



EARLY WARNING INDICATORS AND FAILURES IN DISPLACEMENT MANAGEMENT, AS A MULTIPLIER OF PROTECTION RISKS



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1. Executive Summary

An analysis of developments during February and March 2026 in northeastern and northwestern Syria indicates that natural disasters, particularly flooding, were not isolated events detached from the broader conflict environment. Rather, they constituted a direct extension of the structural vulnerabilities that internally displaced communities have faced on a recurring annual basis. Over the years, such events have contributed to the deepening of protection risks within an already deteriorating legal and humanitarian environment.

Drawing on documentation by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), reports by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), it becomes clear that these disasters have repeatedly exposed persistent structural deficiencies in the management of internal displacement. These deficiencies involve humanitarian organizations and international agencies, local authorities, and the Syrian state, and extend beyond the climatic nature of the events themselves to potential failures in meeting basic obligations related to protection and adequate, safe shelter.

This pattern was particularly evident during the flooding that affected northwestern Syria on 7–8 February 2026. Severe rainstorms in Idlib Governorate triggered flash floods that directly affected at least 24 internally displaced persons (IDP) camps across the governorate, impacting 931 families, approximately 494 of whom reportedly lost their shelters entirely. Field data indicate that hundreds of tents were flooded or destroyed as a result of soil erosion and water flow, while rudimentary drainage systems failed, causing water to accumulate throughout the camps and forcing residents to seek temporary shelter in schools and mosques.

These consequences should not be understood merely as the temporary effects of extreme weather. Flooding in Syria is a recurrent seasonal phenomenon and reveals an ongoing pattern linked to the location of many displacement sites, which are frequently established on low-lying land or near seasonal watercourses and rely on temporary infrastructure that does not meet minimum safety standards. The absence of adequate drainage systems, together with the lack of clear and sustainable solutions to protracted internal displacement, further compounds these risks.

Accordingly, this situation may be characterized as a hazard-induced protection risk compounded by structural vulnerability.

1. Context and **Scope**

Geographically, this analysis covers Idlib and rural Aleppo in northwestern Syria, as well as Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor in northeastern Syria. These areas share a high concentration of both formal and informal displacement sites and are governed through varying forms of administration and territorial control.

The analysis focuses specifically on the effects of the floods that occurred during February and March 2026 and examines how these shocks interacted with existing structural vulnerabilities, including weak infrastructure, the absence of adequate urban and spatial planning, and the persistence of protracted displacement.

Thematically, the analysis focuses on operational protection risks as they manifest in practice, rather than merely describing physical damage or broader humanitarian needs. This includes patterns of risk affecting civilians, such as loss of shelter, increased exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), restrictions on access to essential services, and the erosion of legal safeguards.

Particular attention is given to groups facing heightened exposure to harm, including women, children, LGBTQIA+ people, and displaced persons living in especially precarious conditions.



2. Methodology

This analysis adopts a mixed methodology combining a review of reports issued by United Nations agencies and humanitarian actors, conflict-related data, human rights documentation, comparative analysis of previously documented protection risk patterns, and semi-structured interviews.

It also draws on specialized reporting concerning the effects of military escalation and declining humanitarian funding on protection systems, as well as protection risk analysis approaches informed by the Protection Analytical Framework (PAF).

This combined approach aims to provide an explanatory understanding of the relationship between emergency events and structural weaknesses within the humanitarian response.

Accordingly, the scope of this analysis is not limited to documenting events occurring within a specific timeframe. Rather, it seeks to explain how and why these developments reproduced existing protection risks and whether they constituted temporary deviations or reflected the continuation of a longer-term pattern.

This distinction is essential for informing appropriate responses. Treating such developments solely as emergency events risks reproducing the same outcomes, while the reality requires an approach that takes into account the protracted nature of the conflict and the interaction of environmental, political, and legal factors in shaping the overall protection environment.

3. Flooding and the Escalation of Protection Risks in Displacement Settings

Participant A, a 35-year-old independent journalist, stated:

“I moved with my husband and children to Atmeh Camp in rural Idlib after losing my home in the countryside because of bombardment by the air force of the former Syrian regime and the fighting between different armed groups and Assad’s Syrian army. I remember that night very clearly—the night of the flooding in Atmeh Camp. The tent began collapsing during the day. We tried to surround it with stones and reinforce it to stop it from falling, but by nightfall, reinforcing and securing the tent was no longer enough. It collapsed on top of us and filled with water. Had it not been for God’s mercy, my children could have been killed underneath it. The furniture, kitchen equipment, and bedding were flooded. My husband and I tried to get our five children out, and we left everything behind.”

The consequences were not limited to northwestern Syria. By mid-March 2026, flooding had expanded to northeastern Syria, including Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, following several days of heavy rainfall. In some areas, this was accompanied by the overflowing of rivers, most notably the Khabur River.

According to reports by OCHA and IFRC, the floods inundated homes and displacement sites, caused secondary displacement among dozens of families, and damaged rural infrastructure. Data published through European humanitarian information platforms also indicated that approximately 120 families were evacuated and nearly 700 homes were affected, demonstrating that the impact extended beyond formal displacement camps to vulnerable host communities.

Within this context, displacement camps in Idlib, Jisr al-Shughur, and northeastern Syria emerge as some of the sites most consistently exposed to seasonal hazards. At least 24 camps were documented as directly affected in northwestern Syria, including Khirbet al-Joz, Ain al-Bayda, Badama, Al-Najiya, Al-Fatiha, Qati' al-Nahr, Shuhada Syria, A'idoun, Ata' al-Khair, Al-Dama, Al-Iqan, Salma, and Salma 2.

In northeastern Syria, major displacement sites include Al-Hol and Roj camps, in addition to dozens of informal sites across rural Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, including settlements along the Euphrates River, mud-built villages in western rural Deir ez-Zor and eastern rural Raqqa, Al-Kibar, Al-Jazrat, the eastern Badia of Raqqa, and Qusaiba village. OCHA reports confirmed that some of these displacement sites were among those most severely affected by flooding. This geographic distribution demonstrates the broad nature of the vulnerability, indicating that risk is not confined to isolated locations but affects the wider system of internal displacement.

Participant B, originally from Deir ez-Zor and displaced to Al-Hasakah city, stated:

“Since the beginning of the war in Syria, I have been living with my husband, my children, and my husband’s family, which consists of four people. When the rain began, it continued for almost an entire week. The water level of the Khabur River rose and houses were completely flooded because some parts of the Ghweran neighbourhood are located on low-lying ground. I was extremely afraid that my children would drown. The floodwater was contaminated with sewage. Everyone panicked.”

Participant C, a 55-year-old woman and mother of six daughters and two sons, stated:

“After ISIS took control of most of Deir ez-Zor Governorate, I left my home in Al-Toub village in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, on the Shamiya side, because of threats made against us by my daughter’s former husband. We were unable to return to our village after ISIS was expelled. Even before the Khabur River flooded and Al-Areesha Camp became inundated, the administrative situation in the camp was extremely poor.”



4. Impact on Shelter and Protection Systems

The consequences were not limited to the destruction of shelters and the loss of personal belongings. They also undermined essential protection systems.

The destruction of tents and the collapse of unpaved roads within displacement sites disrupted access to services. Overcrowding in temporary shelters increased women’s and children’s exposure to additional risks, including gender-based violence and the loss of privacy.

The disruption of water, sanitation, and healthcare services further aggravated public health and protection concerns in environments already characterized by fragile infrastructure.

Participant explained how these risks affected her household and personal sense of protection:

“When everyone panicked, my husband started shouting at me, and so did his family. I remained trapped on the roof for an entire day before we were finally able to leave the house with the help of some of my husband’s friends. It was not the loss of the furniture that hurt me, nor my children crying. What overwhelmed me was knowing that the home sheltering me could collapse at any moment, and I did not know where my husband could take me. No one came to help us. After we left the house, my husband and his family supported each other and drank hot tea together, while I was alone and had no money. Even my own family did not check on me. At that moment, I felt as though I meant nothing to the entire world. I will never forget those days, and I would not wish that feeling on anyone.”

Another participant added:

“The administrative situation in the camp was extremely poor. Women were sexually harassed by people involved in camp management, humanitarian assistance was stolen, and the administration did not care about the residents’ problems or attempt to resolve them even under normal circumstances.”

Displacement camps in northern Syria, both in the northwest and northeast, are managed through hybrid local governance structures that generally rely on a “camp manager” and a “local committee,” working in coordination with humanitarian organizations and the relevant local or de facto authorities.

- **Camp Manager/Supervisor:** A person typically nominated or agreed upon by camp residents. The individual may be a community figure, tribal notable, or one of the earliest displaced residents at the site, and acts as the primary liaison between displaced people, humanitarian organizations, and relevant security or service authorities.
- **Camp Management Committee/Local Committee:** A group composed of several individuals representing the families or communities residing in the camp who support the manager with registration, administrative organization, and the distribution of responsibilities.

5. Governance, Aid Distribution, and Response

Community reactions to these events reflected a high degree of dissatisfaction and mistrust toward the response of the authorities. Interventions by both the transitional government and local administrative structures were widely perceived as limited and insufficient, with recurring criticism regarding the absence of structural solutions despite the annual recurrence of the problem.

One participant stated:

“The problem did not end with the flood. For me, the real problem began afterwards. I saw some camp residents receiving assistance while others received nothing because of corruption within the camp administration. People close to the camp management were compensated and received new tents, while the rest of the affected families, including mine, were left outdoors for three days in the cold February weather. Our children had nothing to sleep on before we moved to Latakia Governorate after my husband found temporary work as a porter at the port.”

Participant C stated:

“When the tents flooded, most humanitarian organizations had already withdrawn from the camp, while organized departures from the camp continued. My family and I decided to join the nearest departure and leave the camp. We were like people jumping from a sinking boat. We rented a modest apartment in Deir ez-Zor city and are trying as much as possible to adapt and reintegrate into the community. But the social challenges and financial difficulties are extremely severe. We need psychosocial support and vocational opportunities for young people so that we can live with dignity.”

6. Legal and Human Rights Dimensions

These circumstances raise serious concerns regarding compliance with the right to adequate housing as established under international human rights standards. Establishing displacement camps in high-risk areas without adequate basic infrastructure, and allowing such conditions to persist despite prior knowledge of recurrent seasonal risks, may constitute a failure to exercise appropriate due diligence and fulfil relevant protection obligations, particularly when the hazards are foreseeable and recurrent.

At the same time, overlapping authorities and the multiplicity of actors responsible for managing displacement complicate accountability and create legal ambiguity, weakening the ability of affected people to seek effective remedies.

The events of this period therefore cannot be understood solely as the consequence of a limited or inadequate humanitarian response. They should also be read as an indicator of structural failure in policies governing displacement management and reconstruction, reflecting significant shortcomings in the adoption of sustainable approaches to addressing the root causes of the crisis.

Available evidence indicates that political considerations, complex legal frameworks governing property and resettlement, and limited economic resources have contributed to obstructing meaningful pathways for reconstructing damaged housing or developing durable solutions capable of moving displaced people beyond prolonged camp-based displacement. The absence of a clear and effective commitment to structural solutions, such as systematic reconstruction or safe resettlement, has therefore contributed to keeping populations in prolonged displacement within unsuitable environments. This has entrenched a pattern of what may be described as the “**normalization of vulnerability**,” whereby recurrent disasters become a predictable yet insufficiently addressed element of daily life, resulting in the accumulation of protection risks and increasing the likelihood of gradual humanitarian deterioration over the medium and long term.



7. Protection Risk Matrix – Flooding in Northeastern and Northwestern **Syria**, **February–March 2026**

A cross-analysis of the protection risk matrix demonstrates that the existing response is affected by deep structural deficiencies that extend beyond limited resources or the emergency nature of humanitarian interventions.

The first major gap is the continued reliance on short-term humanitarian responses that focus on containing immediate damage without addressing the underlying causes of risk. This approach has contributed to the seasonal reproduction of similar forms of harm, particularly shelter destruction, as camps are repeatedly repaired or tents replaced by humanitarian agencies without reconsidering the suitability of camp locations or investing in disaster-resilient infrastructure.

Main Risk	Risk Description	Threats	Vulnerability Factors	Groups Most Affected	Drivers/Causes	Measurable Early Warning Indicators	Risk Level	Response Gaps
Shelter destruction and secondary displacement	Loss of tents and housing due to flooding, resulting in repeated displacement	Flooding, flash floods, soil collapse	Low-lying sites, temporary structures, inadequate drainage	IDPs, women, children	Poor camp planning, lack of reconstruction	Number of shelters damaged; number of households displaced again	Critical	Absence of durable solutions and relocation options
Gender-based violence (GBV)	Increased violence resulting from overcrowding and lack of privacy	Overcrowding, lack of protection, inadequate supervision	Poverty, dependency, lack of safe spaces	Women, girls, LGBTQIA+ people	Collapse of services, repeated displacement	Increase in reported incidents; reduced access to services	Critical	Funding shortages and inadequate service coverage and advocacy
Lack of access to essential services	Disruption of water, healthcare, and sanitation services	Infrastructure damage, flooding	Weak systems, dependence on humanitarian assistance	Children, people with health conditions, older people	Weak response capacity, insufficient resources	Facility closures; increases in disease incidence	Critical	Lack of service sustainability
Negative coping mechanisms	Families resort to harmful or high-risk survival strategies	Severe poverty, loss of resources	Lack of income, dependence on assistance	Female-headed households, children	Loss of shelter, inadequate support	Early marriage; child labour	High	Lack of sustainable livelihood programmes
Detention- and camp-related risks	Continued unlawful or arbitrary confinement in unsafe environments	Overcrowding, internal violence, weak governance	Lack of legal status, prolonged confinement	Women, children	Absence of legal solutions	Violent incidents; attempted escapes	High	Lack of legal pathways toward resolution
Community violence and discrimination	Increased tensions within camps and host communities	Social conflict, hate speech	Ethnic divisions, weak governance	Minorities, LGBTQIA+ people	Redistribution of power, weak social cohesion	Violent incidents; restrictions on movement	Moderate	Lack of social cohesion programming
Erosion of legal accountability	Absence of effective mechanisms to investigate and address violations	Multiple authorities, weak institutions	Legal ambiguity, fear of reporting	Entire affected population	Overlapping mandates and responsibilities	Absence of complaints; failure to investigate reported cases	High	Legal and institutional accountability gap
Persistent structural vulnerability	Repeated exposure to harm without structural intervention	Seasonal hazards, lack of planning	High-risk locations, weak infrastructure, chronic poverty	All displaced people	Lack of reconstruction, short-term policies	Recurrence of similar damage annually	Critical	Absence of a national displacement strategy
Failure of durable solutions	Prolonged displacement without reconstruction, return, or safe resettlement	Policy gaps, political constraints	Complex property issues, limited resources	All displaced people	Lack of political commitment and planning	Lack of sustainable returns; continued existence and expansion of camps	Critical	Absence of a comprehensive displacement strategy

The matrix indicates that the majority of identified risks fall within high or critical severity levels and are not temporary in nature but are rooted in structural vulnerability.

In the same context, the absence of clear linkages between humanitarian response and pathways toward durable solutions, including reconstruction and safe resettlement, has contributed to keeping displacement sites in a state of “permanent temporariness.” This strategic vacuum reflects the absence of a coherent national or multi-stakeholder framework capable of addressing internal displacement as a protracted issue and has transformed interventions into mechanisms for managing rather than resolving the crisis.

Legal complexities surrounding land and property rights, together with the multiplicity of de facto authorities, have not been met with serious attempts to develop transitional or alternative mechanisms, resulting in substantial paralysis in reconstruction processes.

8.Operational Protection Outcomes

]Based on the assessment findings and analysis of field data, the following table outlines the main protection-related consequences of flooding for internally displaced people, with particular attention to challenges affecting access to protection services, increased risks facing the most vulnerable groups, and the capacity of responsible authorities and humanitarian actors to fulfil their protection responsibilities.

The analysis also highlights the relationship between damage to shelter and infrastructure and deterioration of the broader protection environment, demonstrating how these factors have increased exposure to violence, reinforced negative coping strategies, and weakened the sustainability of protection programming.

These findings underscore the need for an integrated approach that links immediate humanitarian response with sustainable, human-rights-based solutions.



No.	Protection Outcome	Analysis
1	Access to Protection Services	Available indicators suggest that shelter destruction and infrastructure disruption within camps reduced effective access to protection services, particularly GBV-related services.
2	GBV Risk Exposure	The evidence indicates a clear increase in risk factors, particularly in overcrowded environments resulting from secondary displacement or temporary collective shelters. Overcrowding, lack of privacy, increased domestic violence, and heightened exposure to exploitation are particularly concerning where families are forced to share confined spaces without adequate protection arrangements.
3	Negative Coping Mechanisms	Cross-analysis indicates that the loss of shelter and livelihoods caused by flooding, together with wider structural vulnerabilities, may push families—particularly female-headed households—toward high-risk coping strategies, including early marriage, unsafe work, or reliance on informal networks that may involve exploitation.
4	Protection of the Most Marginalized Groups / Intersectional Vulnerability	LGBTQIA+ people face compounded risks not only because of the restrictive social environment previously documented by SEEN for Gender & Sexual Equity, but also because of the loss of “semi-safe” spaces within displacement settings. Secondary displacement and overcrowding can force individuals back into less safe environments, increasing exposure to community violence while reducing access to informal support networks.
5	Legal Protection and Accountability	These events highlight the absence of an effective protection framework. The failure to implement preventive measures despite the recurrent and predictable nature of seasonal flooding demonstrates shortcomings in the exercise of due diligence. These shortcomings extend beyond emergency response to the absence of preparedness and pre-emptive planning, effectively exposing residents to foreseeable harm and weakening compliance with international protection standards.
6	Sustainability of Protection Programming	Flooding exposes the fragility of existing protection programmes, as environmental shocks can result in their near-total disruption.
7	State and Humanitarian Responsibility for Durable Solutions	These events reveal the absence of an integrated institutional approach linking emergency response with long-term planning. Repeated damage to displacement camps, without serious steps toward reconstruction or safe alternative housing, demonstrates major shortcomings in fulfilling positive obligations related to adequate housing and protection from foreseeable risks.

The gaps identified above demonstrate weaknesses in the integration of protection considerations across service-delivery sectors.

Shelter, water, sanitation, and other technical sectors are frequently treated as separate areas of intervention without sufficient consideration of their direct impact on protection risks, particularly gender-based violence.

This fragmentation has resulted in responses that fail to address the interaction between multiple risk factors, such as the relationship between overcrowding and increased violence or between service disruption and the increased use of negative coping mechanisms.

There are also clear shortcomings in adequately incorporating the needs of groups facing heightened protection risks, particularly women, children, and LGBTQIA+ people, whose safe and equitable access to services remains insufficiently addressed.

These shortcomings are compounded by declining funding for specialized protection programmes, resulting in reduced geographic coverage and narrower service provision and, in some cases, transforming risks that might otherwise have been mitigated into situations that become increasingly difficult to manage operationally.

In addition, the response system suffers from weak accountability and monitoring mechanisms. There is no sufficiently effective system for documenting violations or tracking the medium-term effects of disasters.

This gap not only limits the ability to assess and correct interventions, but also contributes to the perpetuation of an environment of weak accountability, particularly given the multiplicity of actors and the overlap of institutional responsibilities.

Taken together, these challenges reveal a significant gap in proactive risk-management planning despite the foreseeable and recurrent nature of flooding.

There is limited evidence of sustained disaster-risk-reduction strategies, such as redesigning displacement sites or developing disaster-resilient infrastructure. As a result, the current response remains predominantly reactive.

This pattern reinforces what may be described as a “cycle of recurrent vulnerability,” in which crises recur in nearly the same form without meaningful transformation in the way risks are managed.

9. Recommendations

1. To the Transitional Government of Syria and Relevant Ministries

It is recommended that the government develop and implement an integrated national reconstruction and resettlement plan based on updated risk assessments and implemented through a clear and accountable timeframe.

The plan should move beyond declaratory commitments and include binding operational measures, including the redesign of displacement sites, relocation of camps away from high-risk areas to safer locations, and the development of disaster-resilient infrastructure.

Legal issues related to property and housing should also be addressed through transitional mechanisms that safeguard the rights of displaced people and prevent exclusion or discrimination during resettlement processes.

This requires transparent criteria for prioritization and meaningful participation of affected communities in decision-making processes in order to strengthen trust and reduce social tensions.

2. To United Nations Agencies

United Nations agencies should strengthen their monitoring and coordination role to support and encourage Syrian authorities to develop and implement credible reconstruction and resettlement plans consistent with international protection standards.

This requires moving beyond conventional humanitarian assistance toward stronger institutional engagement and accountability mechanisms, including, where appropriate and consistent with humanitarian principles, linking certain forms of longer-term support to measurable progress toward durable solutions for internally displaced people. More effective inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms should also be developed to ensure that protection considerations are systematically integrated across interventions, particularly in the shelter and infrastructure sectors.

In addition, UN agencies should support the establishment of a unified national displacement database capable of tracking displacement trends, identifying gaps, and informing long-term planning rather than fragmented emergency responses.

3. To International Non-Governmental Organizations

International NGOs should strengthen the inclusivity of protection programming by systematically integrating LGBTQIA+ people and children into the design and implementation of humanitarian responses and ensuring their safe and non-discriminatory access to services. Organizations should also develop medium-term interventions that extend beyond emergency assistance, including the reorganization or relocation of displacement sites to areas less exposed to environmental hazards as a transitional measure pending the achievement of durable solutions. At the advocacy level, international NGOs should intensify efforts to ensure that internal displacement is treated as a priority within national and international policy frameworks rather than solely as a continuing humanitarian emergency. Greater integration between humanitarian programming and early recovery interventions is also recommended in order to reduce long-term dependence on humanitarian assistance.

4. To Donors

Donors should provide more flexible and sustainable funding, particularly to organizations working with highly marginalized communities, including queer-led and LGBTQIA+-focused organizations, enabling them to conduct in-depth research, develop evidence-based interventions, and meaningfully participate in advocacy efforts. Funding models should move away from exclusively short-term grants toward multi-year mechanisms capable of supporting structural programmes that address the root causes of vulnerability rather than only their immediate consequences. In addition, donor states supporting the Syrian authorities should play an important role in encouraging policy reform by linking longer-term reconstruction and development financing to the existence of clear, rights-based plans addressing reconstruction, displacement, and durable solutions, while supporting initiatives that strengthen transparency and accountability in implementation.

5. To Local Communities and the Syrian Diaspora

Local communities and the Syrian diaspora should strengthen community-based and media efforts to highlight the recurrent nature of these crises and resist treating them as temporary or seasonal events.

Such efforts should include documenting impacts, amplifying testimonies from affected communities, and contributing to sustained advocacy toward decision-makers at both the local and international levels.

Civil society organizations and local initiatives can also play an important role in monitoring violations, supporting accountability mechanisms, and strengthening solidarity with the groups most severely affected.

Sustained public and community pressure is an important component of encouraging relevant actors to adopt meaningful solutions rather than continuing to manage the crisis through recurrent short-term interventions.



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