progress that has been made. In cities like Raqqa, the local authorities are acutely aware of the local population’s growing frustration over a lack of services and assistance.

Modest investments and predictable policies from donors and other international stakeholders would go far to shore up the fragile stability of northeast Syria and meet the humanitarian needs of local populations. Specifically, the importance of the United States for the northeast’s continuing stabilization and humanitarian assistance must not be underestimated. For the United States to maintain a presence there while the country recovers is a small price to pay to consolidate progress in this strategic corner of Syria’s catastrophic civil war.
RECOMMENDATIONS

• The Trump administration should release all frozen U.S. funding for stabilization and recovery in Syria and restore support for organizations engaged in critical assistance. The release of the $6.6 million for the White Helmets is a welcome first step in this regard.

• The Trump administration must avoid abrupt disengagement of any sort from northeast Syria in light of the grave consequences of such an action. Any transition of the U.S. role should only happen if there are plans in place to respond to the humanitarian effects of the instability that would likely accompany a hasty U.S. disengagement.

• Donors must offer more support to the international and local operational groups that are handling humanitarian action in northeast Syria. Services and assistance in camps and informal settlements are dwindling. This support could take several forms: more cross-border assistance from Iraq, targeted funding for local NGOs, and requiring better collaboration between INGOs and local groups.

• The administrative authorities across northeast Syria should remove barriers to NGOs’ access and operations in order to facilitate more robust and consistent humanitarian aid. This should include uniform registration and approval processes for INGOs’ and local NGOs’ registrations, travel permissions, and projects.

• Donors, the United Nations agencies, and INGOs must begin a collaborative process of strengthening local NGOs’ capacity in northeast Syria immediately, as such work will take time.

• The leadership of the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in its regional office in Amman, should commit to, and make resources available for, better inclusion of local humanitarian groups in the larger response. Increased participation of local groups and authorities in the coordination structure will facilitate communication and collaboration among potential partners.

• Countries and communities hosting Syrian refugees and IDPs should immediately cease any pressures or incentives to return, particularly to Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor. The international standard that returns should be “safe, voluntary, and dignified” has not yet been met for these areas of northeast Syria.
BACKGROUND

During more than seven years of conflict, Syrians have paid a tremendously high price for what began as a peaceful and popular uprising against the Assad regime. Five and a half million people have fled the country and become refugees in the region. Another one and a half million have struck out for Europe, with varying degrees of success. Six million people are internally displaced, thirteen million require humanitarian assistance, and at least half a million are dead. The surrounding countries have effectively closed their borders to most fleeing Syrians, but internal displacement continues. Even as the fight against ISIS wanes, the civil war and generalized violence still ravage the country.

Over the past seven years, Syrian civilians have endured relentless barrel bombing, starvation, chemical weapon attacks, and torture and executions. The civil war itself has evolved increasingly into a proxy conflict, with external parties playing a decisive hand in events on the battlefield and sometimes prolonging the fighting. International diplomacy has done little to stem the violence, and the impact of humanitarian assistance has been limited by the comportment of the conflict’s belligerents. It is essential that diplomats, donors, and humanitarians redouble their efforts in the coming months even if success appears unlikely.

The northeast Syria region offers a significant contrast to other areas of the country, where fighting remains ongoing. ISIS has largely been dislodged from its strongholds in Raqqa and the region’s other major population centers. Local and regional authorities are establishing mechanisms of self-administration and self-governance, including ministries, committees, and civilian councils. And many of the region’s people are going about the hard work of rebuilding their cities, homes, and lives.

The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS, also called “the Self-Administration”) serves as the de facto governance structure in northeast Syria. The Self-Administration is dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (also called the PYD) and by its military arm—the People’s Protection Units (also called the YPG). The Self-Admin-
istration has organized the Syrian Kurdish majority areas along the Turkish border into three regions, each of which self-governs through a system of local councils, committees, and communes.

As ISIS was pushed back, the Self-Administration expanded the area under its de facto authority to include a large stretch of territory south of the Kurdish regions and east of the Euphrates River. The majority of the population in these areas is Sunni Muslim Arab. The governance structures consist of more recently established civilian councils with ties to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These councils oversee the main cities and their surrounding areas. The most notable is the Raqqa Civil Council, but there are similar councils in Deir ez-Zor, Manbij, and Tabqa. These councils coordinate with each other and with the Self-Administration on issues like humanitarian assistance and economic policy.

At the height of the hostilities during the ISIS crisis, about 570,000 people were displaced from Deir ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Since then, hundreds of thou-

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sands of these IDPs have returned to their areas of origin. However, northeast Syria remains home to tens of thousands of IDPs living in camps, informal settlements, and host communities. They have arrived from many parts of Syria, and many have been displaced more than once. Some have fled ISIS; some have fled the Syrian regime; and at the moment, most do not see a possibility of returning home any time soon.

A handful of international donors offer humanitarian and stabilization assistance to the displaced and returning populations in northeast Syria. The United States is by far the most active of these donors. Beyond its military presence in the area, the United States provides some humanitarian support to the main civilian councils. It also funds stabilization activities, such as supporting de-mining programs, rubble removal, and repairing local water and power systems.

Despite the relative stability, northeast Syria is highly vulnerable to external shocks. Turkey could expand its recent military offensive from Afrin into Manbij, displacing up to 200,000 people in the process. In Deir ez-Zor, the regime controls much of the territory south of the Euphrates River, and many expect it to contest population centers just north of the river.

Finally, the United States recently announced its intention to pull its forces out of northeast Syria. This has led to fear of leaving an opening into which Turkey, the Assad regime, and/or a resurgent ISIS could flow. Any of these scenarios would likely cascade into large-scale displacement and a new humanitarian disaster. There are also concerns that U.S. humanitarian assistance could be withdrawn along with the troop presence, making it even harder to meet humanitarian needs. The recent announcement that the United States would suspend $200 million in stabilization assistance exacerbated these fears. The subsequent release of $6.6 million in funding for the White Helmets alone is unlikely to allay these concerns.

The working assumption among most Syria watchers is that the areas overseen by the Kurdish-dominated Self-Administration will at some point be brought back under the authority of the government in Damascus. There is an expectation among Syrian Kurds that reintegration with the Syrian state would be accompanied by greater autonomy and a decentralization of power and authority from the center. However, this assumes that reintegration will come about through negotiations between Damascus and the Kurds, rather than through the use of force by the former against the latter.

**THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION**

Although the fighting has mostly ended, the humanitarian situation in northeast Syria remains shaky. The Kurdish Self-Administration and the local councils in the Sunni Arab majority areas have limited financial and operational capacity to provide for the needs of those who are still displaced or those who have returned to areas recently liberated from ISIS. In addition, where INGOs and the UN agencies might normally fill in the gaps, only a handful of such groups are on the ground, and most of them face significant access issues in reaching vulnerable populations.

Local NGOs have demonstrated an important capacity for humanitarian assistance, but they remain underresourced and subject to periodic restrictions on movement and access by local authorities. At the same time, the regime has specified that organizations registered with Damascus may not register or operate in the northeast. These limitations also prevent the UN from playing its traditional coordination role. As a result, those groups—including local authorities—that might normally step in together as a team to fill this humanitarian vacuum are struggling to organize among
The Local Humanitarian Response

The de facto governance system in northeast Syria is decentralized, opaque, and complex. At the regional, canton, and city levels, committees or departments deal with humanitarian issues. This creates space for a humanitarian response to IDPs, returnees, and host communities, because assistance can flow through a municipality, a civilian council, or the Self-Administration.

One of the ways the United States supports the region’s stability is through assistance to local councils. In addition to activities such as clearing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines, the United States is also helping to equip local authorities to provide some humanitarian assistance, such as food and water beyond what the currently narrow NGO presence can offer.

Various local authorities can allow international and local NGOs access to vulnerable populations in order to assist them. There is also useful flexibility in how communities go about recovering. A city or a region may set its own priorities for what is most important: for some, it may be removal of the explosive remnants of war; for others, it might be food assistance.

However, when RI interviewed humanitarian affairs representatives in several main cities, it became clear that though these offices may sometimes provide minimal direct humanitarian aid, their main role is not in operations; nor do they make grants to humanitarian actors. They function primarily

Defining...

Humanitarian Action “[is] intended to ‘save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after man-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur.’ Furthermore, humanitarian action should be governed by the key humanitarian principles of: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.”

Stabilization “[consists of] linked action across a range of discrete policy spheres with the aim of reducing violence and establishing the political and social conditions necessary for recovery, reconstruction, development and a ‘lasting peace.’”

— Local Official in Northeast Syria

themselves and establish a coherent, predictable response.

“People knew nothing of the outside world under [ISIS]. There were three choices: stay under [ISIS], move toward a GoS (the government of Syria-controlled) area, or move toward an SDF area. Most of them took the third option. They therefore welcomed the liberation and the local authorities. They hoped the internationals and the SDF would help them.”

— Local Official in Northeast Syria

10 | Fragile Progress: Humanitarian Assistance and the Stabilization of Northeast Syria
as liaisons between their communities and humanitarian groups, passing on information about needs to actors that can address them, as well as to the Humanitarian Affairs Office of the Self-Administration. In some cases, they have also been able to support services like rubble removal, bridge repair, or trash collection; but in general, they depend upon outside actors for humanitarian support.

“Everything is needed everywhere, but to differing levels and degrees.”

— NGO WORKER IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

For example, one local humanitarian officer with whom RI spoke explained that every other day, it had distributed free bread in a nearby IDP camp that it managed. Unfortunately, this was the extent of the assistance it could offer, and there was nothing it could do about the fact that the INGO-run medical clinic in the camp was about to close down and no other groups were willing and able to staff and fund it.

Similarly, the humanitarian representatives of a large municipality told of how they had rehabilitated a public bakery, supplying grain and fuel. The bakery was successful, and additional private ones had to be opened to meet the residents’ needs. When the municipality’s funding ran low, it went through the process of requesting that an INGO start providing the grain. One month later, it still had no response. It is not clear where the process for requesting help broke down, but the end result was still that hungry people could not reliably obtain bread.

“Providing a bed and a blanket does not solve the problem.”

— IDP IN AIN EI SSA CAMP

Another humanitarian entity within the Self-Administration told of how its hospitals are understaffed and cannot offer services other than basic first aid. A local NGO gives small amounts of medication when possible, but requests to INGOs for support have gone unanswered. The hospital does what it can using volunteers, but the assistance it can provide is minimal and does not meet needs.

Donors must offer more support to both international and local operational groups that are handling humanitarian action in northeast Syria. The most basic needs in camps and informal settlements are being addressed by aid groups, but services and assistance are dwindling all the time. RI heard of more than one medical clinic that was closing, more than one bread distribution effort that had slowed or ceased, and more than one cash intervention program that had been discontinued. A situation in which people and organizations must compete even more for limited resources will not be conducive to the stability of an area that is already struggling to emerge from the aftermath of ISIS control.

In addition, several dozen governmental donors made pledges at the conference that was recently held in Brussels to mobilize humanitarian aid for Syrians both inside and outside the country. These donors should ensure that support for international and local humanitarian groups in northeast Syria is part of their programs over the coming years as they move toward fulfilling their


www.refugeesinternational.org | 11
pledges. In particular, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, which already offer humanitarian and stabilization support in northeast Syria, should prioritize support for NGOs and INGOs in their assistance plans.

This support could simultaneously take several potential forms: more cross-border assistance from Iraq, targeted funding for local NGOs, and requiring better collaboration among INGOs and local groups.

**Humanitarian Aid Groups in Northeast Syria**

INGOs and local NGOs operating in northeast Syria face regulatory and operational challenges that affect the delivery of humanitarian aid and the ability to create conditions for sustainable return. For the most part, aid groups must register with either the regime in Damascus or with the Self-Administration and the local authorities in the areas where they work. Damascus does not recognize the authority of the Self-Administration and in general exerts tremendous pressure on aid groups not to work there. A given group normally cannot form a partnership with another group that is not registered in the same territory. This has exacerbated the noticeable lack of UN and INGO partnerships with local humanitarian groups in northeast Syria.

The United Nations agencies operating in northeast Syria are generally registered in Damascus, so they cannot always seek out local partners in the northeast that know the vulnerable communities where programs can be implemented. At the same time, local groups with excellent access to people in need often lack the financial resources and technical know-how to carry out programs independently, and they can only turn to a limited number of INGOs registered in northeast Syria for support and capacity building, which they are often not able to provide. IDPs, returnees, host communities, and operational groups are therefore not benefiting much from the best practice of making the humanitarian response as local as possible through partnerships and mutual learning, which thereby would expand the response's scope and scale.

A number of international and local group
staff members with whom RI spoke also indicated that local authorities had a practice of arbitrarily creating administrative demands that delayed or stopped their operations. Most groups acknowledged that these requests—for additional paperwork, for sign-off by other authorities, for organizational re-registration—could usually and eventually be addressed. However, these delays created obstacles to consistent, predictable assistance for vulnerable populations. Such holdups are particularly damaging in the field of health care, because medical services are an acute need in all areas.

The Self-Administration and area- and citywide authorities should have harmonized registration and approval processes for INGOs’ and local NGOs’ registrations, travel permissions, and project approvals. They should also reciprocally honor each other’s current documentation and permissions in order to eliminate interruptions in vital humanitarian assistance.

Ideally, the same authorities across northeast Syria should remove barriers to NGOs’ access and operations in order to facilitate more robust and consistent humanitarian aid. This should include uniform registration and approval processes for INGOs’ and local NGOs’ registrations, travel permissions, and projects.

International donors—primarily the United States—are providing some support and assistance to northeast Syria and to the INGOs and local groups working there to meet immediate needs such as repairing water networks and electricity grids. Demining and clearance of IEDs are under way, rubble removal is ongoing, and efforts are being made to get the health care system up and running. But the sum total of the humanitarian assistance being provided in the region falls far short of needs, particularly if there is an intention by donors to encourage the stability of the territory and avoid creating conditions that would invite a return to humanitarian disaster. As a primary contributor to northeast Syria’s emergence from ISIS occupation, the United States must continue its efforts to enable the region to move forward in its recovery.

Where the United Nations agencies and international NGOs cannot operate in northeast Syria, local groups must be better equipped to fill in the gaps and to gradually take full charge of the humanitarian response themselves. As in so many similar situations, first responders—which are often local individuals and humanitarian groups—need the resources and training that international partners can best provide. Wherever feasible in light of registration rules, international donors, the United Nations agencies, and INGOs must immediately begin this collaborative process, because this capacity building will take time. Investment in the capabilities of local civil society in northeast Syria will only increase prospects for long-term stability.

### Coordination Structure for Humanitarian Assistance

The still-nascent humanitarian coordination mechanism in northeast Syria has filled an important void in the humanitarian response. The disconnect among the UN, those INGOs that are registered in Damascus, and those that are operational in northeast Syria or are focused on cross-border operations from Iraq is a fact of life. Groups must choose an area to work in, and they cannot reasonably be expected to endanger their own operations by running afoul of one or the other set of authorities. But this does present challenges for the coordination and efficiency of the humanitarian response.

In many humanitarian responses, OCHA establishes a platform through which it brings together the various humanitarian groups working in a particular situation. The general aim of convening organizations is to share information, set common priorities, and integrate planning and programs. The members of the group would normally include UN agencies, INGOs, national and local NGOs, and national and local governmental author-
ities that work on humanitarian issues.

However, as OCHA is registered in Damascus rather than in northeast Syria, it is only able to perform its functions for UN agencies and local organizations registered with Damascus. An important consequence of this absence is the minimal inclusion of local humanitarian aid groups in response planning and operations.

The Northeast Syria NGO Forum has helped to fill this gap in coordination with the support of the OCHA Regional Office for the Syrian Crisis. As the lead entity managing cross-border assistance from Iraq into northeast Syria, the forum strives to keep the work of humanitarian groups across the region coherent, and connected to the Whole of Syria response. The forum has made excellent progress in INGO coordination in only one year of work, and it is widely regarded as a useful substitute for a formal OCHA office. The involvement of local northeast Syrian groups in this system is quite minimal at the moment, but there appears to be potential to address this in the future.

At this point, the humanitarian NGOs (both international and local), the Humanitarian Affairs Office of the Self-Administration, and the various humanitarian committees and departments of regions and cities are not always as coordinated and communicative as they could be. The Northeast Syria NGO Forum remedies this where possible, and it can also act as a go-between for some of these entities. But to improve the efficiency of the humanitarian response, local groups must be integrated into this coordination mechanism and supported in their ability to participate.

Recently, a group of Northeast Syria NGO Forum members did a mapping of the national and local NGOs in northeast Syria in order to learn which organizations do what, and where. This is a very welcome first step toward a more coherent and efficient

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5. The Whole of Syria approach, which was established in 2015, is a framework within which the various “hubs” of humanitarian coordination for Syria work together in order to increase the effectiveness and reach of each of their individual operations. The hubs are in Damascus (Syria), Amman (Jordan), and Gaziantep (Turkey).
The next part of this project must be sharing the mapping results with all the relevant agencies mentioned above to increase the participation of local aid groups and authorities in the coordination structure. This will facilitate communication and collaboration among potential partners, particularly between international and local NGOs. The continued support for this developing process by OCHA’s leadership in its regional office in Amman will be crucial to ensuring the growth and improvement of the humanitarian response in northeast Syria at a time when it is desperately needed.

**SUSTAINABLE RETURNS**

Spontaneous returns by Syrian refugees and IDPs are indeed happening. The International Organization for Migration reported that last year, about 600,000 displaced Syrians went home to various parts of the country. In many of these cases, people were simply fed up with being displaced—particularly with the lack of livelihood opportunities—and once their area of origin had been cleared of ISIS, they chose to return. However, in almost as many cases, conditions for return are clearly unsuitable, with education and health care systems decimated, livelihoods opportunities scarce, and water and electricity still not restored.

One crucial element of northeast Syria’s shift toward stability is ensuring that the living conditions for people who decide to return are safe and there is access to social services. Along with traditional humanitarian aid to the displaced in camps and informal settlements—food, shelter, and health care—it is imperative that returns happen under circumstances that make them sustainable. International standards specify that returns by IDPs and refugees should be “voluntary, safe, and dignified.” Those conditions can only be met by creating a change in the amount of support that is currently available to people. This is why ongoing humanitarian assistance must deliberately accompany stabilization activities. It is possible and urgent to capitalize on these efforts in the newly stable northeast to ensure that people returning to their communities do not become displaced yet again.

“[In] Syria, ...USAID stabilization and humanitarian assistance experts are working hand in glove with [Department of Defense] and Department of State colleagues to help stabilize Raqqa and allow for the safe return of people displaced for years by horrific conflict.”

— MARK GREEN, USAID ADMINISTRATOR

Raqqa is one of the most illustrative examples of this imperative. The SDF’s success in pushing ISIS out created an opening for tens of thousands of people to return. An estimated 130,000 people have gone back to areas in and near Raqqa city. However, conditions remain largely unsuitable: about 75 percent of the city was destroyed during the fight with ISIS, electricity and water service are scarce, and the rates of IED and mine contamination are among the highest in the world.

If stability in Raqqa is to endure, it will not be a matter of simply rebuilding structures. People who go home with few resources need food, water, and shelter. They also

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need reliable health care, safe spaces in which to reopen businesses, and educational opportunities for the future—all humanitarian concerns. When people return home to areas that cannot properly receive and support them, the returns have a much greater chance of turning into additional displacement cycles and creating even more vulnerability and need.

“Where there’s peace, there are IDPs.”
— HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS OFFICER IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

In northeast Syria as a whole, the services that are most in demand for the displaced and returnees vary from location to location. In Raqqa, removing explosive remnants of war is paramount, along with medical care. In Tabqa, electricity is the main concern. In Manbij, improving conditions in the camps is a high priority. But the one common element in most areas of return in northeast Syria is the local authorities’ simple inability to offer much support. In light of this reality, countries and communities hosting Syrian refugees and IDPs should immediately cease any pressures or incentives for these people to return, particularly to Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor. The international standard that returns should be “voluntary, safe, and dignified” has not yet been met for these areas of northeast Syria—nor for the rest of the country.

Most of the IDPs in northeast Syria are from within this same region (though an increasing number of IDPs from outside the area have recently arrived), and they are stuck in a difficult situation. The local administrative structure that cannot adequately assist them in a displacement camp or informal settlement is the same one that cannot offer much humanitarian aid in their cities of return, many of which are relatively nearby. Likewise, the local authorities who are struggling to provide for IDPs are the same ones who already cannot fully meet the needs of the host communities in these liberated areas. In such a situation, the relative merits of returning versus remaining displaced may be barely distinguishable as they relate to humanitarian conditions.

CONCLUSION

Though the conflict in northeast Syria has subsided, the need for substantive support—both humanitarian and stabilization—remains if the region is to avoid sliding back into a humanitarian disaster. Even where people have returned to their homes, few places are fully safe or suitable for living. Providing humanitarian assistance and creating livable conditions will therefore remain relevant for the displaced and returnees for years to come.

Everyone with whom RI spoke in northeast Syria agreed that renewed fighting in or around the region could easily overwhelm the region’s overstretched humanitarian architecture and fragile stability. For example, a military offensive by the Assad regime against Idlib or a push by Turkey into Manbij could displace hundreds of thousands of people. Further, local relief groups estimated that upcoming military action against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor could displace tens of thousands of people. Few groups or local authorities have contingency plans in place. The prevailing attitude seemed to be that they would simply deal with contingencies as they occurred. With so few resources for the local authorities and the unpredictable operating environment for aid providers, there appear to be few reliable ways to scale up the humanitarian response. And yet, almost everyone with whom RI discussed this said that they would try to find a way to provide the displaced with at least the basics for survival.

This good will on the part of those admin-
istering the region and maintaining the humanitarian response should not be taken lightly. The situation in northeast Syria is no longer a humanitarian catastrophe, but it would not take much for it to devolve into one. In addition to the funding recently made available for the White Helmets, it is therefore urgent that the Trump administration release the rest of the frozen U.S. funding for stabilization and recovery in Syria and restore support for organizations engaged in critical assistance. Furthermore, the administration must avoid abrupt disengagement of any sort from northeast Syria in light of the grave consequences of such an action. Any transition of the U.S. role should only happen if there are plans in place to respond to the humanitarian effects of the instability that would likely accompany a hasty U.S. disengagement.

Finally, any future U.S. policy toward northeast Syria should include a strong commitment to ongoing humanitarian assistance, even though emergency conditions have subsided. Although the narrative around northeast Syria is now one of stability rather than relief, traditional humanitarian needs remain, and meeting them is a fundamental aspect of ensuring sustainable returns and future stability.

**Daryl Grisgraber and Hardin Lang traveled to northeast Syria, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in April 2018.**
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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We are an independent organization and do not accept any government or UN funding.