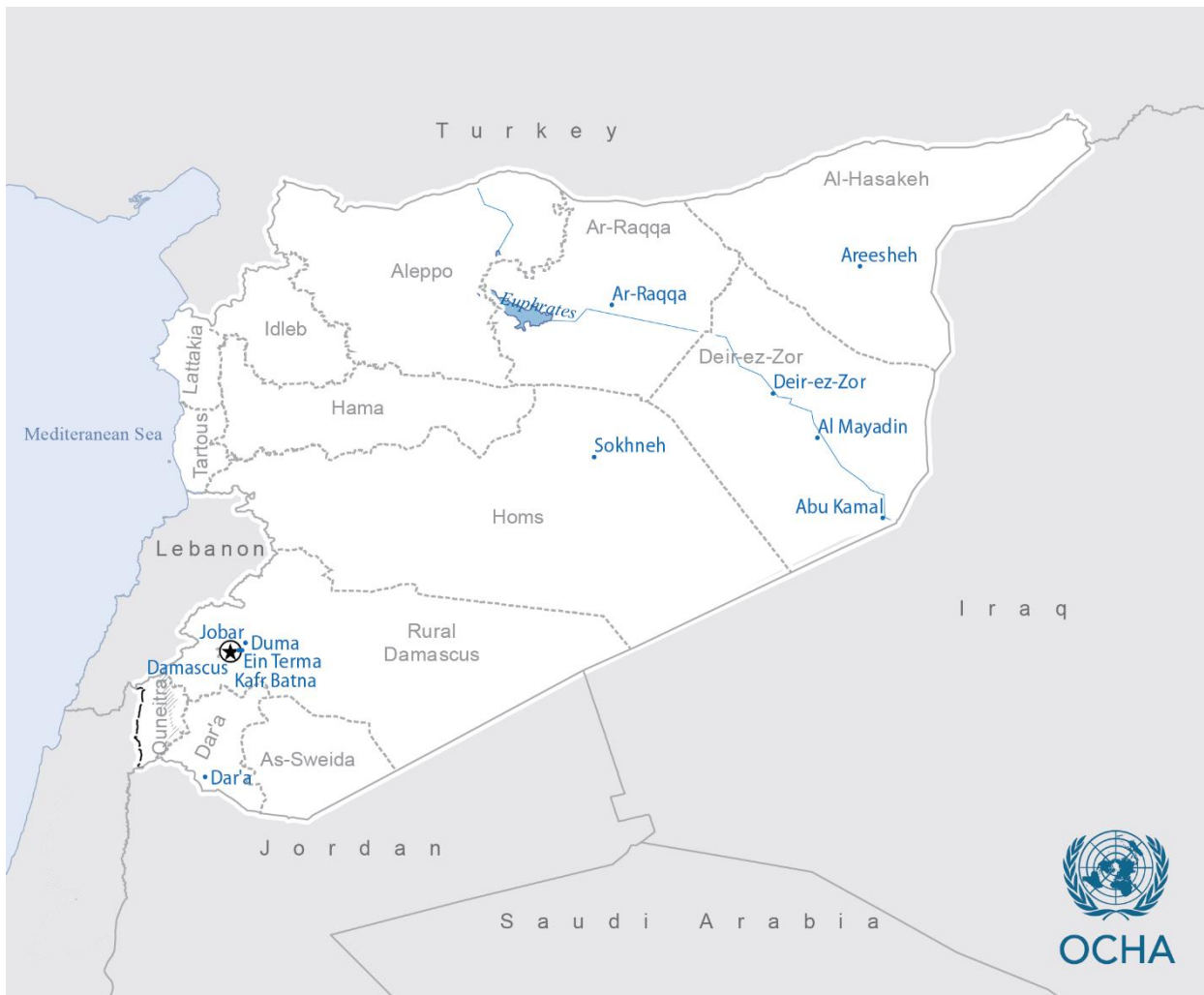


MONTHLY HUMAN RIGHTS DIGEST

SYRIA | August 2017

- Radically increased airstrikes in and around Ar-Raqqa city have resulted in high civilian casualties in this area. At the same time, the dramatic reduction in military engagements including airstrikes and ground-based strikes between pro-Government forces and armed opposition groups in some areas subject to “de-escalation areas” by international guarantors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran has led to a reduction in civilian casualties in such areas as Dar’a city and surrounding areas, and Idlib Governorate. Elsewhere such areas exist in name only, notably in parts of the besieged eastern Ghouta where tensions between armed opposition groups vying for influence and control persist as do strikes by pro-Government forces, which seek to further advance in the area and force individual advantageous ceasefire agreements.
- In eastern Syria, high levels of violence continue, including urban combat accompanied by intense airstrikes and ground-based strikes directed against ISIL-held areas in Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Similar levels of violence are taking place in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate as increased airstrikes hit the areas in and around Al-Maydeen and Albo Kamal, and pro-Government forces make rapid gains towards Deir-ez-Zor city from the west. Meanwhile ISIL continues to prevent civilians from leaving areas under its control and has launched a forced conscription drive. Those who have managed to flee have in some instances been confined to makeshift IDP camps where the humanitarian situation is reportedly severe and civilians face severe shortages of items essential for their survival such as water, food, and medicine.



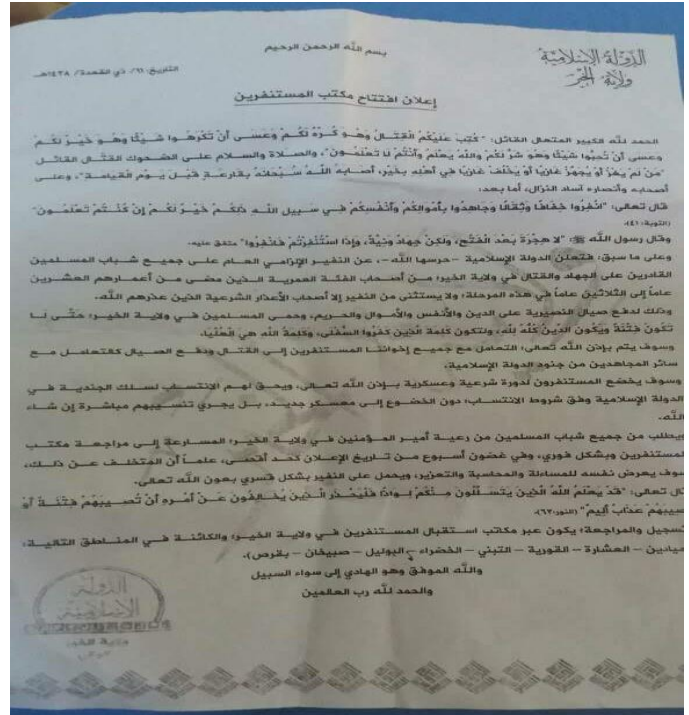
This Monthly Human Rights Digest on Syria has been prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights based on information collected by the Office along with contributions from other agencies. It is intended to serve as an overview of some current and possible future human 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.

The battle to regain Ar-Raqqa from ISIL has radically escalated, with airstrikes and ground-based strikes resulting in extremely large numbers of reports of civilian casualties. The situation of around 20,000 civilians in the city is increasingly perilous, with some remaining trapped and others risking strikes, unexploded ordinance, and crossfire to flee the area. OHCHR remains alarmed by the situation on the ground,¹ and notes that the ongoing battle raises grave concerns not only about the situation in the city itself, but what it means for the likely next battle in Deir-ez-Zor.

DEIR-EZ-ZOR

In recent weeks, pro-Government forces² made significant advances on the ground in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate including from southern Ar-Raqqa Governorate, from southern and eastern Homs Governorate - capturing the last ISIL-held area of Al-Sukhna - as well as from ISIL-besieged Deir-ez-Zor city where pro-Government forces have been encircled along with up to 70,000 civilians for over two years.

In parallel, the number of airstrikes, reportedly carried out primarily by US-led Coalition forces (and to a lesser extent by pro-Government forces, and possibly also Iraqi forces), continued to intensify and affect ISIL-controlled cities, towns, and villages in the Governorate. The majority of such strikes were recorded as taking place in and around the cities of Albo Kamal and Al-Mayadeen with OHCHR receiving



“Anyone who fails to enlist within one week from this announcement will be forcibly deployed to the front lines.”
-- ISIL order issued on 3 August 2017

reports of civilians, including women and children, being killed in such strikes.

Meanwhile, ISIL fighters are understood to have recently launched a massive campaign to forcibly conscript civilians (allegedly aged between 20 and 30) in Albo Kamal and Al-Mayadeen areas to fight in the upcoming battle. OHCHR received reports that ISIL has previously forced civilians to join the group and undertake support tasks such as trench digging, information provision, and meal preparation.

Looking Forward

With the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) having encircled Ar-Raqqa city and making slow but steady progress within it, pro-Government forces are taking advantage of ISIL being pinned down on that front to continue their advance into Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. ISIL fighters are expected to launch

¹ "Battle to regain Raqqa must not be about defeating ISIL at all costs - Zeid," 31 August 2017.

² "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.

assaults and counterattacks against pro-Government forces in and around Deir-ez-Zor city.

The tribal social structure of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate suggests the SDF would be unlikely to lead counter-ISIL offensives in the area. Nevertheless, as the only local force on the ground working with the Coalition and possessing the necessary equipment and training to engage with ISIL, their involvement in military operations in coordination - official or tacit - with pro-Government forces cannot be ruled out.

OHCHR continues to receive reports of high levels of **civilian casualties resulting from airstrikes** launched against ISIL-held areas, including in and around Al-Mayadeen and Albo Kamal. Up to 70,000 civilians are estimated to be in Deir-ez-Zor city along with an unknown number of pro-Government forces. The number of civilians in and around Al-Mayadeen and Albo Kamal cities is unclear, with many believed to be located within densely-populated areas. Thousands of refugees from Iraq are likely in the cities as well. All such civilians remain at serious risk from intense bombardment and fighting, as well as continuous displacement. Previous engagements of the various parties to the conflict strongly suggest a high risk of **indiscriminate attacks** and disregard by attacking and defending parties of the principles of **precautions and proportionality**.

OHCHR has in previous Digests raised concerns with regard to acts of **retaliation** by numerous parties against persons perceived to have been affiliated with enemy parties - both pro-Government and opposition forces. In Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, concern is primarily with pro-Government militias,

as was seen in December 2016 in Aleppo, when OHCHR documented the reported killing of at least 82 civilians by such militias in areas recently taken over from armed opposition groups. These militias are a large component of the pro-Government forces presently advancing against ISIL-held areas, and many are unregulated, outside the Syrian armed forces' general command and sometimes driven by ideological motives. Acts of retaliation by such groups including **cruel treatment, torture, and murder** against persons believed to be affiliated with enemy groups such as ISIL cannot be excluded.

Similarly, the Government of Syria and the SDF have in the past arrested civilians perceived to have been affiliated or expressed sympathy for other armed groups and either **arbitrarily detained** them, or otherwise **denied their fair trial rights**.

As ISIL fighters continues to lose ground to both the SDF and pro-Government forces, they will likely continue to prevent civilians from leaving - using some as **human shields** - and place improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in areas where they are likely to kill or injure civilians. Those believed to be affiliated with or sympathetic to attacking forces, as well as *hors de combat* fighters will likely be subjected to violations including cruel treatment, torture, and murder.

At the same time, ISIL's tactic of indiscriminately detonating car and truck bombs prior to launching ground assaults will put the safety of civilians currently located close to attacking forces - including those besieged alongside pro-Government forces inside Deir-ez-Zor city - at high risk.

MAKESHIFT CAMPS IN SDF-CONTROLLED AREAS

The continued increase in airstrikes along with the resulting deterioration of the security situation in Deir-ez-Zor has resulted in **internal displacement** of large numbers of civilians both within and from the Governorate. OHCHR has received information that up to 180 families - primarily from Al-Mayadeen and Albo Kamal cities - fled ISIL-controlled areas in August after paying substantial amounts of money and at enormous risk to their safety, and are now being held in the makeshift Al-Sadd (or Al-Arisha) camp located in SDF-controlled Al-Arisha village in southern Al-Hasakeh Governorate. Established in early July 2017, the site now hosts more than 6,000 IDPs from Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor eastern Aleppo, and eastern Homs governorates. Scores of people are reported to be arriving at the site on a near-daily basis. Any such involuntary confinement may amount to **arbitrary arrest or detention**. The SDF have allegedly confiscated all ID cards and restricted the movement of the IDPs. The humanitarian situation inside the camp is reportedly of extreme concern - with no toilets, limited medical care, and a severe shortage of food, water, and medicine. SDF-linked smugglers inside the camp are allegedly asking for up to USD 400 per person to facilitate exit from the camp. On 5 July, a malnourished three-year-old boy from Sheheil town in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate reportedly died in the camp due to lack of water. Four other civilians, including two girls, allegedly died in the camp in August due to the harsh conditions and poor access to healthcare. While the conditions in Al-Sadd are understood to

be the most extreme, OHCHR has also received reports of poor conditions in other camps and sites such as Ain Essa Camp in northern Ar-Raqqa Governorate, and Al-Hol, Al-Mabrouka, and Rajm Salibi sites in Al-Hasakeh Governorate. On 2 May ISIL fighters attacked an SDF-controlled checkpoint at the entrance to Rajm Salibi camp - located in close proximity to the ISIL/SDF frontline - and at least 19 civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed in the crossfire with 18 others injured, including at least four women and four children.

Recommendations

All actors with influence over the SDF and related authorities running IDP camps are called urgently to exert all available influence to afford IDPs seeking refuge in areas under their control all basic protection requirements prescribed by international humanitarian and human rights law, including:

- Ensuring the physical security of camp residents, including placing such facilities as far as feasible from the frontlines and military objectives.
- Refraining from confiscating identity documents of IDPs and seek alternative options to such confiscation. Should it be unavoidable, allow only temporary confiscation as strictly required by the need to establish the individual's identity.
- Avoiding family separation at all costs.
- Placing no undue restrictions on the freedom of movement of civilians.

- Providing basic life-saving assistance to camp residents, including water, food, and medicine.
- Ensuring protections to vulnerable populations, including children, women, and the wounded and sick as well as those with disabilities.
- Ensuring that any screening of persons entering such camps is as expeditious as possible and implemented in accordance with international law.
- Establishing clear SOPs on the screening of those exiting ISIL-held areas and the treatment of surrendered or otherwise placed *hors de combat* ISIL fighters in accordance with international law. Such SOPs should be widely disseminated to all personnel involved in such screenings.
- Facilitating the rights of the IDPs to seek safety elsewhere in the country or asylum.

EASTERN GHOUTA

The situation in eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus Governorate remains highly volatile, and daily life of civilians is increasingly hampered by shelling, military clashes, the ongoing siege imposed by pro-Government forces and restrictions on their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Ongoing Clashes between Armed Opposition Groups

In the context of the implementation of “de-escalation areas”, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced on 24 July it had deployed military

checkpoints and observation points around eastern Ghouta to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire. This has led to a reduction in violence in some parts of eastern Ghouta, primarily those controlled by Jaish Al-Islam, and allowed for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. On 31 July, a UN/Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) humanitarian convoy delivered food and non-food items (including educational materials) for 7,200 people in the besieged Nashabiyeh town. On 16 August, a 50-truck UN/SARC convoy delivered humanitarian assistance to 45,000 people in Duma town. Far more assistance is needed - particularly medical assistance, which was not included in the above convoy - notably in the southern part of Ghouta.

The presence of numerous armed opposition groups vying for control of territory and influence in the area, and competing and overlapping negotiations and political agreements between various international players has led to repeated infighting amongst the groups. The presence in eastern Ghouta of Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham - specifically excluded from any ceasefire agreement with pro-Government forces - has been a key obstacle to full adherence to the de-escalation areas, as alliances shift amongst armed opposition groups and pro-Government forces use its presence as justification not to fully implement any ceasefire agreements.

While Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham on its side reportedly is a marginal military force in the area, their strength in Idleb Governorate enables them to mobilise financial resources and considerable influence over other small groups within eastern Ghouta. Recent infighting between Jaish Al-Islam and the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Failaq Al-Rahman was ostensibly

based on their alliances with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (see OHCHR Syria Monthly Human Rights Digest, July 2017).

On 22 July, Jaish Al-Islam participated in a meeting in Cairo - held within the Astana framework - in which Egypt mediated between Jaish Al-Islam and the Russian Federation. While Failaq Al-Rahman was not present, soon thereafter its representatives and those of Jaish Al-Islam reportedly began efforts to end their differences and join forces to expel Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham from eastern Ghouta. On 6 August, Failaq Al-Rahman issued a statement in which it accepted "the principle" of a Russian-brokered ceasefire that excluded armed groups that "do not enjoy popular support" - understood to be a reference to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Failaq Al-Rahman and Jaish Al-Islam then launched a coordinated military operation against the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham-controlled area of Al-Ashaari, taking over the area and arresting the group's fighters, but renewed clashes in the vicinity broke out between Failaq Al-Rahman and Jaish Al-Islam on 11 August, with the latter accusing the former of continuing to provide support to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Five days later, the Failaq Al-Rahman spokesperson disseminated a document allegedly signed in Geneva by the group's representatives and the Russian Federation agreeing to a ceasefire in the Jobar and Eastern Gouta de-escalation area, starting at 21:00 on 18 August. The document also included the group's commitment to either destroy or expel Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham from the areas under Failaq Al-Rahman's control and to provide "safe corridors" of HTS fighters to Idleb Governorate, "with or without their families".

Pro-Government Strikes

Following the July Cairo meeting between Russia and Jaish Al-Islam, pro-Government forces increasingly launched airstrikes and ground-based strikes on Failaq Al-Rahman-controlled areas of eastern Ghouta, and launched repeated ground incursions to take over the strategic Failaq Al-Rahman-controlled Ain Tarma and Kafr Batna towns, as well as the Damascus neighbourhood of Jobar. This escalation, along with the closure of the tunnels into eastern Ghouta - used to bring in both military and civilian items such as food and medicine - and the takeover by pro-Government forces of the Damascus neighbourhoods of Qaboun and Barza, has resulted in a serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the area. On 31 July the Ain Tarma humanitarian committee issued a statement claiming the town was a "disaster area", and that pro-Government strikes in July had killed 40 people and wounded more than 100 others. It further announced the suspension of its humanitarian operations in the area due to the constant shelling.

The ongoing offensive on Jobar and parts of eastern Ghouta has reportedly displaced the majority of civilians from Jobar and Ain Tarma. The recent intensification of attacks has allegedly trapped the few civilians left in the area who are seeking refuge in basements or fleeing to nearby residential areas of Kafr Batna, which has itself been repeatedly hit by ground-based strikes. In the period between 4 and 10 August, OHCHR received daily reports of ground-based strikes and airstrikes on civilian-populated areas including Ain Tarma and Kafr Batna which

allegedly killed and injured tens of civilians, including women and children.

Repressive Measures by Jaish Al-Islam against Freedoms of Expression, Assembly, and Association

OHCHR continues to remain concerned about ongoing reports of restrictions on freedom of expression in the Jaish Al-Islam-controlled city of Duma and threats against independent civil society groups and individuals. On 13 August around 13:00, a group of several dozen male protesters, some of them holding knives, allegedly stormed into a building located in Duma where several civil society organisations have offices. The men reportedly physically assaulted some of the staff members, looted the office, stole personal items, and threatened further retaliation against those present, including by setting fire to the building. Local police advised the civil society groups to shut down the office, stating that the police are unable to protect their members against the mob.

Civil society activists in Duma have faced recurrent pressures and intimidation. In March 2017, the same building was looted and the names and pictures of several individuals disseminated alongside threats following the publication of an article deemed blasphemous by a Jaish Al-Islam-run court (see OHCHR Syria Monthly Human Rights Digest, March 2017). Four prominent civil society and human rights activists - including human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouna - whose whereabouts remain unknown were abducted from the building on 9 December 2013.

Looking Forward

Ongoing infighting between the armed groups will continue as they struggle for influence and a seat at the negotiating table while the Government strengthens its overall control and local agreements become an increasingly attractive objective. At the same time pro-Government forces are taking further advantage of divisions between the groups in order to launch military offensives.

While focus remains on the effectiveness of de-escalation areas and ceasefire agreements, civilians will continue to be killed and injured, as well as face serious shortages of essential items such as food and medicine in areas where the political situation is being manipulated in order to achieve military gains - both between armed opposition groups and between such groups and pro-Government forces.

For more information on the topics raised or for any further information concerning the human rights situation in Syria, please contact Matthias Behnke, OHCHR Syria Coordinator, at mbehnke@ohchr.org.