

Ridding Raqqa of ISIS Costed Extraordinarily Too Much in Lives and Resources

2,371 Civilians Killed, Including
562 Children, and Nearly Half
a Million Displaced

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



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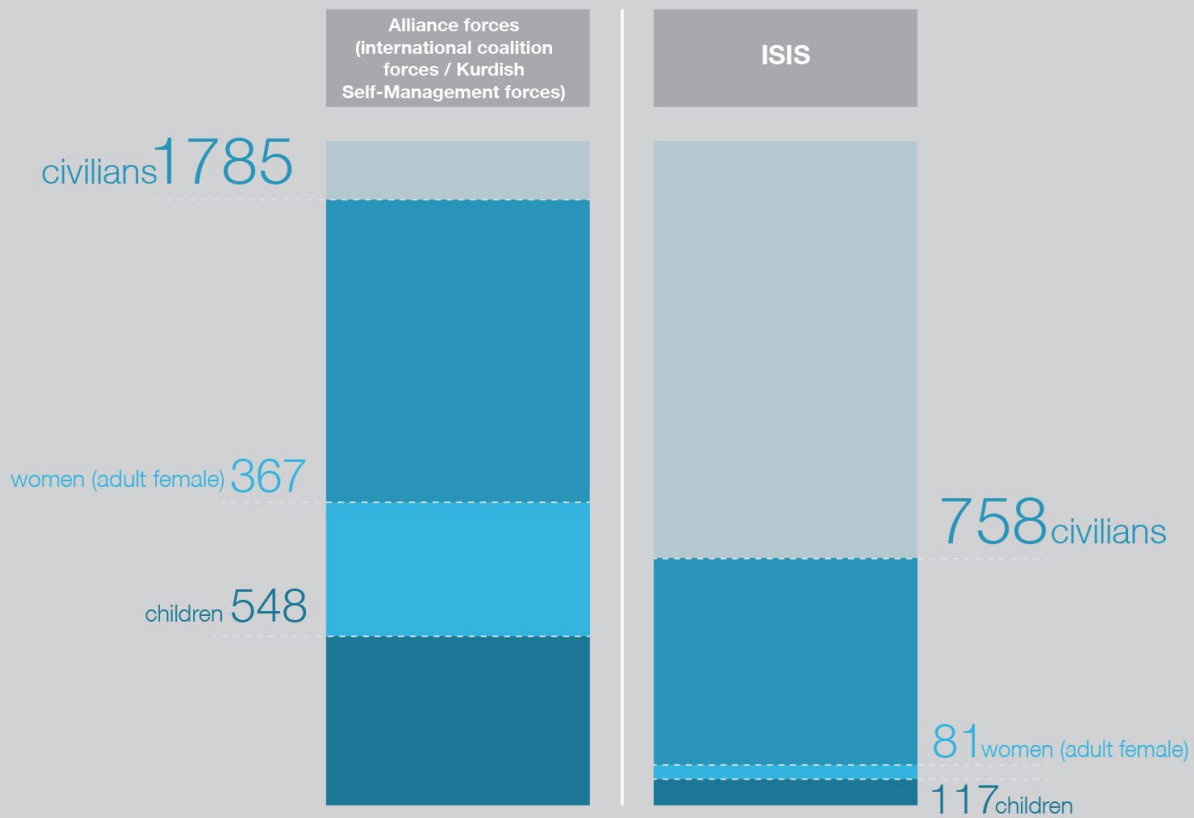
I. Introduction

Raqqa governorate is located in northern central Syria on the north bank of Euphrates River. After the governorate was taken over by factions from the armed opposition in March 2013, the first to be seized by the armed opposition, ISIS (self-proclaimed the Islamic State) emerged on April 9, 2013, and the group set its eyes on fighting armed opposition factions and taking over their areas of control. On January 12, 2014, ISIS had completely seized Raqqa governorate following weeks-long battles with armed opposition factions.

In September 2014, a US-led international alliance was formed with the objective of fighting the terrorist group ISIS which emerged in April 2013. The coalition's first attack was in Syria. However, the coalition, under this pretext, aimed to support a minor, sectarian group of the Syrian people with an armed wing: PYD, which is affiliated to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. In addition, international coalition party didn't take into consideration the lives of the Syrian civilians – the same people they claimed they'd entered Syria to protect from the terrorism of ISIS, as we recorded hundreds of indiscriminate attacks, where thousands of civilians were killed at the hands of this alliance forces (international coalition forces - Kurdish Self-Management forces). Here, we are going to draw a simple comparison in Raqqa governorate solely in terms of loss of human lives between this alliance forces and ISIS from the start of each party's intervention until October 19, 2017.



A comparison between civilian victims in Raqqa killed by the alliance forces (international coalition forces / Kurdish Self-Management forces) and those killed by ISIS from the day both parties entered Syria until October 19, 2017



According to SNHR documentation

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In 2016, Raqqa governorate was clearly divided among the parties to the conflict, where certain areas went to certain parties, even if this wasn't categorically announced, as international coalition forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) focused their attacks on the northern, western, and southern suburbs, as well as the city of Raqqa, while the Syrian-Russian alliance forces' attacks were concentrated in the eastern suburbs – particularly in the villages that are located to the south of Euphrates River (Called Shamiya villages).



In this report, we are going to outline the most notable violations of human rights by the warring forces that didn't consider the most basic rules of war. The report sheds light on the violations by the alliance forces (international coalition forces and SDF) and ISIS in Raqqa governorate between November 6, 2016 and October 19, 2017, the date it was announced that ISIS was no more in Raqqa governorate. Also, the report highlights the attacks by the Syrian-Russian alliance in the eastern suburbs areas between mid-July 2017 and October 2017.

The parties to the conflict have carried a number of offensives over the course of no more than 11 months that resulted in the displacement of nearly 450,000 people out of the total population which was estimated at 470,000 prior to the offensive of November 2016. The airstrikes by international coalition forces and the attacks by SDF were majorly responsible for the largest waves of displacement, about two-thirds of the aforementioned numbers, while the Syrian-Russian alliance's attacks resulted in the displacement of the last one-third.

The report draws primarily upon on the daily documentation and monitoring that SNHR team works on in a daily, ongoing, cumulative manner. Secondly, the report is based on accounts from survivors, eyewitnesses, and local media activists that we have talked to via phone or social media. We also analyzed a number of videos and pictures that were posted online, or were sent to us by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media.

II. Violations of Human Rights by the Warring Parties in the Two Battles of Raqqa

Raqqa governorate saw two major battles within roughly one year. The first battle was waged by the international coalition-backed SDF who aimed to seize the majority of Raqqa governorate, while Syrian-Russian alliance forces were behind the second battle whose objective was to take over the eastern suburbs that are located to the south of Euphrates River.



Toll of violations of human rights by the parties to the conflict between the two battles of Raqqa

First battle of Raqqa

(November 2016 - October 2017)
Carried out by Syrian Democratic Forces with the support of international coalition forces to end ISIS's control over Raqqa governorate. The battle resulted in



killed



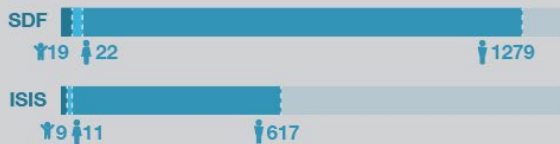
No less than



No less than



arrested



Displacement at least 330,000 people

Second battle of Raqqa

(July 2017 - October 2017)
Carried out by the Syrian-Russian alliance to end ISIS's control over eastern suburbs of Raqqa governorate. The battle resulted in



killed

No less than



No less than



Displacement at least 120,000 people

According to SNHR documentation

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A. First battle of Raqqa (November 2016 – October 2017)

On November 6, 2016, SDF (a Kurdish-majority group that primarily consists of Democratic Union Party forces – the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and a number of armed Turkmani and Syriac groups) announced an operation codenamed “Wrath of Euphrates”. These forces declared that their objective would be to take over the entirety of Raqqa governorate with the support of international coalition forces. The battle was initiated in the northern suburbs of Raqqa, and subsequently western and eastern suburbs.

On June 6, 2017, phase two of “Wrath of the Euphrates” began with the goal of taking over Raqqa city and some areas in the eastern suburbs of Raqqa governorate. The phase lasted until the end of September 2017, with SDF managing to take over most of the areas in Raqqa governorate as well as several neighborhoods in the city. ISIS's areas of control in Raqqa city would be no more than 15%.

On October 13, 2017, an agreement was reached between SDF and ISIS, which was in control of the neighborhoods of al Badou and al Jmeili as well as parts of al Tawse'eya neighborhoods in addition to al Mal'ab al Aswad building and the National Hospital building - that would see ISIS surrendering its areas of control to SDF in exchange of securing a safe passage for the group fighters and their families who left Raqqa on three waves. Some of them headed for the eastern suburbs of Hama, but the majority headed for the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour.

Additionally, ISIS forced nearly 4,200 civilians to leave with its convoys that were heading for eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, using them as hostages as a way to guarantee that those convoys wouldn't be targeted by airstrikes.

The offensives and all of the killings, destruction, and arrests that accompanied have resulted in tens of thousands of residents displacing. Most of those were forced to stay in unequipped desert areas amid a complete absence of the most basic needs of life. SNHR estimates that no less than 330,000 people have been displaced from the various areas of Raqqa governorate. However, a small portion of those people were able to return to their villages after they were taken over by SDF, as this meant that international coalition forces' airstrikes came to an end. Nonetheless, thousands are still displaced, which is the case in Ein Eisa and Tal Abyad counties in northern suburbs of Raqqa because SDF barred those IDPs from returning home.



Huge human and material losses

SNHR has recorded that 2,323 civilians were killed, including 543 children and 346 women (adult female), between November 6, 2016 and October 19, 2017. Also, SNHR recorded no less than 99 massacres. These violations are distributed as follows:

International coalition forces: 1,321 civilians, including 383 children and 247 women. Also, international coalition forces were responsible for 87 massacres at least.

SDF: 309 civilians, including 51 children and 50 women. Also, SDF were responsible for four massacres at least.

ISIS: 693 civilians, including 109 children and 49 women. Also, ISIS was responsible for eight massacres at least.

Additionally, we documented, in the same period of time, no less than 100 attacks on vital civilian facilities, as follows:

International coalition forces: 81

SDF: 7

ISIS: 12

Moreover, civilians in Raqqa governorate were targeted in arrests by both SDF and ISIS. We recorded that no less than 1896 individuals were arrested, including 28 children and 33 women (adult female), between November 6, 2016 and October 19, 2017, as follows:

- 1279 individuals, including 19 children and 22 women, were arrested by SDF. The arrests were made against residents who live in the camps that SDF administer, such as: al Sadd Camp and Ein Eisa Camp over charges of affiliations with ISIS or the armed opposition.
- 617 individuals, including nine children and 11 women were arrested by ISIS. The arrests were concentrated on the civilians who were trying to flee ISIS's areas of control.

B. Second battle of Raqqa (July 2017 – October 2017)

In mid-July 2017, another battle was started in the eastern suburbs of Raqqa which is located to the south of Euphrates River (Shamiya villages), where Syrian-Russian alliance forces escalated their operations, through an immensely heavy and continued aerial bombardment that covered the advancement of a group of local militias that came to be called "Jaish al Ashayer", which are local individuals who were armed by the Syrian regime for the purpose of ending ISIS's existence that has been in control in the area since early-2014. These forces carried out hundreds of attacks that targeted mostly residential neighborhoods and vital civilian facilities with an utter disregard for the rules of the international humanitarian law.



In early-October 2017, Syrian regime forces and their pro-regime militias managed to take over the majority of the areas in the eastern suburbs which are located to the south of Euphrates River.

SNHR has recorded that 48 civilians were killed, including 19 children and eight women (adult female), between mid-July 2017 and the start of October 2017. In addition, SNHR recorded no less than five massacres by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces and 11 attacks on vital civilian facilities by the Syrian-Russian alliance in the same period of time. All of these attacks forced no less than 120,000 people to flee the cities of Ma'adan and al Sabkha. Most of those people displaced to the opposing villages on the other bank of Euphrates River (Jazira villages) which are to the north of the River, while tens of thousands displaced to al Karama Camp (eastern suburbs of Raqqa), al Mabrouka Camp (western suburbs of Hasaka), and Ein Eisa (northern suburbs of Raqqa)

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The parties to the battle of Raqqa have perpetrated serious and various violations to the international human rights law and the international humanitarian law that constitute war crimes. The parties directed multiple attacks at civilian residents, including aerial bombardment and ground-to-ground shelling against populated areas. These forces didn't alarm the residents prior to the attacks as it is required by the international humanitarian law.

We recorded attacks by the three parties, where we believe these attacks were deliberate, while other attacks were indiscriminate and disproportionate. In both cases, these attacks constitute an explicit violation to the international law.

The attacks by the alliance forces (the international coalition and SDF) and the Syrian-Russian alliance have resulted in collateral damages that involved loss of lives, injuries, or heavy damages to civilian objectives. There are strong indicators suggesting that the damage was too excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.



In addition, ISIS was responsible for a wide range of violations to the international humanitarian law against the residents in its areas of control through killing, arrest, and torture. We also recorded that ISIS barred residents from fleeing its areas of control in order to use them as human shields.

Recommendations

The alliance (the international coalition and SDF)

- The states of the coalition have to unequivocally and truly acknowledge that some of the bombardment operations have resulted in the killing of innocent civilians. Denying so won't do any good for these governments, as documented human rights reports and residents' accounts explicitly expose this fact. Instead of denying, these states should take speedy steps to launch serious investigations, and immediately compensate and apologize to the victims and those who were affected.
- The SDF-supporting states should apply pressure on these forces in order to compel them to cease all of their violations in all the areas and towns that are under their control. Also, local council from the local community should be formed in order to establish a civil governance.
- All forms of support, weapons and otherwise, should be ceased until SDF commit to the previous recommendations. This is primarily the supporting states' responsibility. Providing SDF with weapons and support while knowing that they can be used in war crimes or crimes against humanity can be seen as a contribution to these crimes.
- SDF should improve the living situation in the camps that are under their administration. Also, they should allow IDPs to move freely and secure food and medical aids. The supporting states should apply pressure in order to put an end to all violations of human rights.
- International relief organizations should find ways to secure food, water, and shelter for thousands of IDPs who are stranded on the banks of Euphrates River and the desert areas.

The Syrian-Russian alliance

Syrian-Russian alliance forces should immediately cease carrying out indiscriminate attacks, and stop using ISIS as a pretext to bomb residential neighborhoods and vital civilian facilities.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

Our most heartfelt condolences for the victims' families. We also would like to thank the families and activists who effectively contributed to these investigations.





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