



## **Civil Society Statement on Raqqa: More Stability, No more War and Destruction September 25, 2017**

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## Introduction

Raqqa Governorate is located in the northeast of Syria and covers an area of 19,616 square kilometers. It has a population of 1,100,000 according to the 2011 census. The social structure of Raqqa consists of clans, families living in the countryside and the city, as well as diverse ethnic and religious groups. Arabs constitute the largest proportion of the population of the province and the rest of the population consists of Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians and Armenians. Raqqa's population depends mainly on agriculture, livestock, trade and some positions in government institutions.

The natural resources of the province are essential economic resources for Syria, such as oil, gas and water including the Euphrates River and Tabka Lake, as well as other key features such as the border crossing with the Turkish Republic in Tel Abiad, dams and irrigation projects. The largest hydroelectric power station in Syria is located on the Euphrates River in Raqqa, and provides 20 percent of Syria's electricity.

This information demonstrates Raqqa province's geopolitical and economic importance, which was taken into consideration by ISIS, and other parties to the conflict. As the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the international coalition advance to take Raqqa from the terrorist group ISIS, there is a higher focus on political and economic gains in Raqqa than there is on securing gains for the future of Syria as a whole. Raqqa province is crucial for achieving regional and international balance.

Key members of Raqqa's civil society developed this paper to ensure that the priorities of civilians are taken into consideration as well as to fulfill one of civil society's main roles by insiting on democratic process despite the political conflict. This paper was produced through extensive consultations with groups and individuals from Raqqa, and was conducted by the Raqqa Local Platform in cooperation with other civil society organizations. The consultations were conducted between 15-25 September, 2017 in order to hear the voice of Raqqa's civil society in identifying the short- and medium-term priorities necessary for Raqqa province and the city of Raqqa.

### Key Messages from Civil Society in Raqqa:

- To support stability in the province of Raqqa it is crucial to ensure that basic needs are met, including in all emergency, temporary and permanent cases.
- Providing support for a democratic system that engages effective local participation and guarantees and safeguards freedoms, rights and freedom of the press will support stability.
- The basic framework for administration in the province of Raqqa must be the comprehensive solution for Syria outlined in the Geneva Communique and Security Council resolutions, particularly resolutions 2254 and 2118.

## Section 1: Priorities of Civilians

### 1- Humanitarian Situation

Today, people in the province of Raqqa are living through a humanitarian disaster in every area. In the city of Raqqa, the civilians who are still besieged and used by ISIS as human shields are in serious danger because of the heavy artillery shelling and the air strikes by the coalition forces. There are corpses in the streets and under the rubble. The challenges facing civilians are increasing with the lack of mechanisms to help them retrieve the corpses or help the wounded who are under the ruins of the bombardment. Landmines have proliferated.

***“Forty-five members of my extended family are still under the rubble in Raqqa city, we do not know if they are alive or dead. The bombing was done by SDF and the International Coalition.” K.A from Raqqa City.***

Many people have been displaced to rural areas of Raqqa as IDPs; they were displaced from their areas due to the ongoing hostilities, with 75 percent of the city's neighborhoods controlled by the SDF, supported by the international coalition forces. More than 500,000 residents of Raqqa have been displaced and live in camps such as Ein Issa Camp, the largest displacement camp in the northern countryside of Raqqa, which has more than 11,000 IDPs. There are many random camps spread throughout the countryside of the city center and Tabka. None of these camps are sufficiently equipped to receive displaced people. They need relief assistance at all levels of food, health and services.

#### Recommendations:

- Take serious measures to preserve the lives of civilians besieged within the conflict areas and facilitate their safe passage away from battlefields.
- Facilitate the return of IDPs to their cities and villages, if safe, and ensure social stability by providing basics such as water, electricity, energy, fuel, free trade, paved roads and bridges.
- Conduct extensive operations in the city of Raqqa to remove rubble and landmines, restore water and electricity networks, bakeries and trade as well as to secure livelihoods and development resources.
- Mobilize the UN to officially supervise and take care of the IDPs camps until the stabilization is complete.
- Work on the rehabilitation and restoration of public facilities, which have been severely damaged in the city center, where more than 80 percent of infrastructure has been destroyed. Fighting affected roughly 90 percent of the vital infrastructure of schools, hospitals, roads and bridges and completely destroyed most of the infrastructure. The percentage of destruction rose to 90 percent in private and residential establishments.
- Open investigations into war crimes, set up mechanisms to push perpetrators to apologize to victims and their families, compensate them and hold those responsible for violations accountable.
- Highlight the issue of the disappeared and detained, determine their fate and follow up on their status through the legal system.
- Hold the perpetrators of any act of terrorism accountable as criminals and do not exempt perpetrators from punishment.

## **2- Health Sector**

With the continuation of military operations in the city of al-Raqqa, all public and private hospitals have been destroyed. This was accompanied by the displacement of most doctors and a lack of medicines, which has led to the cessation of medical care and a dire health situation. Those most affected in the besieged city are children and people who have chronic diseases, as well as those in the displacement camps where diseases and epidemics spread such as leishmaniosis (a parasite), skin and internal diseases. This has been due to the lack of sterilization and control in addition to the problem of war casualties who have lost limbs and have permanent disabilities.

***“ My family ran away from Maadan vilage because of the bombing by the Syrian regime and Russia; the village was emptied. My family was displaced to Ahwas village in the Eastern Countryside of Raqqa. My mother is sick***

***and she is suffering from heart disease and diabetes. The villages do not have water, electricity, food or bakeries.” Y.M. from Maadan village.***

In addition, psycho-social support for civilians is essential because they were exposed to high levels of violence and mistreatment by ISIS over the last three years.

***“What I remember is how afraid my mother was while we were running away from Raqqa. She started crying and yelling, it was a mixture of joy and relief. We survived from ISIS, bombing and Alhasbeh. I wanted to go back to school and I wanted to play again.” Saba, 9 year old girl.***

#### Recommendations:

- Find emergency solutions to reactivate the health care system and rebuild the destroyed hospitals.
- Engage medical and emergency staff to cover the shortage of medical personnel.
- Work to combat epidemics in camps caused by insects and parasites.
- Establish a specialized center for people with war injuries.
- Provide medical supplies and medicines, and facilitate their access into Raqqa.
- Provide vaccines, dialysis and medicines for chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.
- Encourage the return of doctors and medical staff to their areas and provide them with the necessary support.
- Provide medical equipment and a conducive work environment for international medical organizations.

### **3- Judiciary and Law**

As the city of Raqqa is nearly cleared of ISIS control, a legal vacuum in the province remains in the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. As the war continues, many human rights violations are occurring for different reasons as a result of the chaos that Raqqa province lives under and also because there is no widely agreed upon law system.

The continuation of human rights violations threatens co-existence and local stability. We propose a temporary mechanism to lessen the negative affect of the war on civilians and to push the judicial and legal process until more stabilization can occur in the province.

#### Recommendations:

- Activate Syrian law, with the exception of the laws or constitutional and legal amendments issued after 2011 and the legal articles that contravene human rights. The mechanism for this activation is the proposed Committee below. The process is temporary until a new constitution is drafted according to the political process in Geneva and under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, as well under the law that is going to be implemented in the country.
- For the functioning of the courts in the interim period, we propose the establishment of an Interim Judicial Committee comprised of seven members (five judges and lawyers with the rank of adviser and two civil society leaders who are respected leaders known for their integrity). The Committee shall be independent, not

affiliated with any party, and it shall be known for its integrity, honesty and impartiality. The mission of the Committee:

1. Selects the judicial staff to serve in the courts of Raqqa from the ranks of judges, lawyers and state lawyers. The Committee, operating under its bylaws, ensures the distribution of tasks among them.
2. Selects the public prosecutors, the mechanism of their work, the distribution of tasks and the expansion of this prosecution to be also present in each section of the police, including prisons.
3. Selects and appoints judicial officers including the clerks and employees, and distributes tasks among them. This task shall be entrusted to the chief prosecutor through a proposal which must be ratified by the Interim Judicial Committee in order to come into force. The Committee shall have the right to amend or reject such appointments.

#### 4- Prison Management

The procurator-in-charge of the Prisons Service should be directly responsible for the administration, not only the supervision, of the prison system, and the police must implement the decisions made by the courts.

***“Seven of my cousins are in the central prison in Tal Abyad. There are no courts for them and we do not know why they are in prison or what are the accusations against them, and we do not know how to defend them and which courts will judge them and on which legal basis.” M.M. from Raqqa.***

#### 5- Education

The education system has stopped completely since ISIS took control of the province of Raqqa. Despite most of the areas of the province now being taken out of ISIS control, the halting of the education system has continued. Education plays a very serious role in the fight against extremism and terrorism, and it is also an investment in the human resources that will contribute to development. Thus there must be a focus on the governance of the educational system to fully support the parties in that process.

***“I ran away from ISIS and from the bombing of the international coalition in April 2017. We left Raqqa city to Tal Abyad. I have three children, two girls and a boy, who have not been to school since 2014. I am really worried about the future of my children. I am not Kurdish and I do not speak Kurdish and the Self Administration in Tal Abyad is forcing teaching in Kurdish.” W.H. a mother of three children from Raqqa.***

#### Recommendations:

- Governance of the education system must be through a single body specialized in education and there must be support for the role of the Teachers Union for educational supervision and consultation.
- A safe environment must be secured in the community for the interaction of the students with the education system.
- A curriculum must be provided that is in line with the educational gap experienced by students. This means taking into account the activation of the Syrian curriculum modified with some minor amendments to the parts that contravene human rights.
- Renovate schools, universities and equipment.
- Provide teachers and educational staff and give them appropriate compensation.
- Design special programs for children to fill the gap in their education, and provide them with the psycho-social support that is required for the children to recover from their suffering over the last years.

## Section 2: Local Governance

As many areas of the province of Raqqa are exiting from ISIS control, it is crucial to improve the poor economic and service situation in the province by addressing the basic needs and the demands of these communities. Responding to these basic needs should be a priority for any local administration regardless of which administration it is. Civil society in Raqqa has strongly expressed that concentrating on the humanitarian and service delivery needs must be prioritized more than the local, regional, international conflicts which do not take civilian priorities into consideration.

Taking into consideration the complexity of the conflict over governance in Raqqa among the local, regional and international actors, we insist that the local governance should pass through three stages to prevent the proliferation of political conflicts, to reduce the suffering of civilians, and to achieve good local governance which represents people from Raqqa in a meaningful way.

### 1- Emergency Management Stage:

During this stage the flow of emergency services must be accelerated by removing landmines and rubble, and providing shelter, relief and humanitarian aids, health and water and the other urgent priorities that are explained in Section 1. This stage extends from three months to six months at the most.

### 2. Interim Administration Stage:

During this stage the international community must find opportunities to include the greatest number of people and civil society actors from the governorate of Raqqa to contribute to and participate in managing the needs of their communities. The work at this stage focuses on ensuring the return of IDPs free of harassment, preserving their personal freedoms and ensuring the provision of the basic services of electricity, water, medical care, education, protection and law. Here, the main challenge is to determine the framework upon which this interim stage is based; it is important that it fundamentally derive its legitimacy from the local community, and that Raqqa is not removed from the general Syrian framework. Therefore, civil society in Raqqa suggests forming an Interim Preparatory Committee to prepare for a temporary electoral conference for the Raqqa Provincial Council in accordance with the Local Administration Law which can be agreed upon. This process should guarantee the agreement of different regional and international actors, and this process should go in accordance with the Syrian peace negotiations in Geneva.

The period of this stage extends from six months to one year at the most, starting with the announcement of the international coalition that the entire province of Raqqa is outside of ISIS control.

### 3. Permanent stage:

This stage requires the implementation of the form of administration determined by the comprehensive Syrian agreement within the political solution of Syria in accordance with the Security Council resolutions and Geneva Communique. It covers the whole area of the governorate of Raqqa within its administrative borders, which guarantees the unity and integrity of the Syrian territory and its sovereignty and independence, and is managed by a comprehensive, credible and non-sectarian system which lays the ground for a democratic system for Syria.

### Section 3: The Role of Civil Society

- It is necessary to respect all social groups and provide protection for all civil, tribal, national, sectarian and religious affiliations as well as to ensure that they are allowed to practice their traditions and to express their cultural diversity.
- Allow the work of teams, organizations and initiatives that deal with the areas of civil work within the standards of the International Bill of Human Rights.
- Provide support and stability to the development of newly established civil and humanitarian initiatives and organizations.
- Guarantee freedom for the work of civil society organizations and freedom of the press. Civil society proposes mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the work through the same known mechanisms of international monitoring and evaluation. In order to avoid compromising the freedom of organizations to form and undertake their work, establish an Oversight Committee comprised of international and Syrian NGOs to help in overseeing and supervising the work of civil society organizations in Raqqa.

### Section 4: The Role of Women

Women from Raqqa are known for their strength. Before ISIS, women in Raqqa did not need to have a man accompanying them wherever they went, as ISIS imposed on them. Women in Raqqa, as in all the eastern provinces in Syria, have played an enormous role in the economy particularly through their work in agriculture, side by side with men. During the Syrian revolution, women from Raqqa played an important role in joining and leading the demonstrations, providing humanitarian aid, and leading civil society work. This reality was forced to change when ISIS took control of Raqqa and imposed laws which limited women's freedom, movement, and role in the economy and society.

***“We were living a real nightmare. We had to wear niqab [a full covering], we could not leave the house without a man [a muhram, or chaperone], and we were terrorized because if we committed any violation of their crazy rules, they took our men and dragged them in the streets, and they imprisoned them.” Montaha from Raqqa City.***

As is always the case in conflict, the violations against women are double; we need to work harder to ensure that the role of women is improved in order to get to the point where justice and equality is satisfied in democratic system.

#### Recommendations:

- Conduct a need assessments to assess the specific needs of women and engage women in conducting needs assessments for the community.
- Design long term programs to work with women from Raqqa to address the injustices they experienced as well as to activate their role in society. Empower women to play a role in building the future of Raqqa province.
- Support women's organizations and civil society organizations to work with women from Raqqa to ensure their effective role in decision-making.
- Guarantee a minimum of 30% women's participation in local governance and all of its related institutions.



## Conclusion:

In conclusion, we emphasize that the humanitarian and basic needs of civilians must be the top priorities for Raqqa province. Of equal importance is a focus on building local governance which is credible and legitimate; it is essential that it is built upon a real democratic base.

This paper is a response to the situation that Raqqa province is experiencing on all different levels, and which the contributors to this paper are living through. It is based on the consultations and testimonies from civilians from Raqqa, and a situation analysis of Raqqa. This paper is a product of the team work of a diversity of civil society individuals and groups in Raqqa.

Independent civil society is the only effective guarantor to build democratic, participatory and inclusive local governance.