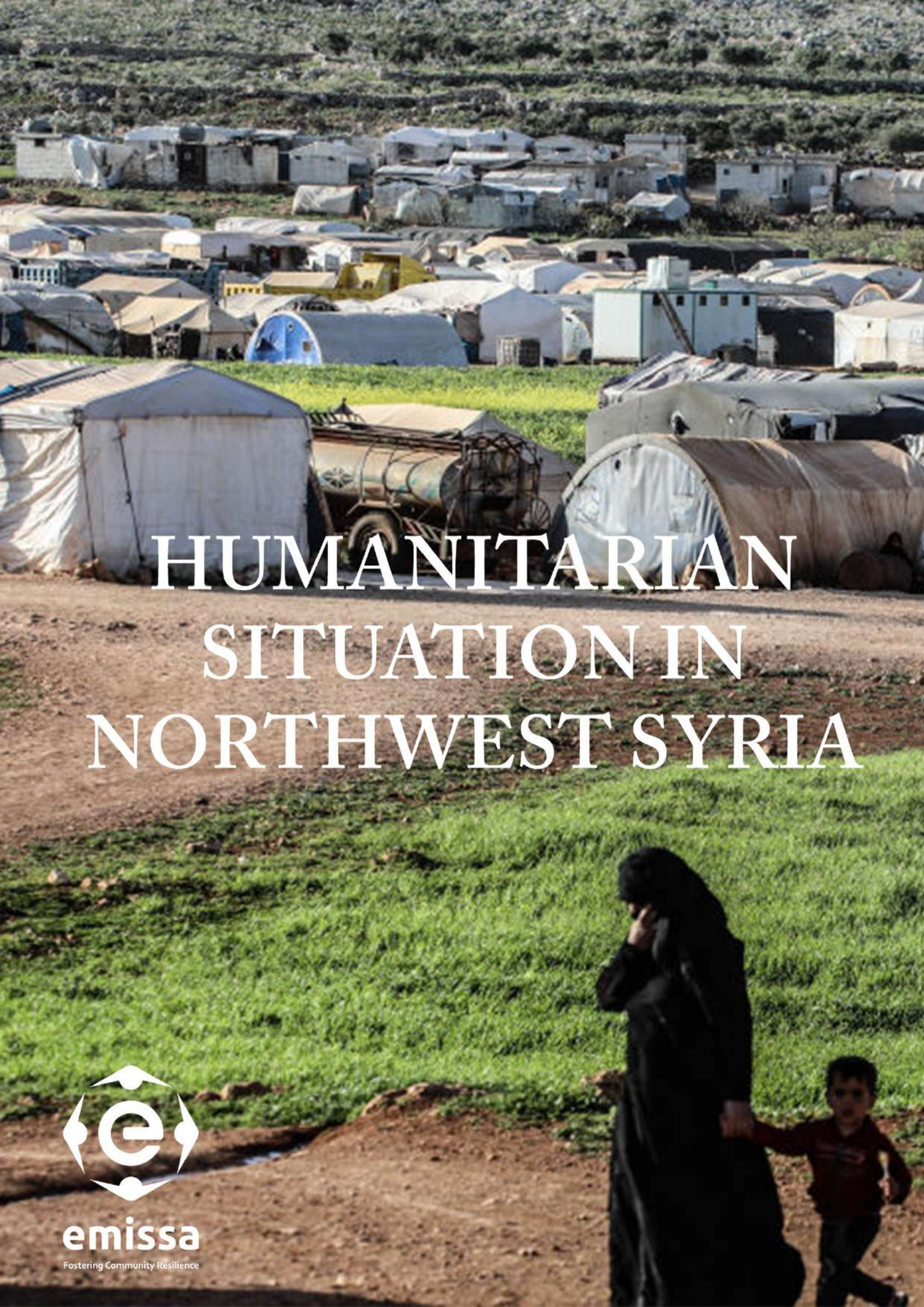




# HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

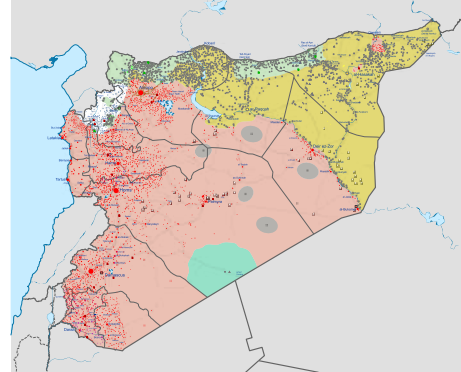


**emissa**

Fostering Community Resilience

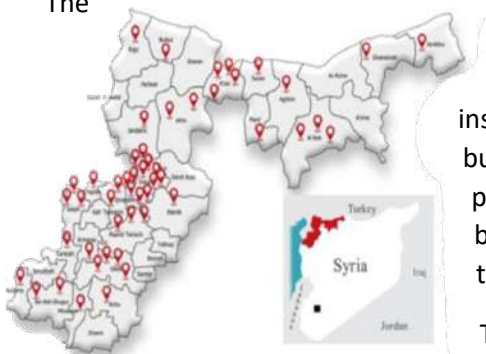
## Introduction:

The northwestern region of Syria stands as a stark testament to the devastating consequences of prolonged conflict, mass displacement, and environmental degradation. Amidst the ruins of war-torn landscapes, millions of internally displaced individuals grapple with deteriorating living conditions, compounded by the relentless onslaught of natural disasters and climate-related hazards. As the specter of hardship looms large, the urgent need for humanitarian assistance has never been more pronounced.



Against a backdrop of protracted instability, the plight of the populace in northwestern Syria has reached alarming proportions. With an estimated 15.3 million individuals in dire need of humanitarian aid across the country, the northwest emerges as a focal point of acute vulnerability, harboring approximately 4.1 million people grappling with the ravages of conflict and displacement. This region, intricately interconnected with neighboring economies, is ensnared in a web of economic crises, with a significant portion of its population reliant on external assistance for sustenance.

The



multifaceted challenges confronting communities in northwestern Syria encompass not only the immediate exigencies of food and water insecurity but also the insidious erosion of livelihoods and the pervasive threat of a burgeoning public health crisis. Against this backdrop, relief projects are paramount, serving as the primary lifeline for a beleaguered population striving to navigate the treacherous terrain of adversity.

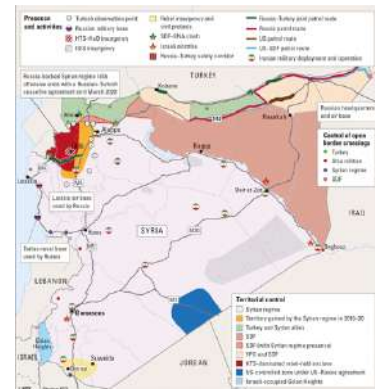
This report delves into the complex dynamics

underpinning the humanitarian crisis in northwestern Syria, shedding light on the intersecting forces of conflict, displacement, and environmental degradation that conspire to perpetuate suffering and deprivation. Furthermore, we underscore the imperative of concerted action at both local and international levels to address the urgent needs of vulnerable populations and pave the way towards sustainable recovery and resilience.



## Northwestern Syria, population, and humanitarian situation

The northwestern region of Syria has been marred by over a decade of armed conflict, resulting in widespread suffering among inhabitants residing in opposition-controlled territories. This area has borne the brunt of continued hostilities, characterized by relentless air strikes and artillery shelling orchestrated by the Syrian regime alongside its ally, Russia, along with military operations conducted by opposition forces. The temporary respite from violence came in March 2020 when a ceasefire agreement brokered by Turkey and Russia momentarily halted the Syrian government's offensive aimed at reclaiming control over the northwest.



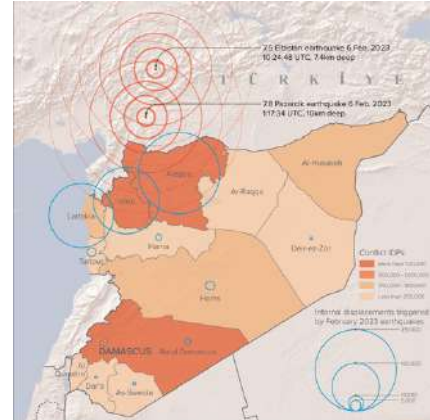
Presently, much of northwestern Syria remains distinct from the region governed by President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus, effectively dividing the area into discrete geographical segments. This fragmentation has spurred intense competition among factions vying for dominance over the northwest. Notably, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an offshoot of the Al-Nusra Front, and Turkey's proxy forces, such as the Syrian National Army, are actively engaged in this power struggle. The influence of Turkey's proxies has surged following Ankara's military campaigns against the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Syria. However, the situation in northwest Syria remains volatile, with ongoing clashes contributing to what is widely regarded as one of the most complex humanitarian crises globally.

Complicating matters further is the contentious issue of Syrian sovereignty, which has impeded the delivery of vital humanitarian aid. Both Russia and China have exercised their veto power in the UN



Security Council, citing respect for Syria's territorial integrity to restrict aid delivery and advocate for additional crossing points through Damascus. Since 2020, three critical border crossings facilitating humanitarian aid—Bab al-Salam, al-Yarubiyah, and Ramtha—have remained mainly closed and excluded from the purview of Security Council resolutions. Consequently, Bab al-Hawa is the sole UN-authorized border crossing for aid delivery into the region.

Yet, collaborating with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which controls Bab al-Hawa and is designated as a terrorist organization by the US government, presents operational challenges for humanitarian organizations and nations like the United States. However, in January 2023, a glimmer of hope emerged with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution No. 2672, facilitating humanitarian aid delivery via border crossings with Turkey for six months. However, this progress was abruptly disrupted by an earthquake the following month, further exacerbating the plight of the region's 4 million inhabitants, nearly 70 percent of whom are internally displaced. Although the quake damaged the Bab al-Hawa crossing, reopening two other crossings offered a unique opportunity for increased aid flow into northwestern Syria.



Despite these efforts, challenges persist. When Security Council Resolution 2672 faced renewal in July, Russia vetoed it. Subsequently, the Syrian government proposed extending the use of Bab al-Hawa for aid delivery for another six months, contingent upon all aid transfers being under its direct control rather than through the United Nations. This development underscores the critical importance of granting the Syrian government some form of direct access to opposition-controlled areas in northwest Syria for renewed humanitarian delivery efforts to materialize.

In addition to the complexities surrounding aid delivery and the challenges posed by armed groups, the northwestern region of Syria also grapples with systemic issues such as widespread poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and inadequate access to education. The protracted conflict has decimated local economies, leaving many residents without means of sustenance and pushing them further into destitution.

The situation is particularly dire for children, who constitute a significant portion of the displaced population. Disrupted education systems and limited access to schooling have deprived countless children of their right to education, jeopardizing their prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Furthermore, the trauma and psychological distress resulting from exposure to violence and displacement have profound and long-lasting effects on children's well-being, necessitating targeted interventions to address their unique needs and ensure their protection and psychosocial support.

Moreover, the northwestern region's healthcare infrastructure has been severely strained by years of conflict, exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation. Access to essential medical services is limited, and facilities are often overcrowded and under-resourced. This has grave implications for the health and well-being of the population, particularly in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which further compounds the challenges healthcare providers face and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.



The constraints on delivering foreign aid to Syria stem from a combination of political dynamics and strategic maneuvering among Syria's allies aimed at normalizing relations with the Syrian regime. These factors have severely limited the efficacy of aid efforts, particularly impacting internally displaced people who find themselves ensnared in a cycle of intersecting threats to their economic,



environmental, and health security. Compounded by the absence of a legally binding international mechanism specifically addressing their situation, the needs of internally displaced people often go unaddressed, with the responsibility for their protection falling on the state.

The earthquake that struck northwestern Syria underscored the delicate balance between state sovereignty and emergency measures. This region, a focal point of significant internal displacement, witnessed a surge in displaced individuals, with over 100,000 seeking refuge in informal settlements or newly established camps. These settlements, often situated in harsh environments such as steep, rocky, or barren lands, are susceptible to seasonal floods, exacerbating the vulnerability of displaced populations. Critical overcrowding in these camps further compounds the challenges faced by residents.

Environmental risks have also exacerbated the suffering of internally displaced people and residents in northwestern Syria, with fires and deforestation wreaking havoc on previously forested areas. The frequency and severity of such incidents have increased due to climate change, displacing thousands of families and pushing many into chronic poverty. In addition to environmental degradation, the lack of adequate healthcare services in rebel-controlled areas further exacerbates the humanitarian crisis, with healthcare facilities struggling to cope with the influx of patients and the aftermath of the earthquake.



Disparities in healthcare provision between regime-controlled and rebel-controlled areas exacerbate the already dire situation, with healthcare facilities in the northwest significantly under-resourced compared to those in government-held territories. The earthquake's impact further highlighted these disparities, emphasizing the urgent need for improved healthcare infrastructure and services to mitigate the effects of future crises.

Despite efforts to provide aid and assistance, the challenges facing internally displaced people in northwestern Syria remain daunting. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, encompassing political, humanitarian, and environmental considerations to ensure the well-being and dignity of all affected populations.

### Food insecurity, water scarcity, and environmental challenges:

The earthquake and subsequent aftershocks had devastating effects on opposition-controlled areas in northwestern Syria, claiming the lives of 4,540 individuals and displacing 86,000 people from their homes. Among the casualties, a significant proportion were children and women, highlighting the vulnerability of these populations in times of crisis.

The destruction caused by the seismic events extended beyond the loss of life, with 55 health facilities and 599 schools damaged or destroyed, exacerbating the region's already strained healthcare and education systems. Economic losses amounted to a staggering \$5.1 billion, with Aleppo and Idlib bearing the brunt of these losses at \$4.2 billion, further deepening the socio-economic challenges the affected communities face.



Despite the tragic toll of the earthquake, it brought renewed international attention to the ongoing crises in northwestern Syria, prompting hopes for increased assistance and support. However, the region was already grappling with multiple challenges, including extreme poverty exacerbated by political and environmental factors. A significant percentage of families receiving aid reported that the assistance provided was insufficient to meet their needs, forcing them to borrow money or send children to work. This further perpetuated cycles of vulnerability and dependence on humanitarian aid.



Water scarcity emerged as a particularly complex environmental challenge, exacerbating suffering in northwestern Syria. Fluctuations between water surpluses, such as floods, and scarcity due to drought and drinking water shortages have significantly impacted communities. The decline in annual water production from one billion cubic meters to 600 million cubic meters between 2019 and 2022

further underscores the severity of the water crisis. While natural factors like heat, drought, and low water levels in the Euphrates River contribute to water shortages, conflict-related factors such as deliberate attacks on water infrastructure have exacerbated the situation.

The disruption of water supply infrastructure, exemplified by the intermittent operation of the Allouk station serving 100,000 people, has compounded water scarcity issues. External interference, including Turkish authorities cutting off water supply to hundreds of thousands of people in Hasakah Governorate, has further strained water access in the region. The earthquake damaged Syria's sewage and water treatment network, exacerbating existing challenges and forcing many of the population to rely on potentially unsafe water sources.

In response to water shortages, many Syrians, including internally displaced persons, lack access to piped water, relying instead on costly water trucking services. However, financial constraints often limit the feasibility of this alternative, especially among populations facing extreme poverty.

Addressing these interconnected challenges requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts to restore infrastructure, enhance water management practices, and alleviate poverty, ensuring the resilience and well-being of communities in northwestern Syria.



The water crisis in northwestern Syria has forced families to make difficult choices, including reducing their daily water consumption and sacrificing hygiene practices, leading to a deterioration in maternal, infant, and child care. This dire situation underscores the interconnectedness of water scarcity and food insecurity, with an estimated 12 million Syrians, or 54% of the population, lacking food security in 2022. Acute malnutrition rates have doubled, particularly affecting internally displaced communities where food spending represents a significant portion of household income.

The agricultural sector, already grappling with challenges such as low rainfall, delays in farm activities, and rising production costs, has been further strained by worsening water scarcity. Approximately 40% of irrigated agricultural areas no longer have reliable access to water, leading to increased operational costs for farmers. Consequently, 70% of farmland in the region has experienced severe agricultural stress, significantly impacting food production.



The decline in agricultural productivity, exacerbated by decreased rainfall and conflict-induced destruction of agricultural lands, has substantially reduced food production. Barley cultivation area decreased by 75% from 2020 to 2021, while wheat production areas also declined. Farmers are considering shifting towards high-value cash crops to mitigate costs. Still, this transition risks further reducing agricultural production and increasing reliance on humanitarian aid to meet food needs.

The cost of recovery and reconstruction in earthquake-affected areas, estimated at \$7.9 billion over two years, underscores the urgent need for support across various sectors, including agriculture,



housing, and social protection. Despite government efforts to improve bread production since 2020, access to subsidized bread remains inadequate, with severe acute malnutrition rates doubling and a significant proportion of the population suffering from food insecurity, particularly in Idlib Governorate.

Efforts to address food insecurity in northwestern Syria must prioritize improving access to safety.

Water, enhancing agricultural productivity, and ensuring equitable distribution of food assistance. Additionally, sustained investment in infrastructure and livelihood support is essential to build resilience and mitigate the long-term impacts of water scarcity and food insecurity on vulnerable populations.

The escalation of widespread hunger in Syria has raised grave concerns regarding nutritional health, particularly among children. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 3.8 million children in Syria require life-saving food assistance. In the northwest, levels of acute malnutrition have surged to 5%, with an alarming increase in diarrheal diseases further exacerbating malnutrition-related complications. Diarrhea, especially prevalent among malnourished children, not only reduces appetite but also hampers nutrient absorption, compounding the severity of malnutrition. OCHA reports that over 50% of children with moderate to severe malnutrition suffer from diarrhea, marking the highest recorded level in Syria to date.

Additionally, data reveals stunted growth in more than a quarter of Syrian children under five years old.

In addition to water scarcity and malnutrition, the rampant spread of infectious and waterborne diseases poses a grave threat to Syrians in the northwest. Diseases such as cholera, measles, polio, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, acute diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and leishmaniasis have proliferated, further straining communities already grappling with dire circumstances. Waterborne disease outbreaks have reached alarming levels in various areas, driven by contaminated water supplies and inadequate sanitation exacerbated by the ongoing water crisis. Internally displaced populations residing in areas with poor drainage services and stagnant water accumulation face heightened risks of exposure to such diseases. With a significant percentage of water stations either non-operational or lacking sterilization in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, the threat of widespread disease outbreaks looms large.





The recent surge in cholera cases in northwestern Syria underscores these concerns, with over 61,075 suspected cases reported since the beginning of the year.

Contaminated food and water sources, coupled with inadequate sanitation infrastructure, have fueled the spread of the disease, further burdening Syria's already depleted healthcare system. The limited capacity of healthcare facilities to manage cholera cases, with only a handful of centers operational and a scarcity of available

beds, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive relief efforts to address the escalating public health crisis.

Moreover, the public health emergency in Syria has disproportionately affected women's health, with rising mortality rates among pregnant women and increased prevalence of anemia among women of reproductive age. These gendered impacts are attributed to the deteriorating economic situation and the destruction of critical public infrastructure, exacerbating health disparities and compounding the challenges faced by women in accessing essential healthcare services.

In conclusion, northwestern Syria stands as a stark representation of the layered suffering endured by internally displaced populations amidst a protracted decade-long conflict. The seismic impact of the earthquake further compounded the region's woes, exacerbating existing crises and deepening the plight of those already grappling with adversity. A concerted, proactive response is imperative, underscored by a comprehensive approach to immediate relief and long-term recovery initiatives.



The region's limited access to safe water, coupled with the deterioration of its agricultural sector and the relentless bombardment of healthcare facilities by the Syrian regime, underscores the urgent need for intervention. However, historical precedent suggests that the international community's response may fall short, with actions often proving ineffective or, at worst, complicit in the abandonment of Syrian civilians to their fate, particularly vulnerable children facing poverty, hunger, and disease.



Furthermore, the forced repatriation of Syrian refugees by Lebanon and Turkey met with minimal international outcry and insufficient measures, underscores the precarious nature of aid prospects for northwestern Syria. Humanitarian assistance has increasingly become a bargaining chip in geopolitical power plays, with various actors, including Turkey, leveraging aid delivery to advance their interests. This has led to a disturbing trend where aid provision hinges on concessions, including normalizing

relations with the Assad regime.

Within this context, the basic needs of the region's populace, already strained by natural and man-made disasters, risk being sidelined.

Regrettably, it is the internally displaced people of northwestern Syria, among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups on economic, political, and environmental fronts, who continue to bear the brunt of these crises and tragedies.