

## Raqqa – A city of rubble and mines

### Situation Report

**November 1 - December 8, 2017**

#### - **Background**

The locals who fled the city of Raqqa because of the battles and aircraft bombing have begun to return to parts of the city of Raqqa following the announcement of the US-led coalition of the expulsion of ISIS from the city. While the active fighting in Raqqa may have ended weeks ago, the suffering for locals has continued, as the majority of the city's neighborhoods are unsafe due to the proliferation of unexploded shells, grenades, bombs, booby-traps and landmines. These explosive remnants of war (ERW) are still planted on the streets and inside houses and pose serious threats to returnees, limiting the return of civilians.

During October and November, ERW in Raqqa have led to the deaths of more than 100 people. According to Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors Without Borders (MSF), 49 people were injured by the explosion of mines during the last ten days of November. These explosive remnants are the major threat to IDPs returning to Raqqa, and they are also the most critical problem in terms of safety for the local population after the end of military activities, despite the fact that there have been many international statements promising to quickly remove the ERW as well as rubble.

#### - **Situation in the city of Raqqa**

ERW of all types are spread throughout the city's neighborhoods as well as its surrounding areas. The old city with its four neighborhoods as well as adjacent neighborhoods are considered to be one of the most dangerous areas, with a high number of landmines. Landmines are also scattered in lands and farms surrounding the city. In addition, there are unsafe areas in the Ba'ath and Andalus neighborhoods, north of the city. These areas were considered to be zones of demarcation (no man's land) between the two conflicting parties during military operations. In the south, ERW such as landmines and unexploded shells are scattered along the Euphrates River in the neighborhoods of Hisham bin Abdul Malik and Euphrates.

The Raqqa Internal Security Forces (RISF), which are a police unit formed in 2017 and supported by the US-led coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), assumed security responsibility for three neighborhoods in Raqqa, while SDF controls the rest of the city's neighborhoods. However, there is a clear failure in the work of SDF and RISF in terms of their inability to identify and announce the mine-laying areas to local residents, as well as their inability to identify a timetable for mine removal.

All kinds of ready-made and locally manufactured mines are spread throughout Raqqa, in addition to booby-traps, and networks of mines with different types of blasting wires, ranging from pressure plates to infrared sensors, and even remotely controlled mines as well as anti-handling devices. Mines may be hidden inside the structure of the building, or inside household appliances and personal property. The remnants of unexploded ordnance, improvised explosive devices and booby-trapped corpses are scattered as well. It is believed at the local level that the sewage system has been booby-trapped by ISIS, as it used the sewage system as a tunnel network. This grim situation in the city of Raqqa and its surroundings is the major obstacle that most hinders

the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who plan to return to their neighborhoods and homes as soon as possible with the onset of winter and the deteriorating conditions of the camps.

- **Impacts on the local community**

• **Humanitarian and psychological impacts:**

1. The explosive remnants of war have led to the death of roughly 250 people, from June 5 to December 5, despite the cessation of military activities.
2. Children and women of all ages are at risk because of mines. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 146 people, including 33 children and 9 women, were killed in the city and its surroundings between June 5 and September 27.
3. The explosion of mines and booby-traps has caused many injuries among civilians of different ages and there are injuries that have led to deformation and amputation.
4. Delay in demining operations will lead to incidents among IDPs during their return. It will also lead to the use of non-technical mine detection techniques.
5. The spread of mines and rubble in the city's neighborhoods will result in IDPs remaining in the camps in winter, which will require greater humanitarian assistance.
6. Fear and panic will spread among residents due to the existence of mines in most residential buildings, homes and even household appliances and personal property.
7. The continuation of displacement will negatively affects the population, especially children and families headed by women.

• **Social impacts:**

1. Lack of community confidence in decision-makers due to casualties among the local population as they return to their neighborhoods.
2. Reducing community cooperation with decision-makers as a result for not prioritizing the community needs.
3. The inability of local residents to remove the bodies of their relatives from the rubble because of the risk of mines.
4. In addition to the social impact related to the proliferation of ERW, there are these impacts:
  - a. Loss of trust in the SDF on the part of the local population due to the spread of looting and theft of houses and property by the forces present in their residential neighborhoods.
  - b. The occurrence of conflict situations between the local residents and officers of the People's Protection Units (YPG), as has already occurred in the old city (the Sayf al-Dawla area).

• **Economic impacts:**

1. The spread of theft of the local population's property in the uninhabited neighborhoods.

2. The spending of considerable amounts of time and money to support IDPs. In addition, freezing the operations of the local economy as a result of displacement
3. Further reduction of the economic activity of the local community due to the spread of mines, debris and destruction that hinder the return of the local population to engage in economic development.
4. Non-clearance of landmines located in agricultural lands prevent the productive re-use of these lands without endangering workers and farmers.
5. Increased need for longer-term food aid for IDPs from the local population living in camps who are unable to return due to ERW.

#### - Recommendations

1. The international coalition and the UN must assume their responsibilities to protect civilians and ensure stability.
2. Assessing the risk of the spread of mines and unexploded ordnance through a competent authority and disseminating information to the local population.
3. Setting and announcing a demining schedule to ease pressure on the local population.
4. Activating the role of local security agencies to be responsible for security and protection during the removal of rubble and mines. These agencies should be responsible for protecting the city from theft and looting to reassure the local population.
5. Mapping of mine-infested areas and zones as well as the placement of warning signs in the city and its surroundings in areas and sites where mines have not been cleared.
6. Supporting the dissemination of mine risk awareness programs by Mine Action agencies to ensure community outreach.
7. Ensuring the continued flow of humanitarian aid to IDPs as demining continues.
8. Ensuring freedom of movement for IDPs in the north of Raqqa, in the area of Tell Abyad (Tell Abyad, Ein Issa, Salouk).
9. Surveying land around the city to make it safe and viable for economic re-development.
10. Identifying and training community-based clearance teams to complete Demining operations.