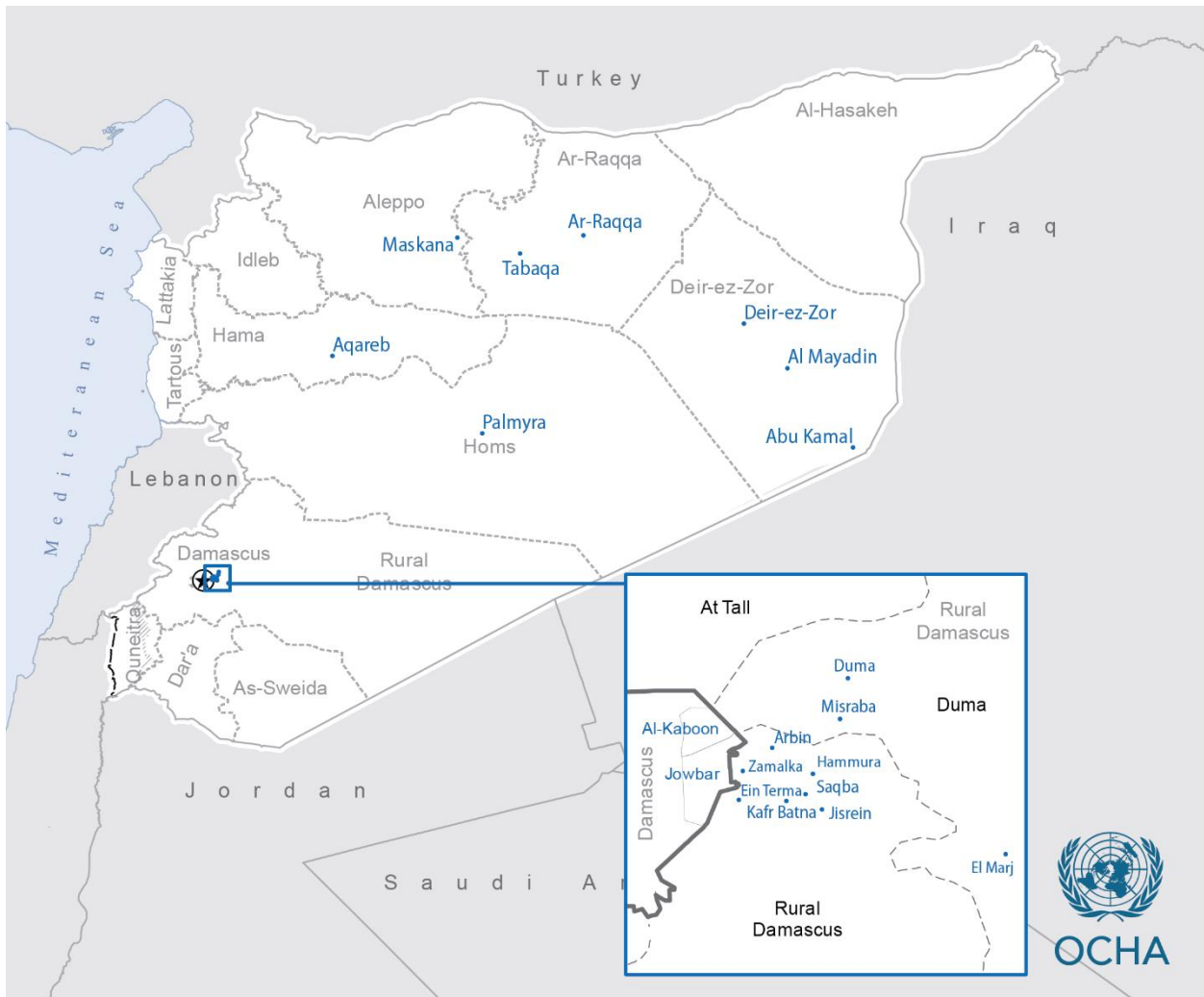


MONTHLY HUMAN RIGHTS DIGEST

SYRIA | May 2017

- The significant number of civilian casualties as a result of airstrikes and ground-based strikes hitting areas under the control of IS remains and issue of serious concern. These strikes are taking place in the wake of the retreat of IS fighters from Ar-Raqqa and the capture by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces of the strategic area of Tabqa, including the only remaining supply route for IS in the governorate. Advances there and in Mosul, Iraq, have caused IS fighters and their families as well as other civilians to move towards bordering areas in rural Deir-ez-Zor, including Albo Kamal and Al-Mayadin. These areas are expected to come under increased airstrikes that could result in further civilian casualties.
- Under the backdrop of a siege in which civilians continue to face the effects of armed conflict and shortages of items essential for their survival, infighting between armed groups in Eastern Ghouta is currently resulting in the death and injury of civilians, medical units being damaged or destroyed, aid workers and peaceful protesters attacked, and civilians deprived of their liberty and sometimes used as hostages.



This Monthly Human Rights Digest on Syria has been prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights based on information collected by the Office along with contributions from other agencies. It is intended to serve as an overview of some current and possible future human rights concerns in Syria, as well as provide humanitarians with a brief outline of relevant international human rights and humanitarian law provisions relating to the alleged violations. The Digest does not seek to highlight all human rights violations and abuses committed in Syria during the last month, nor list all documented cases of a particular type. Rather, OHCHR focuses every month on a few key areas which are of particular concern as the situation develops, based on data which has been analysed and cross-checked. Only information which is deemed credible is included. Separately, OHCHR provides input on past developments for the monthly report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council.

OHCHR would like to thank OCHA for its support with the graphics and map compilation for the Digest.

CIVILIANS AND THE OFFENSIVES AGAINST IS

Concerns raised in previous Monthly Digests surrounding the well-being of civilians in areas under the control of Islamic State (IS) are increasingly materialising with a further increase in reported civilian casualties as parties to the conflict intensify their efforts to defeat IS. OHCHR has recorded high numbers of airstrikes and ground-based strikes on IS-controlled areas in which civilians are being killed, injured and/or displaced, yet the effects of such offensives do not receive the same level of scrutiny as battlefronts elsewhere in the country. Such large numbers of civilian casualties raise serious concerns regarding the adherence to key obligations of international law. So too does IS fighters' prevention of civilians from leaving areas under their control.

Airstrikes and Ground-Based Strikes

Supported and increasingly armed by the US-led Coalition, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have slowly encircled Ar-Raqqa city from the west, north, and east. Following almost two months of intense military activity, the SDF fully captured from IS the city of Tabqa along with its vital dam on 10 May, cutting off a key IS supply route to Ar-Raqqa.

The Raqqa offensive has thus far resulted in massive civilian casualties, displacement, and serious infrastructure destruction. OHCHR documented several incidents in April and May with high numbers of civilian casualties due to an escalation of indiscriminate airstrikes and ground-based shelling

in Ar-Raqqa. The escalation of attacks also resulted in thousands of civilians displaced – in some cases repeatedly – from one area to another; some were killed while on the move.

The US Department of Defense publicly confirmed that the Coalition carried out 549 strikes in April against IS targets in the governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Homs. Around two-thirds of those strikes were reported to have been in Ar-Raqqa Governorate and nearly a third in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Its public reporting as of 25 May indicates 431 strikes, all but 17 in the two governorates.

Meanwhile, pro-Government forces¹ are intensifying airstrikes and ground-based shelling and advancing towards the town of Maskana (the last IS-controlled area in Aleppo Governorate) and neighbouring areas in western Ar-Raqqa Governorate. They have also attempted to push east from Palmyra towards Deir-ez-Zor. In these IS-held areas, there is likely to be a lack of sufficient scrutiny with regard to the number of civilian casualties caused by such advancements.

In areas recently captured from IS, reports received indicate that civilians remain at risk. In Tabqa the SDF has reportedly imposed a curfew severely restricting freedom of movement. Many IDPs remain stranded in the desert as they are prevented from entering into SDF-controlled areas unless a Kurd from the community provides guarantees for them.

¹ "Pro-Government forces," unless otherwise specified, includes forces of the governments of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, and Iran, as well as Hezbollah and other foreign and domestic allied militias fighting in support of the Government.

As a consequence of the large amount of firepower directed against IS in Ar-Raqqa, as well as across the border in Iraq, the group has reportedly started transferring its high profile fighters and their families from Mosul and Ar-Raqqa towards Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, mainly to areas around Albo Kamal and Al-Mayadin. Such movement has been followed by intense bombardments on these areas.

On 14 May, airstrikes hit two vehicles transporting farmers, many of them women working in Al-Akeirshi village in eastern Ar-Raqqa, resulting in the reported killing of 23 civilians including 17 women and the injuring of five others including two women. The following day, airstrikes hit two areas in the IS-controlled city of Albo Kamal in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The airstrikes resulted in the alleged killing of at least 59 civilians (including 16 children, 12 women) and the injury of no less than 70 others. Eight Iraqi refugees were reported to have been amongst those killed. One IS member was also reported as having been killed in the strike.

In response to the 15 May incidents, the following day IS fighters executed eight men at the locations where the airstrikes hit. The group reportedly announced to the crowds present that they were being executed for having provided the coordinates to those who launched the airstrikes.

Threats Faced from IS

Civilians in IS-controlled areas also remain exposed to risks associated with life under the group's control such as deprivations of liberty, being subjected to cruel treatment, and exposure to sniper fire and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). IS

fighters have also reportedly prevented civilians from leaving areas under their control. The only exception is for those facing life-threatening sickness, who must obtain IS approval and provide a house or vehicle as a guarantee of their return. Those caught smuggling civilians outside IS-controlled areas may be executed or held and forced

Preventing civilians from leaving an area due to the effects of the armed conflict runs contrary to international human rights law, including but not limited to the rights to freedom of movement and to life, liberty and security of person. Along with raising concerns as to the possible use of human shields, it also violates the international humanitarian law principles of distinction, and precautions from the effects of attack which requires parties to a conflict to remove to the extent feasible, civilian persons and objects under its control from the vicinity of military objectives.

to pay fines.

Given previous scenarios where IS has been on the defensive, the organisation may launch surprise attacks including those using of suicide and car bombs against unexpected targets. On 18 May, IS fighters reportedly raided the Government-controlled and predominantly Ismaili Shi'a village of Aqareb in Hama Governorate. At least 36 civilians, including 19 children as well as nine women, were killed. Many died from crossfire and sniping but some also had their throats cut.

At least 74,000 civilians in Deir-ez-Zor city remain under an IS-imposed siege along with others living

under IS control in and around the city.

Looking Forward

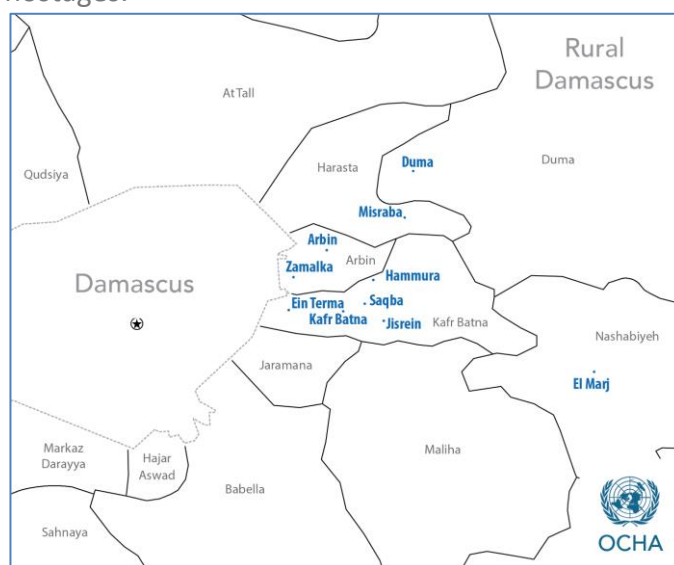
The SDF offensive supported by airstrikes and ground-based strikes on Ar-Raqqa and surrounding areas is expected to continue. This is likely to be coupled with military operations on the southern Syrian Euphrates valley, targeting the areas of Albo Kamal and Al-Mayadin in order to cut off IS' supply route, secure the border with Iraq and prevent IS moving fighters from Mosul to Syria. Reports indicate that this offensive will likely be supported by US and British ground and air assets. OHCHR received reports that thousands of armed opposition group fighters are currently being readied for such upcoming operations.

At the same time, the fear of arbitrary arrests, detention, deprivations of liberty, and the infliction of cruel treatment due to perceived affiliation with IS or other armed opposition groups will likely lead to a large number of persons displaced as various forces advance into IS-held areas. Civilians also face similar treatment by IS fighters and exposure to unexploded ordinances left behind as they retreat.

SITUATION IN EASTERN GHOUTA

In late April, armed clashes erupted in the Government-besieged and opposition-controlled Eastern Ghouta between Jaish Al-Islam and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (primarily made up of the group formerly known as Jabhat Al-Nusra) together with

Faylaq Al-Rahman (affiliated with the Free Syrian Army). As a result, civilians were killed and injured, medical units damaged or destroyed, aid workers and peaceful protesters attacked, and civilians deprived of their liberty and sometimes used as hostages.



Jaish Al-Islam controls large areas in Eastern Ghouta including the towns of Duma, Misraba, and parts of Arbin, while Faylaq Al-Rahman and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham control primarily western and southern parts of this area. On 28 April, Jaish Al-Islam launched attacks on areas controlled by Faylaq Al-Rahman, including the towns of Zamalka, Kafr Batna and Hezzeh. While Jaish Al-Islam stated on 28 April that the offensive was in response to the alleged recent abduction of one of its fighters by Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (adding that it intended to "clean" the Ghouta from the group's influence), Faylaq Al-Rahman stated that the abduction was an excuse and the offensive had been intended to take over its positions.

Local councils in the area mandated a "civil committee" to mediate between the groups. After

meeting representatives of the groups, the committee issued a statement on 2 May condemning attacks on civilians and calling on Jaish Al-Islam to withdraw from areas it took over. Two days later, the committee sought to impose a ceasefire guaranteed by the deployment of other armed opposition groups not involved in the fighting on the frontline between the opposing factions. The committee urged the factions to release all civilians detained since 28 April, lift their checkpoints, end attacks against medical units and aid workers, and submit disputes to an independent legal committee. Viewed by Jaish Al-Islam as close to Faylaq Al-Rahman, the committee failed to end the fighting.

At least 17 civilians were reportedly killed and others injured between 28 April and 14 May as a result of the clashes between the armed groups.

Freedom of Expression and Association

On 30 April, civilian protesters gathered in several areas of Eastern Ghouta, including the towns of Saqba, Kafr Batna, Hamourya, Ein Terma, Zamalka, and Hezzeh, to demand an end to the clashes between the armed opposition groups. Approximately 3,000-4,000 protesters marched towards Jaish Al-Islam-controlled parts of Arbin the following day. After crossing three Jaish Al-Islam-run checkpoints, the protesters arrived at a fourth in Arbin where 30 to 40 fighters attempted to disperse the protestors by shooting in the air and then directly at the civilians. At least nine civilians were reportedly injured. Jaish Al-Islam later condemned the shootings and said it considered this an isolated incident.

Medical Units and Aid Workers

In the context of ongoing clashes between armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta, numerous incidents involving medical and aid workers as well as health facilities were reported. Civilians including Civil Defence workers were exposed to direct sniping during the evacuation of injured from areas where clashes occurred. Several medical units were reportedly raided and some looted by armed men due to the units' provision of medical assistance to fighters from opposing factions, or in a bid to abduct wounded fighters. On 29 April, a medical facility in Hezzeh was raided by Jaish Al-Islam, reportedly looking for injured fighters from opposing factions. The premise of a local charity in the town of Jesreen was raided on 30 April by fighters from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and Faylaq Al-Rahman. Humanitarian and IT equipment were looted and two staff members allegedly abducted.

Threats and violence against medical workers were

Medical units *exclusively* assigned to medical purposes must be respected and protected in all circumstances. This includes military hospitals supported or run by parties to the conflict, and medical units providing medical care to injured fighters.

also increasingly reported at checkpoints controlled by the armed opposition groups. On 13 May, several medical unit staff in Merj town were reportedly assaulted at a checkpoint controlled by Faylaq Al-Rahman. One staff was physically abused and a female nurse verbally abused. Three doctors were

taken to an unknown location and held incommunicado for several hours. A delegation of civilians and medical workers went to the town hall of Misraba - run by Faylaq Al-Rahman - to demand the doctors' release was prevented from accessing the building by armed men shooting in the air.

Reports were also received of aid workers and other civilians being subjected to sniper fire while attempting to evacuate persons injured in the armed clashes.

Following these incidents, several humanitarian organisations suspended part or all of their activities in Eastern Ghouta. The local section of the Civil Defence issued a statement on 8 May highlighting the increasing number of incidents affecting its workers and holding responsible the armed opposition groups involved in the clashes. On 14 May, the "Unified Medical Bureau in East Ghouta" issued a statement that it would halt all but vital activities in the area until they received guarantees that their staff would be safe. It further called for the dismantling of checkpoints set up during the clashes by the armed groups which further restrict the ability to deliver medical assistance in Eastern Ghouta, impacting residents' enjoyment of the right to health.

[Arbitrary Deprivation of Liberty of Civilians](#)

OHCHR has received information about 20 civilians held by competing armed opposition groups between 28 April and 14 May, including several media activists and aid workers. Some were held due to their perceived support or affiliation with an opposing group. While most were released after a

few hours during which they were reportedly interrogated and intimidated, an unknown number remain missing. In what may amount to hostage-taking, OHCHR has also received reports that some civilians were held in order to exert pressure on

Hostage-taking is the seizure or detention of a person, combined with threatening to kill, injure or continue to detain the person, in order to compel a third party to do or abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for the person's release.

their relatives fighting with an opposing group to surrender.

[Restrictions on Freedom of Movement](#)

Some civilians in the vicinity of clashes have reportedly been prevented from leaving their houses for several days. In the town of Zamalka, an estimated 600 families remained trapped in their homes for several days.

Armed groups have set up checkpoints and dispatched snipers across Eastern Ghouta, and OHCHR has received reports of harassment and abduction of civilians, including aid workers, at some of these checkpoints. Such restrictions on freedom of movement have also significantly impacted residents' ability to conduct business and ensure their daily needs are met, particularly against the backdrop of the ongoing siege.

Looking Forward

The violations and abuses suffered by civilians as a result of the armed opposition group infighting in Eastern Ghouta illustrate the ongoing suffering that civilians in Syria are being subjected to throughout Syria, regardless of which party to the conflict is in control of the area. It highlights the difficulties of bringing an end to hostilities, including through the latest “deconfliction zones,” without a clear strategy on dealing with groups such as that formerly known as Jabhat Al-Nusra since Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, of which the group is the primary component, is present in the same locations as armed groups who are being pressured to abide by local ceasefire agreements.

The infighting and resulting incidents in which civilians have been killed and injured, deprived of their liberty and freedom of movement, and denied items essential for their survival takes place against a backdrop of increased restrictions on freedom of movement by Government forces since mid-2012, and the imposition of an ongoing siege on the area since early 2013. Over the last month, airstrikes and ground-based strikes on the Ghouta have been reported on a daily basis, with civilians allegedly killed and injured as a result. On 1 May, at least seven civilians were killed by strikes which hit residential parts of this area. The humanitarian situation has deteriorated still further since the supply tunnels network (used for both military and civilian supplies) linking Eastern Ghouta to the opposition-controlled Damascus suburb of Qaboun was taken over by pro-Government forces in May.