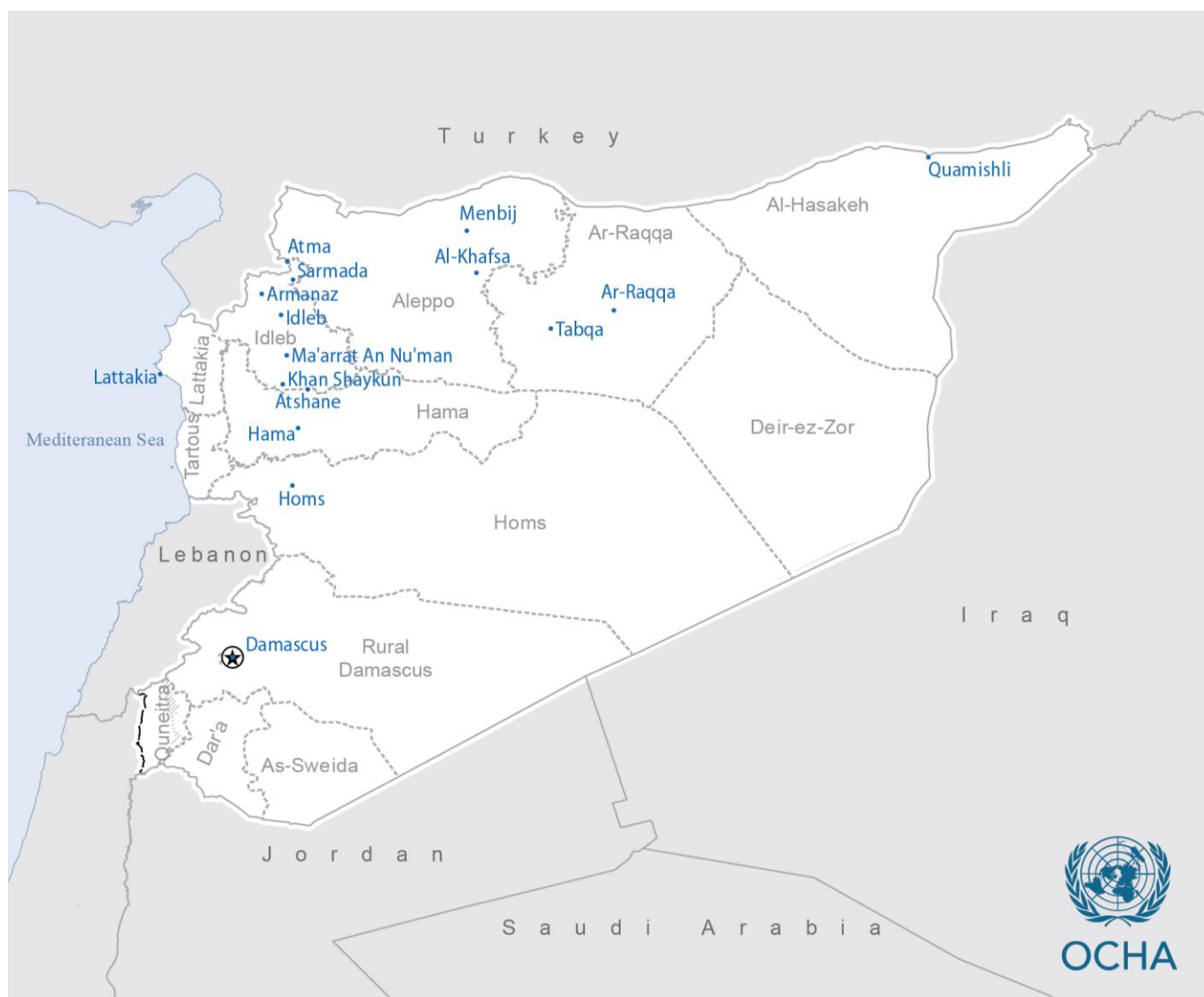


# MONTHLY HUMAN RIGHTS DIGEST

SYRIA | June 2017

- The situation facing **civilians in Islamic State-held areas** continues to be of increasing concern. In the city of Ar-Raqqa alone up to 100,000 civilians are now trapped inside the city alongside Islamic State combatants. In addition to being prevented from leaving by Islamic State, attacking forces- made up primarily of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces supported by airstrikes launched by the US-led Coalition have now entirely encircled the city. Between 1 and 25 June, OHCHR documented the alleged killing of at least 173 civilians by attacking forces. There are also worrying reports of violations and abuses by the armed group, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in areas under its control such as Tabqa city, including looting, abductions, and deprivations of liberty during screening processes as well as the recruitment of children.
- While the number of air and ground-based strikes launched by pro-Government forces against armed opposition groups inside **Idleb Governorate** has noticeably decreased following the agreement on the establishment of various de-escalation areas in Syria, OHCHR has received ongoing reports of violations and abuses by armed opposition groups inflicted upon civilians as well as *hors de combat* fighters from other groups. Such incidents include deprivations of liberty, along with the carrying out of extra-judicial killings, pillage, and infliction of cruel treatment.



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.

## KURDISH-DOMINATED FORCES

In the May 2017 Digest, OHCHR highlighted serious concerns with regard to the high number of civilian casualties being reported as a result of air and ground-based strikes being launched against areas under Islamic State (IS) control by various actors.

The city of Ar-Raqqa, with at least 100,000 civilians remaining within it, is now fully encircled by attacking forces and facing an increasingly dire humanitarian situation. Fighting is rapidly getting closer to heavily populated areas and the number of air and ground-based strikes being launched are increasing. IS continues to forcibly prevent civilians from leaving, though some are managing to do so by handing over large amounts of money to smugglers, including IS affiliated smugglers. There is no apparent set fee, though OHCHR has received reports of sums ranging from 3,000 US dollars to in excess of 10,000. OHCHR has documented that between 1 and 25 June 2017, at least 165 civilians were killed as a result of air and ground-based strikes launched on Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Attacking forces have now entirely encircled Ar-Raqqa city. Unlike in Aleppo in December 2016, no provision has been made for escape corridors for civilians wishing to flee.

The offensive against IS in and around Ar-Raqqa is being conducted by the Kurdish dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)- a coalition dominated by Kurds and the People's Protection Units - Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), along with smaller elements of Sunni and Christian Arabs, and volunteer foreign

fighters. The SDF receives both weapons well as air, ground, and logistical support. This was confirmed in a 6 June 2017 press statement by the US Department of Defense, which announced the launching of an offensive to liberate Ar-Raqqa "with the US-led Coalition providing equipment, training, intelligence and logistics support, precision fires and battlefield advice".

Advances on the battlefield by the SDF have been accompanied by intense air and ground-based strikes on IS positions. Ongoing reports of high numbers of civilian casualties are an indication that all feasible precautions may not be being taken to avoid civilian casualties.

Parties to a conflict must abide by the core international humanitarian law principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in and against the effects of attack.

In addition, OHCHR has documented other reports of incidents which may amount to violations of international humanitarian law and abuses of international human rights law by the SDF, including, the infliction of cruel treatment, pillaging of private property, deprivations of liberty, and the recruitment of children.

As the SDF captured Tabqa city from IS on 10 May 2017, OHCHR documented several incidents of concern which included the harassment of civilians at checkpoints and the pillaging of private property. The empty houses of at least three Arab civilians

were allegedly pillaged by Arab SDF fighters. Reports indicated that at least one of the houses was targeted due to personal grievances. Civilians are also reported to be being deprived of their liberty by the SDF. While such actions were understood to primarily be part of a screening process to identify members of IS, reports have been received of civilians being ill-treated and held for prolonged periods without their families being informed. It is understood that an unknown number of such persons are still being held though it is unknown whether this is due to their membership of IS or for other reasons.

Recent reports were also received of the SDF holding civilians in Menbij city in rural Aleppo Governorate. Similarly with what has been reported in Tabqa, this is understood to have been primarily as part of a screening process. However, similar reports of the mistreatment of those held have been received. Incidents were mainly reported in Al-Rabeta Street against civilians who had fled the Al-Khafsah area of eastern rural Aleppo prior to its capture by Government forces in April 2017. Dozens of men were reportedly detained in the Al-Maliya building (Finance Building), currently being used both as an SDF Office and holding centre. Some were later released while others were reportedly handed over by the SDF to the Syrian Government Military Intelligence Directorate in Aleppo City. Reports indicate that some of those held remain in detention, some were conscripted into the Syrian army after being handed over to the Military Intelligence Directorate when received by the Government Military Intelligence, and others have been released. Those held are alleged to have been subjected to ill-treatment both by the SDF and

Government military intelligence. OHCHR is in the process of verifying these allegations and remains concerned for those who remain in the custody of both parties.

Reports of forced recruitment campaigns by the SDF and YPG in both Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hassakeh Governorates are also being received. In two reported cases in the city of Quamishli on 19 June, two men that had previously been released from compulsory military service by the Government of Syria on serious medical grounds were reportedly forcibly recruited into the SDF. OHCHR has also received reports of the recruitment of children into the SDF.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict places a complete prohibition on any armed group recruiting persons under the age of 18 into their forces, even if the recruitment is voluntary. This applies to all armed groups- both those allied with or fighting against Government forces. Under the same Optional Protocol, the Government of Syria is prohibited from forcibly recruiting persons under 18. Any voluntarily recruitment of persons aged between 15 and 18 is subject to strict safeguards listed in the Optional Protocol. The Government of Syria is also obliged to take all feasible measures to ensure that those between 15 and 18 who have been voluntarily recruited in conformity with the Optional Protocol, do not take an active part in hostilities.

## Looking Forward

Due to the common goal of defeating IS in northern Syria, the SDF continues to receive the support of the United States as well as other members of the US-led Coalition. Such support has only strengthened in recent months due to both successes made on the ground by these forces as well as political considerations emanating from apparent IS-linked or inspired attacks outside Syria.

The high number of reported civilian casualties resulting from such increased offensive action against IS indicates that much more needs to be done by the parties to ensure the protection of the civilian population through strict adherence to the requirements of international humanitarian law. In the case of the offensive against Ar-Raqqqa, such high numbers of reported casualties are sadly being overshadowed by news of rapid advances against the group on the ground. Civilians must not be sacrificed for the sake of rapid military victories.

## Recommendations:

All actors able to do so are called to urgently exert all available influence on forces launching attacks against Islamic State positions to:

- i) Strictly adhere to the requirements of international humanitarian law, including but not limited to the prohibition on the launching of indiscriminate attacks, and the requirement to adhere to the principles of proportionality and precautions in attack.
- ii) Ensure and uphold the human rights of all civilians present in the area including but not limited to the right to life; right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; right to liberty and security of person, and right to freedom of movement.
- iii) Put in place measures to enable civilians wishing to do so to flee the fighting and be provided with all necessary protections both while doing so and after having fled.
- iv) Allow civilians who have fled and wish to do so, to return to their homes as soon as it is safe enough for them to do so.

## PROTECTION CONCERNS OF CIVILIANS IN IDLEB GOVERNORATE

Following the agreement on the memorandum establishing various de-escalation areas in Syria, the number of airstrikes on Idleb Governorate has noticeably decreased and with it the number of reported civilian casualties and destruction of civilian infrastructure. That said, grounds remain for serious concern relating to the well-being of civilians and their ability to enjoy their basic human rights in Idleb Governorate remain as OHCHR receives ongoing reports of violations and abuses by armed opposition groups inflicted upon civilians as well as *hors de combat* fighters from other groups. Such incidents include the carrying out of extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detention, pillage, and cruel treatment. In one example, OHCHR received

reports of a high-ranking officer in the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Division 13 having been held by HTS in a raid on his house on 18 June. Reports indicated that after being injured by gunshots, he was taken away and killed by severe blows to the head.

Common Article 3 of the Four Geneva Conventions requires that members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and surrendered, or otherwise placed “hors de combat” by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, be in all circumstances treated humanely. This includes a prohibition on the infliction of any kind of humiliating and degrading treatment, torture, or murder. Should the fighter be wounded or sick, he must be cared for. Such protection is granted to all fighters without distinction and regardless of the group they belong to. The killing of captured fighters is a war crime.

There has also been an increase of the use of car bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) being used by various armed groups against each other's positions. On 23 June, a car bomb exploded near a Jaysh Al-Fatah-run police station located in a market in Idleb city, reportedly killing four fighters. On 24 June a car bomb exploded near a market in Dana city, located north of Idleb which reportedly killed 7 civilians and injured at least 30 others. On the same day, the towns of Armanaz, Sarmad and Idleb witnessed explosions caused by car bombs and IEDs with no reported civilian casualties.

At the same time, as armed opposition groups are increasingly involved in clashes between each other,

rising incidents of criminal activity are being reported with civilians being subjected to abductions, armed robberies, along with cases of mob justice where civilians have begun to take justice into their own hands. On 10 May in the town of Atma, two children accused of robbery were hung upside down for an entire day. On 10 June a member of a local council was reportedly abducted by unidentified men south of Idleb. On 14 June, an ambulance driver working in the hospital of Khan Shaykhun was allegedly abducted, reportedly by members of HTS. On 15 June, a child was reportedly killed and a woman injured by gunshots fired by unidentified actors near a mosque in Idleb city.

### Armed opposition group infighting and repression of the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.

Following on from long standing tensions between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and other armed opposition groups, on 8 June 2017, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) raided various positions of Division 13 in the city of Ma'arat An Nu'man. HTS claimed that the raid came as a response to the killing of the father of one of their fighters by Division 13. Intense armed clashes broke out between the two groups within the city and resulted in the killing of a 50 year old street vendor.

Civilian residents subsequently protested publicly on the same day as the HTS raids, calling for an end to the fighting and the immediate withdrawal of HTS from Ma'arat An Nu'man. Two civilians were reportedly injured as a result of HTS fighters firing both in the air and at civilians in an attempt to



disperse protesters, and a further four were allegedly severely beaten and detained. About 300 children gathering in an orphanage to break the Ramadan fast near the clashes had to be evacuated.

After two days of infighting between HTS and Division 13, HTS withdrew from positions it had taken within the city, and while retreating reportedly pillaged the education directorate of Ma'arat An Nu'man, the electricity generating plant, a water pumping station, as well as civilian property including vehicles, furniture and personal belongings.

Protests by civilians condemning abuses by HTS have taken place regularly within Ma'arat An Nu'man, and similarly to incidents raised in the March 2017 Digest with regard to Eastern Ghouta, OHCHR has received reports of activists and journalists being subjected to harassment and intimidation by various armed opposition groups, particularly Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

In other parts of Idleb and northern Hama governorates, clashes between competing armed groups, most notably between HTS and Ahrar-Al-Sham, continue to affect the well-being of civilians. Such clashes have reportedly been over the control of border crossings, checkpoints, as well as the monopoly on key resources such as electricity.

On 11 June, Ahrar Al-Sham reportedly cut off electricity from the main electricity station in Atchane in northern rural Hama in response to the HTS monopoly on the supply of electricity and the high power prices demanded. Parts of Idleb Governorate have as a consequence been deprived

of electricity, including some hospitals. In addition, Ahrar Al-Sham fighters have reportedly prevented a team of technicians sent by HTS to repair the power station from accessing the site.

## [Conditions of persons deprived of their liberty](#)

OHCHR has received a number of reports which it is investigating with regard to allegations of abuses perpetrated within holding units of armed opposition groups in Idleb Governorate, particularly those controlled by HTS. In a statement dated 16 June 2017, the Political Committee of Idleb Governorate (the body which coordinates all public services and local councils in Idleb) condemned the recent "arrests" by Ahrar Al-Sham and HTS, called for the immediate and unconditional release of those "arbitrarily detained" and requested access for NGOs to monitor facilities where such persons are being held. The statement also requested armed opposition groups to provide information on missing persons, ensure the safe return of those who had been forced to leave, and support the establishment of an independent court.

## [Looking Forward](#)

Tensions continue to mount between the armed opposition groups operating in Idleb and northern Hama governorates, with each group seeking to gain control over strategic positions and infrastructure. The influx of fighters from other areas of Syria subject to local ceasefire agreements with the Government of Syria is also increasingly destabilising an already fragile area of the country. International

shifts in alliances and policies including the ongoing rift between the State of Qatar and some other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council will also undoubtedly have repercussions in terms of the financing and support of various groups. As armed groups battle for control of the area, the well-being of civilians is placed increasingly at risk.

The situation facing civilians should also be viewed in the context of them being confined in an area surrounded by hostile pro-Government<sup>1</sup> forces who are increasingly gaining the upper hand against armed opposition groups. Despite the different context, parallels and warnings can be drawn from Rwanda where in 1995 under “Operation Turquoise” approximately 1.2 million people were confined within an area approximately 1/5<sup>th</sup> the size of the country, alongside armed groups opposed to the new Rwandan Government. The presence of such armed elements hostile to the Government and civilians perceived as being affiliated with it, led to the Government increasingly viewing the entire area as a threat. The Rwandan Government eventually entered the area in an attempt to remove armed elements from within the largest IDP camp in the area, Kibeho. At least 4,000 people were killed during the operation, many reportedly summarily executed.

Similarly in Idleb and northern Hama Governorates, the increasing infighting and security vacuum, coupled with the influx of fighters from other areas of Syria, is putting civilians at serious risk and risks

leading to a possible large-scale military operation by pro-Government forces to take over the area. While discussions relating to the deployment of international troops to the area as part of the de-escalation areas may go somewhere towards alleviating concerns of a final military confrontation in Idleb Governorate, it should be remembered that in Rwanda international troops were present inside the protected area prior to and during the intervention by the Government.

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<sup>1</sup> “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.