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AREA PROFILE - IDLIB CITY AND JABAL AL-ZAWIYAH - RETURNS CONTEXT MONITORING
Jabal al-Zawiya

7. OVERVIEW
   7.1. GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY
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10. RETURN AND DISPLACEMENT PROSPECTS
# GLOSSARY

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>EO</td>
<td>Explosive ordnance</td>
<td>GoS</td>
<td>Government of Syria</td>
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<td>HTS</td>
<td>Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham</td>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally displaced person</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
<td>JAN</td>
<td>Jabhat Al-Nusra</td>
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<td>JFS</td>
<td>Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham</td>
<td>NWS</td>
<td>Northwest Syria</td>
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<td>RCM</td>
<td>Returns Context Monitoring program</td>
<td>SIG</td>
<td>Syrian Interim Government</td>
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<td>SNA</td>
<td>Syrian National Army</td>
<td>SSG</td>
<td>Syrian Salvation Government</td>
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<td>TRY</td>
<td>Turkish Lira</td>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States dollar</td>
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<tr>
<td>UXO</td>
<td>Unexploded ordnance</td>
<td>YÖLYDS</td>
<td>Turkish High School Proficiency and Equivalency Examination for International Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>WoS</td>
<td>Whole of Syria</td>
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1. KEY FINDINGS

Idlib City

- Home to 100,000 people in 2004, Idlib city’s population has risen to nearly 250,000 over the course of the conflict as a result of several waves of internally displaced persons (IDP) settlement.

- In 2015 the city came under joint opposition-Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN) control after factions expelled Government of Syria (GoS) forces, and continued to witness frequent conflict related hostilities, factional infighting, and deteriorating services for nearly two years.

- As conflict dynamics shifted and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) consolidated control of the city and placed governance and services under the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), circumstances in the city have marginally improved and it has become a hub for IDP settlement in Northwest Syria (NWS).

- Idlib city is the administrative hub of the SSG and the SSG, along with NGOs, oversee services in the city.

- While services have notably improved over the past several years, with rehabilitation of the water network and extension of power from the Turkish power grid, they are still not adequate to meet the needs of the city’s large population.

- Notably, the city’s water infrastructure still requires extensive repairs, and the education and health sector are in desperate need of additional support.

- Similar to services, Idlib city’s economy has improved over the past several years, with the city’s industrial, housing, and services sectors all witnessing considerable growth.

- Nevertheless, residents and IDPs living in the city reportedly continue to struggle to meet their daily needs as economic growth has failed to produce adequate employment opportunities, wages remain low, the SSG and NGOs provide limited support, and housing prices are high relative to incomes.

- These issues, combined with the uncertain future of SSG administered NWS, remain significant barriers to return and the prospects for largescale sustainable return to Idlib city are minimal for the foreseeable future.

- Conversely, as services and economic prospects are stronger in Idlib city than other parts of NWS, the city will likely continue to witness gradual inflows of IDPs from other parts of NWS. This dynamic will only increase if more housing becomes available and property rental and purchasing prices become more affordable.
**Jabal Al-Zawiyah**

- The Jabal Al-Zawiyah area is located in southern Idlib. While not a formal administrative area, the area is made up of approximately 20 communities and its boundaries closely align with the Ehsem subdistrict of the Ariha District/Idlib governorate.

- Over the course of the Syrian conflict, the population of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area has fallen by almost half, from approximately 65,000 to just 33,000.

- The population distribution has also shifted. As the southern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area is considered an active frontline, the majority of the area’s population is concentrated in five communities in the northern half of the area.

- The Jabal Al-Zawiyah was amongst the first areas of Syria to witness armed conflict, with GoS-opposition clashes reported as early as mid-2011.

- While the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area has witnessed brief periods of calm, generally over the entire conflict the area has suffered from poor security as a result of conflict hostilities and infighting.

- Sitting just south of the M4 highway, the likely target of any future GoS offensive, the Jabal Al-Zawiyah future security prospects remain poor.

- Consequently, even as services and the local economy have largely collapsed, neither the SSG nor NGOs have been willing and/or able to provide adequate support to the area.

- Without a robust security or political agreement that provides sustained, mid to long-term stability in Jabal Al-Zawiyah, there are unlikely to be any meaningful improvements to circumstances in the area and prospects for largescale sustainable returns will remain minimal for the foreseeable future.

- At the same time, there is significant potential for large scale conflict-related displacement. Jabal Al-Zawiyah would almost certainly be targeted as part of a GoS offensive against NWS, and any further advances would likely force vulnerable IDPs and residents to resettle in areas further north near the Syrian-Turkish border.
2. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

2.1. BACKGROUND

The Return Context Monitoring (RCM) project was established at iMMAP in June 2020 to fill qualitative information gaps around experiences of and conditions for IDPs and refugee returnees inside Syria. RCM operates through two main deliverable streams, return and reintegration area profiles which cover specific geographic areas, and thematic reports on topics relevant to return dynamics at the regional or whole of Syria (WoS) level. RCM works with a variety of stakeholders to identify key information gaps and develop research aims, including durable solutions working groups, sector working groups, and bilateral partner and donor consultations.

This report includes the 16th and 17th RCM area profiles, covering Idlib city and the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area in southern Idlib. In addition to exploring the current situation and conditions for returns in both areas, which are currently unfavorable, the report explores the distribution and status of IDPs in both areas, the drivers of outward migration, and prospects for returns and further displacement.

2.2. METHODOLOGY

The information and findings in this report are based on desk research and primary research. Desk research consisted of two components: 1) a review of relevant local and international news reports, social media content, and humanitarian reporting; and 2) a review of population data from operational partners and the GoS.

Building on initial desk research findings, the core RCM analysis team developed a semi-structured questionnaire for qualitative primary research covering the demographic, governance, services, and security dynamics of both Idlib city and the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, with a focus on return and displacement trends. Following discussions around each questionnaire with the core RCM analysis team, four Syrian research consultants completed the questionnaires through discussions with dozens of local stakeholders, including community leaders, residents, current IDPs, returnees, and opposition officials. Both the core RCM analysis team and research consultants also carried out ad hoc follow-up with relevant stakeholders to address outstanding information gaps and to support triangulation efforts.

2.3. LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation faced by the RCM analysis team throughout data collection for both profiles was the lack of detailed and historic population data. Assessing population and movement data in both Idlib city and the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area was challenging due to the frequency and scope of displacement over the past 11 years. While information on displacement has improved over the past four years, providing the RCM analysis team with reliable figures about general population movement, the team relied on triangulated field reporting to determine the nature of displacement and movement at the local level.
IDLIB CITY
3. OVERVIEW

3.1. GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Map 1. Control Map of NWS - February 2022
Idlib city is located in the Idlib subdistrict of the Idlib district/Idlib governorate, just 10 km northeast of the intersection of the M5 and M4 highways and approximately 40 km south of the Syrian-Turkish border. While an ancient community, Idlib city remained relatively small until the late 20th century. According to the GoS census, Idlib city was home to an estimated 100,000 people in 2004, while figures from operational partners in late 2021 indicate the city’s population has risen to nearly 250,000 over the course of the conflict as a result of several waves of IDP settlement, discussed in Sub-section 3.2 below.

Sunni Muslims have made up the vast majority of Idlib city’s original population and are represented by several dozen prominent local families. While tribes and tribalism were not a feature of the city’s Sunni Arab population, they do play an important role amongst many IDP communities who have arrived to the city over the past several years. In addition to Sunni Muslims, Idlib city was home to a significant Christian minority, which local sources estimate reached 5,000 people prior to the conflict, as well as a small Shia Muslim minority.

Map 2. Idlib City
3.2. DISPLACEMENT AND SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS

As a result of conflict dynamics, Idlib city witnessed several waves of displacement and IDP settlement between 2012 and 2020. While opposition forces briefly gained control of the city in early 2012, between 2012 and 2015 the city would remain under GoS control. During this period local sources estimate between 25% to 45%, approximately 25,000 to 45,000 people, fled the city for several reasons, including fear of GoS detention and mandatory conscription, general instability, and deteriorating economic conditions. At the same time, thousands of IDPs from opposition-held central and southern Idlib settled in the city during this period. While some of these IDPs were reportedly GoS loyalists, local sources report that the majority had no clear association with the GoS and fled to Idlib city as a result of intensifying hostilities and collapse of basic services in their home communities.

In March 2015, Ahrar Al-Sham, JAN, and several opposition factions, organized under the Jaysh Al-Fatah coalition, gained control of the city following a campaign against remaining GoS-held areas in central Idlib. While a small number of residents reportedly returned to city immediately after the fighting, local sources estimate 35% of the remaining population, approximately 20,000 to 25,000 people, fled due to fears of further instability and the absence of services in the city under Jaysh Al-Fatah control. It was during this period that the city lost its remaining Christian and Shia Muslim minorities, both of which had gradually reduced in size throughout the previous years of conflict. General population outflows continued over the next two years, as the city suffered from conflict related hostilities, severe infighting, and an acute deterioration of service provision.

By 2017 these dynamics began to change as a result of several factors. First, as Idlib city was relatively stable compared to frontline communities to the south and east and had a significant housing surplus, it became a key destination for IDPs fleeing GoS advances elsewhere in the country. Thus, between 2017 and 2019, the city hosted an estimated 150,000 IDPs arriving in waves from Rural Damascus, Homs city, northern Homs, Daraa, and Al-Quneitra. While most of these IDPs would eventually move to more stable areas of northern Syria, namely Turkish-held northern Aleppo and areas of Idlib along the Syrian-Turkish border, Idlib city continued to be a settlement hub for thousands of IDPs from areas of southern and eastern Idlib and northern Hama retaken by the GoS during campaigns between late 2017 and early 2020.

1 Local sources estimate that by mid-2015, 60% to 70% of homes in Idlib city were vacant.
4. GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY DYNAMICS

4.1. GOVERNANCE

While governance and services in Idlib city are currently overseen by the SSG in coordination with the Idlib City Council, following the expulsion of the GoS, the city remained without any clear civilian governance and services authorities between 2015 and 2017 due to disputes within Jaysh Al-Fatah. After expelling GoS forces from the city in March 2015, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) sought to transfer ministries from Turkey to Idlib city and make the city the capital of opposition-held NWS. Although opposition factions and parts of Ahrar Al-Sham supported the move, JAN and a number of Ahrar Al-Sham commanders strongly opposed it. Consequently, Jaysh Al-Fatah established the so-called Civilian Administration to oversee services in the city under the direct supervision of armed factions. While this was technically meant to ensure power sharing between Ahrar Al-Sham, JAN, and several opposition factions, Ahrar Al-Sham dominated the administration between 2015 and 2017.

During this period, disputes within Jaysh Al-Fatah were closely linked to wider competition between JAN, Ahrar Al-Sham, and other opposition factions over authority across all NWS. As JAN sought to gradually position itself to sideline its rivals, in mid-2016 it rebranded as Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham (JFS) and publicly distanced itself from Al-Qaeda. While the faction continued to operate as JFS for nearly six months, in January 2017 it continued to consolidate its influence, assuming control over four smaller factions in NWS as part of its establishment and transformation to HTS.

Meanwhile, in Idlib city, services continued to suffer. Service provision remained disjointed and underfunded, factions interfered in services, and humanitarian actors refused to provide significant support to the city due to lack of civilian governance and service bodies. Eventually the deteriorating situation in the city led local notables and activists to establish an independent, civilian local council in January 2017. While the Jaysh Al-Fatah Civilian Administration stated it would hand over management of services in Idlib city to the city council by March 2017, this never fully materialized.

In July 2017, HTS launched operations against Ahrar Al-Sham throughout NWS and successfully dismantled the faction. While HTS began definitively consolidating its control over military, security, governance, and economic affairs throughout NWS, it also gained full control over the Jaysh Al-Fatah Civilian Administration in Idlib city and service bodies affiliated with Ahrar Al-Sham throughout NWS. After a JAN-approved civilian initiative led to the establishment of the SSG in November 2017, JAN publicly transferred authority over services to the SSG the same month. The SSG subsequently established ministries in Idlib city in former GoS ministry offices and established Idlib city as the de facto capital of SSG administered NWS. While the original Idlib city council was still active during this period, by early 2018 the SSG had fully restructured the council and placed it under the Ministry of Local Administration and Services.

Currently, the Idlib city council is made up of seven offices, which are managed by 20 council members and staffed by approximately 60 permanent and temporary staff. In addition to working to facilitate activities with humanitarian organizations in coordination with SSG ministries and directorates, the council’s main role is carrying out basic municipal services, namely repairing roads, waste collection, mukhtar selection, and supporting coordination with humanitarian actors. As the council falls under the SSG Ministry of Local Administration and Services, the ministry is responsible for funding the council and authorizing its activities, as well as approving council membership.
4.2. SECURITY

Security Actors

Similar to governance, the SSG and HTS manage security in Idlib city through two local security forces, SSG Ministry of Interior police forces and HTS General Security forces. The SSG police force is made up of four branches, criminal police, emergency police, traffic police, and municipal police which are responsible for responding to criminal complaints and investigating crimes, protecting public and private property, addressing emergency incidents, directing traffic, overseeing crowd control at gatherings, and patrolling markets. While local sources report the SSG police are visible in Idlib city, their ability to investigate and resolve crimes is limited by their lack of capacity and resources, and in some cases, an inability to investigate crimes involving HTS members or influential local figures.

In Idlib city, HTS General Security forces oversee checkpoints, intelligence gathering, and security raids and operations. General Security force checkpoints are located around the perimeter of the city, but according to local sources forces only search vehicles or question individuals during periods of heightened conflict or when HTS suspects Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Huras Al-Din, and GoS cells are planning attacks in the city. During such periods, forces will carry out vehicle searches and question individuals deemed to be suspicious. While local sources report checkpoint units do not normally question unaccompanied women on the purpose of their travel, such instances do occasionally occur when conservative HTS members are manning the checkpoints. General security forces also carry out operations related to serious crimes, such as kidnapping and ISIS, Huras Al-Din, and GoS cell activity, but such operations have been rare in Idlib city. HTS General Security forces have also been implicated in intimidating and arresting opposition activists critical of HTS.

Security Concerns and Freedom of Movement

Local sources report conflict related hostilities have remained the primary security concern amongst residents and IDPs in Idlib city. Despite a reduction in hostilities in NWS over the past two years, due in large part to Turkish-Russian coordination, sporadic shelling and airstrikes against the city remain a serious threat. In 2021, Russian warplanes carried out strikes against the city in June and GoS forces shelled the city in September.

Over the mid to long term, there are also significant local concerns about a renewed Russian-backed GoS campaign against NWS and the potential impact of such a campaign on the city. The most likely target of a GoS campaign would be to regain control of the M4 highway, which sits approximately 10 km south of Idlib city. While it is unclear if the GoS and Russia would be interested or able to push further north and take Idlib city, in any scenario the GoS and Russia would likely target the city, as a nearby strategically and symbolically important population center, in order to pressure HTS and Turkey. Thus, the city could endure sustained GoS shelling and Russian and GoS airstrikes, which would likely force much of the current population to temporarily flee northward.
Alongside conflict related hostilities, local sources report there are widespread concerns about general criminality in and around Idlib city. Residential and commercial thefts are reportedly common, while relatively well-off individuals, including local businessmen and people working for international organizations, are also at risk of kidnapping. Kidnapping incidents are reportedly rare within the city, but travel to the countryside carries heightened risk for such individuals. As there is no mandatory conscription in NWS, this is not a daily concern for local men.

While local sources report male residents and IDPs face no restrictions on their freedom of movement within and to and from Idlib city, women’s freedom of movement is mixed. Between 2017 and 2019, HTS established units in the city to enforce the group’s strict interpretation of Islamic morality and behavior. In addition to questioning men and women meeting in public or travelling together, units would confront women about their dress, makeup, and travelling unaccompanied and store owners about displays and products units considered un-Islamic. Local sources report they were eventually dissolved, due to local complaints about the units’ behavior and defections of hardline elements from HTS. Since the dissolution of these units, neither HTS nor SSG police forces work to restrict women’s freedom of movement. Nevertheless, like much of NWS, the conservative cultural norms of Idlib city’s resident and IDP populations continue to informally limit women’s freedom of movement.

IDPs and residents can easily travel to other SSG administered areas via private vehicle, taxi, minibus, or public buses operated by the SSG, but access to other areas of Syria is poor. Since 2020, there have been no active civilian crossings between SSG and GoS areas. While smugglers move people between the two areas, numbers are limited due to the risks involved and the costs, with smugglers reportedly charging 400 US dollar (USD) per person. Finally, residents and IDPs can travel to Turkish-administered Operation Olive Brance and Operation Euphrates Shield areas via bus or taxi but cannot settle in either area without permission from authorities.

While they were active, the units were renamed several times, and were referred to during various periods as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, Suwaid Al-Kheir, Al-Hisbah Forces, and Markez Al-Falah.
5. SERVICES AND LIVELIHOODS DYNAMICS

5.1. ELECTRICITY

The primary sources of power in Idlib city are the Turkish national power grid and ampere service. In both cases, households and businesses purchase power at market rates set by the SSG General Electricity Establishment, either in coordination with private sector actors involved in power distribution or directly. In May 2021, a local Syrian company, Green Energy, extended power from the Turkish grid to Idlib city after repairing the main transfer stations in Idlib and several stretches of transmission line. Green Energy currently offers subscriptions to households and businesses throughout the city. While coverage in the city’s central neighborhoods and industrial area is strong, conflict related damage and a shortage of power meters has prevented Green Energy from extending coverage to the entire city. According to local sources, Green Energy is working to address both issues and expects full coverage by mid-2022.

To subscribe for service, individuals must go to a local Green Energy service center, where they present their ID, property documentation, and pay enrollment and installation fees. Once service begins, customers pay for usage through prepaid power cards purchased in 100 Turkish Lira (TRY), approximately 7.58 USD, increments at local service centers. Following TRY volatility and rising power prices in Turkey, Green Energy increased the price of power in January 2022.

Residents and IDPs without access to power from the Turkish network continue to purchase ampere service. In Idlib city, ampere service is operated by Green Energy and service subscriptions are sold at rates set by the SSG General Electricity Establishment. As of January 2022, rates stood at approximately 60 TRY (~11.80 USD) per ampere per month, with individuals able to purchase up to four amperes for approximately six hours a day.

5.2. WATER

Households and businesses in Idlib city receive water from four main sources: public water networks, wells, tanker trucks, and bottled water. The public water network in Idlib city relies on the Seijar and Arshani pumping stations five km west of the city, as well as six small groundwater pumping stations inside the city. The Goal NGO is responsible for overseeing the public water network throughout the city. Accordingly, Goal teams rehabilitate, manage, and support the main pumping stations serving the city, carry out network repairs, and respond to local complaints. As water provision in Idlib city is NGO supported, local authorities do not charge for usage of the public network. However, since mid-2021, the SSG General Water Establishment has started to discuss introducing water meters and usage-based fees in Idlib city and several other densely populated communities.

In Idlib city, Goal teams schedule pumping to ensure each neighborhood receives water from the public network once a week for several hours. The weekly pumping schedule is posted on social media at the start of each week. While this allows most households and businesses connected to the network to fill water tanks for use throughout the week, upper-level apartments generally suffer from limited access to water from the network. In addition to insufficient pumping pressure, local sources report the amount of water provided within the weekly window is frequently only enough to fill tanks in lower-level apartments. This issue is exacerbated by some lower-level household and businesses installing more than one water tank.

For areas of the city without access to water through the public network, or upper-level apartments that have limited or inconsistent access to water from the network, households and businesses can draw water from public wells located throughout the city, water purchased from tanker trucks, or small residential wells. Tanker trucks often require households and businesses to purchase between five to ten 220-liter barrels at a time.
5.3. FOOD AND FUEL SUPPORT

Food support in Idlib city consists of subsidized bread provision from the SSG and limited food support by I/NGOs and charitable organizations. Within Idlib city, normal Syrian bread is the primary bread available, and produced by approximately 10 privately owned bakeries. While all bakeries in the city are registered with the SSG Directorate of Bakeries and Grains, the directorate only provides seven bakeries with reduced price flour to produce subsidized bread. As of January 2022, the price of subsidized bread in the city stands at 2.5 TRY (~0.19 USD) per 600-gram packet, while unsubsidized bread is sold at market rates capped by the SSG at 5 TRY (~0.38 USD) per 750-gram packet. In addition to providing reduced price flour to certain bakeries, the SSG provides all bakeries with reduced price fuel to reduce the cost of bread production. Although bread is relatively expensive when compared to other areas of Syria, due to NWS’s reliance on imported flour and fuel, over the past two years Idlib city has not witnessed a bread shortage and the quality of bread has reportedly remained good.

In addition to SSG subsidized and price regulated bread, several I/NGOs provide a range of direct and indirect food support in the city, including free bread, food baskets, and, increasingly, cash and voucher programs. Local sources report that most of these efforts target specific at-risk segments of the population such as IDPs, widows, and orphans. Meanwhile, those who are not eligible or do not report food support rely on the open market to obtain their needs. Although prices are reportedly high relative to incomes, local sources report the availability of foodstuffs is especially strong in Idlib city, with the markets enjoying strong access to products from the surrounding area, Turkish-administered northern Aleppo, and Turkey.

The SSG does not subsidize fuel products in NWS or Idlib city. Since 2018, the HTS and SSG-affiliated Watad company has enjoyed a near monopoly over the fuel market in NWS. Watad purchases most of its fuel from a Turkish company responsible for importing the fuel to Turkey and transporting it to the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing. Watad also purchases locally refined, domestic diesel, from traders in Turkish-administered northern Aleppo, however, local sources report it has gradually sought to reduce the amount of domestic fuel in the market.

In addition to being able to purchase imported and domestic fuel at gas stations in and around Idlib city, residents and IDPs also can also purchase fuel from roadside vendors, known as bastat. In both cases, as fuel is not subsidized, individuals can purchase unlimited amounts. While neither Watad nor the SSG formally set the price of fuel, as Watad is responsible for supplying nearly all fuel in the local market, nearly all fuel in gas stations and bastat is sold at prices issued by Watad on a weekly basis. Previously pegged to the TRY, volatility forced Watad to shift prices to USD in December 2021. Since then, fuel prices in Idlib city, and across NWS, have ranged between 0.50-0.80 USD per liter for diesel, 0.55-0.86 USD per liter for gasoline, and 12 USD per butane gas cylinder.
5.4. HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Over the past several years, Idlib city has become a center for health services for communities throughout central and southern Idlib. Currently there are ten public hospitals and five private hospitals in Idlib city, alongside more than a dozen primary health care centers and specialized medical facilities. In addition to primary care and maternal care services, several hospitals and facilities provide specialized secondary care and diagnostic services, including intensive care, neurology, orthopedic, vascular, pediatric, urology, radiology, and gastroenterology treatments and surgery and x-ray, CT scans, and lab tests.

The health sector in Idlib city suffers from several issues. While current hospital bed figures from operational partners for the Idlib district stand at 9.7 beds per 10,000 people, just short of the IASC standard of 10 beds per 10,000 people, facilities and the city and district lack adequate medical staff. According to figures from operational partners for the Idlib district, there are currently 13.8 health workers per 10,000 people, falling short of the IASC standard of 22 health workers per 10,000 people. While hospitals in the city do offer a range of specialized services relative to other parts of NWS, due to the lack of specialists and specialized equipment the availability of such services is extremely limited and not sufficient to meet demand. Further, the same issues have led to an acute lack of certain specializations and specialized services, such as oncology, dialysis, and burns treatment.

These challenges are exacerbated by both the surrounding areas’ reliance on health services in Idlib city and the sector’s reliance on external support. As surrounding areas also suffer from a lack of health services, which has only grown more severe with recent reductions in external support to numerous rural facilities, growing external demand has placed the city’s already health sector under further pressure. While local sources report there have not been any major reductions in support to the health sector over the past several months, even a modest reduction could have a significant impact on local health services, as public facilities in the city are wholly reliant on external support for staff salaries and operating costs, supplies and medicines, and capital and equipment costs.

Finally, COVID-19 has also presented a major challenge to public health and the city’s health sector. The city lacks an adequate number of isolation centers dedicated to treating COVID-19. According to data from operational partners and local sources, there are just three COVID-19 isolation facilities in the city, each of which can accommodate approximately 20 patients at a time.

Local sources report there are approximately 150 functional schools in Idlib city, the majority of which are primary stage 1 and stage 2 schools. With the exception of several religious schools, schools in the area teach the amended GoS curriculum developed by the SIG Ministry of Education. The Free Idlib Education Directorate manages the schools throughout the city through the Idlib education complex in coordination with NGOs.

Since the closure of civilian crossings in 2020, students in the city have largely foregone GoS exams. Although this has prevented students from pursuing university education at GoS institutions, students are able to enroll in Turkish universities or universities located in NWS, including Idlib University, and northern Aleppo. Because the Turkish language is not taught in public schools in the city, students wishing to take the Turkish High School Proficiency and Equivalency Examination for International Students (YÖLYDS) required to enroll in Turkish universities must enroll in supplementary Turkish language courses. While there are several private institutes offering general Turkish language courses, for courses specifically meant to prepare students for the YÖLYDS exams, local students must either enroll with online institutes or at the Turkish Language Advisory Institute within Idlib University.

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5.5. HOUSING

According to local sources, Idlib suffers from a housing shortage which has led to relatively high housing prices. The current housing shortage is the result of an influx of IDPs and gradual movement into the city from the surrounding area. With the city's population doubling over the past several years, existing housing stocks, primarily apartment buildings, have been occupied. The shortage has been exacerbated by conflict related hostilities, which according to operational partners, impact approximately 15% of existing housing stock. Despite damage, the severity of the housing shortage means even buildings with severe conflict related damage are being occupied.

As of early 2022, monthly rental prices, set in TRY or USD, for a typical 2-to-3-bedroom rental apartment ranged between 50 and 200 USD. The price of rentals fluctuates according to the location of the apartment, whether it is furnished or unfurnished, and the availability of services. While housing at current rates is unaffordable for many IDPs in the city, local sources report it is common for residents who have left the area to provide IDPs apartments for free so long as they agree to tend to the property in the owner's absence.

Meanwhile, purchase prices range between 7,000 USD and 50,000 USD, with the former encompassing damaged or dilapidated homes purchased for redevelopment and the latter encompassing newly built modern homes. Due to high demand, current home purchase prices are largely the same as pre-conflict prices. With high demand and stable prices, the city has witnessed a major uptick in construction of new homes and home repair over the past several years. While local sources report escalations on nearby frontlines have temporarily led to declining prices, as most inputs are purchased in USD and properties are sold in USD, TRY volatility had little impact on the sector and building continued apace throughout late 2021 and early 2022.

5.6. CIVIL DOCUMENTATION AND REGISTRATION

Currently, the SSG Ministry of Interior oversees all civil registration services in Idlib city, through the SSG Idlib Civil Affairs Directorate. Operating out of the former GoS civil registry building, the directorate issues family books, birth, death, marriage, and divorce certificates, and documents related to inheritance for Idlib city residents, as well as IDPs. In December 2021, the SSG announced plans to begin issuing SSG ID cards by mid-2022. The cards would reportedly be similar to SIG biometric IDs issued to residents and IDPs in Turkish administered areas. As civil documents issued by the SSG are not recognized by the GoS or outside of NWS, local sources report many residents and IDPs in Idlib city continue to obtain civil documents from the GoS. Due to extremely limited access to GoS areas, residents and IDPs rely on relatives, lawyers, and fixers to obtain and deliver GoS civil documents. According to local sources, IDs, family books, birth, death, marriage, and divorce certificates can be obtained for approximately $50, while passports cost between $500 to $2,000.
5.7. ECONOMY AND LIVELIHOODS

Overshadowed by Aleppo, located just 45 km to the northeast, and communities along with the Syrian–Turkish border 35 km to the north, Idlib city was never a major regional economic hub. Nevertheless, as an administrative and population center, the city became an important local economic hub for central and southern Idlib. With an industrial area on the eastern edge of the city, home to small factories and dozens of workshops, and several large markets, the city became a trade hub for the surrounding countryside. Consequently, according to the GoS SCBS, in 2004, nearly 70% of residents were employed in either manufacturing or trade jobs. While 55% of residents were employed by the private sector at the time, like much of Syria, Idlib city was also heavily dependent on public sector employment, with 35% of the population working as public servants or in state owned enterprises.

Idlib city’s economy has been severely undermined by the conflict. Between 2012 and 2015, even as security was relatively stable inside the city under GoS control, it remained isolated and surrounded by opposition forces. As factories lacked access to inputs and markets and surrounding opposition-held areas could no longer access the city’s workshops and local markets, economic activity effectively came to a standstill. The situation continued to deteriorate between 2015 and 2017 after Jaysh Al-Fatah gained control of the city. In addition to widespread looting of factories and workshops, both by retreating GoS forces and incoming Jaysh Al-Fatah forces, airstrikes and shelling damaged the industrial area and key infrastructure.

Since 2017, the economy has partially recovered as a result of declines in conflict related hostilities and local infighting, the influx of IDPs, and the gradual restoration of services. The manufacturing sector has reportedly witnessed notable investment over the past four years, with both residents and IDPs establishing small factories and workshops to produce processed foodstuffs and household supplies. Service workshops have also emerged in large numbers, with Idlib city becoming a hub for auto repair and service. Similarly, with the increased demand for housing the local building sector has expanded, and the city has witnessed increased trade in building materials, the emergence of dozens of new contracting companies, and restoration and establishment in carpentry and blacksmithing workshops. Idlib city has also once again become a local center for commerce, with a strong vegetable and fruit trade, large clothing and home goods markets, and a range of service businesses, including restaurants, and exchange and hawala offices.

Despite the partial recovery and relatively stronger economic conditions compared to nearby areas, local sources report much of the city still suffers from major economic challenges. First, unemployment remains high. While there are no precise figures available, operational partners estimate the unemployment rate stood as high as 40% in 2019. Additionally, the public sector has greatly contracted over the course of the conflict, as the GoS dismissed most local public sector employees and SSG employment has remained limited. Due to these issues, wages have remained low. Outside of a small number of public sector jobs and positions with humanitarian organizations, where monthly salaries range between 150 and 600 USD, local sources report monthly private sector wages typically range between 60-300 USD.
6. RETURN AND DISPLACEMENT PROSPECTS

In Idlib city and across NWS, poor essential services and limited economic prospects, combined with the uncertain future of SSG administered NWS, remain significant barriers to return. As there are unlikely to be meaningful improvements in these key areas in the near to mid-term, the prospects for large-scale sustainable return to Idlib city are minimal for the foreseeable future. Conversely, as services and economic prospects are stronger in Idlib city than other parts of NWS, it will likely continue to witness gradual inflows of IDPs from other parts of NWS. This dynamic will only increase if more housing becomes available and property rental and purchasing prices become more affordable.

In the absence of clarity on the future political and security status of NWS, the potential for large scale conflict-related displacement remains. Idlib city would likely be targeted as part of a GoS offensive against NWS. While the GoS may not seek to take the city, any increased, sustained targeting would lead to significant temporary displacement and likely encourage IDPs and residents to explore resettling in areas further north near the Syrian-Turkish border.

Finally, as noted above, the same conditions acting as barriers for return will also continue to encourage displacement from Idlib city if left unresolved. The only thing preventing significant outflows are the limited pathways out of Syria and minimal crossline movements.
JABAL AL-ZAWIYAH
7. OVERVIEW

7.1. GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

The Jabal Al-Zawiyah area is located in southern Idlib. While not a formal administrative area, the informal boundaries of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah closely align with the Ehsem subdistrict of the Ariha District/Idlib governorate. Accordingly, the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area is made up of approximately 20 communities, and extends 13 km north to south, from Rami to Kansafra, and 14 km east to west, from Ein Laruz to Farkya. Sitting directly south of the M4 highway, and 13 km west of the M5 highway, the mountainous area overlooks both highways, as well as the Sahel Al-Roj and Sahel Al-Ghab areas to the west. Within the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, communities are linked by narrow, mountainous local roads.

According to the 2004 GoS census, the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area was home to an estimated 65,000 people, with half of the area’s population concentrated in just five towns, Bara, Kansafra, Balyun, Al-Rami, and Ehsem. Figures from operational partners in late 2021 indicate the area’s population has dropped by nearly half, to approximately 33,000, over the course of the conflict. In addition to the general reduction in the area’s population, population distribution has also shifted as frontlines have moved further north. Currently, the majority of the area’s population is concentrated in five communities in the northern half of the area, Rami, Bsames, Marayan, Ehsem, and Kafr Haya, while Bara, Kansafra, and Balyun have largely been vacated due to their proximity to frontlines.

Map 3. The Jabal Al-Zawiyah Area

The original and current population of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area are completely Sunni Arab. Among the area's original population, familial and communal identities are extremely strong. Thus, each community is home to several distinct families which, due to decades of intermarriage, often make up the entire local population. Similar to tribal dynamics, local elders and notables have played an important role in maintaining stable relations between families and communities, resolving local disputes, and communicating local issues and concerns with authorities.
7.2. DISPLACEMENT AND SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS

The Jabal Al-Zawiya area has witnessed several waves of displacement and IDP settlement over the past decade. While opposition activity in much of the country remained peaceful through 2011, the Jabal Al-Zawiya was amongst the first areas to witness armed conflict, with GoS-opposition clashes reported as early as mid-2011. As a relatively remote area with mountainous terrain and strong anti-GoS sentiment, hundreds of defected GoS soldiers, both local men and men from other parts of the country, took refuge in the area and began organizing against the GoS. In response to increased attacks on local GoS checkpoints and widespread protests, the GoS began expanding its military and security presence in and around the area as early as May 2011. Over the coming months, the GoS intermittently shelled communities and carried out numerous raids. The two most notable raids were a raid against Rami in June 2011 which reportedly killed more than ten civilians, and a raid in October 2011, known as the Jabal Al-Zawiya massacre, where GoS forces reportedly executed more than 70 defected soldiers found hiding in a streambed outside of Kansafra.

As a result of the deteriorating security conditions, local sources report hundreds of residents, primarily local men, began leaving the area in mid-2011. Most of those who fled between mid-2011 and early 2012 went into hiding in other areas of Idlib where the GoS presence was reduced relative to Jabal Al-Zawiya or fled to Turkey or Lebanon. In 2012, hostilities increased significantly throughout the Jabal Al-Zawiya area. Armed opposition factions increased operations against GoS forces in the area, and expelled GoS forces from most communities by July 2012, forcing hundreds of residents with ties to the GoS to flee to GoS-held Latakia and Damascus.

Following the expulsion of GoS forces, circumstances continued to decline. Suffering from near daily GoS shelling and airstrikes, between 2013 and 2014, the Jabal Al-Zawiya was also home to severe opposition infighting and rampant criminality, namely kidnapping, banditry, and extortion. As a result of these issues, thousands of residents fled the area to northern Idlib and Turkey during this two-year period. While opposition infighting and criminality would decline in late 2014, when Suqour Al-Sham, Ahrar Al-Sham, and JAN expelled the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) in 2014, and even further when HTS expelled Suqour Al-Sham and Ahrar Al-Sham in 2017, both rounds of fighting forced residents associated with the defeated factions to flee. At the same time, frequent GoS targeting, the collapse of services, and dire economic conditions continued to push hundreds of residents out of the area through 2017.

Conversely, between 2013 and 2018 communities throughout the Jabal Al-Zawiya area hosted thousands of IDPs fleeing even greater instability. In 2013 and 2014, thousands of IDPs from Ariha city settled in the area before opposition factions gained control of the city in May 2015. Meanwhile, from 2014 to 2018, several waves of IDPs settled in the area after fleeing GoS advances in northern and western Hama and southern and eastern Idlib. While the population had increased to approximately 61,000 people by mid-2018 as a result of these inflows, according to figures from operational partners, the area's entire population fled the Russian-backed GoS campaign against southern Idlib in early 2020. In the months following the March 2020 Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement, nearly 33,000 residents and IDPs returned to the Jabal Al-Zawiya area. Most returns have been to communities in the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiya area, as communities in the southern half are considered active frontlines.

Continued GoS targeting and the collapse of services and economic activity have discouraged further returns. Local sources report IDPs from the Jabal Al-Zawiya area remain distributed in several parts of Idlib. While some have settled in host communities such as Idlib city, Ariha, Maarrat Misreen, Binish, Harim, and Salqeen, there are reportedly large concentrations in informal camps outside of Killi, Kafr Arouq, and Maarrat Misreen and formal camps around Sarmada, Al-Dana, and Deir Hassan along the Syrian-Turkish border.
8. GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY DYNAMICS

8.1. GOVERNANCE

The governance sector in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah is currently overseen by the SSG and ten local councils. As the SSG and NGOs have been hesitant to provide significant support to the area due to the relatively small population, limited prospects for returns, proximity to frontlines, and continued GoS targeting, the role of local councils has declined significantly over the past two years. In 2020, the SSG Ministry of Local Administration established the Ariha District Administration to oversee governance and services across the entire Ariha district, which includes Jabal Al-Zawiyah, Ariha city, and the Mhambel subdistrict.

Local sources report councils in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area regularly meet with the Ariha District Administration to report on urgent needs. The Ariha District Administration is responsible for communicating the needs to NGOs and various SSG bodies based in Idlib city and Ariha and coordinating the support and response to address them. Accordingly, local councils are reporting mechanisms and, outside of intermittent waste collection in some communities, no longer play a direct role in service provision. Due to their limited role, most councils in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area are made up of just eight to ten members, generally local notables who have been approved by the SSG to represent the community.

8.2. SECURITY

Security Actors

The SSG and HTS manage security in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area through local security forces. The Ariha District Police Command, under the SSG Ministry of Interior, oversees day-to-day security in Jabal Al-Zawiyah. Based in Ariha city, the District Command operates a police station in Essem which is responsible for responding to criminal complaints and investigating crimes, protecting public and private property, and addressing emergency incidents across the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. Local sources report the station is currently made up of just 15 officers, nearly all of which are from the area, and was placed out of service for several weeks when the previous station was destroyed by an airstrike in June 2021. The HTS General Security force also maintains units throughout the area. Also based in Ariha city and reportedly made up of both locals and IDPs from Hama and southern Idlib, GSS units operate checkpoints, and carry out investigations, intelligence gathering, and operations related to serious crimes, such as kidnapping and ISIS, Huras Al-Din, and GoS cell activity.

In addition to SSG and HTS security forces, HTS, Turkish military, and Syrian National Army (SNA) forces are positioned throughout the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, as it is considered a frontline with the GoS. HTS units are stationed in posts and bases along frontlines in the southern half of Jabal Al-Zawiyah and Turkish forces are distributed across approximately 20 observation posts located in abandoned properties and schools throughout the area. While Turkish forces are deployed to assess damages following GoS and Russian airstrikes and shelling in the area, they do not carry out patrols and generally remain confined to observation posts. SNA forces are present in small numbers and support Turkish units in the area with logistics and local area knowledge.
Security Concerns and Freedom of Movement

Local sources report immediate and mid-term conflict related hostilities are the primary security concern amongst residents and IDPs across Jabal Al-Zawiyah. Even as much of NWS has witnessed a reduction in hostilities since the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement in March 2020, communities across the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area have continued to endure regular GoS and Russian strikes. Over the past year, strikes have hit health facilities, homes, and farmland, leading to dozens of civilian casualties and significant property damage. Following strikes, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and explosive ordnance (EO) remains an issue, and as recently as December 2021, UXO killed two individuals who were cleaning out their home. Meanwhile, UXO and EO, as well as gunfire and shelling from adjacent GoS positions, also represent a major threat to farmers and landowners tending to local orchards. During harvest seasons in summer and fall, the SSG operates hotlines that allow farmers to coordinate harvesting activities in areas close to frontlines with HTS forces in the area, local sources report there is little HTS can do to prevent GoS forces from targeting farmers.

In addition to immediate concerns, Jabal Al-Zawiyah’s population remains extremely fearful that Turkey could eventually approve a renewed Russian-backed GoS campaign against NWS. As the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area is the final line of defense against GoS advances toward M4 highway, any GoS campaign in NWS is likely to be focused on regaining control of Jabal Al-Zawiyah. While the mountainous terrain may slow GoS advances, intensive shelling and airstrikes would force most residents and IDPs to immediately and permanently flee the area.

Alongside conflict related hostilities, local sources report there are widespread concerns about general criminality in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. Due to the area’s poor economic situation and isolation, vehicle and equipment thefts are reportedly common. Looting of abandoned homes and shops is also reportedly an issue. As there is no mandatory conscription in NWS, this is not a daily concern for men living in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area.

Residents and IDPs currently living in Jabal Al-Zawiyah face mixed freedom of movement within and to and from the area. While there are no major restrictions on freedom of movement in the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, the threat of shelling, airstrikes, and targeting by nearby GoS positions discourage civilian travel to the southern half. Like the rest of NWS, the conservative cultural norms of the area’s resident and IDP populations informally limit women’s freedom of movement.

While IDPs and residents can travel to other SSG administered areas via private vehicle, taxi, minibus, or public buses operated by the SSG in Ariha city, access to other areas of Syria is poor. Since 2020, there have been no active civilian crossings between SSG and GoS areas, and movement between the two areas is rare due to the security risks and costs. Finally, residents and IDPs can travel to Turkish-administered Operation Olive Brace and Operation Euphrates Shield areas via bus or taxi but cannot settle in either area without permission from authorities.
9. SERVICES AND LIVELIHOODS DYNAMICS

9.1. ELECTRICITY AND WATER

Throughout Jabal Al-Zawiyah ampere service remains the most common source of power. While ampere service is managed by private operators, the SSG regulates subscription rates. As of January 2022, rates stood at approximately 60 TRY (~11.80 USD) per ampere per month, with individuals able to purchase up to four amperes for approximately six hours a day. In addition to ampere service, the Green Energy Company has gradually extended power from the Turkish grid to communities in the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. While coverage in the area remains limited, local sources report Green Energy plans to extend full coverage to all communities in the northern half of Jabal Al-Zawiyah area by the end of 2022. Due to ongoing hostilities, Green Energy is reportedly not planning to extend coverage to the southern half of the area. Finally, in rural areas without access to ampere service or power from the Turkish grid, residents and IDPs rely on residential solar panels or live without power.

The majority of households and businesses in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah obtain drinking water via tanker trucks. While there are two water pumping stations in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, and public water networks were present in most communities prior to the conflict, conflict-related damages, poor maintenance, and a lack of support have left public networks inoperable since as early as 2014. As neither the SSG nor NGOs are currently able to restore the networks, due to lack of resources and the proximity to frontlines, communities rely heavily on tanker trucks to obtain water. Tanker trucks serving communities in the area draw water from private wells and local pumping stations. While private tanker trucks sell water, NGOs intermittently provide communities with free drinking water from tanker trucks.

9.2. FOOD AND FUEL SUPPORT

Food support in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area consists of subsidized bread provision from the SSG and limited food support by I/NGOs and charitable organizations. Like the rest of NWS, normal Syrian bread is the primary bread available in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area and is produced by a small number of operational bakeries in the northern half of the area. As these bakeries do not provide enough bread to meet demand, bakeries in Ariha have appointed agents to deliver bread to communities in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area daily.

All bakeries in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area are privately owned and registered with the SSG Directorate of Bakeries and Grains. While the SSG provides all bakeries with reduced price fuel to keep production costs in line with SSG price ceilings for unsubsidized bread, since the roll out of the SSG’s subsidized bread program in late 2021, the SSG also provides several local bakeries with reduced price flour to produce subsidized bread. Like the rest of NWS, the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area has not witnessed a major bread shortage over the past two years and the quality of bread has reportedly remained good.

In addition to SSG subsidized and price regulated bread, several I/NGOs provide a range of direct and indirect food support in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, including free bread, food baskets, and, increasingly, cash and voucher programs. Local sources report that most of these efforts target specific at-risk segments of the population such as IDPs, widows, and orphans. Meanwhile, those who are not eligible or do not report food support rely on the open market to obtain their needs. Basic food items and household products are available in markets in the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, while specialty goods must be purchased in nearby Ariha city.
Like the rest of NWS, the SSG does not subsidize fuel products in Jabal Al-Zawiyah and nearly all fuel in the area is supplied by the SSG and HTS affiliated Watad company. Residents and IDPs in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area can purchase unlimited amounts of imported and domestic fuel at local gas stations or bastat. Currently, fuel prices in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, and across NWS, range between 0.50-0.80 USD per liter for diesel, 0.55-0.86 USD per liter for gasoline, and 12 USD per butane gas cylinder.

Due to the high price of fuel and limited fuel support from NGOs, local sources report segments of the population have resorted to alternative methods for heating homes in the winter, including coal, firewood, and pistachio and hazelnut shells.

9.3. HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Currently there are no health facilities operating in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. While the area was home to a number of small hospitals, primary care clinics, and medical points, between 2019 and 2021, GoS airstrikes and shelling destroyed five facilities in and around Jabal Al-Zawiyah and forced remaining facilities to close. In lieu of operational local health facilities, Ariha city acts as the center for health services for residents and IDPs in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. According to local sources and data from operational partners, health services in Ariha city remain extremely limited. Serving the entire population of the Ariha district, which stood at nearly 180,000 people in late 2021, the city contains just one hospital, one primary clinic, one mobile clinic, and six specialized care centers. While facilities can serve patients in need of basic primary care, treatment for primary injuries, or initial trauma care, patients must travel to Idlib city, northern Idlib, or Bab Al-Hawa for most other medical needs.

Local sources report there are currently 38 functional schools in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, all of which are located in the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. Of the 38 schools, there is only one secondary school, located in Ehsem, while the remaining 37 are primary stage 1 and stage 2 schools. All schools in the area teach the amended GoS curriculum developed by the SIG Ministry of Education. The Free Idlib Education Directorate manages the schools through the Ariha education complex in coordination with NGOs. While secondary education options are extremely limited in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, like the rest of SSG administered NWS, local students have largely foregone GoS exams since the closure of civilian crossings in 2020. Although students can enroll in Turkish universities or universities located in NWS, including Idlib University, and northern Aleppo, this is reportedly rare.

9.4. HOUSING

The Jabal Al-Zawiyah area currently has a significant housing surplus. Since early 2020, local sources report there are dozens of vacancies in communities in the northern half of the area, such as Rami, Marayan, and Ehsem, and hundreds of vacancies in communities near frontlines, such as Bara and Kansafra. As a result of the abundance of vacant homes and the absence of demand for housing, there is no active housing market in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area. While the area is currently home to approximately 4,800 IDPs, local sources report that nearly all IDPs live in homes rent free, either in wholly abandoned homes or in homes offered by absentee owners in exchange for IDP tenants managing the property. Notably, demand for housing in the area was strong between 2015 and 2018. As previously discussed, during this period the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area hosted thousands of IDPs from neighboring GoS areas of Idlib and Hama. Consequently, local sources report nearly all houses were occupied by residents or IDPs.

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3 Strikes against hospitals and clinics include the November 2019 airstrikes against the Al-Ikhlas Hospital in nearby Shinan and Adnan Kiwan Hospital in Kansafra, the January 2020 airstrike against the Al-Iman hospital in nearby Sarja, and the September 2021 strike against a medical point in Marayan.
9.5. CIVIL DOCUMENTATION AND REGISTRATION

Currently, the SSG Ministry of Interior oversees all civil registration services in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, through the Ehsem branch of the Idlib Civil Affairs Directorate. Due to hostilities in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area the SSG moved the Ehsem branch to the Civil Affairs Directorate office to nearby Ariha in early 2022. The Ehsem Civil Affairs Directorate branch issues family books, birth, death, marriage, and divorce certificates, and documents related to inheritance to residents of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area, while IDPs must travel to Idlib city to obtain such documents. Local sources report some residents and IDPs in Idlib city continue to obtain civil documents from the GoS via family members, lawyers, and fixers. Due to the relatively high cost of obtaining GoS documents and limited recognition and utility of SSG documents, many residents and IDPs in the area reportedly do not possess current civil documents.

9.6. ECONOMY AND LIVELIHOODS

Throughout modern Syrian history, the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area has remained an economically depressed area. The area's mountainous terrain and relatively remote location discouraged significant local investment and the GoS failed to develop the area's numerous Roman-era archaeological sites and local tourism sector. Consequently, Jabal Al-Zawiyah's economy was fueled by government employment and agriculture, specifically olive, fig, and cherry cultivation, and as neither provided adequate employment opportunities the average unemployment rate reached 30% and as high as 40% to 75% in some communities according to the SCBS. Poor economic conditions led to high rates of migration out of the area prior to the conflict. According to local sources, thousands of individuals originally from Jabal Al-Zawiyah settled in Damascus, Latakia, Aleppo, and neighboring Lebanon. While those who settled elsewhere in Syria commonly gained low-level government employment, those who settled in Lebanon most often worked in the construction sector.

Over the course of the conflict, the local economy has effectively collapsed. The GoS's dismissal of public servants in Idlib resulted in hundreds of households losing their primary, or only, source of income. Further, recurrent hostilities and the breakdown in services not only prevented investment but forced local business owners to relocate their capital and activities to other parts of NWS. While the agriculture sector has remained partially functional, due to the nature of olive, fig, and cherry cultivation, it only offers limited, seasonal employment and farmers have limited access to markets. Due to the dire local economic conditions and lack of opportunities, unemployment has reportedly reached unprecedented levels and the majority of residents and IDPs currently living in the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area are reliant on remittances from other parts of Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon to meet their daily needs.
10. RETURN AND DISPLACEMENT PROSPECTS

The Jabal Al-Zawiyah area suffers from amongst the weakest services and worst economic circumstances in all SSG administered NWS. While these factors alone have acted as significant barriers to return, the security situation has further undermined return prospects. Continued hostilities have prevented the vast majority of residents and IDPs from considering return to the southern half of Jabal Al-Zawiyah. Meanwhile, the northern half of the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area sits just south of the M4 highway. As the highway is the likely target of any future GoS offensive, the area’s uncertain future has not just discouraged returns, but continues to prevent the investment and support required to improve services and the economy.

Without a robust security or political agreement that provides sustained, mid to long-term stability in Jabal Al-Zawiyah, there are unlikely to be any meaningful improvements to circumstances in the area. Consequently, the prospects for large scale sustainable returns to the Jabal Al-Zawiyah area are minimal for the foreseeable future. At the same time, there is significant potential for large scale conflict-related displacement. Jabal Al-Zawiyah would almost certainly be targeted as part of a GoS offensive against NWS, and any further advances would likely force IDPs and residents to resettle in areas further north near the Syrian-Turkish border.