

## Syria: Forces battling ISIL 'losing sight of ultimate aim' to free civilians from terror – UN rights chief

31 August 2017 – Forces fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group in Syria are losing sight of the obligation to protect civilians as the battle to retake Raqqa from ISIL is being waged at the cost of their lives, the top United Nations human rights official warned today.

“Surely [the purpose of defeating ISIL](#) should be to protect and assist civilians who have been suffering under their murderous regime,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a news release.

“Given the extremely high number of reports of civilian casualties this month and the intensity of the airstrikes on Raqqa, coupled with ISIL's use of civilians as human shields, I am deeply concerned that civilians who should be protected at all times – are paying an unacceptable price and that forces involved in battling ISIL are losing sight of the ultimate goal of this battle,” he added.

Between 1 and 29 August, the Coalition reports that it conducted 1,094 airstrikes on and near Raqqa city up from 645 in July. In July, throughout the whole of Syria, a total of 885 airstrikes were conducted by the Coalition.

The Russian air force, which operates separately from the Coalition, reported publicly that it had carried out 990 combat flights in Syria from 1 to 21 August and that 2,518 aviation strikes had been conducted.

Airstrikes and ground-based strikes on Raqqa have resulted in a large number of civilian casualties. While it is difficult to get a full picture, the Office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)) has managed to verify 151 civilian deaths in six incidents since 1 August 2017, in each of which more than 20 civilians were reportedly killed.

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ez-Zor

“So as airstrikes bombard Raqqa, some 20,000 civilians are either trapped, or risk their lives to flee and end up confined in makeshift camps in areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces under horrendous conditions until prolonged security procedures are completed, with no oversight on how they are treated and screened,” Mr. Zeid said.

The High Commissioner called on all those with involvement or influence in the conflict to facilitate the rapid, safe departure of civilians wishing to leave Raqqa, and to ensure the protection of those who remain.

OHCHR has also received information about ISIL forcibly conscripting civilians in Deir-ez-Zor, including children.

Once Raqqa is retaken from ISIL, the next big battle will be Deir-ez-Zor, Mr. Zeid said, appealing to all the parties involved in the conflict in Syria to fully respect their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population and civilian objects.

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## [In the Gaza Strip, UN chief appeals for Palestinian unity; renews call for two-state solution](#)

30 August 2017 – Visiting Gaza for the first time since taking office as United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres today called for Palestinian unity, saying division only undermines the cause of the Palestinian people.

Speaking to reporters at a UN-supported school in northern Gaza, the Secretary-General appealed for unity, in line with the principles of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which include rejecting violence and terrorism, and recognizing Israel's right to exist in peace.

I have a dream. A dream to one day see the Holy Land with two states – Israel and Palestine – living in peace and security together, Mr. Guterres [told](#) reporters in Beit Lahiya, Gaza, at a school run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)).

Making this second appeal, Mr. Guterres underscored the importance of a credible political process and actions to improve living conditions of Palestinians.

It is important to open the closures, in line with resolution 1860, he said, referring the Security Council resolution from 2009 which called for an immediate ceasefire to the fighting between Israel and Hamas and lifting of blockades for food, fuel and medicines.

The resolution was meant to diffuse an intra-Palestinian conflict which flared when Hamas took over Gaza in 2007. Since then, Israel sought to isolate the group by restricting the movements of goods and people in and out

of the strip.

In today's statement, Mr. Guterres that it was important to avoid the 'build-up of the militantism' that can undermine the confidence between the two people, he added.

The UN chief today appealed to the international community to strongly support humanitarian aid in Gaza. He ordered an immediate release of \$4 million from the limited resources of the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF), to support the UN activities working for the benefit of the Gaza people.

**VIDEO:** In Gaza [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres visits a school managed by UNRWA saying their contribution to the Palestinian people 'will never be forgotten'. Credit: UN News

Mr. Guterres, who toured the Israeli-Gaza border by helicopter and then crossed it by vehicle, called the conditions in Gaza, 'one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises' he has seen during his time working as a humanitarian.

The two million people living in Gaza have lack access to basic services, such as electricity, food or healthcare. The real gross domestic product (GDP) is largely stagnant, unemployment is up and the infrastructure and private sector have been gradually debilitated, according to a [UN report](#) published last month.

Given the current trends, Gaza would become 'unliveable' by 2020, according to the report.

#### *'True peacemakers'*

Wrapping up his trip to the Middle East, Mr. Guterres today also visited the Museum of the Jewish People, where he reiterated his ongoing calls for an end to anti-Semitism around the world.

Pledging that he will do all possible to stand against anti-Semitism and all other forms of bigotry and discrimination, Mr. Guterres stressed that anti-Semitism includes calls for the destruction of Israel.



Secretary-General António Guterres delivers a speech at the Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv, Israel. Photo: OSSG

'Israel is a Member State of the United Nations. It bears all the responsibilities and enjoys all the rights of every other Member State and, therefore, it must be treated as such,' he stressed.

Mr. Guterres described meeting families in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz close to the Gaza Strip. Speaking with relatives of a child killed by a Palestinian

rocket, he told of a request to help the Palestinians in Gaza have better lives.

Calling the request a “fantastic example of solidarity, of humanity, of tolerance,” Mr. Guterres paid tribute to the “voices of these true peacemakers.”

“Let us not forget that those individual peacebuilders represent the best faces of their communities and serve as the human foundation so essential for a lasting peace, here and everywhere,” he said.

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## [‘Time to shift from logic of war,’ put interests of Syrian people first, UN Security Council told](#)

30 August 2017 – Calling for creative ways to work towards peace in Syria, the United Nations Special Envoy today outlined the political path forward, which includes holding another round of the so-named Astana talks and behind-the-scenes efforts by the international community.

“This is a time for realism and focus, for shifting from the logic of war to that of negotiation, and for putting the interests of the Syrian people first. If I could identify one thing above all that can make the difference, it will be a sense of unity of purpose internationally with clear priorities and common goals,” UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, told the Security Council.

He noted that the next round of what has become known as the ‘Astana talks’ between the Syrian conflict parties and led by Russia, Turkey and Iran will be held on 14 and 15 September.

These three countries “will need to keep actively working, as they have been doing, on de-escalation,” Mr. de Mistura said, adding that he and his team will be supporting these efforts.

The UN official also noted the key role that Saudi Arabia and other countries with influence over the opposition have in fostering “cohesion and realism of the opposition.” Mr. de Mistura said his office is ready to convene further technical talks to support Saudi efforts on unifying the opposition.

In addition, he noted the importance of working with the Government of Syria. He said that it will be vital for those countries with influence to “assess the situation carefully and signal a genuine readiness for dialogue and inclusion” on the country’s political future.

Today's briefing comes just weeks ahead of the annual high-level opening segment of the UN General Assembly, where the European Union will host a special event in New York which will serve as "an opportunity" to address future resilience and stabilization efforts, and support the humanitarian needs in Syria, Mr. de Mistura said.

These events will all take place ahead of the convocation of the formal [intra-Syrian talks](#) in Geneva later in October.

"This is designed to give time for the dynamics I have just described to reach a further stage of maturity," the senior UN official said.

He added "it is my hope that both the Syrian Government and the opposition will come to Geneva then to engage in formal negotiations."

Also today, the Council heard from outgoing Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, who steps down tomorrow.

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## [In the Gaza Strip, UN chief appeals for Palestinian unity; reveals dream of two-state solution](#)

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## [Syria: UN adviser warns trapped civilians face greater risks as Raqqa fighting intensifies](#)

30 August 2017 – The United Nations adviser on the prevention of genocide today expressed deep concern at the deteriorating situation of up to 25,000 civilians trapped in Syria's Raqqa, noting that civilians are used as human shields in this de facto capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group under intense bombardment.

"I am [deeply disturbed](#) by reports coming out of Raqqa of the horrendous situation faced by civilians caught up in the offensive to retake the city from the so-called ISIL," said UN [Special Adviser](#) on the Prevention of Genocide Adama Dieng in a statement released by the Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General.

International counter-ISIL coalition forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are carrying out airstrikes, and ISIL, which still controls Raqqa, is reportedly using civilians as human shields, he added.

ISIL fighters are reportedly killing those who try to escape, and coalition forces are targeting boats on the Euphrates river, which had been one of the remaining escape routes for civilians. Civilians in south of the Euphrates river are reportedly facing indiscriminate attacks by Syrian Government forces and their allies during military operations to retake the area.

"The legitimate aim of retaking Raqqa must not be achieved at such a high cost to civilians," said the Special Advisor, urging all parties to

adhere to their obligations under international human rights and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians.

Reiterating calls for a humanitarian pause to spare civilian lives, Mr. Dieng warned that as the offensive to retake Raqqa reaches its final stages, the fighting is likely to intensify and increase the risks faced by civilians still trapped in the city.