

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.

Once Raqqa is retaken from ISIL, the next big battle will be Deir-
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.