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INTRODUCTION

Northeast Syria used to be the heartland of the so-called Islamic State (IS). Between 2015 and October 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with air support from the US-dominated International Coalition, largely succeeded in expelling the terror group from its strongholds in Northeast Syria. After a period of intense fighting, Kurdish forces liberated the city of Kobane in January 2015. On October 20, 2017, Raqqa, the Syrian capital of IS, was liberated, after the International Coalition unleashed a “war of annihilation” against the terror group.

However, the liberation from IS came at an extremely high cost to civilians, in the form of destruction and civilian deaths. Human rights groups have documented thousands of civilian deaths at the hands of the International Coalition, while the United Nations estimates that almost 70 % of Raqqa was destroyed.

16 months after the liberation of Raqqa from Islamic State, large parts of Northeast Syria are still in ruins. The humanitarian situation remains extremely dire, and rebuilding efforts have barely started. The area is still littered with explosive hazards, civilian infrastructure is in ruins, and rubble removal has only partially started. Civilians are faced with a lack of health services, electricity and water. Economic recovery has been slow, while education and employment opportunities are scarce. Traumatized children do not have access to psychological support, and protection in IDP camps is severely lacking.

However, on a more positive note, in recent months security in the area has been improving, and local and international humanitarian actors have managed to significantly scale up their operations.

Still, dark geopolitical clouds are gathering above Northeast Syria and are threatening this fragile calm. After Turkish President Erdogan threatened to start a Turkish offensive against the Kurdish YPG east of the Euphrates on December 12, 2018, US President Trump on December 19, 2018 announced a withdrawal of the estimated 2.000 US ground troops in Syria. Aid officials and experts have warned that a rushed and uncoordinated US withdrawal risks leaving behind a power vacuum, which could trigger a new round of bloodshed that could have devastating humanitarian consequences, and could offer IS a chance to regroup.

In this context, questions remain on which actions the EU and its member states can take in the short and medium term to improve conditions on the ground and play a meaningful role in diplomatic talks about the Northeast’s future.

These questions will also play an important role in the run-up to the third Brussels conference on Syria and the Future of the Region, which will be held on March 12-14, 2019. In this regard it is important to note that already in April 2018, the EU has stated that it *‘will engage in stabilization efforts in the areas liberated from Da’esh by the Global Coalition in north-eastern Syria.’* Yet, up until now this announcement has not resulted in a significant increase of EU assistance in the area.

Against this backdrop, this report offers a number of practical suggestions through which the EU and EU member states can help avoid a bloody escalation and support civilians in Northeast Syria in rebuilding their lives. It is largely based on field research conducted by 11.11.11 in the Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates in January 2019.

A first part will briefly outline key scenarios that might unfold after the US' withdrawal from Northeast Syria. The second part then provides a brief overview of the humanitarian situation across the area, and zooms in on which actors are doing the bulk of the humanitarian work. A third part outlines four key threats to the future stability of Northeast Syria, and the final part of this report aims to offer some practical suggestions through which the EU and EU member states can increase their diplomatic and humanitarian profile in the area.

1. THE US WITHDRAWS FROM SYRIA

1.1. THE TRUMP ANNOUNCEMENT

On **December 19, 2018**, US President Donald Trump announced on Twitter that the US military will be fully withdrawing from Syria. *'We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency'*, Trump wrote on Twitter.¹ In a subsequent video posted on his Twitter account, the US President added that US soldiers *'are all coming back, and they are coming back now'*.² White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders added the same day that *'we have started returning United States troops home as we transition to the next phase of this campaign'*, with the aim of withdrawing all US troops within 30 days.

Trump's announcement came as a shock to his advisers, as well as to key European allies, many of which were not informed in advance. It led to the resignation of US Defense Secretary James Mattis and anti-IS envoy Brett McGurk. In the days and weeks after this surprise announcement, Pentagon and State Department officials scrambled to convince Trump to allow for a more gradual and phased withdrawal. In a cabinet meeting on **January 2**, Trump seemed to have (partially) given in to his advisers; he emphasized that there was no specific timetable for a US withdrawal (*'I never said we're doing in that quickly'*), and that he would not allow Turkey to attack Kurdish US allies in Northeast Syria. On January 3, 2019, Trump added on Twitter that *'we will be leaving at a proper pace'*.

On **January 6, 2019**, US national security adviser John Bolton met with his Turkish counterparts in Ankara, and presented a five-point "non-paper". This non-paper reportedly stressed that any US exit will be orderly and gradual; that the US would continue to defeat IS remnants during the withdrawal period; that Turkey would not be allowed to harm YPG/SDF fighters; that the US would not allow any Iranian presence; and that IS fighters captured by YPG/SDF forces should not be released under any circumstances.³ Bolton reportedly also stated that a US withdrawal would take at least 120 days instead of the 30 days that were initially mentioned.

Adding to the overall confusion, on **January 11**, a spokesperson from the Pentagon stated that the US military had started the withdrawal process, although officials later clarified that only equipment (and not troops) was being withdrawn. 3 days later, on **January 14**, Trump threatened Turkey (on Twitter) with *'economic devastation'* if it were to attack the Syrian Kurds. However, in the same tweet he also suggested that the US and Turkey could work together to estab-

lish a 32-km “security zone” in Northeast Syria. That same week, Trump and Turkish President Erdogan held two phone conversations to discuss the establishment of such a security zone. After Islamic State claimed two deadly attacks on military convoys in Manbij and Hasakeh (on 16 and 21 January, respectively), Trump re-iterated to Erdogan that he still intends to withdraw US troops.

Meanwhile, on **January 17**, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that France will maintain a military presence in Syria throughout 2019, while on **January 21**, the United Kingdom announced its intention to pull out half of all UK warplanes and all UK special forces from Syria.

On **January 23**, Russian and Turkish presidents Putin and Erdogan met in Moscow. At this occasion, Erdogan stated that a security zone would be established ‘*in a few months*’. President Putin, in an attempt to encourage the Turkish and Syrian governments to re-establish bilateral relations, emphasized that the 1998 Adana agreement is still valid. However, Turkish officials interpreted Putin’s remarks as a green light for cross-border “counterterrorist” operations against the YPG/SDF. At the end of January, President Erdogan also suggested that a safe zone in Northeast Syria would allow up to four million Syrian refugees to return.

Finally, on **February 6, 2019**, the 79 members of the Global Coalition against Islamic State met in Washington DC to discuss the overall progress of the anti-IS campaign. On this occasion, Trump stated that ‘*it should be formally announced sometime probably next week that we will have 100 percent of the caliphate*’.⁴ However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stressed that the fight against Islamic State is far from over, and described the US withdrawal as a ‘*tactical change, not a change in mission*’.⁵

In a statement published after the meeting of the Global Coalition, the foreign ministers of the 79 coalition members acknowledged that the military defeat of Islamic State is only a first step. In order to ensure an enduring defeat of the terror group, the ministers committed to further humanitarian, recovery and stabilization assistance in Northeast Syria:

*‘Where possible, we support inclusive local recovery and stabilization in areas liberated from ISIS and community-based dialogue and reconciliation efforts to foster conditions conducive to a Syria-wide political resolution to the Syria conflict. We will continue to focus on providing humanitarian and stabilization assistance, to improve the lives of vulnerable populations; help enable the safe and voluntary returns of refugees and displaced persons; and ensuring civilian protection and access to education, setting the path for sustainable recovery from ISIS occupation so that local communities can continue to rebuild with the extraordinary resolve, dignity, and resilience they have demonstrated since liberation.’*⁶

BOX 1: RISE OF THE KURDS IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

Kurdish YPG fighters have been at the forefront of the fight against Islamic State (IS), as they acted as the ground troops of the International Coalition against IS. YPG fighters compose the majority of the “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF), a multi-ethnic military force created in late 2015 to displace IS fighters from Northeast Syria.

In 2012, during the early stages of the Syrian war, Syrian government forces withdrew from the northern Kurdish-majority areas (called ‘Rojava’ or ‘West-Kurdistan’ by the Kurds) and left control to local militant groups and social organizations. The PYD (the political arm of the YPG) was the driving force behind the administrative organization of the area, with the establishment of the “Movement for a Democratic Society” (TEV-DEM) as a new governance body. In January 2014, the three Kurdish cantons under TEV-DEM rule declared political autonomy and issued a ‘Social Contract’ to determine the basic constitutional principles of the self-proclaimed autonomous region.

In late 2016, the ‘Democratic Federation of Northern Syria’ was established in order to better reflect the presence of non-Kurds in the area under Kurdish control, and a new version of the Social Contract was adopted. Meanwhile the liberated areas of Northeast Syria where Sunni Arab populations were more predominant, fell under the authority of the “Syrian Democratic Council” (SDC). However, in September 2018, the creation of one over-arching administrative body for both areas, the “Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria”, was announced.

Proponents of the Autonomous Administration, which is strongly dominated by the PYD, emphasize that the political project of the PYD (“Democratic Confederalism”, articulated in a “Social Contract”) could serve as a model for a future decentralized Syria. The two main principles of this “Kurdish revolution” are communalism (independent communes, local councils, districts and regions that cooperate in a federation) and the empowerment of women. According to Belgian author Ludo De Brabander, the idea of democratic confederalism further promotes religious and ethnic diversity (with an administrative structure co-chaired by Arabs and Kurds), gender equality, environmental sustainability, and bottom-up and participatory democracy.⁷

In contrast, critics point to a gap between theory and practice. They have accused the PYD and the Autonomous Administration of authoritarian tendencies and the creation of a de facto one-party rule.⁸ Human rights organizations and a UN Commission of Inquiry have accused Kurdish groups of serious violations of human rights, including arbitrary arrests of political opponents, forced conscription campaigns, and the use of child soldiers.⁹

Moreover many observers state that real power and authority within the Autonomous Administration is still concentrated within the PYD and YPG. These groups still retain close ideological and operational links to the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Abdullah Öcalan, which is considered by Turkey, the EU and US as a terror group. For example, a report from 2017 by the International Crisis Group argues that key PYD/YPG cadre members have received military training and ideological education from the PKK. It also claimed that PKK-trained lower-level cadre acts as a “shadow command chain” within institutions in the SDF areas’ formal institutions.¹⁰

1.2. WHO WILL GOVERN AND SECURE NORTHEAST SYRIA?

The announcement from the US that they were withdrawing equipment and troops from North-east Syria has triggered intense diplomatic talks between the United States, Turkey, Russia, the Syrian government, the Autonomous Administration of Northeastern Syria and other domestic and regional actors.

Currently, these actors seem to be discussing four main scenarios. In this regard it should also be noted that, apart from France and the United Kingdom (and to a lesser extent Germany), **the European Union and its member states do not seem to be seriously involved in any such talks**. Moreover, Autonomous Administration officials and senior PYD leaders complained about a lack of formal channels of communication with the EU and EU member states to 11.11.11, and repeatedly asked why Europe is not more involved in the search for a diplomatic and humanitarian solution for Northeast Syria.¹¹

Scenario 1: A negotiated deal between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration, with Russia as “guarantor state”

After the surprise US withdrawal announcement on December 19, 2018, the Syrian government and the Kurdish-dominated “Syrian Democratic Council” (SDC) have intensified negotiations (started in late July 2018) on the future status of Northeast Syria. In January 2019, the SDC reportedly proposed an 11-point “**Roadmap**” to Damascus. According to one UN official interviewed by 11.11.11, these negotiations have received tacit support by the United States.¹²

This proposal, the implementation of which the SDC wants to see guaranteed by the Russian Federation, includes a future autonomous status for the area; the reintegration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA); a recognition of the apparatus of the Syrian state and President Assad; a return of the Syrian state to the border crossings with Turkey; and an agreement on sharing the revenues of the area’s natural resources. It could potentially also include the deployment of Russian military police to patrol the area.¹³

In the short term, this scenario could result in a series of smaller agreements between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration, followed by a full agreement in the long run. As such, civil entities of the Syrian government would gradually re-establish their presence in key sectors (such as health, electricity and civil documentation), in locations in Deir ez Zour, Raqqa, Arima and Hasakeh governorate. At least in the short term, SDF forces would maintain de facto control over security issues, as there would be no immediate return of Syrian government security forces.¹⁴

However, it remains unclear to what extent this scenario would result in the Syrian government re-establishing military control over the entire northeast and all international borders in the longer term. Questions also arise on what the impact of such a return of government security forces on overall humanitarian access throughout the area would be. Civilians and officials interviewed by 11.11.11 expressed strong concerns on arbitrary arrests, forced military conscription and human rights violations by Syrian intelligence forces and/or pro-government militias. Young male NGO workers aged 18-42 are particularly concerned, since NGO workers have been among the primary targets of arrest campaigns in areas where the Syrian government has returned, and also run the risk of being subjected to forced military conscription.¹⁵

Scenario 2: Turkish security zone

Turkey, on the other hand, wants to establish a 32-km deep “security zone”, which would run from the Turkish border to Ain Issa, and is said to include the main population centers of the Northeast (Kobani, Ras al Ayn, Tal Abyaad, Qamishli). On January 7, 2019, in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, Turkish President Erdogan outlined the main features of the Turkish plan for such a security zone. He proposed the establishment of a stabilization force that would feature *‘fighters from all parts of Syrian society’*, after the completion of an *‘intensive vetting process to reunite child soldiers with their families and include all fighters with no links to terrorist organizations’*. Erdogan also claimed that Turkey does not take issue with Syrian Kurds, and proposed that areas under YPG control should be governed by popularly elected councils, in which *‘individuals with no links to terrorist groups will be eligible to represent their communities’* and would get technical support from Turkish officials.¹⁶

Such a security zone would be modeled after the “Euphrates Shield” and “Olive Branch” areas in Northwest Syria, which are currently controlled by Turkey and (extremist) militias closely aligned to Turkey. The arrival of any such militias is widely perceived as a key protection concern. Human rights groups and the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria have documented widespread occurrences of looting, extortion, arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, beatings and destruction or appropriation of property by extremist militias in Afrin since early 2018¹⁷, a scenario which risks repeating itself in Northeast Syria.

During recent field research in Northeast Syria (January 2019) 11.11.11 spoke to civilians and officials, who all made the same statement when asked about their perspective on a Turkish security zone: *“We don’t want any of that. Just look what these extremist militias did in Afrin”*. Moreover, it should be noted that many observers have warned for a creeping, de facto, Turkish annexation of large territories of Northern Syria.

Scenario 3: Security zone under international protection

In a statement published on January 16, 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stated that *‘we are ready to support the efforts to establish a safe zone in North and East Syria on conditions that it is under international guarantee, protects all ethnic and religious components in the region from massacres, secures their rights and prohibits any external intervention in the region.’*¹⁸ The same day, senior Kurdish political leader Aldar Khalil also said that Syrian Kurds would accept the deployment of United Nations forces along the border between Turkey and the territory currently controlled by the Autonomous Administration.¹⁹ Khalil and other officials have since argued repeatedly for a UN force similar to UNIFIL (Lebanon) to be deployed on the Turkish-Syrian border.²⁰

In an interview with 11.11.11, a high-level PYD official similarly emphasized the possibility of deploying UN forces in Northeast Syria. The official also stressed the need for (international) air support in order to prevent Turkey from launching an all-out attack on the area.²¹ Moreover, senior officials from the Kurdish National Council (KNC, the main Kurdish opposition umbrella) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) also expressed their support for the deployment of UN forces on the border with Turkey and/or in main population centers in Northeast Syria.²²

According to (unconfirmed) reports in the Turkish media, Turkey would also be open to a UN presence, as this would bolster the overall international legitimacy of the proposed security zone.²³

Scenario 4: Joint Turkish-international patrols: enter Rojava Peshmerga

According to *Middle East Eye*, US officials are working on a plan that would result in joint Turkish-French-British patrols in non-urban areas in Northeast Syria.

Under this plan, approximately 6.000 Rojava Peshmerga forces (who are aligned with the Kurdish opposition umbrella KNC, the main rival of the YPG) would be deployed in Kurdish-majority cities along the Syrian side of the Turkish border, while Arab elements of the YPG-led SDF would be deployed in Arab-majority towns along the border. The US military would reportedly also maintain a de facto no-fly zone in Northeast Syria.²⁴ Additionally, some media reports have suggested the possibility that “Syrian Elite Forces” (SEF), the militant wing of Syria’s Tomorrow Movement, would be deployed to control the border together with Rojava Peshmerga.²⁵ However, KNC officials interviewed by 11.11.11 emphasized that Rojava Peshmerga forces could only be deployed as part of an internationally sponsored mechanism that would merge SDF and Rojava Peshmerga forces.²⁶

According to some reports, US officials are also discussing the possibility of collecting heavy weaponry from the YPG/SDF while still allowing the Autonomous Administration to maintain its administrative rule in the main northeastern cities.²⁷ Other reports claim that the US have asked several Western allies (including France, United Kingdom and Australia) to deploy forces in a buffer zone close to the Turkish-Syrian border, but that, as of now, none of these nations have accepted to fulfill this request.²⁸

2. THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

2.1. HUMANITARIAN SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW

16 months after the liberation of Raqqa city from the so-called Islamic State (IS), the humanitarian situation across Northeast Syria remains dire. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has produced subsequent situation reports to monitor the humanitarian conditions in Northeast Syria. These reports have highlighted several key humanitarian and protection concerns:

- **A (re-) contamination with explosive hazards** remains a key humanitarian concern. It hampers humanitarian access and the ability to conduct assessments, and also poses a serious threat to returning civilians. In the first six months after the liberation of Raqqa city, an average of 120 fatalities and 100 injuries per month occurred as a result of explosive hazards. As a consequence of an increased number of operations by humanitarian actors and the scaling up of mine risk education activities, the number of blast-related cases gradually decreased from May 2018 onwards. While the number of such cases was over 170 per month in December 2017 and January 2018, UNOCHA recorded only 23 cases in May 2018. In June 2018, area-based clearance operations also started in Raqqa city (which for the first time also included the clearance of residential areas), combined with the establishment of a clearance coordination mechanism.
- **Widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and rubble removal:** In April 2018, a UN humanitarian assessment team visited Raqqa city for the first time, and stated that nearly 70 % of all buildings were destroyed or damaged. The large number of unsound buildings and debris poses a direct security threat to returning civilians and has a negative effect on the ability of humanitarian actors to increase their presence and operations. Moreover, there are still many corpses trapped under the rubble, which poses a great risk to public health.
- **Lack of health services:** The public health situation in the Raqqa governorate remains particularly critical, although in recent months some minor improvements have been made. In early December 2017 UNOCHA reported that 92 % of the 77 health facilities across the Raqqa governorate were non-functional. By early January 2018, one health clinic, some private pharmacies and 3 medical practices had re-opened in Raqqa city. Since then, at least six hospitals also resumed operations (again in Raqqa city). In addition to this, a health center in Raqqa city, a gynecology hospital in Raqqa governorate and a MSF primary healthcare clinic in Raqqa city started or resumed operations between April and June 2018. Overall, by October 2018, two public hospitals, five private hospitals, and eight public or NGO-run healthcare clinics were operational in Raqqa city.²⁹ Meanwhile, outbreaks of multiple infectious diseases were reported in the governorates of Raqqa, Hasakeh and Deir ez Zour from September 2018 onwards. In late August 2018, 500 cases of typhoid were reported in the governorate of Hasakeh governorate. In September and October 2018, UNOCHA reported 112 cases of typhoid and 634 cases of bloody diarrhea, while between September 1 and October 15, 2018, 250 new suspected cases of measles and 1,321 cases of leishmaniasis were reported. The latter disease largely spread due to a lack of health care and health actors in affected areas.

- **Lack of electricity:** Access to electricity remains a critical issue, particularly in the governorate of Raqqa. It also directly impacts other basic services such as water pumping stations, bakeries, food markets and healthcare and educational facilities. By August 2018, Raqqa city's electricity supply network was still not restored. Residents mainly rely on community generators. In this way, residents of most neighborhoods of Raqqa city are able to secure access to electricity for at least 8 hours a day. Meanwhile, by August 2018, power supply lines had been installed across 5 villages in northern rural areas of the governorate of Raqqa, providing access to electricity between 5 to 8 hours per day for 50,000 individuals. In June 2018 UNOCHA also reported that the electricity station of Ain Issa had reopened, providing electricity to over 400 villages across multiple governorates.
- **Lack of water:** Access to sufficient and safe water from the water network remains problematic, particularly in the governorate of Raqqa. The main water pumping station in Raqqa is still not fully functional as a result of electrical and mechanical issues, although repair works have started in early 2018. In late August 2018, reports also emerged about 500 Raqqa city residents exhibiting signs of water-borne illnesses.
- **Lack of education:** Although access to primary education has increased since March 2018, by mid- July 2018 less than 50 % of all children aged 5-10 were enrolled in primary schools. On a more positive note, in January 2018 students in the governorate of Raqqa sat for school exams for the first time since IS was dispelled from the area.
- **Lack of livelihood opportunities:** Local communities identified livelihoods as the third priority need in the August 2018 REACH Humanitarian Situation Overview report for Northeast-Syria.³⁰ Less than 8 % of assessed communities reported having received food distribution in the previous month, and less than 20 % of assessed communities reported that residents had enough income to cover household needs. At the same time, economic life is slowly returning to Northeast-Syria, although there are still enormous challenges. Already in December 2017, UNOCHA reported that many small shops and larger workshops were reopening in the industrial zone of Raqqa city, and that a local sheep market and at least 37 bakeries have re-opened across the governorate of Raqqa. In April 2018 a UN humanitarian assessment team also confirmed that many shops and markets were reopening in Raqqa city, while in August 2018 it was reported that maize and cotton cultivation in rural parts of Raqqa governorate had restarted and that several poultry farms had been rehabilitated as well. However, an unprecedented drought in Northeast-Syria has posed serious challenges for food security and livelihoods, particularly in the governorate of Hasakeh. By the end of October 2018, the total wheat production for 2018 was only 1.2 million tons, a mere 30 % of the pre-2011 annual average yield.
- **High levels of trauma and distress:** many residents in Northeast-Syria, particularly children, are experiencing high levels of trauma and distress linked to their experiences under IS control, exposure to hostilities, and the limited freedom of movement in IDP sites.
- **Situation in IDP sites:** the overall protection situation inside IDP sites remains critical. Deteriorating humanitarian conditions due to decreasing levels of donor funding, the confiscation of personal documents and identity documents by camp management authorities, restrictions in freedom of movement in some camps, and fear of compulsory conscription (including of adolescent boys) are reported as key protection challenges. *'As the displacement situation becomes more protracted, levels of stress, frustration*

and anxiety is increasing, having negative implications on familial and community relations, UNOCHA already noted in July 2018. Additionally, child and gender protection concerns are of particular concern in IDP sites, with reported cases of domestic violence against children, sexual violence and harassment, child labor, and children engaging in begging or substance abuse. According to UNOCHA, the protracted displacement situation *'has contributed to a climate of anguish, idleness and desolation, triggering negative behaviors from youth, children and leading to suspected situations of exploitation and abuse.'* The deteriorating situation has resulted in negative coping mechanisms, including early marriage and military recruitment of children and young men and women. In October 2018, the already challenging humanitarian situation further deteriorated due to increasingly challenging weather conditions and a decrease in assistance. For example, on 30 May 2018, a storm struck Ain Issa camp and destroyed one third of all tents. On 25 October 2018, torrential rains and strong winds inflicted damage on several IDP sites in rural parts of the governorate of Raqqa.

- **Compulsory conscription:** In March 2018, UNOCHA reported that Kurdish security forces launched a compulsory conscription campaign, resulting in rising tensions across the governorate of Raqqa. Compulsory conscription is also having a negative impact on the humanitarian situation, since many local humanitarian workers are young males, who are more at risk to being subjected to forced conscription.

BOX 2: “WAR OF ANNIHILATION” IN RAQQA

In May 2017 then US Defense Secretary James Mattis declared that there would be a “war of annihilation” against Islamic State (IS). Shortly after, in June 2017, the final battle for Raqqa, the Syrian capital of Islamic State, started. Raqqa was liberated on October 20, 2017, but its liberation came at an extremely high cost to civilians.

The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria³¹, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights³², monitoring group Airwars and local activists³³ have documented a dramatic increase in the number of civilian deaths by the US-led International Coalition against Islamic State. Furthermore, both Human Rights Watch³⁴ and Amnesty International³⁵ documented hundreds of civilian deaths, lax procedures of the International Coalition, the use of white phosphor, and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated neighborhoods.

A team of UN experts who visited the city in March 2018 estimated that nearly 70 percent of buildings were destroyed or damaged. Earlier that month, the UN Commission of Inquiry stated that the International Coalition ‘*failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law*’.³⁶

During recent research in Northeast Syria, 11.11.11 spoke with different survivors and with relatives of deceased victims of Coalition airstrikes in Raqqa city. To date, the International Coalition has **not provided reparations** to survivors or to relatives of civilian deaths. The monitoring group Airwars has described Raqqa as ‘*a city destroyed then forgotten*’ by the members of the International Coalition³⁷. In January 2019, Amnesty International also issued a blistering condemnation of the Coalition’s lack of accountability for civilian deaths and the lack of any support for victims of the Coalition’s bombing campaign:

‘It is deplorable that the US-led Coalition continues to ignore its responsibility of carrying out any meaningful investigations into the hundreds of civilian deaths it caused in Raqqa and elsewhere – even as it starts to withdraw from Syria.’ (...) The Coalition is unashamedly ignoring the devastating legacy of its bombing campaign, adding insult to injury by making clear that it has no intention of offering survivors any form of remedy or compensation.’³⁸

2.2. SYRIAN AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT

In the current context, most humanitarian projects in vast parts of Northeast Syria are being carried out by local and international NGOs, while local authorities are mainly involved in coordination and issuing permissions and registrations.³⁹ 25 international NGOs (INGO) and over 140 Syrian NGOs (SNGO) are currently working in the area. They have been mainly focusing on providing emergency aid, but recently have also started expanding their activities in the field of early recovery assistance.

In contrast, the United Nations only has a limited role in large parts of Northeast Syria. As the Syrian government has prohibited organizations registered in Damascus to register or operate in non-government areas, the UN is mainly operating in or around Qamishli and Hasakeh city, and has limited operations in Raqqa city. Because of these restraints in access, the UN is unable to play its traditional coordinating role in Northeast Syria.⁴⁰ ‘*The UN have more access re-*

straints than NGOs. The difference with us is that NGOs have offices everywhere, bases everywhere, can get access and get to know local communities directly', according to one aid official based in Northeast Syria.⁴¹

In this challenging context, it should be noted that Syrian NGOs have rapidly matured and expanded their operational presence in Northeast Syria. A Syrian NGO-mapping by international NGOs (last updated in July 2018, not exhaustive) has identified at least 142 Syrian NGOs active in Hasakeh (92), Raqqa (32), Eastern Aleppo (10) and Deir ez Zour (3). Most are working in protection (56%); Food security and livelihoods (45%); health (42%); education (40%); shelter and non-food items (35%); WASH (26%); nutrition (13%); early recovery and livelihoods 10%; and cash assistance (5%).⁴² In a similar vein, the United Nations has repeatedly stated that *'the capacity of local actors continues to increase, creating opportunities to scaling up assistance and service delivery in Ar-Raqqa city and Deir-ez-Zor.'*⁴³

Syrian NGOs are widely recognized for having superior access to specific areas and a greater knowledge on the needs and priorities of specific communities.⁴⁴ In the words of a recent report by Refugees International, *'INGOs often lack knowledge of local communities and their needs, access to these same populations, and an inherent understanding of what sorts of humanitarian interventions will work or not. These are the very same skills and knowledge in which local groups tend to excel (...) Their growth will help ensure the region moves forward with a capable humanitarian civil society in the aftermath of ISIS.'*⁴⁵ Additionally officials from the Autonomous Administration and NGO workers interviewed by 11.11.11 stressed that expanded support to local NGOs is a key factor in maintaining a sustainable humanitarian effort in the area, as these are the organizations that will stay after the INGOs have moved on to yet another major humanitarian crisis.⁴⁶

However, Syrian NGOs are also facing several key challenges to scale up their work:

- **Limited cooperation and coordination with INGOs:** many Syrian NGOs indicate that they are not treated as equal partners by international NGOs (INGO), and that there is insufficient cooperation and coordination with these INGOs.⁴⁷ This is also acknowledged by the INGOs themselves. *'Being equal partners means that we make it accessible to them to coordinate with us, join our working groups, etc. Local NGOs are not excluded but we are not sufficiently trying to link with them',* according to one INGO-official based in Northeast Syria.⁴⁸

A recent survey summarizing INGO-SNGO engagement in Northeast Syria also shows that half of the approximately 25 INGOs in the area do not have partnerships with SNGOs, that most of the remaining half has partnerships with only one SNGO, and that only 3 INGOs have partnerships with more than 3 SNGOs.

Barriers for increased cooperation and coordination between INGOs and SNGOs include (among others) differences in language and technology, a lack of understanding of the humanitarian coordination system, and limited access to transport and logistical support that would allow SNGO representatives to travel longer distances. Several INGO representatives interviewed by 11.11.11 acknowledge this situation, while also indicating that they consider increased engagement with local NGOs as a key priority. Since the summer of 2018, the Northeast Syria (NES) Forum, a coordination body be-

tween INGOs, has reformed its structure and is now allowing increased Syrian NGO membership and participation.

The body has also developed a list of concrete action points to increase cooperation and coordination with local NGOs, including the creation of a Syrian NGO task force, the organization of outreach meetings; translation services, a rotation of meeting locations, and investments in local capacity building initiatives. However, the implementation of such initiatives depends on the availability of sufficient resources.

- **Limited organizational capacity:** according to a report by the Raqqa Civil Society Support Center, Syrian NGOs working in the governorate of Raqqa are not very much interested in program development, technical management and funding mechanisms. Moreover, according to the report, there is a '*lack of sufficient funds that ensure the continuity of operations and the sustainability of their organizational structure*', as the lack of funding means that many organizations are still heavily relying on volunteers or project-based contractors.⁴⁹

Important needs identified by the report include equipment and supplies, administrative salaries, operation costs, training (on project management, human resources management, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning, financial management), and work and activity space.⁵⁰ Similar limitations and needs are also present with local NGOs in the governorate of Hasakeh, as confirmed during 11.11.11's field visit to the area in January 2019.⁵¹ In addition, local NGO-representatives interviewed by 11.11.11 also mentioned problems with access to bank accounts and unfair competition with INGOs for qualified staff members, while a lack of core organizational support is increasing local NGOs' dependency on the rapidly shifting priorities of donors.⁵²

- **Administrative and regulatory restrictions:** throughout 2018, the Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria has imposed periodic and arbitrary demands and restrictions on the work of local and international NGOs, negatively affecting their ability to deliver humanitarian assistance in a consistent and predictable way.⁵³ For example, in January 2018, local authorities temporarily suspended permissions for 25 local NGOs, as a result of which 60 to 70 % of all humanitarian operations in Northeast Syria were put on hold. Reports by UNOCHA also point to intermittent bureaucratic impediments to operate in IDP camps, and to interference by local authorities in the operational procedures of humanitarian NGOs.⁵⁴ Moreover, an INGO official interviewed by 11.11.11 stated that registration and permission procedures '*can change overnight*', which has a negative impact on the planning ability of humanitarian actors.⁵⁵

In contrast, officials working for the Autonomous Administration stated to 11.11.11 that they fully support the work of SNGOs and INGOs, and recognize the importance of close coordination and dialogue with NGOs. However, they also acknowledge that they sometimes interfere in the work of NGOs, but claim that this is only for reasons related to efficiency and security. One key humanitarian official working for the Autonomous Administration also indicated that his office is in the process of writing a new NGO law, which would clarify and streamline procedures for humanitarian actors.⁵⁶

2.3. RETURN AND DISPLACEMENT TRENDS

In 2017, an estimated total of 322,100 individuals were displaced from and within the governorate of Raqqqa, largely from Raqqqa city. Between October 2017 and December 14, 2018, an estimated 166,305 individuals returned to Raqqqa city. A large majority of these people came from Jurneyya and ar Raqqqa farms (at the outskirts of Raqqqa city). Returns from IDP sites across the governorate of Raqqqa have been limited. In addition to returns to Raqqqa city, in early 2018, 43,000 people also returned to the eastern countryside of the governorate of Raqqqa, and an estimated 200 people returned to the Western countryside. At the end of October 2018, at least 23,400 IDPs still resided in four main IDP sites (Ain Issa, Mabrouka, Al Hole, Areesha) in Northeast-Syria.

A recent (November 2018) perception survey performed by IMPACT among Syrian IDPs and refugees who had returned to the governorates of Raqqqa and Hasakeh provides us with important insights in the “push” and “pull” factors that determine decisions on return:⁵⁷

- **Main push factors** for return include a lack of economic opportunities (39 % of refugee returnees, 21 % of IDP returnees); a lack of basic services (25 % of refugee returnees, 39 % of IDP returnees); and a lack of safety (9 % of refugee returnees, 34 % of IDP returnees).
- **Main pull factors** for return include the improvement of the safety situation (66 % of refugee returnees, 72 % of IDP returnees); nostalgia and homesickness (16 % of refugee returnees, 1 % of IDP returnees); better economic opportunities (8 % of refugee returnees, 8 % of IDP returnees); access to basic services (3 % of refugee returnees, 5 % of IDP returnees); the presence of relatives (3 % of refugee returnees, 1 % of IDP returnees); and the intention to reoccupy or repossess assets (2 % of refugee returnees, 10 % of IDP returnees).

Surprisingly, and despite the fact that a “lack of basis services” constitutes an important push factor, the level of humanitarian assistance at the place of return was not identified as a key pull factor.

In addition to push and pull factors, the IMPACT study also found that community network and resources within the community of origin played a central role in determining the decision to return. Not only are people motivated to be reunited with relatives and friends and feel more comfortable to return when they know people at the return location, they also rely on information and reintegration support from their community network.

On a more negative note, IMPACT also found that a significant number of households perceive inequality with regard to access to income-generating opportunities and humanitarian assistance. This could have a negative impact on community relations in the future, particularly in the case of an increase of resource constraints. Finally, the IMPACT study highlights that many refugee returnees (34 %) and IDP returnees (19 %) found the situation at the location of return worse than expected, although their expectations were already very low. Some returnees also indicated that they received false information about conditions at the place of origin, while others faced ERW risks during or after the return journey.

3. MOVING FORWARD: FOUR KEY CHALLENGES FACING THE NORTHEAST

3.1. RENEWED FIGHTING AND DISPLACEMENT

Northeastern Syria is home to an estimated 2.1 million Syrians, including at least 500.000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵⁸ Almost half of this population lives in the 32-km “security zone” currently discussed between Turkey and the United States.

Two months after US President Trump announced his intention to withdraw troops from Northeast Syria, it remains unclear who will govern and secure the area. During field research performed by 11.11.11 in January 2019, civilians, local authorities and humanitarian workers all stressed the need for clarity and an orderly, planned and coordinated US exit. ‘*The question is not, and should not be, if the US withdraws, but when and how it exits*’, one top humanitarian official articulated.⁵⁹ Civilians interviewed by 11.11.11 also described an intense feeling of being caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they expressed fear for a looming Turkish attack and the subsequent arrival of extremist militias supported by Turkey. ‘*Look what these extremist militias did in Afrin: there was looting, abuses at checkpoints, arbitrary arrests. We don’t want a repetition of such Afrin scenario here*’, one civilian summarized. This sentiment is widely shared, and has also been documented by human rights groups.⁶⁰ On the other hand, many civilians and aid workers fear a return of, and/or an attack by, government forces and pro-government militias, mentioning abuse of civilians in other areas, such as Deraa and Ghouta, that were recently retaken by the Syrian government.

Indeed, an uncoordinated and rushed US withdrawal could leave behind a power vacuum and bring more destruction and chaos to an area that has been relatively stable during the past 1,5 years. As a military offensive by the Turkish army and pro-Turkey militias looms, the chances of yet another bloody episode in the Syrian war and a new displacement wave of hundreds of thousands Syrians are very real indeed. Renewed fighting could indeed trigger massive displacement, similar to other areas that were the scene of intense fighting in 2018.⁶¹

According to scenarios developed by the United Nations and humanitarian actors in Northeast Syria (January 2019), renewed fighting could displace between 36.000 and 450.000 people⁶²:

- A “minimal” scenario would see the intensification of sporadic clashes between the SDF/YPG and the Free Syrian Army (FSA)/Turkish army along the frontlines between Jarablus and Manbij, with limited shelling along the Turkey-Syria border. This could lead to a short-term displacement of up to 36.000 people.
- A second scenario would see a limited Turkish incursion across the Turkish-Syrian border (Tal Abyad, Ras al Ain) and in Manbij, and could lead to a short-term displacement of up to 84.000 people.
- A third scenario would see a large-scale offensive by the Turkish army and Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters on SDF-YPG positions across Northeast Syria. In such a scenario, up to 340.000 people could be displaced.
- A “maximal scenario”, a full-scale military offensive on the area by the Syrian government, could potentially lead to a short-term displacement of up to 450.000 people.

In this context, local authority officials, civilians and NGO workers stressed the need for international protection to 11.11.11. For many, such international protection could be provided by a (temporary) deployment of UN forces at the Turkish-Syrian border and/or in the main population centers.

3.2. SCALING DOWN INTERNATIONAL AID

Aid groups have expressed serious concerns that any military offensive in Northeast Syria could result in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, as well as in the disruption or suspension of the humanitarian response in the area. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians are at risk of losing access to vital humanitarian assistance.⁶³

At this moment already, the uncertainty about who will control Northeast Syria after the US withdrawal is seriously complicating NGOs' ability to plan ahead. Moreover, a change of control of the area could have a dramatic impact on overall humanitarian access in the area, and could be felt in different ways:

- **Local humanitarian workers in the crossfire:** as both Turkey and the Syrian government are suspicious of NGOs that have worked in areas outside their control, humanitarian officials interviewed by 11.11.11 expressed significant fears that local employees of both international and Syrian NGOs would be specifically persecuted and arrested by the new authorities. Moreover, any male Syrian NGO worker aged 18-42 would be at risk of being subjected to forced military conscription. Hence, the need to establish a specific **protection mechanism for humanitarian workers** (see more details in box 3 below) was emphasized repeatedly.
- **INGO retreat:** INGO representatives in the area indicated to 11.11.11 that in case of a Turkish takeover or Syrian government return, they would most likely be forced to withdraw their staff and suspend their humanitarian operations in Northeast Syria. As such, they emphasized the need for robust (international) guarantees that their employees would not be targeted, as a precondition for the continuation of humanitarian operations in the area. In the words of one INGO representative: *'if the Syrian government returns we will lose all humanitarian access. We simply cannot take the risk for our staff. Nobody trusts the government to honor any commitment they make, as we have seen in Deraa and Ghouta. We need strong reassurances.'*⁶⁴ As a large bulk of international aid in the area is channeled through INGOs, any suspension of INGO operations would have dramatic humanitarian consequences for the civilian population.⁶⁵
- **A decrease in international funding:** the withdrawal of US troops would in all likelihood be connected to a drastic decrease of US humanitarian and stabilization assistance in the area. The US is by far the largest donor in Northeast Syria, and it seems unlikely that either the Turkish or Syrian government have the capacity or the intention to ensure sufficient humanitarian assistance. Hence, NGO representatives and current local authorities in Northeast Syria have called on other donors to fill the gap left behind by US aid cuts, in order to avoid sudden disruptions in aid assistance.

BOX 3: TOWARDS A PROTECTION MECHANISM FOR HUMANITARIAN WORKERS?

Following the start of a military offensive by the Syrian government and allied forces in the governorates of Deraa and Quneitra governorates in June 2018, a group of local humanitarian workers proposed a mechanism for the protection of humanitarian staff working in these areas to ensure the ability of humanitarian workers to continue responding to the humanitarian needs of the civilian population.

The mechanism consists of the creation of a Joint Committee with Russian representatives from the Hmemeem Reconciliation Centre, UN OCHA and OHCHR staff, a representative from the ICRC and a representative of Syrian humanitarian organizations. This joint committee would then instigate mechanisms for the protection of humanitarian workers, including:

- Humanitarian workers or their organizations are to submit information to the Joint Committee (including name, contact information and whereabouts), as well as contact information of at least two persons authorized to report any violation against them and to communicate on their behalf. Afterwards, the Joint Committee would need to ensure that the person is a humanitarian worker and would therefore issue a “Humanitarian Worker” card.
- The Hmemeem Centre would provide guarantees that humanitarian workers will not be detained or harassed. In the event of violations, the Hmemeem Centre and the Joint Committee would need to be informed immediately, and would have to establish mechanisms to intervene.

3.3. THE MANIPULATION OF INTERNATIONAL AID

Although there have been some cases of interference and arbitrary restrictions, humanitarian actors currently operating in Northeast Syria emphasize that they have a constructive relationship with the current local authorities. This allows humanitarian actors to conduct their operations in a way that respects humanitarian principles. In the meantime, some stabilization contractors have also started small-scale projects.

In contrast, aid workers and UN officials interviewed by 11.11.11 expressed serious concerns that a shift in control (either by Turkish⁶⁶ or government forces) in Northeast Syria would have a significantly negative impact on the ability of humanitarian or stabilization actors to conduct their work in an independent way.⁶⁷

The risk of abuse seems to be particularly high in case of a return of the Syrian government.⁶⁸ Over the past few years the Syrian government has significantly manipulated external humanitarian aid to strengthen its own political, economic and military position. It has used humanitarian aid to exclude communities perceived as “hostile”, and as a means to reward and benefit loyalists. This manipulation occurred in a variety of ways. Firstly, research has shown how the UN has handed procurement contracts worth tens of millions USD to regime cronies directly involved in repression and violence against Syrian civilians.⁶⁹ Secondly, the Syrian government has intervened directly in the drafting and redacting of strategic UN documents, leading to a situation in which (former) opposition areas are often denied assistance⁷⁰.

Several internal UN documents echo this kind of criticism. An OCHA evaluation report (2016) stated that *'at a country level, strategy has not been the exclusive domain of OCHA. In Syria, the government has dominated'*.⁷¹ Additionally, an internal UN audit described how the lack of humanitarian aid going to opposition areas can mainly be explained by political reasons rather than considerations of security.⁷² A leaked draft of the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan stated that there is still *'the potential for aid diversion, corruption and empowerment of parties to the conflict'*, which should be *'addressed by all partners through their intervention design, management and monitoring systems'*.⁷³ Finally, it should be noted that a UN memo on "Parameters and Principles of UN Assistance in Syria" (2017) stressed the need for human rights-based programming. The memo also promised equitable and non-discriminatory assistance, based on the most acute needs rather than on government priorities. It also stated that assistance *'must not assist parties who have allegedly committed war crimes or crimes against humanity'*.⁷⁴

UN officials caution that the manipulation of humanitarian aid can easily repeat itself when it comes to early recovery, stabilization or reconstruction. In the absence of concrete mechanisms to shield aid programs from interference and manipulation, it seems likely that such programs will indeed be abused and manipulated again. *'In the current context it does not mean anything if you provide aid money and allow it to be massively abused by the government'*, a UN official told 11.11.11.⁷⁵ Another UN official acknowledges the political impact of UN actions in Syria and stresses the need for better impact analyses and control mechanisms.⁷⁶ In the same vein, a UNDP official who used to work in Damascus argues for robust monitoring mechanisms and the imposition of clear conditions for increased engagement:

*'It has to be conditional engagement. Not for political reasons, but as a matter of project effectiveness. Scaling up our resilience activities needs to be accompanied with the necessary conditions that allow us to be effective. It needs to be conditional on us reaching an agreement with the government to be allowed to work with local civil society organizations, to work in a transparent way, to have anti-corruption measures in place, etc. If this is not possible we must refrain from moving into resilience programming, because it would make no sense to do it.'*⁷⁷

3.4. AN ISLAMIC STATE RESURGENCE?

Northeast Syria used to be the core area of the so-called "Caliphate". Although Islamic State (IS) has been for the most part defeated militarily by SDF/YPG ground forces and the US-dominated International Coalition, it is still covertly present throughout the area.⁷⁸

During recent months, IS sleeper cells have set up flying checkpoints and carried out several targeted assassinations and attacks by means of IEDs and car bombs in Raqqa city, Manbij and Hasakeh. Attacks only seem to have intensified after the US announced its withdrawal. On January 16 and 21, 2019, the terror group claimed two attacks on Coalition and SDF forces in Manbij and Hasakeh.⁷⁹

Indeed, renewed fighting and increased instability in Northeast Syria could provide the terror group with a fertile breeding ground it could use to regroup and resurface.⁸⁰ A report from February 2019 by the UN Secretary-General estimates that between 14.000 and 18.000 IS militants are still active in Syria and Iraq, while a report from the US Lead Inspector for Operation Inherent Resolve (February 2019) estimates that approximately 2.000 IS fighters remain in and around the Middle Euphrates River Valley.⁸¹

In his report from February 2019, the UN Secretary-General states that Islamic State is in the phase of transition, adaptation and consolidation. The report, based on information provided by a UN member state, warns that IS' key objectives for the post-caliphate period include undermining stabilization and reconstruction activities, targeting infrastructure rebuilding efforts and thwarting overall economic progress.⁸² This echoes statements from previous UN reports (August 2018), in which the Secretary-General warns that *'ISIL relocators appear to be hiding wherever they can, with the intent to become active again when circumstances allow'* and are *'likely to survive in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic in the medium term owing to the ongoing conflict and complex stabilization challenges.'*⁸³

In a similar vein, a report from November 2018 by the US Lead Inspector General states that *'distrust of government, problems delivering services, insecurity, economic challenges, the continued clandestine ISIS presence and activities, as well as longstanding religious and ethnic tensions can contribute to a resurgence of ISIS or similar violent extremists.'*⁸⁴ A US State Department cable (January 2018) also warned that, if conditions deteriorate in Northeast Syria, IS could potentially recruit new fighters into another jihadist insurgency.⁸⁵ IS is *'well-positioned to rebuild and work on enabling its physical caliphate to re-emerge'*, a Pentagon spokesman similarly told VOA news in August 2018.⁸⁶ The most recent US Lead Inspector General Report (February 2019), the first since the US announced its withdrawal, includes a similarly stark warning: *'ISIS remains an active insurgent group in both Iraq and Syria. If Sunni socio-economic, political and sectarian grievances are not adequately addressed by the national and local governments of Iraq and Syria it is very likely that ISIS will have the opportunity to set conditions for future resurgence and territorial control (...) ISIS could likely resurge in Syria within six to twelve months.'*⁸⁷

In this regard, one should also be aware of the fact that eight years of war have seriously damaged inter- and intra-communal relations. This could also lead to the creation of a fertile breeding ground for IS and other extremist groups. For example, research by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) has documented a dramatic 30 percent decrease of social capital compared to the since 2011. The starkest decline occurred in Northeast Syria: an 80 % decline in the governorate of Raqqa and a 52 % decline in the governorate of Hasakeh. Levels of inter-personal mistrust and the lack of shared values have also been the highest in Raqqa and Hasakeh governorates.⁸⁸ The report from February 2019 by the UN Secretary-General mentioned above also states that IS could capitalize on this lack of social capital. According to the report, the terror group *'shows signs of wishing to stoke sectarian tension and pose as a standard-bearer for marginalized communities.'*⁸⁹

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

16 months after the liberation of Raqqa from Islamic State, large parts of Northeast Syria are still in ruins. The humanitarian situation remains extremely dire, and rebuilding efforts have barely started.

However, hope is on the horizon. In recent months, the security situation in Northeast Syria has been improving. Humanitarian actors have also increased the scale of their operations and have significantly improved their mechanisms for coordination and cooperation. Despite a lack of substantial international support, local civilians have taken matters in their own hands and are trying to pick up their life.

Still, dark geopolitical clouds are gathering above Northeast Syria and are threatening a fragile calm. After Turkish President Erdogan threatened to launch a Turkish offensive against the Kurdish YPG on December 12, 2018, US President Trump on December 19, 2018 announced a withdrawal of the estimated 2.000 US ground troops from Syria. The threat of a military escalation by other actors looms over the Northeast.

In this context, questions remain on which actions the EU and its member states can take in the short and medium term to improve conditions on the ground and play a meaningful role in diplomatic talks about the Northeast's future. Hence, in January 2019, 11.11.11 has conducted field research in the governorates of Raqqa and Hasakeh.

This report has identified and discussed four key challenges for Northeast Syria: 1) renewed fighting and a new wave of internal displacement, 2) the scaling-down of international aid, 3) risks with regard to the manipulation of international assistance, and 4) the possibility of a resurgence of the so-called Islamic State (IS). This research offers the following main observations:

- Aid officials and experts alike warns that a rushed and uncoordinated withdrawal by the US risks leaving behind a power vacuum, which could very well trigger a new round of bloodshed that could have devastating humanitarian consequences and provide ISIS with a chance to regroup. Although the US is right not to maintain an open-ended permanent presence in Northeast Syria, it should commit itself to an orderly and coordinated withdrawal. Local actors look at the EU to increase its diplomatic and humanitarian presence in the area, but up until now, the EU has been largely absent from the scene. Furthermore, Kurdish officials demand that any future “security zone” should be under international supervision, preferably by the United Nations.
- Regardless of the exact future political status of Northeast Syria, there are enormous challenges in terms of humanitarian assistance and rebuilding efforts. International assistance is needed *now*, and should not be subjected to political bickering on the future status of the area. As the US' military withdrawal from Northeast Syria will most likely be coupled with a drastic decline of the level of US humanitarian and stabilization assistance, there is an urgent need for other donors to step in and fill the gap.

- In the absence of a full-scale UN presence, the bulk of the humanitarian work in large parts of Northeast Syria is being done by local and international NGOs. Local NGOs have matured rapidly, while INGOs have created a body which substitutes for the lack of a formal UN coordination office. 25 international NGOs (INGO) and over 140 Syrian NGOs (SNGO) are currently working in the area. Their main goal has been to provide emergency aid, but recently they have also started to expand their activities to the field of early recovery assistance as well. Local NGOs in Northeast Syria are widely recognized for their superior access to specific areas, as well as for their greater knowledge on the needs and priorities of specific communities. Their continued growth will help Northeast Syria to move forward with a capable civil society in the aftermath of Islamic State.
- Thousands of Syrians have been victims, directly or indirectly, of the International Coalition's "war of annihilation" against IS, and expect reparations for the harm that was done to them. Up until now, such reparations have not been provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Up until now, the EU and most EU member states have been largely absent in international and domestic discussions on the future of Northeast Syria. In the run-up to the Brussels III conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (12-14 March 2019), they should take up a more active role in discussions on Northeast Syria, including:

1. A diplomatic push for a coordinated and responsible US withdrawal
 - Intensify diplomatic engagement with Turkey to abstain from a military offensive in Northeast Syria, respect the sovereignty of the Syrian border, and strive towards de-escalation of Turkish-Kurdish tensions.
 - Intensify diplomatic efforts to ensure that any future agreement on Northeast Syria guarantees full and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the area, protection of civilians, and guaranteed protection of humanitarian workers. To this end, actively encourage the Office of the Special UN Envoy for Syria to increase its mediation efforts, make use of the French and German participation in the so-called "Istanbul Quartet" format, and open more direct channels of communication with the Autonomous Administration of Northeastern Syria.
 - Explore scenarios which could increase assurances for the protection of Syrian civilians, including Kurdish proposals for the temporarily deployment of UN forces on the Turkish border and/or inside a future security zone.
2. Fill the international aid gap
 - Expand the geographical scope of the EU Trust Fund for Syria (Madad Fund) towards projects inside Northeast Syria, in line with the EU Foreign Affairs Council conclusions of 16 April 2018.
 - Develop robust "conflict sensitivity guidelines" that ensure that EU assistance respects the principles of "do no harm" and "conflict sensitivity".

- Intensify practical support to, and coordination with, the Northeast Syria (NES) Forum, and encourage/offer practical support to the forum to actively include Syrian NGOs and strengthen the latter's capacity.
- Encourage humanitarian actors in the area to incorporate resilience-building and early recovery components into humanitarian interventions, and to pay particular attention to the dire humanitarian situation inside the IDP camps across Northeast Syria.
- Consider the creation of a special mechanism issuing small-scale grants that would allow Syrian civilians to start rehabilitating their personal property.
- In case of Turkey or the regime taking control, develop a mechanism for the protection of humanitarian workers in Northeast Syria.
- In case of Turkey or the regime taking control, encourage the UN to take up a greater role in vetting and in authorization mechanisms for local and international NGOs.
- Ensure full humanitarian access, among others by strengthening the infrastructure of key humanitarian border crossings.
- Make resources available for local projects that aim to rebuild social cohesion.

3. Accountability and reparations

- Create a mechanism to investigate allegations of IHL violations by the International Coalition against Islamic State, and make the results of such investigations public.
- Create an accessible and transparent mechanism to provide full reparations to survivors and to the relatives of deceased victims of Coalition airstrikes.

CONTACT

Willem Staes

Policy Officer Middle East

tel: +32 2 536 11 26

willem.staes@11.be

www.11.be



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- ⁴⁸ Email exchange with humanitarian official based in Northeast Syria, February 2019.
- ⁴⁹ Civil Society Support Center in Raqqah (2018): 'Civil Society Landscape in Raqqah and its surroundings', p 14.
- ⁵⁰ Civil Society Support Center in Raqqah (2018): 'Civil Society Landscape in Raqqah and its surroundings', p 15.
- ⁵¹ Interviews with INGO and SNGO representatives in Hasakeh governorate, January 2019.
- ⁵² Interviews with Syrian NGO representatives, Raqqah and Qamishli, January 2019.
- ⁵³ Grisgraber, D. and Lang, H. (2018): 'Fragile Progress. Humanitarian Assistance and the Stabilization of Northeast Syria', p 9, p 13. Refugees International.
- ⁵⁴ See 'Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria Situation Report No. 30 (1 November - 14 December 2018)', 14 December 2018, Reliefweb.
- ⁵⁵ Interview with INGO official based in Amuda, January 2019.
- ⁵⁶ Interviews with humanitarian officials from the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, Amuda/Raqqah/Tabqa/Ain Issa, January 2019.
- ⁵⁷ See IMPACT Initiatives (2018): 'Picking up the Pieces: realities of return and reintegration in North-East Syria'.
- ⁵⁸ Mercy Corps data made available to IRIN News, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2019/01/16/trump-pullout-plan-leaves-aid-groups-northeast-syria-scrumbling>.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with INGO official, Amuda, January 2019.
- ⁶⁰ See for example 'Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property', 14 June 2018, Human Rights Watch.
- ⁶¹ For example, an estimated 158,000 people left Eastern Ghouta between 9 March and 15 April 2018 following weeks of fighting; at approximately 270,000 Syrians in Daraa and Quneitra governorates were displaced in June-July 2018; and another 320,000 people were displaced from Afrin between January and March 2018.
- ⁶² 'North-East Syria (NES) Scenarios. January 2019'.
- ⁶³ See 'Hundreds of thousands at risk from imminent military action in northeast Syria, warns the IRC', 20 December 2018, International Rescue Committee.
- ⁶⁴ Interview with INGO representative, Amuda, January 2019.
- ⁶⁵ Interview with humanitarian official from the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, Ain Issa, January 2019; interview with Syrian doctor and local health coordinator, Tabqa, January 2019.
- ⁶⁶ Interview with EU official, Brussels, February 2018.
- ⁶⁷ Interviews with representatives of INGOs and Syrian NGOs, Raqqah and Qamishli, January 2019; interviews with UN officials based in the region, January 2019.
- ⁶⁸ See in this regard also 11.11.11 (2018): 'Reconstruction Calling? Towards a different EU role in rebuilding Syria'.
- ⁶⁹ A full overview of the UN's procurement contracts can be found on https://www.unops.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/ASR/2016_ASR_Major%20purchase%20orders%20and%20contracts%20by%20UN%20organization.pdf; See also 'UN pays tens of millions to Assad regime under Syria aid programme', 29 August 2017, The Guardian; 'How Assad's Allies Got \$18 Million From the UN', 1 August 2017, Bloomberg Business; 'Exclusive- Assad Allies Profit from Syria's Lucrative Food Trade', 15 November 2013, Reuters; 'UN Pours Millions on Syrian Companies, Including Regime Figures', 8 August 2017, The Syria Report; 'UN's \$4bn aid effort in Syria is morally bankrupt', 29 August 2016, The Guardian; 'Rami Makhlouf: Magnate of the Syrian State, Part Two', 23 January 2017, The Fulda Gap.

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- ⁷⁹ See 'ISIS Vows to Step up Operations Against American Forces', 23 January 2019, The Syrian Observer; 'Islamic State Targets U.S. Convoy in Northeast Syria', 21 January 2019, Haaretz; 'Cornered in Syria, IS lays groundwork for a new insurgency', 6 February 2019, The Washington Post.
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- ⁸² United Nations Security Council (2019): 'Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat', S/2019/103, p 2.
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- ⁸⁵ US Department of State Cable cited in https://media.defense.gov/2018/Nov/05/2002059226/-1/-1/1/FY2019_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q4_SEP2018.PDF, p 59.
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