



**“I WON’T FORGET THIS
CARNAGE”**

CIVILIANS TRAPPED IN BATTLE FOR RAQQA – SYRIA

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Cover photo: Smoke rises from building in Raqa's eastern al-Sanaa neighbourhood, on the edge of the old city, on August 13, 2017, as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US backed Kurdish-Arab alliance, battle to retake the city from the Islamic State (IS) group.

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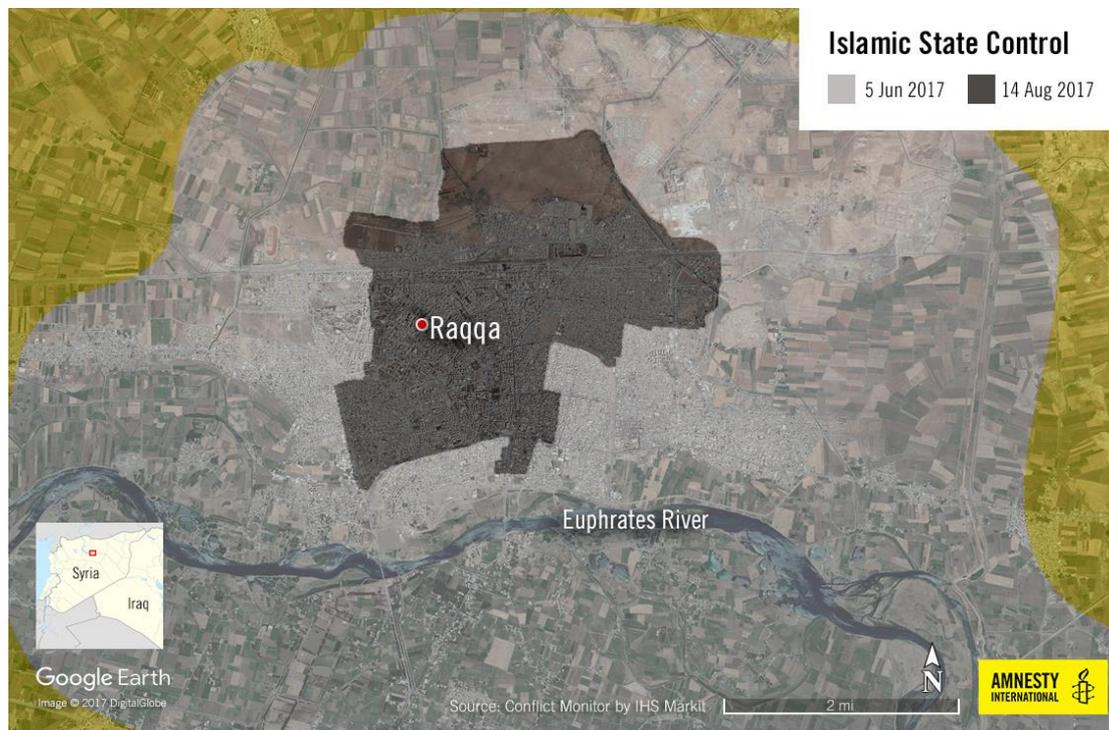
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MAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The battle for Raqqa, so-called capital and main stronghold of the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, is taking a heavy toll on civilians trapped under fire in the city. Since the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)¹ and the United States (US)-led coalition forces² launched the final stage of the military operation to recapture Raqqa on 6 June 2017, civilians have come under a barrage of ground and air attacks, while the IS has been using them as human shields and killing those attempting to escape areas under its control. At the same time Russia-backed Syrian government forces, engaged in military operation to recapture areas south of the Euphrates river from IS, have carried out indiscriminate attacks which have killed and injured civilian residents. As the battle intensifies in its final stages, the risk for the civilian population is set to increase.

Artillery and air strikes launched by coalition forces, usually on the basis of coordinates provided by the SDF, have killed hundreds of civilians since the start of the military operation to recapture the city.³ Some of the civilian casualties may have been the result of wrong targets having been struck by coalition forces based on wrong coordinates provided by the SDF. In April 2017 coalition forces said that wrong coordinates provided by the SDF resulted in a coalition strike which killed 18 SDF fighters,⁴ but no information has been made public by the coalition so far indicating whether similar incidents have resulted in civilian casualties.

In addition, guided and unguided artillery shells, as well as guided rockets and air-delivered bombs used by coalition forces, and mortars being used by SDF forces, have a wide lethal effect radius and thus carry a high risk of harming civilians when used in residential areas. Consistent testimonies of residents who fled the city recently indicate that salvos of unguided artillery shells have been fired into the city's residential neighbourhoods, targeting areas of hundreds of square metres rather than specific pinpoint targets – which, if true, would constitute not only disproportionate but also indiscriminate attacks.⁵

This report documents the killings of 95 civilians, including 41 children and 25 women, killed in coalition/SDF strikes in Raqqa; as well as 30 civilians, including 16 children and 3 women, killed in Russia-backed Syrian government air strikes south of Raqqa. These are out of a total of 176 cases of civilians of which 146 by coalition/SDF, including 60 children and 42 women, killed in and around Raqqa in the context of the ongoing military operation in June and July 2017⁶, examined by Amnesty International in researching this report. This is a small sample of a much wider pattern.

¹ The SDF is a Kurdish-led alliance of armed groups, founded in October 2015 and including fighters from different ethnic and religious communities, which controls large areas of northern Syria and which is leading the military efforts to recapture Raqqa, with in partnership with the US-led coalition.

² The US-led coalition of more than 30 countries involved in the Raqqa military operation has been carrying out military operations in Syria and Iraq since 2014. It was initially established by the US Department of Defense as the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) on 17 October 2014. See <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/>.

³ According to the information available to Amnesty International, US forces carry out almost all the air strikes in the Raqqa military operation, with a small percentage carried out by other coalition members, and US forces are the only coalition members carrying out ground (artillery) strikes, alongside SDF forces who fight with lighter weapons and 120mm mortars. SDF forces fighting on the ground provide coordinates to the coalition forces for the targets to be struck with artillery and air strikes. See for example: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUKKBN18Z2FH>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKqHrFP9L4>; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/11/syria-conflict-ijihadists-raqa.html>.

⁴ Misdirected strike results in partnered force casualties, CJTF-OIR, 13 April 2017 <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/News-Releases/Article/1150611/misdirected-strike-results-in-partnered-force-casualties/>.

⁵ Residents described strikes of six or 12 artillery shells landing in and around their street one after the other, consistent with the firing of salvos of unguided artillery shells.

⁶ Except for two cases of airstrikes in May 2017.



Raqqa Old City overview. Imagery taken on 2 June 2016. ©CNES 2017, Distribution AIRBUS DS



Raqqa Old City overview. Imagery taken on 19 July 2017. ©CNES 2017, Distribution AIRBUS DS

IS fighters, for their part, use crude unguided projectiles, including locally manufactured mortars, and a host of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including car bombs, all of which pose an inherent lethal danger to civilians. Moreover, the danger for civilian residents of getting caught in crossfire between the warring sides is all the more acute as IS fighters have been redoubling efforts to prevent civilians from leaving the city, using them as human shields while they launch attacks against SDF and coalition forces from amongst the

civilians. Those who have recently managed to flee the city – at great risk - have told Amnesty International that IS fighters have been mining and booby-trapping possible escape routes and shooting at civilians attempting to flee.

Meanwhile, just south of Raqqa, on the southern bank of the Euphrates river, Syrian government forces, backed by Russian forces, have been launching indiscriminate air bombardments against towns, villages and displaced people's shelters full of civilians. According to consistent survivors' testimonies, internationally banned cluster bombs were used in some of those attacks, which killed at least 18 civilians and injured dozens in July 2017.

Civilians are thus trapped in the city, under fire from all sides, as the fighting intensifies. The conduct of IS fighters, notably the fact that they embed themselves among the civilian population, poses a serious challenge for forces battling IS and significantly increases the risk that civilians will be harmed.

Notwithstanding these challenges, and in fact because of them, it is imperative that all the parties to the conflict take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians; fully comply with the rules of international humanitarian law in the planning and execution of strikes and attacks - including by cancelling attacks that risk being indiscriminate, disproportionate or otherwise unlawful, and ending the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated civilian areas, in compliance with the prohibition on indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.



Families displaced by the conflict in Raqqa look for shelter in abandoned apartments in damaged and unsafe buildings in nearby towns previously recaptured from ISIS.
© Amnesty International

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on field research carried out between 25 July and 2 August 2017 in northern Syria, where Amnesty International interviewed civilians displaced by the conflict in and around Raqqa who are now sheltering in formal and makeshift camps for internally displaced persons (IDP), schools, construction sites and other shelters in areas controlled by the YPG and the SDF, including Ain Issa, Manbij, Tabqa, Tal Abyad and rural areas to the east and west of Raqqa.

Two Amnesty International researchers interviewed 98 civilian residents of Raqqa and areas south of the Euphrates river, including 29 women and nine children.⁷ All the interviews were carried out in private, without the presence of any authorities, translators or others. Amnesty International also interviewed medical and humanitarian personnel and journalists and activists operating in and around Raqqa, politicians and members of the military and security forces and military and security experts, and reviewed open-source written and audio-visual material from a variety of sources. The organization obtained and analysed satellite images of several locations in and around Raqqa city taken on different dates before and since the beginning of the Raqqa military operation.

Most of the interviewees in this report are referred to by their first name only and in several cases names of witnesses and survivors have been changed, due to concern for their security. In the latter cases the names are in quotation marks.

Civilian casualties examined in this report are believed to have been caused by artillery and air strikes – based on survivors' and witnesses' description of the incidents – carried out by coalition forces, operating in partnership with the SDF, in and around Raqqa city and by Russian-backed Syrian government forces in areas south of the Euphrates river.⁸

⁷ Children were interviewed with the consent of their families. Some of them were girls aged 15 to 18, who are married and with children of their own.

⁸ Amnesty International did not attempt at this time to investigate casualties from mortars and other shorter-range projectiles fired by the SDF and IS fighters as this would have been more difficult without access to the strike locations and the rapidly shifting frontlines between SDF and IS fighters in the city.

BACKGROUND

Syrian government forces lost control of Raqqa City to armed opposition groups including Ahrar al Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra in early March 2013, making Raqqa the first Syrian provincial capital from which government forces were expelled entirely since the beginning of the uprising in 2011.⁹ After a brief power struggle with other armed groups, by the end of 2013 the IS had taken full control of the city,¹⁰ which it held until June 2017, when the ongoing military operation to recapture the city was launched by the SDF and US-led coalition forces.



Children displaced by the battle in Raqqa sheltering in IDP camp in Ain Issa, northern Syria. © Amnesty International

The formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was announced on 11 October 2015 with the stated objective to “unite secular and democratic forces including Kurds, Arabic, Syriacs and other groups” to form a national military force to confront IS and build a democratic Syria.¹¹ Though comprising disparate Arab

⁹ Armed opposition groups only ever managed to take control of parts of other cities, such as Homs, Aleppo and Deir al-Zour. For more details see, for example: <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2014/01/how-did-Raqqa-fall-to-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-syria/>

¹⁰ “The Mysterious Fall of Raqqa, Syria’s Kandahar” Firas al-Hakkar, Al-Akhbar, 8 November 2013 – <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17550> .

¹¹ “New Syrian Rebel Alliance Formed, Says Weapons on the Way”, Suleiman al-Khalidi and Tom Perry, Reuters, 12 October 2015 – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCNOS60BD20151012> .

tribal militia, former Free Syrian Army (FSA) elements and Assyrian Christian Fighters, the SDF is dominated by the Kurdish armed group Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG, Peoples Protection Units). Prior to the creation of the SDF, the YPG had been battling Islamic factions in northeastern Syria since 2013 and, with US support, had already succeeded in driving IS from several towns in the areas and establishing an area of Kurdish autonomous control which it calls Rojava,¹² and which currently stretches from the northeastern border with Iraq to Jarablus in Syria's northwest. Relations between the YPG and Arab Muslim and Christian communities which currently form part of the SDF have long been uneasy, partly due to the YPG's aspiration for an autonomous region in northern Syria which encompasses areas populated by non-Kurdish communities, and partly because of its ambiguous relations with Syria's government.¹³

The SDF announced Operation Euphrates Wrath to oust the IS from Raqqa and its surrounding areas on 6 November 2016. The operation took place in five phases,¹⁴ with the fifth and final phase announced on 6 June 2017 and currently ongoing.¹⁵ The SDF operates in partnership with the US-led Coalition, which also provides weapons and training to the SDF, as part of its fight against IS, dubbed Operation Inherent Resolve.¹⁶

At the same time, in June 2017 Syrian government troops, supported by Russian forces,¹⁷ launched a military operation in areas south of the Euphrates River and of Raqqa to recapture the strategic provincial capital of Deir al-Zour, on the border with Iraq, part of which has been under IS control since 2013. At the time of writing Syrian government forces continued to advance eastwards towards Deir al-Zour.¹⁸

¹² For more on the de-facto self-administered Kurdish areas in north Syria see for example: Kurdish Self-governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition" Ghadi Sary, Chatham House, September 2016 <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/assets/documents/2016-09-15-kurdish-self-governance-syria-sary.pdf> .

¹³ Despite its stated opposition to the Syrian government, the YPG has maintained a degree of tactical cooperation with the Syrian government and its forces, including in the context of its power struggle with armed opposition groups since 2012 – first against FSA groups and currently against IS. YPG and government forces currently share control of Qamishli and Hassakeh cities in northern Syria. For more details also see for example: Secret Russian-Kurdish-Syrian military cooperation is happening in Syria's eastern desert, The Independent, 24 July 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-isis-russia-kurdish-ypg-happening-in-secret-a7857471.html> .

¹⁴ Phase 1 focused on the northern Raqqa countryside and phase 2, announced on 10 December 2016, on the rural areas west of the city (See: "Syrian Democratic Forces Launch Fourth Phase of anti-ISIS Raqqa Campaign", Wladimir van Wilgenberg, 14 April 2017 – <http://aranews.net/2017/04/syrian-democratic-forces-launch-fourth-phase-of-anti-isis-raqqa-campaign/>). Phase 3, announced on 4 February 2017, focused on the eastern countryside of the city (See: SDF announcement, with English subtitles, – ARANEWS, accessible at isis.liveuamap.com <https://isis.liveuamap.com/en/2017/4-february-sdf-announcement-with-english-subtitles-about>). Phase 4, announced on 13 April focused on clearing the northern countryside and included the capture of the strategically important city of Tabqa, to the west of Raqqa on 11 May 2017 (See: "US-backed militia celebrates victory over IS at Syria's Tabqa", MEE and Agencies, 11 May 2017 – <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sdf-celebrate-biggest-victory-yet-against-tabqa-liberated-448817461>).

¹⁵ "US-backed force launches assault on Islamic State's 'capital' in Syria", Reuters, 5 June 2017 – <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKBN18W29P> .

¹⁶ The involvement of Coalition forces in the conduct of hostilities, in partnership with the SDF and not at the invitation of the Syrian government, is governed by the laws of war applicable to international armed conflicts, whereas actions by the SDF are governed by the laws of war applicable to non-international armed conflicts.

¹⁷ See for example: Secret Russian-Kurdish-Syrian military cooperation is happening in Syria's eastern desert, The Independent, 24 July 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-isis-russia-kurdish-ypg-happening-in-secret-a7857471.html> .

¹⁸ Tensions between Syrian and Coalition forces peaked in June 2017, when US forces shot down a Syrian warplane in response to a Syrian government air strike which allegedly targeted the SDF; See: "US coalition downs first Syrian government jet", BBC, 19 June 2017 – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40322666> . On 19 June 2017 Syrian forces captured al-Resafa, 65 km southwest of Raqqa city, and on 10 August 2017 they captured al-Sukhnah, 150 km south of Raqqa.

DISPROPORTIONATE STRIKES – COALITION SHELLS RAINING DOWN ON CIVILIANS

“Artillery shells are hitting everywhere, entire streets. It is indiscriminate shelling and kills a lot of civilians”

Ahmad Mahmoud, injured in artillery strike in Raqqa in June 2017

In preparation for Operation Euphrates Wrath, the US-led coalition moved US Special Operation Forces, US Army Rangers and US 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit to north eastern Syria to provide artillery support to SDF forces. US forces are armed with M777 Howitzers, which fire 155mm shells, and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) with GPS-directed 227mm rockets.¹⁹ SDF forces meanwhile, were equipped with 120mm mortars.²⁰

Coalition forces’ reliance to a large extent on weapons which have a wide impact radius and which cannot be accurately pinpointed at specific targets to neutralise IS targets in civilian neighbourhoods, has exacted a significant toll on civilians.

Residents of Raqqa explained the cost of these tactics to civilian life. Ahmad, who was injured in a barrage of artillery shells in the Daraiya neighbourhood, west of the city centre, around 10 June 2017 told Amnesty International:

“Twelve shells landed in and around the street, striking several houses and killing at least 12 people. I can only speak about the 12 people I know who were killed in five houses near where I was. I don’t know if the other shells killed more people. The first shell landed right behind the house where I was. Instinctively I fled across the road to the home of another relative but the next shell struck that house. The houses there are simple one-storey houses, so they don’t offer much protection from such strikes. The owner of the house, a 75-year-old man and his 13-year-old

¹⁹ Images from Syria have shown US Marines employing the low-cost XM1156 fuze kit, which turns regular high-explosive shells into GPS-guided projectiles. Reports that US forces fired HIMARS towards Raqqa: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2017/6-june-reports-that-us-himars-fired-6-rockets-towards-Raqqa> .

²⁰ Images showing SDF fighters using 120mm mortars: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXFzfEQF4sE/> ; <http://naplesherald.com/2017/07/28/claims-deadly-attack-north-us-backed-force/> .

grandson Suleiman were both killed next to me. I was injured, as were Mahmoud's son and daughter. We were all in the same room.

Another shell hit another house nearby killing two women and two children: Mahmoud's daughter, Rajaha, two of her daughters, Tabarak, five, and Mouna, 18 months, and her mother-in-law, also called Rajaha, about 55. Another shell struck another nearby house, killing Ibrahim, his 18-month-old son, and his friend Rahmoun. Another shell killed Hisham in another house, and another still killed the two daughters of Hsein Kenjo; I don't know their names but they were about eight or ten years old.

It all happened in the space of a few minutes, sometime between 1 and 2pm, the shells struck one after the other. It was indescribable, it was like the end of the world – the noise, people screaming. If I live a 100 years I won't forget this carnage. Artillery shells are hitting everywhere, entire streets. It is indiscriminate shelling and kills a lot of civilians".²¹



Raqqa, Ihsewa crossroad area. Imagery taken on 19 July 2017 after a series of strikes launched on 9 June. Yellow circles highlight some of the damaged areas. Coordinates: 35.9479°, 38.9864°. ©CNES 2017, Distribution AIRBUS DS

On 8 and 9 June several civilians were killed in a series of strikes – a mix of air and artillery strikes according to witnesses and relatives of the victims - in the Daraiya neighbourhood of Raqqa, west of the city centre. Among them were the father and brother of Intissar, who told Amnesty International:

“On 14th day of Ramadan (8 June) a shell struck our home, killing my father, Rabi’a, who was 60 years old. The following day another shell killed my brother, Kuteiba. He was in the street near the mosque in our neighbourhood. He was going around telling neighbours that the Daesh checkpoints had gone and so there was an opportunity to escape.

He was 27 and the father of three girls and his wife is pregnant. He had been imprisoned many times by Da’esh for selling cigarettes, and the last time, 18 months ago, they amputated his right hand. They told him that because he kept committing the crime of selling cigarettes – because they consider smoking a crime and selling cigarettes an even bigger crime – it was as serious as stealing and so they gave him the same punishment as for stealing and amputated his hand. And now, just

²¹ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

as he was looking forward to the end of Daesh's brutal rule, he was killed by those who are liberating Raqqa. He won't see Raqqa free, and his baby won't ever know his father".²²

“Whether you live or die depends on luck because you don't know where the next shell will strike, so you don't know where to run”

Mohammed, resident of Raqqa's Daraiya neighbourhood.

In the early evening of 8 June, Abdallah Allawi, his wife Muntaha, and their seven sons, aged between three and 18, were killed when their home was shelled and destroyed. Mariam, a neighbour, told Amnesty International that she presumed that the house had been hit by an air strike because it had been completely destroyed, but she could not be sure. The house was a simple one-storey structure and the destruction could have been caused by either air or artillery strikes.



Imagery taken on 2 June 2017 and on 19 July, before and after an airstrikes launched on the evening of 8 June 2017. Coordinates: 35.9482°, 39.9864°. ©CNES 2017, Distribution AIRBUS DS

Nearby, the home of Jamal al-Aswad, a 52-year-old food vendor was struck just after midnight (night between 8 and 9 June). His next door neighbour, Mohammed, told Amnesty International:

“Jamal was killed for sure but I don't know if his wife and children were there or not. If they were there they are also dead. We found no survivors but don't know how many bodies were under the rubble. I fear they were also killed because I don't think he had managed to get them out. I had been trying to leave for three days with my family but it was impossible. Da'esh had destroyed the bridge going west and mined the roads going north-west. The only movement possible was eastward, towards the city centre. We eventually escaped some days later by going into the city centre and then to the south and across the river.

Also killed was Abu Mahmud al-Tadfi with his wife and children, who were sheltering at Jamal's. Less than an hour before Jamal's house was bombed, I spoke to Abu Mahmud. He had come to stay with Jamal because they had had to leave their home. Jamal's home was on the ground floor of an unfinished building. I don't know how many children Abu Mahmud had, three for sure.

²² Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 1 August 2017. Other interviews with other witnesses were conducted on 27 and 30 July 2017.

Another strike hit the tent near the kaak [biscuits] bakery, where the baker, Mr Sufi, and his family lived. They were killed, along with Zahra, a young woman who worked at the bakery, and her husband and another neighbour. They were at the bakery working, and when the shelling started nearby, they ran to the tent. They went there because it was a little further away from the built-up area and they thought it would be safer, but the tent was shelled and they were killed right there. Whether you live or die depends on luck because you don't know where the next shell will strike, so you don't know where to run".²³

Another neighbour told Amnesty International that the shelling in the area had been intense:

"It was hell, many shells struck the area. Residents did not know how to save themselves. Some people ran from one place to another. People ran from the bakery to the baker's shelter only to be bombed there. Didn't the SDF and the Coalition know that the place was full of civilians? We were stuck there at that time because Daesh didn't let us leave".²⁴

Ahmed, who lived in the centre of Raqqa, near the Old Mosque, told Amnesty International that on 15 June a public gathering of IS members prompted shelling which killed 25 civilians:

"There had been a problem between IS and local civilians. I was in the area buying fruit juices for Iftar. It was around 7.15 in the evening. I saw a heated situation develop and I stopped on the corner to see what was going on. People were gathered outside the Old Mosque where IS used to exchange money for Durham Da'ashi [IS currency]. Some people got into an argument with an IS guy about the exchange rate. The IS guy took out his pistol and hit a man on the head with it. A fight broke out and around 20 local civilians beat two IS guys to death.

Soon afterwards six or seven IS cars arrived on the scene full of armed IS guys. They ordered everyone to return home immediately. They closed down all the shops and blocked off the streets. I went home, just down Sharia Jama al Qademeeh.

The first strike came at around 7.30pm. When I heard the explosion I ran from my home with my wife and three children, one of whom is disabled. We ran to a neighbour's house and hid in the cellar. There were 20 people from the neighbourhood in the cellar. He had prepared everything so there was food and water. We didn't come out for two days.

All night they shelled, every 15 minutes, with mortars and artillery. You could tell from the sound. The street is 2km long. There were around 100 IS in the area and around 2,000 civilians. When the shelling began the IS got in their cars and escaped. They [the SDF/coalition] killed 25 people on Sharia Jama al Qademeeh, including 10 children. I know because I met up with my neighbours and other people from the area at "aind al Democrati" [the SDF collection point for civilians beyond the frontline]. We all talked and everyone knew someone who had been killed that night.

One of the strikes hit my house and destroyed it. It was an Arab house of three storeys in Jama al Qademeeh. It also destroyed the adjoining house. The family living there was killed. Three brothers, Jihad aged 20-23, Ahmed aged 18 and Mahmoud, aged 15 or 16. Jihad's wife Beytool was also killed. She was 19 or 20 and had been 2 months pregnant. Another person killed was Abu Maher, a local motorcycle mechanic.

When we came out of the cellar we arranged to leave the area. I paid the smugglers 400USD to get me and my family out of Raqqa. We crossed the river and then crossed back again at Sahel where the SDF was positioned".²⁵

²³ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017. Other interviews with other witnesses were conducted on 30 July 2017.

²⁴ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017.

²⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017. Other interviews with other witnesses were conducted on 30 July 2017.

MENACING SKY OVER RAQQA – CIVILIAN CASUALTIES FROM COALITION AIRSTRIKES

“Don’t they keep watch over their targets before they bomb? If they had they would have known that there were only women and children there.”

“Aziz”, relative of the victims of a series of Coalition strikes in the Hukumya/Salhiya area northwest of Raqqa on the evening of 11 May 2017

The US-led coalition has been providing significant air support to the SDF offensive, and is the only force with air power over Raqqa City.²⁶ According to the accounts of residents of Raqqa City to Amnesty International, air strikes have been more accurate than artillery fire, though they have often also killed and injured civilians - at times entire families – in their homes or as they tried to flee.

A series of Coalition strikes on a farm in the Hukumya/Salhiya area northwest of Raqqa killed 14 members of a family and severely wounded two others on the evening of 11 May 2017. Eight of those killed in the attack were women and five were children. The two who were wounded were both children. Relatives of the victims told Amnesty International that those who perished were residents of Raqqa who had fled the looming battle there two months earlier and had since been living at the farm. “Aziz” told Amnesty International:

“My sisters, my mother, my nephews and nieces, were bombed to shreds for no reason at all. Four strikes were launched against a house full of women and children, why? Only one of my brothers was with them. My sister’s husband had stayed in Raqqa to try to protect their homes. They knew that if they left their homes empty Daesh would occupy them. The battle for Raqqa had not yet started but they got the women and children out for fear that the city would be besieged and they would get stuck there. That is why they were staying at the farm, to be safe, but death came to them in the more horrible way. Don’t they keep watch over their targets before they bomb? If they had they would have known that there were only women and children there.”²⁷

His brother “Marwan” added:

²⁶ Syrian government forces and Russian forces have not launched air strikes on Raqqa since the onset of the Raqqa military operation.

²⁷ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

*“I visited my mother and sisters that afternoon and shortly after I left, as I had almost reached my home, I saw a big fire in the distance, in the direction of my mother’s house. The planes were circling all night and we could not even approach the house to get the two injured children out from under the rubble until the following day. The bodies were in shreds. We recovered body parts hundreds of metres away”.*²⁸

Amnesty International researchers visited the site and from the pattern of destruction there seems little doubt that the house was destroyed by air strikes. At the site, the organization’s researchers recovered a fragment which weapon experts identified as a guidance fin from an American-designed Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM), which is a GPS-guided air-delivered bomb.²⁹ It is however not clear why the house was targeted. According to the two survivors of the strike, two children aged 14 and 15, no one was in the house other than the family members who lived there – eight women, seven children and one man. Amnesty International could not establish whether IS fighters might have been hiding in or launching attacks from the fields around the house before/at the time of the strike. However even if this was the case, it would not have constituted ground for targeting a house full of civilians.



Fragment of a guidance fin from an American-designed Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM), which is a GPS-guided air-dropped bomb. From one of the bombs used in an air strike in Hukmya/Salhiya area northwest of Raqqa killed 14 members of a family and severely wounded two others on the evening of 11 May 2017. Eight of those killed in the attack were women and five were children. The two who were wounded were both children. © Amnesty International

“Sabah”, “Widad” and “Jamila”, three women who survived a series of air strikes which killed 31 of their relatives on the evening of 12 May in Shannina, on the northern outskirts of Raqqa, told Amnesty International that the targeted houses were simple agricultural structures where members of several related families who had fled Raqqa were sheltering. “Jamila” recounted:

We lived in Meshleb (southeast of Raqqa) but we fled Raqqa last year when it was feared that the dam near Raqqa was at risk of exploding and flooding the city. We went to stay with my in-laws in Shannina, in the countryside north of Raqqa. Many of our relatives came to join us as they fled the repression of Da’esh. On 12 May the bombing started at about 8pm and continued until 4am. The planes were above all this time. I was in the early stages of my pregnancy and I started to bleed. I was terrified, I was holding my children close to me and praying that we would be safe; what else

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ JDAM adds to existing inventories of 1,000 and 2,000 pound conventional bombs a tail section containing Inertial Navigation System (INS) / Global Positioning System (GPS) guidance. See: <http://www.accrusaero.com/locations/accrus-aerospace-tulsa/major-programs/jdam-smart-bomb-smart-program/> .

could I do? In all 31 people were killed, most of them women and children. Many others were injured.³⁰

“Sabah” told Amnesty International:

“I don’t know why they bombed us. There were no terrorists with us. The bombs killed many children, small children aged few months to six years. Among those killed was my daughter Iman, her husband and their four-year-old son Haitham, and her mother-in-law Noura. And my niece Fadda was killed with three of her six children; one of them was a baby boy born four days earlier and not yet named.

“My other niece Sumaya, Fadda’s sister, and her husband and three of their four children were also killed. Another cousin, Jamal was killed with his mother Fatima and his two daughters, and his brother Mousa and his two-year-old son Mahmoud; and their cousin Mohammed and his son and daughter, aged four and six. It was a massacre, I have no words to describe the horror of what happened that night. I wish I had died with them and not have to remember it every day.”³¹

“Widad” listed yet more dead relatives: *“Amina and her husband and their little girl, and Amina’s sister, Shaha, and her husband and their two young children; and also uncle Mohammed Nasser who was more than 60 years old. We left our homes and went there to be safe away from Da’esh. Now as well as our homes we also lost our families.”³²*



Abdulsattar lost his seven-year-old son Mohammed in a coalition air strike in Raqqa City in June. He was in the street pushing his cart and collecting plastic and metal when a nearby building was bombed and collapsed, injuring him and killing his son. © Amnesty International

Survivors told Amnesty International that they had heard the sound of explosions in the area, quite far from them, but that they had not been able to identify whether it was incoming or outgoing fire. Fighting between IS members and SDF/Coalition forces was ongoing in the outskirts of Raqqa at the time, but Amnesty International could not establish how close the fighting was to the location of this very severe incident. However, even if there had been armed confrontations and/or IS positions nearby, this could not justify launching such an attack on shelters full of civilians.

³⁰ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July and 1 August 2017.

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

In the old city of Raqqa, a family of five, the parents and three children were killed on the evening of 1 July when an air strike hit the building they lived in, near the Old Mosque. A neighbor who witnessed the strike told Amnesty International that the nearest IS target was some 100 metres away:

“Since 20 Ramadan (15 June) the shelling was daily with rockets and mortars. It was hard to leave, someone I know was killed by an IS sniper. On 1 July at around 5pm an air strike hit our four-storey building near Makhbas al Tayar [Tayar bakery], not far from Madrasseh al Farouq [Farouq School]. We were living in the building but managed to survive as only half of it collapsed. I was outside at the time and I heard the sound of a plane in the air. My wife and five family members were inside but they were not badly hurt. A displaced family from Deir al-Zour were living in the part of the building that collapsed. They were all killed: Yasir al Nawaaf, 40, his wife Jameela al Abdulla, 35, and three of their children, Ghafran, 16, Sheyma’, seven, and Nawaaf, three.

“At the time we left, the three-year-old boy’s body was still under the rubble, it had not been recovered. IS were around 100 metres away from our building when it was struck. They were in a house that they had commandeered from a family. There were around 10 of them in the house. They’d been there for maybe two days.”³³

³³ Amnesty International interviews, northern Syria, 28 July 2017.

COALITION'S POOR REPORTING AND INADEQUATE INVESTIGATION OF CASUALTIES

In its monthly published analysis of civilian casualties allegedly caused by Operation Inherent Resolve across Syria and Iraq, the US-led coalition states that it “takes all reports of civilian casualties seriously and assesses all reports as thoroughly as possible”.³⁴ This includes analysis of information provided by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, partner forces, and traditional and social media, however it does not extend to carrying out site visits or interviewing witnesses. Relying on this limited methodology leads the coalition to discount a majority of reports as “non-credible” or inconclusive, and to subsequently claim that civilian casualties account for only 0.31% of all engagements. Since the final phase of the operation to recapture Raqqa the coalition forces have listed 16 reports of alleged casualties in or near Raqqa between 6 and 30 June, dismissing three as “non-credible”, while 13 others are pending assessment.³⁵ Figures for July will be published in the next monthly report in early September. A crucial shortcoming of the coalition reports is that they do not provide even minimal information about the strike, such as the location or time of the strikes, the types and number of targets hit, and the type of munitions used – including, crucially, whether the weapons were air-delivered or ground-fired. Such information can be crucial to determining the proportionality of each individual strike.

According to information released by the Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTFOIR), coalition forces carried out an average of 16.43 airstrikes a day in and around Raqqa during the month of June³⁶ and 12.53 during the month of July.³⁷ The vast majority of strikes were carried out by US warplanes. While the information released by CJTFOIR provides some indications of the volume of strikes,³⁸

³⁴ Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve Monthly Civilian Casualty Report, 04 August 2017: <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/Article/1262124/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-monthly-civilian-casualty/>.

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ Operation Inherent Resolve, “Strikes Releases – June 2017”, accessible at - <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/Strike-Releases/>.

³⁷ Operation Inherent Resolve, “Strikes Releases – July 2017”, accessible at - <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/Strike-Releases/>.

³⁸ See for example the definition of strike as explained by the US Department of Defense on 3 August 2017: “Ground-based artillery fired in counterfire or in fire support to maneuver roles is not classified as a strike... A strike, as defined by the coalition, refers to one or more kinetic engagements that occur in roughly the same geographic location to produce a single or cumulative effect. For example... a single aircraft delivering a single weapon against a lone ISIS vehicle is one strike, but so is multiple aircraft delivering dozens of weapons against a group of ISIS-held buildings and weapon systems in a compound... The task force does not report the number or type of aircraft employed in a strike, the number of munitions dropped in each strike, or the number of individual munition impact points against a target”. Accessible at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1265973/strikes-continue-against-isis-in-syria-iraq/>.

it does not help determine the locations of targets engaged by these strikes. Usually, the information provided on target location is limited to “near Raqqa”; a typical entry reads as follows:

“Near Raqqa, 25 strikes [1 British] engaged 17 ISIS tactical units; destroyed 16 fighting positions, five vehicles, two ammo caches, a recoilless rifle, a supply cache, and an UAS launch site; and suppressed an ISIS tactical unit”.³⁹

As well as failing to provide target locations, CJTFOIR releases usually fail to provide information about weapons deployed. Although they contribute only a small fraction of the total strikes, the British and the French sometimes release more information than the US in relation to their engagements. The British Ministry of Defence (MoD), for example, released the following information about its aerial activities over Raqqa on 11 June:

“...a second Tornado flight, and two pairs of Typhoons, operated the same day over Raqqa. Paveway IVs accounted for four sniper positions and a Daesh-held building, while a simultaneous attack with two Brimstones eliminated two firing points in a building on the western edge of the city”.⁴⁰

In this instance, The British MoD confirmed that an unknown quantity of 500lb bombs (Paveway IVs), carrying 192lbs (87kg) of explosive, with a harmful fragmentation radius of 230 metres and a harmful blast radius of 89metres were used to kill four snipers,⁴¹ and that two Brimstones with a harmful fragmentation radius of some 150 metres and a harmful blast radius of some 37 metres were used simultaneously on the same target. While this extra level of detail is a step in the right direction, without precise target location information, preferably precise coordinates, it does not help determine the legality of strikes as considerations about necessary precautions and proportionality will depend upon the number of civilians in the area. It is similarly impossible to determine whether information CJTFOIR corresponds to any of the strikes covered in this report.

³⁹ Operation Inherent Resolve, “20170625 Strike Release – Final.pdf”, accessible at <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Strike%20Releases/2017/06June/20170625%20Strike%20Release%20-%20Final.pdf?ver=2017-06-25-064622-603>.

⁴⁰ UK Government – Ministry of Defence, “RAF air strikes in Iraq and Syria: June 2017”, accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/june-2017>.

⁴¹ The harmful fragmentation and harmful blast radiuses relate to use in open spaces and would need to be adjusted for use in built up areas, depending upon the size of buildings, the spaces between buildings, as well as building materials used.

CIVILIANS KILLED WHILE FLEEING ACROSS THE RIVER - INDISCRIMINATE STRIKES

“And we shoot every boat we find...”

‘Lieutenant General Stephen J. Townsend, the American commander of the coalition force leading the Raqqa military operation.

Coalition forces have repeatedly struck boats crossing the Euphrates river, south of Raqqa, killing dozens of civilians, even though this has been one of the most used routes for civilians fleeing the city. Most civilians displaced from Raqqa interviewed by Amnesty International told the organisation that their only option to flee the city has been southward across the river, using small boats because the bridges were destroyed by coalition forces’ air strikes at the beginning of the year.⁴²

“Ashraf”, who fled Raqqa in early July with his wife and children, told Amnesty International:

*“We lived in the northern part of Daraiya, just south of Jazra Junction [west of the city centre]. For several days I tried to find an escape route towards the north or the west but I could not. Daesh has been mining the exit routes and had checkpoints and snipers shooting at people caught trying to get out. The only movement possible was eastward and southward, towards areas still controlled by Daesh. In the end I resigned myself to using the river, which has to be by boat because the Coalition has bombed both bridges. South of the river, it is still controlled by Daesh but it is rural and control is not as tight as in the city. So we crossed the river in a small boat and paid a smuggler to take us out of the areas controlled by Daesh into the liberated areas to Tabqa”.*⁴³

Ashraf’s journey is identical to that of many other civilians, whole families, who managed to escape Raqqa in recent months and weeks. However, though incurring less risk from IS, it carries more risk from Coalition forces. Leaflets dropped by the Coalition in March 2017 warn: “*Da’esh is using boats and ferries to transport weapons and fighters – Do not use ferries or boats, airstrikes are coming*”. The leaflets feature three pictures of a small boat, a bridge and a ferry, each with a strikethrough.⁴⁴

⁴² See for example: “U.S.-backed Syrian force in new phase of Raqqa assault” (Air strikes on Friday in Raqqa hit two bridges over the Euphrates river, hindering movement from the city southwards), Reuters, 4 February 2017: <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idINKBN15JODB>.

⁴³ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 26 July 2017.

⁴⁴ See image of the leaflets at: <https://twitter.com/soundandpic/status/837426814712676352> and <https://twitter.com/soundandpic/status/837426976554160129>.



Leaflets dropped by the Coalition over Raqqa in March 2017.

On 2 July 2017 Lieutenant General Stephen J. Townsend, the US commander of the Coalition force leading the operation, was quoted by the New York Times saying:

“And we shoot every boat we find. If you want to get out of Raqqa right now, you’ve got to build a poncho raft.”⁴⁵

Lt. General Townsend’s statement appears not to take into account the difficulties civilians face in trying to escape the city, as by then it was well known that civilians wanting to flee the city had few options but to cross the river. Strikes on “every boat” crossing the river on the assumption that every boat carries IS fighters and weapons, without verifying whether that was indeed the case on each separate occasion, are indiscriminate, and as such unlawful.

Relatives of Mohamed Nour, 15, told Amnesty International that the boy was killed around 20 June with a friend as they were trying to cross the river in a small boat. The family was informed by witnesses that the boat had been struck from the air, killing the two boys and other passengers. “Rawda”, his aunt, told Amnesty International:

*“He [Mohammed] was afraid that Daesh might take him and force him to fight with them. Daesh are forcibly recruiting boys, even young ones. That’s why he tried to cross the river, God bless him”.*⁴⁶

Hana, a mother of four who fled Raqqa in early June told Amnesty International that her cousin Yasser, a father of two young children who worked transporting people fleeing the city across the river was killed in an air strike around 10 June:

*“A plane hit the boat and killed him and two women and a man he was transporting. He had taken me and my family across the river a few days earlier. That is what he did, he helped people to flee. He saved our lives; were it not for him we would not have been able to escape. He took a big risk because the punishment Daesh imposes for this is death, but in the end he was killed by an airplane”.*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/world/middleeast/us-backed-forces-close-to-trapping-isis-holdouts-in-Raqqa.html?_r=0.

⁴⁶ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

CIVILIANS USED AS HUMAN SHIELDS BY IS, TRAPPED UNDER FIRE

“Daesh kept us like rats in a cage; they blocked all the exits, while missiles and shells were falling on us from the sky.”

Hala, resident of al-Mansur neighbourhood of Raqqa.

As the SDF/Coalition military operation to recapture Raqqa got underway, IS redoubled efforts and employed multiple tactics to prevent residents from leaving the city, effectively using the civilian population as human shields and exposing them to grave danger. IS fighters laid mines and booby traps to render exit routes impassable, set up checkpoints around the city to prevent passage, and shot at those trying to sneak out.

For civilians desperate to get their families to safety, there is only one way to escape Raqqa, and that is to pay money to smugglers to guide them out of the city, often by taking long detours under the cover of darkness. Most of Raqqa residents that Amnesty International interviewed outside Raqqa, almost all had paid smugglers, usually around 100USD per person, to facilitate their escape. The extent of smugglers' collusion with IS members is unclear.

Raqqa residents explained that paying smugglers was necessary *“because only they knew where the [IS laid] mines were”*,⁴⁸ though it does not provide an absolute guarantee of safe passage. Anas, who said he paid the equivalent of 600USD for a smuggler to get his family of eight out of Raqqa, told Amnesty International:

*“Smugglers know the routes which provide the best chance of getting out but things change all the time, frontlines change, new IS checkpoints can spring up anytime, anywhere. You can't know you'll get out safely until you got out.”*⁴⁹

The escape route used by residents interviewed by Amnesty International almost always involved moving south through IS-controlled neighbourhoods of Raqqa City and crossing the Euphrates River on small boats, despite the Coalition's insistence that they conduct air strikes against all boats crossing the river.⁵⁰ Once on the other side of the river, the escapees found themselves still in IS-controlled territory, albeit less populated, rural in nature and thus more difficult for IS to keep sealed. Smugglers then guided them through fields and away from the Euphrates westwards until they looped round towards Mansoura, under SDF control. Before

⁴⁸ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 1 August 2017.

⁵⁰ <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/News-Releases/Article/1249025/remarks-by-general-townsend-in-a-media-availability-in-baghdad-iraq/>, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/world/middleeast/us-backed-forces-close-to-trapping-isis-holdouts-in-Raqqa.html> .

finding safety, escapees ran a gauntlet of dangers - possible strikes from all warring parties and being summarily executed by IS fighters if caught fleeing.

Those who cannot afford to pay smugglers have one of two choices: either stay at home and risk being bombed or getting caught in the crossfire, or attempt to leave on their own and by so doing facing an even greater level of risk being killed by IS fighters or by the IS' mines and booby-traps.



Leftover of so-called "Islamic State caliphate" east of Raqqa, now deserted. © Amnesty International

Raawana, 15, told Amnesty International how her husband and her father-in-law were both killed as they stepped on a mine or booby-trap while fleeing Raqqa in mid-June:

"We lived in the Amasi area, in the [west of the] city; when the air strikes came we fled, we walked a long way, through small roads and fields. My husband, Ibrahim (24), and his father, Ahmad, were in front. I was a bit behind because I am pregnant and I was tired from so much walking. They stepped on a mine and were both killed on the spot. Ibrahim's mother and sister rushed to them and screamed that they were dead. I was so scared I could not move and then I fainted. They buried them there and then we continued to walk until we reached a populated village and we knew we were safe. But my baby will never have a father".⁵¹

Members of another family were likewise killed and injured as they too stepped on a mine or booby trap while fleeing. "Loay", a relative, told Amnesty International:

"We left our home, near the Old Mosque because of the artillery shells and bombs from the warplanes. Da'esh were everywhere and we were afraid that we would be bombed if Daesh people came near our house. We crossed town, to leave from the west side; there, while going through a small path in a field, a mine exploded. Fatima was killed on the spot. She was 25. Her husband, Yusef, had his leg blown off and many injuries all over and her three-year-old nephew, Omar, sustained a bad head injury. He is now in hospital in Damascus. There is no way to be safe in this war for poor, ordinary people like us. The armed men can protect themselves but no one protects us. May God help us".⁵²

⁵¹ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 26 July 2017.

⁵² Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

With the frontlines continuously shifting, civilians are at risk – whether they stay or try to flee, as explained by Mahmouda from the western Raqqa district of Daraiya:

*“It was a terrible situation [in Daraiya]. We were besieged. IS wouldn’t let us leave. We had no food, no electricity. There were lots of spies for the religious police. They besieged us with snipers. If you get hit by a sniper you die in your house. There were no doctors”.*⁵³

Yaman from Raqqa’s Malaab district lost a relative to an IS sniper. He told Amnesty International:

*“On the 16th of Ramadan [11 June] IS shot my brother. He’s the father of this nine-year-old boy. He had six children in total, three boys and three girls. The youngest is one year and six months old; the eldest is 12. The shooting happened at 8.30am. We are five brothers and we were in a car looking for a way out of the area. IS shouted at us to come back but we ignored them. There were a few cars driving in a line, trying to leave. We were in the last car and they shot us. My brother was shot in the head”.*⁵⁴

On 29 July “Abd-al-Mun’am” was trying to flee by motorbike with his wife and two children when men presumed to be IS fighters shot at them, injuring his four-year-old son, Ali. He recounted:

*“We were shot at as I was driving the bike, with my wife sitting behind me and my son and daughter in front of me. Ali was at the front but thankfully I had put a bag of diapers in front of him, and so as the bullet exploded inside the bag of diapers and the extent of the injury sustained by Ali was reduced”.*⁵⁵

IS kept people trapped in their neighbourhoods in order to use them as cover for military operations. In some neighbourhoods, including Daraiya and Mishlab, IS entered residents’ homes by force and made holes in the walls, both to allow them to move between houses without using the street and to use as firing positions against SDF lines. In the Old Mosque district in the heart of the city, IS covered commercial streets like Sharia Mansour with fabric canopies so that their movements could not be seen from coalition surveillance aircraft or drones. To counter this, coalition planes targeted the canopies with aircraft cannon to set them on fire. IS dress codes, imposed on civilians and IS fighters alike, made it even more difficult for SDF and Coalition forces to distinguish between them. As Mahmouda from Daraiya explained:

*“The planes couldn’t distinguish between IS and civilians as IS made us all wear the same clothes. If the religious police caught my 12-year-old son they’d make him cut his trousers Kandahari style [between the knee and the ankle] – so they couldn’t distinguish”.*⁵⁶

One family, interviewed by Amnesty International, described leaving their home in Mishleb in mid-May because IS had forced their way into their home and made holes in their walls. They managed to reach Sahlat al-Banat village just outside the city and close to the SDF lines. The homes in Sahlat al-Banat were full of civilians attempting to escape, whom IS used as cover while firing from a vehicle-mounted heavy machine-gun⁵⁷ at Coalition helicopters. Amina described events as follows:

“We found an empty house in Sahlat al-Banat, in which we stayed for two or three days. It was a one-storey house. Eight family members were in the house, along with two guests, bringing the total number of people to 10. On 21 May at around 5pm my husband saw a plane in the sky above. He came inside and told us ‘this place isn’t safe’. There were two IS houses among the houses in Sahlat al-Banat. There was also an IS vehicle mounted with a doshka that was hiding under some trees next to a civilian house. The doshka began firing at the planes, which responded with rocket fire. At least six buildings were hit, five houses and the driving school. When the firing began everyone ran from the houses and into the fields.

*We wanted to run as well but my mother, the boy’s grandmother, is disabled and uses a wheelchair. She refused to leave, saying, ‘I’m not going anywhere’. It would have been impossible to carry her or to push the wheelchair along the stony ground. One of my sons ran out of the house and came back with a car. That was when the planes struck the house we were in. My father, Abd-al-Rahman al-Abdulla (72) and two of my brother’s sons, Abd-al-Rahman Ahmed al-Abdulla (20), and Ezzeldine Mohamed (19) were killed”.*⁵⁸

⁵³ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017.

⁵⁴ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 2 August 2017.

⁵⁶ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July.

⁵⁷ DShK 12.7-mm, commonly referred to in Syria as a “doshka”.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 1 August 2017.

Another family member, Hassan (interviewed separately), described the way in which the IS vehicle deliberately drew danger to the civilian houses:

“On the evening of 18 May there were two planes and two helicopters above Sahlat al-Banat. They began targeting an IS vehicle with a mounted doshka that was moving around the houses in the village. The IS vehicle would take a position next to a house and fire at the planes and helicopters in the sky. Then it would move and park next to another house. The helicopters and planes kept trying to hit it. They hit many houses but they didn’t even hit the vehicle. It moved too quickly and they would strike five minutes too late.

We were staying in a small, one-storey house of three rooms, only about 30 square metres. It had an exterior wall and a garden. The house was damaged by three strikes, all of which landed outside the perimeter wall. The closest was perhaps five metres away, near the main entrance. This strike killed the two boys as they were coming back into the house [having brought the car for their grandmother]. My brother was killed inside one of the rooms of the house. His body is still under the rubble.”⁵⁹

As well as trapping civilians in neighbourhoods under attack and using civilians as cover for military operations, as the battle progressed and IS was driven deeper into Raqqa City, it began forcing civilians to retreat with it into the new conflict zones. Reem from Daraiya told Amnesty International:

“I am from near Jama al-Safar in Daraiya. We left Daraiya on 16 July. Around the start of July, Daesh started forcing people to move from Daraiya to inside the walls of the Old City. They laid mines across Daraiya. They came to knock on our door and told us we had half an hour to get to the Old City. If you refused they accused you of being a PKK agent and threatened to take you to the prison.

We didn’t want to move to the Old City so we stayed at home and waited and waited for a chance to leave. Daesh were too busy with the fighting in Daraiya at that time to come back and imprison us. When the SDF were close we took our chance to escape.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 1 August 2017.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 1 August 2017. Before the family managed to escape, Reem’s husband was killed by a mortar, seemingly fired by the SDF which fell on their home.

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT FORCES' INDISCRIMINATE BOMBARDMENT OF CIVILIANS SOUTH OF RAQQA

“All of a sudden, there were explosions all around, like fireworks. Then I fainted.”

Usama, a 14-year-old boy, who sustained massive injuries during the air bombardment on Shuraiyda

While civilians in Raqqa City are bearing the brunt of the fighting between IS and the Coalition-backed SDF north of the Euphrates river, villagers south of the Euphrates are suffering a separate onslaught. Russia-backed Syrian government forces have been launching indiscriminate air bombardments against IS-controlled towns and villages a few kilometres southeast of Raqqa as they advance in their campaign to recapture Deir al-Zour from IS control.

In July many residents of towns and villages south of the river fled their homes and set up makeshift camps a few kilometres to the north, close to the irrigation canals which run south of the Euphrates, hoping to escape the air raids, but to no avail. Several of the locations where the villagers were sheltering by the canals were bombed in the second half of July, killing at least 30 people - including 16 children and three women - and injuring many more.

Residents of Arhabi, Sabkha, Sabkhawi, Shuraiyda, Ghanim al-Ali, Abu Hammad and Maadan told Amnesty International they had witnessed relatives and neighbours killed in barrel bombs and cluster bombs air strikes. Residents told Amnesty International that government forces had dropped leaflets on towns and villages in the area prior to the attacks warning them to leave and move further north, close to the water. They said the leaflets depicted built-up areas, which were marked with a cross, and undeveloped areas near the water canals and river, which were marked with a tick. A woman injured in one of the attacks told

Amnesty International that the message was clear; they would be safe by the water. With the threat of imminent attacks on their towns and villages, residents fled, with many ending up in makeshift camps between the Euphrates and its subsidiary irrigation canals. However, those shelters too soon came under attack.



Survivors of cluster bomb attack by Syrian government forces in displaced people's shelters south of Raqqa show Amnesty International clothes torn by cluster bomb shrapnel. © Amnesty International

On 23 July Syrian or Russian warplanes launched several strikes on camps between the canals and the river near Sabkha.⁶¹ Consistent testimonies from residents who managed to flee the area and who lost family members and/or were themselves injured in the attacks suggest that cluster bombs were used in some of the attacks. Abdel, who had been sheltering by the canal north of Sabkha, told Amnesty International:

“At around 9am on 23 July I heard the sound of a plane. It dropped four cluster bombs on the camp. The ground jumped. Afterwards I helped to bury the bodies. Eight people were killed from one family. Thirty people were injured.”⁶²

Another survivor, Mohamed, gave the following account:

“The shelling began in Sabkha on 14 July so we left for Sabkha camp. For a week or so nothing happened then the camp was bombed. There were hundreds of people there. At between 9.30am and 10am two planes appeared in the sky above the camp. I didn't see what the planes dropped but I saw lots of explosions when whatever it was hit the ground. The explosions occurred over a space of maybe 200 metres. Every 10 to 15 metres within this space there was an explosion.

“I took my kids to the other side of the camp, away from the area that was hit. Sometime later the same thing happened there. There was a nurse there trying to treat people. He was killed by the second cluster bomb. His name was Bashir al Hussein and he was 45. Also killed were Reem al Aja' (55), Hamid al Naasir (25), Qsaar Asfeyeh and Nabil al Hamid (both around 20), and Fowaz al Aja' and Haasim al Ali (both around 15)”⁶³

⁶¹ Syrian government forces use Russian aircraft, making it difficult to establish responsibility for individual air strikes.

⁶² Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 29 July 2017.

⁶³ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 29 July 2017.

“Zahra” told Amnesty International that four of her relatives were killed and several others injured when a makeshift camp near Sabkha was bombed on 23 July:

“We know they were cluster bombs because it was not one big explosion in one place; there were many small explosions all over a very large area. The explosions set the tents on fire, so we lost everything. We were staying near the canal (between the village and the river) because the government had dropped leaflets telling people to leave the villages. My cousin, Ibrahim al-Shahab al-Mula who was in his mid-late 40s, was killed, along with his two teenage daughters, Fatima and Bushra, and his 12-year-old son, Ali. After the attack we fled and came here. We came with nothing; all that we had burned; the cluster bombs set the place on fire and everything burned.”⁶⁴

Twenty-year-old Warda lost her 18-month-old baby boy, Rajab, in the same cluster bomb attack. She told Amnesty International:

“There were many strikes; many villages were bombed all around us. We left our village, Arhabi, to be safe but even in the camp we were not safe. At about 2pm, my baby was injured in the first explosion so my husband ran with him to a nearby camp, but that was bombed as well and our baby died. I am pregnant again and I started to bleed from the shock. I had never been so scared in my life. Now when I close my eyes I still see explosions all around.”⁶⁵

Warda’s husband, Ali, explained:

“I was running with the baby in my arms. The baby was still alive. When I got within 300 metres from the tent of Bashir, the nurse, there were two more strikes. The rockets split and many small bombs spread and exploded everywhere. Our baby was killed and I was injured in the leg. I later learned that Bashir the nurse had also been killed in the attack”.⁶⁶

Warda and her mother, Fadhila, were both seriously injured in the strikes. Shrapnel cut two large holes in Warda’s back and her mother lost most of her top inner thigh.

Other survivors told Amnesty International that one of the strikes on the Sabkha camp that day killed several members of two families. Khalil Ibrahim al Hajji lost his daughter Nawal (22), his son Ammar (12) and his mother Rima Salah Musa (mid-50s). Khalil lost a leg and his wife lost an eye. His cousin Hassan al Hajji Karmo lost his five children; three sons and two daughters.

The following day, 24 July, more cluster bombs were reportedly dropped on Shuraiyda camp, around 2 kilometres to the east of the Sabkha camp. Mohamed, who was sheltering in the camp told Amnesty International:

“I left Shuraiyda village with my parents, my wife and our two children 15 days ago when the shelling started on 14 July. I went to Shuraiyda camp where there were about 15 tents, next to the water. For a while it was peaceful but then they hit Shuraiyda camp the day after they hit Sabkha camp. It happened at between 11 and 12 in the morning as I was helping my neighbours to construct their tent.

I heard the sound of a plane and an explosion above. The bomb exploded maybe 100 metres above the camp and the little bombs started landing in the camp. They were about the size of an orange. They covered an area between 100 and 200 square metres. They landed on the first five tents of the camp. Then five minutes later a rocket landed in the same place. Khalaf al Seyid (40) and Mohamed al Ahmed Al Obeid (12) were killed and twenty people were injured, including many women and children. Everyone killed or injured in the attacks was a civilian. Two hours later it happened again but this time they didn’t kill anyone”.⁶⁷

Amnesty International visited victims of the attack on Shuraiyda camp at Tel Abyad Hospital. Among them was Usama, a 14-year-old boy who sustained massive injuries to the abdomen and limbs. He too described what appears to have been a cluster bomb attack:

“All of a sudden, there were explosions all around, like fireworks. Then I fainted”.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 30 July 2017.

⁶⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 28 July 2017

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria on 29 July 2017.

⁶⁸ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 2 August 2017.

Seven of his relatives were killed in the attack: 80-year-old Amsha Issa, Khalaf Abd-al-Khalaf (35), his sister Tamam, (28 and a mother of two), and four children, Abed Hammud and Abde Khalaf (both 15), Bashar Ahmad Issa (five) and Mohamed Hammud (four). Usama's mother was also injured in the attack.

The air strikes on these areas were the first Syrian government forces' attacks on areas near Raqqa City since the SDF and Coalition military operation to recapture Raqqa began on 6 June.⁶⁹ Syrian government troops had previously been confined to areas west of SDF-held Tabqa City. The first strikes on 14 July triggered rapid de-confliction talks between the Coalition and the SDF on one side, and the Syrian government on the other, resulting in a de-confliction agreement announced on 17 July, intended to ensure there would be no contact between SDF and Syrian government troops for a few kilometres south of Raqqa.⁷⁰ Once the de-confliction line had been agreed upon, Russian-backed Syrian government forces resumed their attacks on villages east of the line, launching air strikes on Ghanem Ali and Maadan on 19 July.



Usama, a 14-year-old boy, who sustained massive injuries during the attack on Shurayda. © Amnesty International

“Amal”⁷¹ from Ghanem Ali told Amnesty International:

“I left Ghanem Ali on 19 July and went to Ghanem Ali camp.”⁷² There were hundreds of people in the camp. They came to escape the shelling in Ghanem Ali, which started on 18 or 19 July. They shelled three or four times on the first day and again at night.”

Residents from Maadan, meanwhile, explained that while “Syrian/Russian government forces’ air strikes had been ongoing in the areas near Maadan since 14 July, the first air strike on Maadan was on 19 July. Ahmed told Amnesty International: “*The shelling was completely random, They hit so many buildings. They would kill 50 civilians for one Daesh member.*”⁷³ The attacks on Maadan were followed by attacks on Sabkhawi, a

⁶⁹ Syrian government forces have long been launching indiscriminate air bombardments on rebel-held towns and villages, including with internationally banned cluster bombs. See for example: “Syria’s ‘Circle of hell’: Barrel bombs in Aleppo bring terror and bloodshed forcing civilians underground”, Amnesty International, May 2015: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/05/syrias-circle-of-hell-barrel-bombs-in-aleppo/>

⁷⁰ “SDF agrees to deconflict operations with Syrian regimes around Deir ez-Zor”, AnnaEngV, grasswire.com, 17 July 2017 – <https://www.grasswire.com/2017/07/us-backed-sdf-syria-regime-agree-to-deconflict-line-Raqqa-deir-ezzor-isis-operations-us-russia-channel/>.

⁷¹ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 29 July 2017

⁷² Located a few kilometres north of the village, close to the canal.

⁷³ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 26 July 2017.

small town approximately 10kms south of Sabkha and Shuraiyda. Sabkhawi residents told Amnesty International that their village and the nearby makeshift tent-camp was bombed on the morning of 21 July.

“There were two helicopters which dropped barrel bombs inside the village, and two war planes (fighter jets) which dropped cluster bombs on the tents outside the village. A 15-year-old boy, Ibrahim Mohammed al-Sheikh was killed in the strike”.⁷⁴

Another witness, Ghazwan, told Amnesty International:

“When they dropped the first two barrel bombs on Arhabi I ran to Sabkhawi, where the shepherds live. A week later they dropped barrel bombs on Sabkhawi. At 1.30pm the Syrian army entered and started taking money from people and stealing whatever they could find. But there was hardly anyone left in the town. The army caught people running in the fields. There were no IS in Sabkhawi, they were all busy fighting closer to the river. People were killed in the explosions and some of the injured were left to die.”⁷⁵

At midday on 23 July Abu Hammad village was bombed. Seventy-year old Mohamed Suleiman Ali sustained shrapnel injuries to the chest. He had refused to leave his home in the village, his relatives told Amnesty International in Tel Abyad Hospital, where he was being treated for his injuries.

Dozens of survivors and witnesses of the attacks on the different makeshift camps, interviewed by Amnesty International separately in different locations, all gave detailed descriptions of multiple small explosions over areas of hundreds of square metres, strongly indicating that cluster bombs were used in those attacks. Several survivors and witnesses of attacks on towns and villages said that barrel bombs were dropped. Amnesty International could not establish whether barrel bombs or other types of bombs had been used in those attacks, but from the residents’ testimonies the attacks appeared to have been indiscriminate, striking multiple locations full of civilians, rather than specific IS targets.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 29 July 2017.

⁷⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Syria, 27 July 2017.

⁷⁶ Barrel bombs are locally produced unguided bombs, usually with oil barrels, fuel tanks or gas cylinders packed with explosives, fuel, and metal fragments dropped from helicopters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By the time the SDF and the US-led coalition launched the joint military operation to recapture Raqqa and surrounding areas, IS patterns of behaviour were well-known – as were the dangers that this posed for the civilian population trapped in IS-controlled territory. IS members embed themselves within the civilian population, use civilians as human shields and prevent them from leaving the areas under their control – including by mining or booby-trapping exit routes, shooting at those trying to flee, and using civilians as cover for suicide bombers and car bombs to target SDF and coalition forces.

In addition to constituting war crimes, such conduct poses momentous challenges for SDF and Coalition forces, making it more difficult to distinguish between civilians and legitimate military objectives, to avoid harming civilians, and to provide safe escape routes for the trapped civilians. However, IS' violations of the laws of war do not in any way lessen the obligation of the forces fighting IS to select lawful targets, to strike them in a way that is neither indiscriminate nor disproportionate, and to take all feasible measures to minimize harm to civilians.

The findings of this briefing suggest strongly that this has not always been the case. Furthermore, as the battle to recapture Raqqa reaches the city's innermost areas, the danger to civilians looks set to increase. More can and must be done to preserve the lives of civilians trapped in the conflict and to facilitate their safe conduit away from the battleground.

Pursuant to the findings in this briefing, Amnesty International is making a number of recommendations to the parties to the conflict:

SDF AND COALITION FORCES

- Fully comply with the rules of international humanitarian law in the planning and execution of strikes and attacks, including by cancelling attacks that risk being indiscriminate, disproportionate or otherwise unlawful.
- Fire only on targets known to be hostile and end the practice of engaging an entire class of civilian objects, such as boats.
- End the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects, including artillery, in populated civilian areas, in compliance with the prohibition on indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.
- Assume the presence of civilians in every structure when engaging IS fighters, given the likelihood of IS using civilians as human shields and adjust tactics to take civilian presence into account.
- Take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians, including giving effective advance warnings of impending attacks to the civilian population in the concerned areas.
- Take all feasible measures to ensure the safe evacuation of civilians from Raqqa including, when possible, establish safe passageways for civilians so they can safely flee and provide advice to civilians on specific evacuation routes that should be taken.

COALITION AUTHORITIES

- Establish an independent mechanism tasked with ensuring that independent and impartial investigations are carried out in any instances where there is credible information that violations of international humanitarian law have taken place and make the findings public. Provide full cooperation with other competent investigative bodies including the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).⁷⁷ - Where there is admissible evidence that an individual is responsible for war crimes, ensure they are prosecuted in a fair trial without recourse to the death penalty.
- Immediately cease the provision of weapons, training or support of any kind to any armed groups or militias whose members are responsible for the commission of war crimes or other violations of the laws of war.
- Provide accurate public information on all strikes carried out including detailed information on location, target, delivery system and weapons used.
- Report in a detailed, timely, public and transparent manner on strikes carried resulting in civilian deaths or injury and damage to civilians and civilian property and infrastructure. Widen investigation techniques to include interviews on the ground with victims and witnesses.
- Establish a concrete mechanism to provide reparations to civilians harmed from Coalition strikes, including by allocating and providing adequate budgetary resources and ensuring that all legislative and regulatory measures are in place to provide reparations to victims and families of victims of violations (including compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition).
- Accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, if they are not already a state party to it, and issue a declaration accepting the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction since 1 July 2002.
- If they are not already a state party, accede to the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II) and to the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I).

Given US policy on “pre- and post-strike measures to address civilian casualties in U.S. operations involving the use of force”,⁷⁸ Amnesty International also calls on the US government to take the following measures in accordance with the Order:

- Conduct a review of the effectiveness of existing civilian casualty prevention and mitigation processes, including of warning systems and methods for adjusting tactics and choices of weapons in response to IS practices.
- Disclose to the public information regarding existing mechanisms designed to minimize civilian harm, including trainings and collateral damage mitigation processes.

THE ARMED GROUP CALLING ITSELF THE ISLAMIC STATE

While it has not been able to engage directly with the armed group calling itself the Islamic State, Amnesty International appeals to the group to take the following actions:

- Immediately cease the use of human shields, the mining/booby trapping of escape routes and the targeting of those wanting to leave, and allow and facilitate the evacuation of civilians wishing to flee the conflict.

⁷⁷ The IIIM was established in by the UN General Assembly in December 2016 to “Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011”. See: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/71/L.48 .

⁷⁸ As set out in Executive Order 13732, signed by the US President on 1 July 2016. See: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-07-07/pdf/2016-16295.pdf> .

- Immediately halt the use of hospitals and other protected objects as lodging for fighters or military positions and end the use of the use of inherently indiscriminate weapons such as improvised explosive devices.

UN COMMISSION OF INQUIRY / INTERNATIONAL, IMPARTIAL AND INDEPENDENT MECHANISM

- Ensure that civilian deaths and injuries as a result of the conduct of hostilities by all parties to the Raqqa operation and other military operations in Syria are monitored, documented and reported on in a timely fashion.
- Assist Coalition authorities/partners in the establishment and running of an investigative mechanism into events in Raqqa for accountability and reparation purposes.

THE SYRIAN AND RUSSIAN GOVERNMENTS

- End the use of internationally banned cluster munitions and accede to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, end the use of imprecise munitions, including inherently indiscriminate barrel bombs, and desist from launching disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks with conventional weapons in civilian areas;
- Cooperate in full with the UN Commission of Inquiry and IIM and hand over all officials suspected of war crimes.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- States providing military assistance or transferring military equipment to the SDF should, prior to any sale or transfer, undertake a rigorous assessment of the likelihood that any transfer under consideration would be used by the intended recipients, or by others through diversion, to commit or facilitate serious violations of international human rights or international humanitarian law.
- Ensure that the necessary resources are in place to promptly clear all areas of Raqqa affected by the conflict of unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices and ensure the clearance is completed before encouraging residents to return.
- All governments should urgently increase funding for humanitarian assistance to civilians fleeing the fighting in Raqqa.

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“I WON’T FORGET THIS CARNAGE”

CIVILIANS TRAPPED IN THE BATTLE FOR RAQQA – SYRIA

The battle for Raqqa, so-called capital and main stronghold of the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, is taking a heavy toll on civilians trapped under fire in the city. Civilians have come under a barrage of ground and air attacks since the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the local armed group leading the fight against IS, and the United States (US)-led coalition forces launched the final stage of the military operation to recapture Raqqa on 6 June 2017. Artillery and air strikes launched by coalition forces, usually on the basis of coordinates provided by the SDF, have killed hundreds of civilians since the start of the military operation to recapture the city, while the IS has been using civilians as human shields and killing those attempting to escape areas under its control.

At the same time Russia-backed Syrian government forces, engaged in military operation to recapture areas south of the Euphrates river from IS, have carried out indiscriminate air bombardments on towns, villages and displaced people’s camps south of Raqqa.

Civilians are thus trapped in the city, under fire from all sides, and, as the battle intensifies in its final stages, the risk for the civilian population is set to increase. It is imperative that all the parties to the conflict take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians, including ending the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated civilian areas, in compliance with the prohibition on indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks.