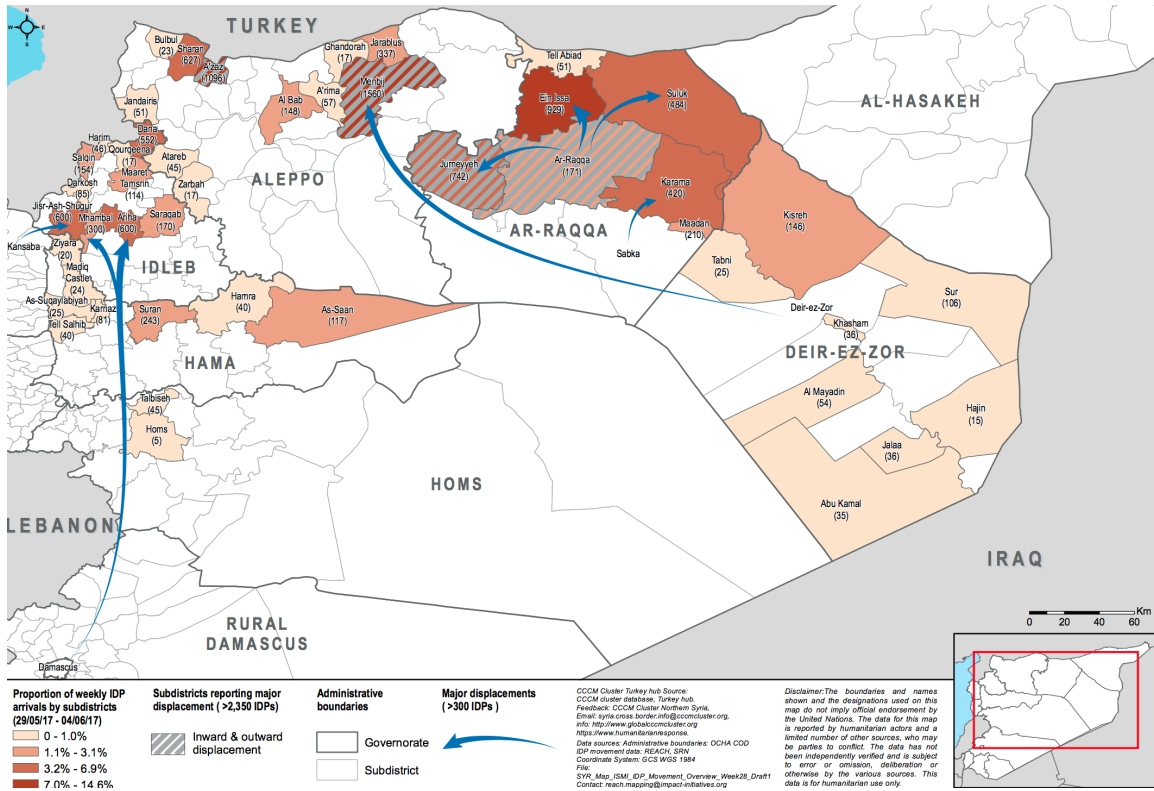


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**RECOMMENDATIONS TO ANTI-ISIS  
COALITION ON OPERATIONS IN SYRIA**  
JUNE 2017

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## Map of IDP Movements in Syria as of June 8, 2017



Map created by REACH.

## Summary

On June 6, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition<sup>1</sup> (the coalition) began a military offensive with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<sup>2</sup> inside Syria to end ISIS control of Raqqa and surrounding areas. The SDF are trained and armed primarily by the US and supported in the fight against ISIS by about 1,000 US troops (Special Forces and Marines) on the ground and with coalition air support. According to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) since November 2016 more than 200,000 people have been displaced as a result of the Raqqa operation and 160,000, including 40,000 children, are estimated to remain in the city.<sup>3</sup>

There are significant civilian protection concerns as the operations in Raqqa unfold including:

- The capabilities of the SDF to conduct operations in populated areas;
- An increase in civilian casualties caused by US airstrikes;
- ISIS's use of civilians as human shields and the booby-trapping of buildings;
- Lack of coordination and conflicting communications to civilians whether to stay or leave areas of hostilities and move to safe areas; and
- Absence of adequate screening procedures respecting the dignity and rights of civilians.

Current operations in west Mosul offer lessons for Raqqa on the coalition's decision to encircle and "annihilate" ISIS in Mosul's al-Qadima (old city). On May 28, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced a shift of military strategy against ISIS from "attrition" to "annihilation."<sup>4</sup> Parties to the conflict must consider the impact on civilians of an annihilation strategy that would besiege ISIS in an area, along with thousands of civilians who face significant challenges to leaving. This strategy and its severe consequences for civilians is on full display in west Mosul, as coalition and Iraqi forces have closed in on al-Qadima where ISIS fighters remain along with over 150,000 civilians and face life or death choice: either leave and risk being killed by ISIS shelling and snipers, or stay and risk death from coalition and Iraqi aerial bombing, artillery, and mortars. Such a stark choice must be avoided in Syria and civilians must be given options for safe exit out of active areas of hostilities.

This paper offers recommendations to the anti-ISIS coalition and SDF to address key civilian protection concerns in Syria. The coalition should:

- Take all feasible precautions to reduce civilian casualties, improve investigations, and acknowledge victims and offer them assistance;
- Refrain from using bombs with heavy payloads and explosive weapons with wide-area effects, such as artillery, rockets, and mortars, in populated areas;
- Refrain from entrapping civilians along with ISIS and ensure civilians have safe exit routes from ISIS areas;
- Commission an independent assessment of all anti-ISIS coalition operations to understand how civilians are being harmed and learn how to better protect them;
- Communicate consistently with civilians to allow them to make informed choices on whether to leave or stay, and also ensure proper coordination with humanitarian agencies to allow for necessary assistance to displaced persons;

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<sup>1</sup> Department of State, The Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, <https://www.state.gov/s/seci/>

<sup>2</sup> SDF coalition consists of Kurdish, Arab, Syriac Christian, and Turkmen groups. The most powerful member of SDF is the Kurdish People's Protection (YPG), which provides logistics and fighters. Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist organization due to the group's ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party, thereby placing the SDF in direct conflict with Turkey.

<sup>3</sup> Syria Crisis: Situation in Ar-Raqqa (as of June 10, 2017), <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-ar-raqqa-situation-report-no-6-23-may-2017>; UNICEF, "More than 40,000 Children are in Line of Fire as Fighting in Ar-Raqqa Intensifies," June 9, 2017, <https://www.unicef.ie/2017/06/09/40000-children-line-fire-ar-raqqa-fighting-intensifies/>

<sup>4</sup> Martin Pengelly, "Defense secretary Mattis says US policy against Isis is now 'annihilation'," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/28/james-mattis-defense-secretary-us-isis-annihilation>

- Develop and enforce consistent screening guidelines in accordance with international law at SDF checkpoints for displaced persons.

## **Key Civilian Protection Concerns**

The SDF launched Operation Wrath of the Euphrates in November 2016 to take northern parts of Raqqa governorate from ISIS. The SDF announced the final stage of the operation in April 2017, with the goal of retaking Raqqa city. Subsequent SDF advances against ISIS have been supported by US-led airstrikes, and SDF began operations against Raqqa city on June 6. Furthermore, the US has armed and trained members of the SDF, and some US forces are advising SDF on the ground.

Preventing civilian harm in the fight against ISIS, as has been observed in Mosul and Raqqa, is challenging in the following ways:

- Deliberate attacks by ISIS on civilians who try to flee or are suspected of cooperating with SDF or the coalition;
- Lack of safe routes for civilians to flee as coalition-backed ground forces advance into ISIS territory;
- Use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects, such as artillery, rockets, mortars, and 500-1,000-lb aerial bombs in densely populated areas;
- Capabilities of ground forces to conduct complex urban operations and minimize civilian harm;
- ISIS tactics of using civilians as human shields, booby-trapping buildings and streets, and attacking coalition and ground forces from civilian homes;
- Coalition and ground forces not assuming civilian presence in buildings in populated areas given the likelihood that civilians may be prevented by ISIS from leaving an area;
- Faulty intelligence from ground forces that then informs targeting;
- Car bombs and suicide bombers as ground forces approach ISIS territory.

ISIS has had three years to fortify Raqqa and the eastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor for the battle with coalition-backed ground forces. Given ISIS tactics in west Mosul, the likelihood that every building in Raqqa is booby-trapped with explosives is very high. If Mosul is an indicator of ISIS tactics, coalition and allied ground forces should anticipate ISIS to do the following:

- Order civilians to remove the front door of homes to allow ISIS to enter at any time to plant IEDs;
- Use every building irrespective of civilian presence to attack ground forces or coalition planes, aiming to draw return fire and cause casualties;
- Create “worm holes” or passageways between connecting houses to allow fighters to move unseen;
- Prevent civilians from leaving ISIS territory;
- Use civilians as human shields;
- Booby-trap buildings with explosives to cause mass casualties;
- Kill fleeing civilians and those thought to be working with anti-ISIS forces.

In order to minimize harm to civilians still left in Raqqa and other ISIS-held areas, the coalition and the SDF should take all feasible precautions to reduce civilian harm, ensure safe passage for civilians, and implement consistent screening procedures in accordance with international law.

## Reduce Civilian Harm, Improve Capabilities to Assess Incidents, and Assist those Harmed

Airstrikes in Syria by the coalition resulting in civilian harm have increased in 2017. According to the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve's (CJTF-OIR) monthly civilian casualty report, to date 484 civilians have been unintentionally killed by coalition strikes in Iraq and Syria since operations began in 2014.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Airwars—a UK based transparency organization that tracks coalition-caused civilian casualties and shares incidents with the coalition for assessments—reports more than 3,800 deaths attributed to the coalition since 2014. In April alone, between 283 and 366 civilians were reportedly killed in Iraq and Syria.<sup>6</sup> In June, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic alleged that 300 civilians have been killed in airstrikes by the US-led coalition since March 21, which includes 200 civilians killed in a school in the town Mansoura, near Raqqa governorate.<sup>7</sup>

In May, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that coalition airstrikes killed 23 civilian farmworkers in eastern Raqqa Governorate on May 14, along with 59 civilians in the ISIS-controlled city of Albo Kamal, in eastern Deir ez-Zor governorate on May 15, suggesting that “insufficient precautions” might have been taken to minimize civilian casualties.<sup>8</sup> OHCHR also reported that ISIS fighters had announced the execution of eight men suspected of having provided coordinates for these airstrikes.

Airstrikes also caused infrastructure damage to various locations west and north of Raqqa city in February, including several bridges<sup>9</sup>, the Tabqa Dam, and school and medical facilities.<sup>10</sup> ISIS has also destroyed vital infrastructure as its forces retreat, a tactic which is likely to continue as it loses ground. Water pumping stations have reportedly been destroyed on the Euphrates River forcing residents to drink untreated water from the same river. In mid-May 2017, OCHA reported there were no operating clinics, hospitals, or medicines available in Raqqa city. Most of the water stations, pipes, and water tanks have also been destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

The fight in Raqqa could also take a toll on SDF ranks who are likely to face similar style of attacks, as noted above, from ISIS to that seen in Mosul with implications on civilian protection due to increased reliance on airstrikes in populated areas to support ground forces. The competency of SDF—a newly created force—to conduct complex operations in an urban densely populated area and minimize civilian harm is also of concern.

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<sup>5</sup> Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve Monthly Civilian Casualty Report, June 2, 2017 <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/News-Releases/Article/1200895/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-monthly-civilian-casualty/> In the month of April, CJTF-OIR received 43 new reports of possible civilian casualties resulting from Coalition strikes. During this period, the Coalition completed the assessment of 47 reports, of which 31 were assessed to be non-credible and 16 were assessed to be credible resulting in 132 unintentional civilian deaths. To date, based on information available, CJTF-OIR assesses that, more likely than not, at least 484 civilians have been unintentionally killed by Coalition strikes since the start of Operation Inherent Resolve. A total of 38 reports were still open and being assessed at the end of the month. Coalition strikes are defined as ground artillery or airstrikes conducted as part of the Coalition Air Tasking Order.

<sup>6</sup> See generally Airwars, [www.airwars.org](http://www.airwars.org)

<sup>7</sup> Nick Cumming Bruce, “US Led Airstrikes in Syria Killed Hundreds of Civilians Says UN Panel,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-airstrikes-civil-](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-airstrikes-civil-ians.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FUnited%20Nations&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection)

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<sup>8</sup> OHCHR, “Airstrikes, ISIL causing civilian casualties in Syria — Zeid,” May 26, 2017,

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21662&LangID=E>

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR, Monthly Human Rights Digest, Syria, February 2017,

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/ohchr\\_-\\_syria\\_monthly\\_human\\_rights\\_digest\\_-\\_february\\_2017.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/ohchr_-_syria_monthly_human_rights_digest_-_february_2017.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> OCHA, Syria Crisis: Menbij and Ar-Raqqa Situation Report No. 4 (as of 1 May 2017),

<http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-menbij-and-ar-raqqa-situation-report-no-4-1-may-2017>

<sup>11</sup> OCHA, Syria Crisis: Ar-Raqqa, Situation Report No. 5 (as of May 15, 2017),

<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Raqqa%20Sit%20Rep%20No.%205.pdf>

The coalition should:

- Commission an independent assessment of all anti-ISIS coalition operations to understand how civilians are harmed and how to better protect them;
- Theater commanders should issue a tactical directive stating that the anti-ISIS coalition's intention to protect civilians is mission critical to the defeat of ISIS;
- Exercise tactical patience to reduce civilian harm when responding to ISIS targeting coalition aircraft from rooftops and when called upon to support SDF, who are under fire from ISIS;
- Assume presence of civilians in every structure when engaging ISIS fighters given the likelihood of ISIS using civilians as human shields and adjust tactics to take civilian presence into account;
- Recognize and consider the ISIS tactic of booby-trapping buildings to cause mass casualties when making targeting decisions, and adjust tactics and choice of weapons to reduce civilian harm;
- In densely populated areas avoid, to the extent feasible, airstrikes as a primary tactic, and consider tactical alternatives—for example, properly trained SDF conducting more door-to-door clearing operations to minimize civilian harm;
- Refrain from using explosive weapons with wide-area effects such as rockets and artillery in densely populated areas given the likelihood of harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure from blast fragmentation and the high probability of civilian presence in buildings;
- Ensure that the SDF are properly advised in urban warfare in order to reduce civilian harm;
- Improve post-strike assessments by tracking civilian harm from all weapons platforms—UAV, rotary and fixed-wing aircraft—and indirect and direct fire weapons;
- Improve investigations of civilian casualty incidents by interviewing witnesses and conducting site inspections where feasible, and not rely solely on aerial reviews. SDF should provide key information on impact on civilians from air and ground operations to verify aerial reviews of strikes. Make public detailed findings of such incidents and undertake remedial measures to adjust tactics and mitigate such harm;
- Acknowledge civilian harm and develop the capability to make condolence payments to affected families by working with the Department of State to identify processes where families harmed by coalition strikes can report incidents to trusted local council members and submitted to the coalition for verification. (Money for this purpose has already been allocated for Syria in the US National Defense Authorization Act). Non-US coalition members should create similar processes to acknowledge and offer assistance to victims.

### **Ensure Safe Passage and Adequate Humanitarian Assistance for Civilians**

Parties to the conflict are obligated under the laws of war to take all feasible steps to evacuate civilians from areas of fighting or where fighters are deployed and not block or impede the evacuation of those wishing to leave. Mixed messages have been given by the coalition and SDF to civilians in ISIS areas on whether they should stay or risk leaving and be killed or injured. Given ISIS use of civilians as human shields, entrapping them to cause mass casualties, and mining roads, civilians face a difficult choice as to whether to shelter in place or attempt to flee.

ISIS has imposed tight restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians to SDF-controlled areas. Some civilians have at times been able to flee by paying off ISIS members but many have little or no money left to bribe their way to safety and thus take the risk that

they may be killed and injured by IEDs laid by ISIS or by sniper attacks as they cross ISIS lines to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in SDF controlled areas.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, aid groups have told CIVIC that IDP camps in SDF areas face shortages of water and food. There are also a lack of medical professionals and emergency trauma centers to treat civilians fleeing ISIS-held areas.

In Syria, the SDF has advanced to the western and northern fronts of Raqqa city, while airstrikes have damaged infrastructure (particularly of bridges), severely hindering civilians' freedom of movement. The possibility of fleeing to Deir ez-Zor and further south remains open by crossing the Euphrates River. Should some ISIS fighters be allowed to leave, Deir ez-Zor rather than Raqqa could become the main theatre of active conflict with potential besiegement. Uncertainty also remains around the role that the Syrian regime troops, pro-regime militias, and Russia might play in the offensive in Deir ez-Zor and how their plans coincide with the US and SDF and what the impact on civilians will be.

ISIS is also known to engage in reprisals and retaliatory fire against civilians fleeing areas it controls, necessitating coalition and SDF to provide security to people in safe places.

Parties to the conflict cannot leave civilians with no choice for safe exit and must assess all tactics as they advance towards ISIS.

The coalition should:

- Communicate clearly and consistently with civilians in ISIS areas to allow them to make informed decisions regarding their physical safety, and to enable civilians to leave areas within an adequate timeframe where operations are conducted;
- Keep some safe exits open for civilians to leave areas of hostilities and avoid entrapping civilians alongside ISIS fighters in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor;
- Allow displaced civilians to move to safe areas;
- Ensure routes to safe areas are cleared of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) and issue warnings regarding mines and ERQ;
- Improve coordination with humanitarian agencies to enable them to provide critical assistance, including food, water, medicine, and trauma care.

## **Create and Implement Consistent Screening Procedures**

Civilians leaving ISIS-controlled areas are screened at SDF and YPG controlled checkpoints before moving to IDP camps or, if allowed, to move to other parts of Raqqa, Hasakeh or Aleppo governorates.<sup>13</sup> Reports have emerged of forced conscription at checkpoints, confiscation of identification documents by camp administration after screening, and mistreatment of alleged ISIS members or sympathizers.<sup>14</sup>

Aid agencies report the absence of consistent guidelines for forces at checkpoints on how to treat civilians and screen for ISIS members. The coalition, including the SDF, should create uniform screening procedures in accordance with international standards and implement them in a systematic, transparent, and timely manner. Guidelines should cover the following good practices:

- Treat persons fleeing ISIS areas with dignity and respect;
- Avoid presumption of affiliation with ISIS or criminal activity based simply on gender, age, religious sect, or tribal name;

<sup>12</sup> Doctors Without Borders, "Syria: Airstrikes or Minefields—the Deadly Choice of Facing Raqqa's Residents," June 9, 2017, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/syria-airstrikes-or-minefields—deadly-choice-facing-raqqa-s-residents>

<sup>13</sup> Conversations with humanitarian organizations, May-June 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

- Screening sites should be a safe distance from active conflict, and be carefully selected—use of vital infrastructures such as schools should be used only as a last resort;
- Measures should be taken in consultation with humanitarian agencies to expedite the identification and screening of vulnerable groups and/or people with priority needs, such as pregnant women or women with newborns, children under five, unaccompanied and separated children, persons with serious medical conditions, the elderly and persons facing protection risks, such as survivors of gender-based and other forms of violence;
- People held for security screening must be given access to basic facilities, such as clean water, food, sanitation and shelter;
- Any individual suspected of ISIS affiliation who is detained, should be transferred immediately to a legally established detention facility and processed according to international legal standards for detention and trials;
- Children associated with ISIS (or suspected of having been associated with ISIS) or other armed groups are accorded special care and protection under international humanitarian law and should have their safety, protection, and well-being assured, and the ICRC should have access to facilities where they are held;
- Refrain from confiscating any identification documents at screening facilities;
- Investigate allegations of arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture of detainees and hold perpetrators accountable.

### **About Center for Civilians in Conflict**

The mission of Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is to improve protection for civilians caught in conflicts around the world. We call on and advise international organizations, governments, militaries, and armed non-state actors to adopt and implement policies to prevent civilian harm. When civilians are harmed we advocate for the provision of amends and post-harm assistance. We bring the voices of civilians themselves to those making decisions affecting their lives.

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