

# AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

FRAGILITY AND HUMANITARIAN PRIORITIES IN  
NORTHEAST SYRIA

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FIELD REPORT | JULY 2019



Cover Photo: A woman walks amidst debris in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa.  
(DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images)

# **CONTENTS**

**4 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**8 RAQQA**

**10 DIER EZ-ZOR**

**11 AL-HOL CAMP**

**12 A TURKISH BUFFER ZONE**

**13 CONCLUSION**

## SUMMARY

After almost eight bloody years, the war in Syria finally appears to be reaching the endgame. The Assad regime controls some two-thirds of the country.<sup>1</sup> In the northwest, the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has launched an offensive against opposition-controlled Idlib governorate under the cover of a brutal Russian bombing campaign. Upwards of 3 million Syrians in Idlib are under threat. Meanwhile, in northeast Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces—the Syrian Kurdish dominated militia backed by the United States—have dislodged the Islamic State and now control one-third of the country. However, the humanitarian situation in the northeast remains extremely fragile and could deteriorate quickly. Indeed, over a third of the 4 million people in this area need humanitarian assistance and some 600,000 are displaced.<sup>2</sup>

A patchwork of international relief groups and local actors are working hard to meet the needs of this population. However, their efforts are being hampered by a series of factors. At the top of this list is the continued uncertainty over U.S. engagement in northeast Syria. In December 2018, the Trump administration abruptly announced that it would pull troops, civilian staff, and funding out of Syria.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, it partially reversed course, opting to slow the drawdown and leave some 400 U.S. troops in place for an unspecified period.<sup>4</sup> These troops reportedly would become part of a 800 to 1,500 strong multinational force, which the administration would solicit from NATO countries and other partners.<sup>5</sup> While France and Germany have reportedly indicated that they would contribute new troops, formal commitments have yet to be announced.

Some of the larger international aid organizations initially responded to the December 2018 announcement by preparing to evacuate. Local groups braced for the worst. Although such anxiety has lessened, the lack of clarity over American intentions makes it difficult for humanitarian actors and the communities they serve to plan. The consequences are on display in key population centers like Raqqa, the former capital of the Islamic State. Over the last year, important progress has been made in Raqqa. More than half the population that had been displaced by fighting has now returned, most streets are clear of rubble, and markets are open. Until recently, those efforts were stalled as donors withhold recovery funding in response to the uncertainty in U.S. policy.

The humanitarian situation in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor—Syria’s oil and natural gas region and the last redoubt of the Islamic State—is of greatest concern. While the fighting has ebbed, few aid groups can access a civilian population in desperate need of assistance. The remnants of the Islamic State continue to destabilize the area. So, too, does the Assad regime, reportedly

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1. Lister, Charles, “Argument: Assad Hasn’t Won Anything,” July 11, 2019, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/11/assad-hasnt-won-anything-syria/>.

2. “Syrian Arab Republic: North-east Syria Humanitarian Snapshot—As of 20 June 2019,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), June 20, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-humanitarian-snapshot-20-june-2019>.

3. Landler, Mark, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring ‘We Have Won Against ISIS,’” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>.

4. Mitchell, Ellen, “Trump backs off total Syria withdrawal,” *The Hill*, February 23, 2019, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/431289-trump-backs-off-total-syria-withdrawal>.

5. Carla E. Humud, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” Congressional Research Service, Report RL33487, updated March 25, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>.

through connections to the governorate's Sunni Arab tribes. Relations between the local population and the governance mechanisms set up by Syrian Democratic Forces are deeply problematic and have impacted relief efforts.

The fighting displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians in Deir ez-Zor. Over 70,000 of these internally displaced people (IDPs) remain crammed into Al-Hol camp along the border with Iraq.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of camp inhabitants are women and children—mainly family members of Islamic State fighters. While services are being scaled up, the response remains inadequate. Of greater concern, however, is the lack of a plan to provide sustainable solutions for the camp's population—particularly the Iraqis and third county nationals.

Finally, tensions between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds continue to complicate the situation. The specter of Turkish intervention looms over relief and recovery efforts. Turkey has repeatedly massed troops along the border of northeast Syria, most recently in mid-July 2019. Intervention could also take the form of a buffer zone along the border.<sup>7</sup> Negotiations between Turkey and the United States over a proposed zone reportedly continue. However, humanitarians and local community leaders believe that a zone could plunge northeast Syria into renewed conflict, displacing hundreds of thousands and forcing most international aid organizations to evacuate.

All these elements have helped make northeast Syria what the United Nations has called “one of the most complex operating environments in Syria for humanitarian organizations.”<sup>8</sup> When Refugees International returned to the area at the end of May 2019, relief workers and local leaders alike were muddling through as best they could. However, the United States, international donors, and humanitarian actors must act quickly to keep the situation from deteriorating further.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The United States should sequence the withdrawal of U.S. troops with the deployment of the envisaged multinational residual force in northeast Syria:** The United States should condition the timeframe for the drawdown to 400 troops on the commitment and arrival of capable military contingents from other NATO countries to constitute the multinational residual force. Avoiding a precipitous drawdown will be key to preventing further destabilization and the ensuing humanitarian suffering.

**The United States should reinforce its civilian presence in northeast Syria and resume stabilization funding:** The United States should ensure that it has a full complement of diplomats and aid workers in the northeast to spearhead stabilization and recovery projects. It should also make new funding available for stabilization. The United States should channel new assistance to local groups, particularly proven partners in Raqqa and new ones in Deir ez-Zor.

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6. “Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp,” Situation Report No. 5 — As of 5 July 2019, UN OCHA Syria, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Al%20Hol%20sitrep5%20FINAL.pdf>.

7. “Snapshots: Turkey: Washington Warns Ankara About Troop Buildup on Its Border With Syria,” Stratfor, July 15, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/turkey-washington-warns-ankara-about-troop-buildup-its-border-syria-sdf-s400-sanctions>.

8. “Syrian Arab Republic: North-east Syria Humanitarian Snapshot—As of 20 June 2019,” UN OCHA, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-humanitarian-snapshot-20-june-2019>.

**The United States and other donors should fund the transition to early recovery in Raqqa:** European donors should accept a degree of risk and release funding to support Raqqa's transition to early recovery. As one aid official put it, "it's time for the donors to be brave. Trump's tweet did not change the needs of the local population." For its part, the United States should use the "Relief and Recover Fund" to support such programming and encourage European donors to step up their assistance. Priority sectors include livelihoods, education and agriculture.

**Donors and aid groups should focus on community engagement in Deir ez-Zor:** Humanitarians will need to invest time and resources to build relationships with local communities and to hire locally within these communities. While this may slow down the pace of programming in the short-term, it offers a pathway to sustainable humanitarian engagement. International aid groups and donors should seek to partner with local communities in order to reach those in need.

**The United States should work with the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) to improve governance and humanitarian coordination in Deir ez-Zor:** The SDC should, as a matter of priority, strengthen local governance structures in Deir ez-Zor and make them more inclusive of the local population. The SDC should strengthen outreach to local communities and bolster humanitarian coordination with local humanitarian and community-based groups throughout the governorate.

**Iraq should ensure that its plan to repatriate its 30,000 citizens from Al-Hol Camp is transparent and conducted in a safe, dignified and voluntary manner:** The government of Iraq should support their repatriation, afford them rights enjoyed by all other citizens, and ground any deprivation of liberties in due process of law.

**The governments of the 11,000 third-country nationals in Al-Hol Camp should establish a formal process for repatriating their third-country nationals currently in Al-Hol:** Governments should establish formal processes for repatriating the 11,000 family members of the Islamic State fighters currently in Al-Hol camp who came from third countries beyond Syria and Iraq, unless these family members are to be prosecuted for crimes in accordance with international standards.

**Any buffer zone between Turkey and northeast Syria should do no harm:** In seeking to address Turkey's security concerns along its border with the northeast, the United States should prioritize the principle of "do no harm." Specifically, whatever arrangement may be negotiated with respect to a buffer zone must prioritize the well-being of the civilian population in northeast Syria. The United States should refuse to facilitate any such arrangement that would likely trigger hostilities or widespread displacement.

# GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS, also called “the Self-Administration”) serves as the de facto governance structure in northeast Syria. The Self-Administration was initially dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (also called the PYD) and its military arm, the People’s Protection Units (also called the YPG). The YPG served as the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of militias and local partner for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The Self-Administration began in Syrian-Kurdish-majority areas along the Turkish border, establishing a system of local councils to govern communities there. As the Islamic State was pushed back, the Self-Administration expanded the area under its de facto authority to include a large stretch of territory south of the Kurdish-majority areas and east of the Euphrates River. The majority of the population in these areas is Sunni Muslim Arab. Local councils have been established to oversee the main cities and their surrounding areas. The most notable is the Raqqa Civil Council, but there are similar councils in Deir ez-Zor, Manbij, and Tabqa.



Source: ESRI

## RAQQA

The situation in Raqqa has improved markedly since Refugees International last visited the city in 2018.<sup>9</sup> Much of the city had been destroyed during the fighting between the Islamic State and the U.S.-led coalition. Hundreds of thousands of people had fled their homes and thousands were reportedly killed. Today, relief workers told Refugees International that over 250,000 had returned to Raqqa city – well over half of the pre-war population. While much of the city is still in ruins, the streets in many areas have been cleared of rubble. Markets and stores are open, and much of the electricity grid has been turned back on. People have access to some services. One year ago, “90 percent of the water available in the city was being trucked in. Now, 90 percent of the city is receiving water through the Raqqa’s water network.”<sup>10</sup>

Still, the needs are significant. For many individual households, the economic situation is getting worse. The local population has largely exhausted its financial reserves and those available through extended family and social networks. Staff from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) observed that, “People are getting poorer as more people come back and compete for the few jobs that are available.” As a result, both aid workers and local city officials are increasingly focused on livelihoods programming and other interventions designed to generate jobs. Interestingly, the access to primary education has reportedly fallen in recent months. Shelter also remains a critical need. Residents have done what minimal repairs they could afford to do to their bomb-damaged homes. However, donor support is not available to undertake the kind of large-scale repairs required to make the city whole.

The Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) is the governing body in the city. A year ago, senior RCC officials with whom Refugees International spoke were deeply concerned that the local population would force them out of office. They feared that “the local population was turning against us.” At the time, civilians returning to the city had grown deeply frustrated with the challenges of daily life. Now, senior officials say the greatest challenge is no longer internal. Rather than popular local discontent, they point to the lack of clarity about the political future of northeast Syria as the primary threat to security in the city. Local officials told Refugees International, “We have no idea what the future holds. We are worried that if the United States pulls out, the Assad regime will move against us or the Islamic State will return.”

Indeed, outside experts and some city residents are increasingly worried about the rise in attacks by the Islamic State in recent months. These have included bombings and targeted killings. Despite this recent spate of violence, international NGOs operating in Raqqa still consider the vast majority of the city to be accessible. “Raqqa is now pretty permissive. There’s nowhere my teams can’t go,” said one senior humanitarian official. This is a significant shift from a year ago.

The overall humanitarian situation in Raqqa had improved enough for international aid groups to transition from emergency response to early recovery. Some international NGOs and their donors had been planning for this transition for months. However, last December’s announcement of a U.S. withdrawal all but stopped that planning. According to senior relief officials, European and other non-U.S. donors withheld recovery funding “because the Americans are getting ready to leave.” The donors have reportedly

9. Grisgraber, Daryl, “Raqqa: Avoiding Another Humanitarian Crisis,” Refugees International, June 26, 2018, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2018/6/25/raqqa-avoiding-another-humanitarian-crisis>.

10. “Situation Overview: Area-Based Assessment of Ar-Raqqa City,” REACH, March 2019, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach\\_syr\\_situationoverview\\_raqqa\\_aba\\_march2019\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_syr_situationoverview_raqqa_aba_march2019_0_0.pdf).



# RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In May 2019, a Refugees International team traveled to northeast to research the humanitarian situation in territory under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The team visited the major population centers along the Turkish border, including Qamishli and Kobane. It also travelled to Raqqa and Hasakah governorates. The team interviewed international nongovernmental organization (INGO) staff, UN officials, and local officials from the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Refugees International also spoke with displaced persons and with representatives of some 20 local civil society groups from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

been pressuring aid groups to quickly spend money that has already been disbursed. Referring to the President Trump's December 2018 announcement of a U.S. withdrawal, one senior aid official commented that the donors were abandoning Raqqa "all because of a tweet." While some donors are reportedly beginning to reengage, the process should be accelerated.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the U.S. decision in 2018 to redirect \$230 million in stabilization funding away from Syria.<sup>11</sup> Continued stabilization efforts were to rely on funding from other countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Germany. Saudi Arabia alone is reported to have pledged \$100 millions to help fill the gap.<sup>12</sup> Today, however, key local partners who used to receive stabilization funding from the State Department and USAID are now being forced to shutter their operations. These include groups who helped clear much of the rubble from Raqqa's streets. New local groups, including ones dedicated to women's rights and ending gender-based violence,

have sprung up. However, they have been unable to access donor funding.

There is little doubt that an abrupt withdrawal by U.S. forces from the northeast of Syria would have significant impact on the stability of Raqqa and on the well-being of the local population. What progress has been achieved to date remains fragile. However, some modest investments from donors in Raqqa's transition to early recovery would help solidify the gains made. Donors should prioritize a few key sectors including livelihoods, agriculture, and education. These investments would also enhance the resilience of the civilian population regardless of the city's long-term political future. The agriculture sector will be particularly important for jumpstarting the economy and helping adjacent rural communities to recovery. The United States must lead by example and utilize money in the Relief and Recovery Fund to assist civilian populations in Raqqa and, indeed, other areas liberated from the Islamic State.<sup>13</sup>

11. Humud et al, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>.

12. Ibid.

13. Humud et al, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>.

## DEIR EZ-ZOR

After the Islamic State was ejected from Raqqa in October 2017, many fighters retreated down the Euphrates River into Deir ez-Zor governorate. The U.S.-led coalition and the SDF followed them. The group made its last stand in the city of Baghouz in Deir ez-Zor, which fell in March 2019. While the fighting has ebbed, security in Deir ez-Zor remains a major challenge and the humanitarian situation in the governorate is the most acute in the northeast of Syria. This is especially true in towns and villages along the eastern side of the Euphrates from Basira to Hajin, where an estimated 150,000 people are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>14</sup>

Those displaced by the fighting remain the most vulnerable. Tens of thousands of IDPs live in informal settlements and in damaged or unfinished buildings. Many sites are at risk of flooding. Many families lack access to health care and safe water, particularly in southern districts and communities along the Euphrates River. Moreover, local humanitarian groups told Refugees International that the SDF had placed restrictions on the movement of IDPs. In the southeast of the governorate, IDPs reportedly face threats from the Islamic State and other armed groups. Above all, individuals report needing greater support for livelihoods.

As in Raqqa, the Islamic State continues to operate in Deir ez-Zor despite having lost control of its territory. However, in Deir ez-Zor, the threat is greater than in Raqqa, and the SDF has responded by planning a new round of security operations to clear out fighters and sleeper cells dispersed throughout the governorate. These “back clearance” operations are expected to concentrate in the informal settlements where the displaced are sheltering along the Euphrates and major traf-

fic arteries. Those settlements are relatively small in size, but there are many dispersed throughout the area.

Tensions between the population and the SDF further complicate the situation. The local population is largely tribal and deeply distrustful of outsiders. Demonstrations against the SDF were being held almost daily. As one senior humanitarian put it, “[The local population] feels that the Syrian Kurds and the SDF are trying to control them from outside.” For its part, the Assad regime is reportedly using tribal connections to foment instability in communities under SDF control.

The local civilian authorities are not improving the situation. The Deir ez-Zor Civil Council is reportedly poorly staffed and lacks capacity. Few international aid workers or local NGOs view the council as an effective partner. For their part, council staff operate under significant threat from armed groups. Refugees International met one senior official who commutes 4 hours daily to Deir ez-Zor to discharge his duties. The security situation is so poor that he cannot live in the city and must travel different roads each day to avoid being targeted by armed groups.

As a result of these dynamics, international NGOs are highly constrained in their operations. One of the few large aid groups that is providing emergency relief is even considering suspending its activities in Deir ez-Zor and shifting its program elsewhere. Humanitarian NGOs acknowledge that their imperfect understanding of local tribal dynamics hinders their access to communities. Some aid groups are trying to hire local staff to gain the community’s acceptance. However, relatively few locals have the skills or education that these international NGOs require.

Refugees International met with almost a

14. “Syrian Arab Republic: North-east Syria Humanitarian Snapshot—As of 20 June 2019,” UN OCHA, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-humanitarian-snapshot-20-june-2019>.

dozen local NGOs operating in Deir ez-Zor. Only three of them reported receiving assistance from international donors. Others claimed they were ready to partner with international donors but acknowledged that they would require assistance to build their capacity first. Local NGOs did not complain about the security situation and claimed that they were able to move freely among communities in Deir ez-Zor. As a couple of local NGOs representatives noted, “These are our communities. We can go where we wish without being attacked.”

In a welcomed move, senior officials from the United States and the Gulf have recently travelled to the northeast of Syria to meet with members of the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council, local tribal leaders, and Syrian Kurdish officials.<sup>15</sup> American and other coalition diplomats should continue to push for better and more inclusive governance in the governorate and support humanitarian and recovery efforts in communities hit hard by the fighting.

## AL-HOL CAMP

At the end of March 2019, the Islamic State was evicted from the last territory it controlled in Deir ez-Zor. The SDF took the surviving fighters and their families into custody. For the most part, the men were detained while the women and children made their way to Al-Hol camp for the IDPs in Hasakah governorate. The SDF controls security in the camp, which is administered by the SDF’s civilian counterparts. By May 2019, the camp’s population had spiked to 73,000, up from about 9,000 in December 2018.<sup>16</sup> Over 90 percent of that population is made up of women and children.

There are three distinct populations residing in the camp—roughly 30,000 Syrians, 30,000 Iraqis, and 11,000 nationals of other countries. By April 2019, the camp was overwhelmed. The camp was poorly prepared to meet the needs of the influx of IDPs, who had been exposed to the trauma of war and endured days in transit with little aid. As a result, hundreds of people died in these early chaotic days—most of them children.

Even today, conditions in the camp remain dire. Shortages of clean water and medical care have been compounded by the arrival of the scorching summer heat. Since June 2019, there has been an increase in cases of acute diarrhea. Humanitarian agencies still do not have complete access to civilians in need of assistance. Furthermore, tensions in the camp are running high. These tensions are reportedly driven by limited services, uncertainly among camp residents about their future and continued support for the Islamic State among some elements of the camp population.

Even as the need for immediate humanitarian aid remains high, a central challenge going forward will be to determine the process and conditions under which the different caseloads in Al-Hol will be permitted to leave the camp and where they will go. This may be easier for Syrian residents than for others, as Syrians enjoy more freedom of movement than Iraqis or residents of other nationalities. Some Syrians have already been allowed to depart the camp and return home through a deal brokered between the SDF and the local tribes from Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Under the deal, local community leaders agree to sponsor and take responsibility for the returnees. The first group—over 700—returned to Raqqa and Tapqa on June 1, 2019, during the final days of Ramadan.<sup>17</sup> Another

15. “Syrian Kurdistan focus of foreign diplomatic attention,” Al Monitor, July 19, 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/syria-us-diplomatic-european-deir-az-zor-kurdish-area-visits.html>.

16. “Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp,” Situation Report No. 3 — As of 1 May 2019, UN OCHA Syria, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AhHol%20EN%20sitrep3%20May%206.pdf>.

17. “North East Syria: Al Hol camp service mapping snapshot - As of 19 June 2019,” UN OCHA Syria, <https://reliefweb.int/report/>

group followed suit shortly after the Eid holiday.

Iraqis face more significant challenges when it comes to returning home. As of July 2019, about 30,000 Iraqis reside in Al-Hol.<sup>18</sup> The Iraqi government has announced that it intends to repatriate all of its citizens from the camp, but the details of that plan remain unclear. Thus far, only a fraction of the Iraqis in the camp have registered to return home. Many residents who claim Iraqi citizenship lack the relevant documentation. There are also serious concerns that the Iraqi government may fail to respect the rights to which returnees are entitled. The Iraqi government is reportedly still considering a plan for the internment of families with perceived Islamic State affiliation. The plan could involve up to 280,000 people, primarily women and their children, who would be required to undergo compulsory deradicalization programming.<sup>19</sup> As of June 2019, only 5,000 Iraqis had volunteered to go back to Iraq.<sup>20</sup>

Other third-country nationals face even greater challenges, as many of their home countries do not want to accept them. UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet recently addressed the plight of this camp population, many of whom she described as living in “deeply sub-standard conditions.”<sup>21</sup> Ms. Bachelet called on governments to repatriate some 11,000 foreign family members of the Islamic State fighters “unless they are to be prosecuted for crimes in accordance with international standards.”<sup>22</sup>

## A TURKISH BUFFER ZONE

Humanitarian actors with whom Refugees International spoke were significantly concerned about the prospect that Turkey would move to establish a buffer zone along the border with northeast Syria. “Turkey is our number one concern,” they said. Turkey has long called for a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border to insulate itself from the YPG, which it considers to be an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Turkey has designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. Turkey’s planned zone would extend into northeast Syria, pushing the Syrian Kurdish militia away from the border area.

The United States has reportedly been in on-again, off-again discussions with Turkey on the latter’s proposal to create such a zone. Ankara first floated the idea years ago. In January 2019, President Trump proposed the creating of a of a 20-mile deep “safe zone” on the Syrian side of the border shortly after announcing that the United States would withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria.<sup>23</sup> Turkey has subsequently warned that it would establish the zone unilaterally if it fails to reach an agreement with the United States. To this end, Turkey on more than one occasion has amassed thousands of Turkish troops and Sunni Arab militia fighters near areas controlled by the SDF. The local population in northeast Syria is particularly con-

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syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-al-hol-camp-service-mapping-snapshot-19-june-2019.

18. “Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp,” Situation Report No. 5—As of July 5, 2019, UN OCHA, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-humanitarian-response-al-hol-camp-situation-report-no-5-5-july>.

19. “Iraq: Confining Families With Alleged ISIS Ties,” Human Rights Watch, May 7, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/07/iraq-confining-families-alleged-isis-ties-unlawful>.

20. Sly, Liz, “New suffering for the children of the ISIS caliphate as hunger and sickness spread,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-suffering-for-the-children-of-the-isis-caliphate-as-hunger-and-sickness-spread/2019/06/18/3824fe6c-87a2-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.20191c3f977d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-suffering-for-the-children-of-the-isis-caliphate-as-hunger-and-sickness-spread/2019/06/18/3824fe6c-87a2-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b_story.html?utm_term=.20191c3f977d).

21. “Opening statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet at the 41<sup>st</sup> session of the Human Rights Council,” June 24, 2019, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24724&LangID=E>.

22. Ibid.

23. Humud et al, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33487>.

cerned about these Sunni Arab militia—many of these fighters are drawn from hardline Islamic radical groups. These hardline fighters played major role in the Turkish offensive that pushed Syrian Kurdish forces out of Afrin district along the Turkish border. They have reportedly committed serious human rights abuses against the local civilian population.

In interviews with Refugees International, international humanitarian actors and officials from the Self-Administration warned that an effort to establish a buffer zone would trigger a military reaction from Syrian Kurdish forces. As one senior aid official put it, “it does not matter how the buffer zone is organized. It will lead to war.” This in turn would have two major humanitarian consequences. First, it would displace hundreds of thousands of civilians from the major population centers there. Up to 80 percent of the population—which is overwhelmingly Kurdish—could be expected to flee.

Second, the creation of a buffer zone would eliminate much of the humanitarian assistance architecture throughout northeast Syria. Aid officials from large international NGOs that Refugees International interviewed shared the view that the establishment of a Turkish buffer zone would constitute a “strategic shock to the system.” This shock would force them to withdraw from the region. Some were also concerned that they would be unable to maintain even limited operations as their national staff would need to focus on ensuring the safety of their families in the wake of renewed fighting. As a result, humanitarian coverage in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and even IDP camps would be lost just when the needs would be exploding. Al-Hol camp would be particularly vulnerable as an evacuation of humanitarian aid organizations would leave the Syrian Kurdish authorities to manage the situation with few resources. It could also seriously complicate any effort to facilitate the return of Iraqi or third country nationals in Al-Hol.

For these reasons, humanitarian actors felt that the Turkish proposal would constitute a significant humanitarian challenge. However, more pragmatic variations of that proposal elicited a wider variety of views. For example, it has been reported that a more limited option for a zone might only reach 5-7 kilometers into northeast Syria from the Turkish border and exclude at least two of the major Syrian Kurdish population centers—Qamishli and Kobane. This could significantly reduce the resulting displacement. Finally, the zone could be demilitarized and enforced or monitored by third party patrols. These patrols could be conducted by the United States or other international forces drawn from the Global Coalition. “This is the only option that would be possible without widespread hostilities,” said one senior international aid official.

## CONCLUSION

Looming over all these challenges is a pervading sense of strategic uncertainty. The current status quo in which the SDF controls the northeast of the country will become increasingly untenable as its main ally – the United States – withdraws. The Assad regime and Turkey are both poised to take advantage of that vacuum when and if it emerges—as are the remnants of the Islamic State. The nature, scope, and timeline of any withdrawal will have significant implications for region’s stability. So too will the political conditions under which it takes place.

However, the series of measures can help bolster prospects for stability, improve the humanitarian situation, and enhance community reliance no matter what the future holds. To this end, the United States should sequence the withdrawal of its troops with the arrival of capable counterparts from NATO and other partner countries. At the same time, it should resume stabilization funding and push for better and more inclusive governance in Deir ez-Zor. More

broadly, donors should fund early recovery in Raqqa and, together with relief groups, prioritize community engagement in Deir ez-Zor. In Al-Hol, Iraq and other coalition countries must facilitate the safe, dignified, and voluntary repatriations of their nationals. Finally, any arrangement reached with Turkey to manage security along its border with northeast Syria must not result in significant humanitarian suffering.

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# ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We are an independent organization and do not accept any government or UN funding.

**REFUGEES **  
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