



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا
Violations Documentation Center in Syria

Cover Image: [AFP](#)

Bloody cost

**A special report on mass graves in
Al-Raqqa governorate**

Violations Documentation Center in Syria / 2019

Table of content

General Framework

Methodology

Challenges and difficulties

Numbers and statistics

The time context of events

Responsibility of actors for unlawful killings

Unlawful air attacks against civilians

The use of illegal weapons

Violent practices against the civilian population by all parties to the conflict

The use of civilians as human shields

The use of mines by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ ISIS

Preventing the civilian population from accessing safe zones

Arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture

Targeting vital installations

Mass graves in the city

Mechanism for exhumation and identification of corpses

Initial Response Team

Risks and challenges during exhumation

Mechanism for recording and documenting corpses

Mass graves discovered in the province

Finally

General Framework

- Syrian civilians, including children and women, continue to account for the bulk of casualties resulting from the ongoing conflict in Syria. The conflict entered a new phase on 23 September 2014 after the United States and its allies in the '[International military intervention against ISIL](#)' began military strikes inside Syrian territory against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The strikes also targeted other militant organizations such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as al-Nusra Front.
- The Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (hereinafter referred to as the VDC) presents and details in this report the most notable violations and illegitimate practices committed by all actors during the latest military campaign against the city of Raqqa, which resulted in dozens of mass graves and what has become of the city after ISIS seized control of it.
- Mass graves remain undefined in international law. Having said that, the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur defines a mass grave as a location where three or more bodies are buried, victims of extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, not having died in combat or armed confrontations¹. Mass graves are a convenient method of disposing of large numbers of human remains. Contrary to common misconception, not all mass graves result from criminal actions. Some of them contain legally buried bodies of combatants or victims of epidemics, famines and natural disasters.
- Considering the large number of responsible actors on the ground, mass graves are seen as one of the most difficult and complicated cases happening in Syria. In that context, the biggest challenge is in finding the suitable mechanism to determine the identity of the bodies in addition to finding the cause of death
- Despite the fact that "enforced disappearance" can be a result of several factors and reasons (a result of internal conflicts, human rights violations, disasters, organized violence or because of their displacement, etc.), disappearance became a universal challenge that requires an organised sustainable international response to address the need of people. When people are missing as a result of a certain catastrophe, law enforcement entities should take control in order to ensure the use of improved techniques, such as modern forensic methods, in order to discover the location and identity of corpses. These efforts are also rooted in the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (the right to life), and other relevant international instruments that require public authorities to conduct effective investigations even in the absence of direct liability of state.

¹ International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia Bulletin (1996). Twin Tribunals ICTY 9/10, 14-VIII-1996.

Methodology

- In its methodology, this report relied on the testimonies of many and varied sources, such as the local councils and those responsible for rescuing team, exhumation teams and local residents who were in direct contact with the event, in addition to many interviews conducted by the Violations Documentation Center team in Syria with many field and media activists.
- The definition of “violations” is based on the definitions addressed in international human rights conventions, human rights standards, the Rome Convention incorporating the Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Geneva Conventions, including, but not limited to, attacks against civilians.
- VDC documents the violations committed by all actors in Syria, regardless of race, religion or any other aspect, and regardless of political alignment VDC stands at the same distance from all violators and victims. As much information as possible is documented on each violation, including its perpetrator, the location and date of its occurrence, and its type, as well as other statistical characteristics of victims and violations.
- In preparing this report, VDC held consultations with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), in order to familiarize itself with best practices at the international level used to effectively locate and identify missing persons in line with the rule of law. The ICMP is an international organization which addresses the issue of missing and disappeared persons from war, human rights abuses, disasters, organized crime, irregular migration and other circumstances where persons go missing for involuntary reasons. ICMP is an intergovernmental organization established by treaty whose mandate is to ensure the cooperation of governments and others in locating missing persons. As such ICMP helps build institutional and legislative capacity and it supports efforts to locate and identify missing persons used advanced data systems technologies and scientific methods. On the scientific level it is best known for pioneering the use of DNA methods to identify large numbers of missing persons following conflict. In the context of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, ICMP was able to assist the governments in the region in identifying over 70% of the 40,000 persons who went missing, including almost 90% of the 8,000 victims of Srebrenica, the only recognized genocide on European soil since WWII. ICMP has worked in over 40 countries around the world and currently has a program for Syria. ICMP’s Syria program is dedicated to:
 - Building the capacity of Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and families of the missing by uniting them on key policy issues relevant to the missing persons process;
 - Supporting the creation of a central data repository of missing persons (using ICMP’s Identification Data Management System (iDMS)) by forming data partnership agreements with Syrian CSOs;
 - Conducting an assessment of the current missing persons process in Syria, with an emphasis on NE Syria with a view to advancing efforts to find missing persons;

- Advancing cooperation among states hosting Syrian refugees and displaced persons, particularly Syria's neighboring states, to support productive initiatives, including the ability to work with Syrian groups and to collect data on missing persons relevant to the Syrian conflict; and,
- Advancing the ability of families of the missing to exercise rights, including through ICMP's partnerships with the International Impartial Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM).

Challenges and difficulties

The issue of mass graves in Syria is considered to be one of the most difficult and complex files. The challenges differ from one case to another, according to the complexity of that case and its details. Therefore, VDC set a clear and specific goal for this report, and decided to proceed with this goal to show the scale and brutality of the violations that occurred in Al-Raqqa governorate, which all parties of the conflict were responsible for.

This report highlights the most important challenges and difficulties facing local organizations and teams concerned with exhumation, identification and preservation of evidence, in addition to the challenges that faced the families of the victims of missing persons in obtaining information that indicates the fate of their beloved ones.

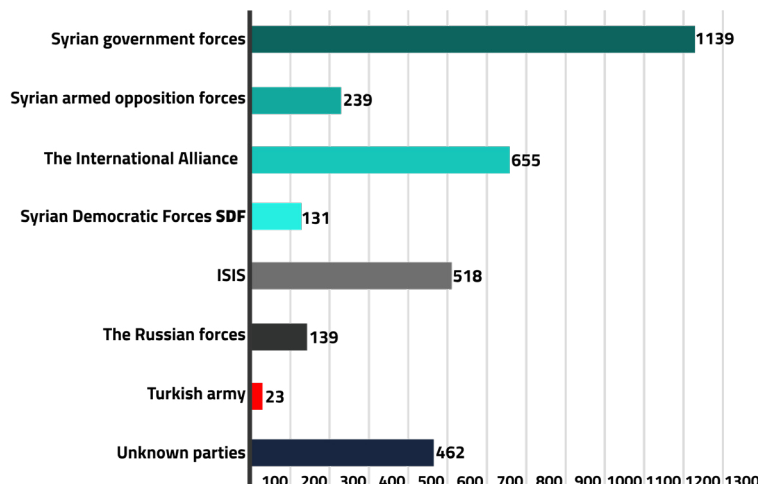
Numbers and statistics

VDC has recorded the killing of at least {3306} civilians in Al-Raqqa from the beginning of the conflict in Syria in mid-March 2011 until the 15th of December 2019.

VDC has documented at least {20} mass graves discovered in Al-Raqqa governorate.

In the period between the 9th of January 2018 and mid-December 2019, the number of exhumed corpses was approximately {5350}.

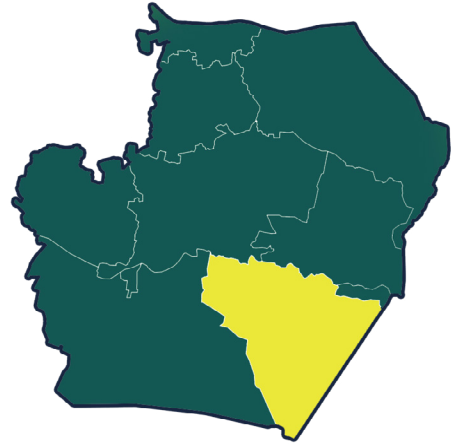
Deaths in Al-Raqqa by the parties responsible



The time context of events

Al-Raqqa city is the center of the Syrian province of Al-Raqqa, on the left bank of the Euphrates River, before its confluence with the Balikh River. Its area is about 27000 square kilometers, and it is located 190 km far from the city of Aleppo. It was inhabited by about {300} thousand people, the majority of whom were Christian Arab Kurds and Turkmen.

The first anti-government demonstrations began in the city of Raqqa on March 25, 2011, and continued for a few months in varying numbers.



On the 15th of March 2012, Syrian government forces killed a young man called Ali Babansi during the protests. On the next day, his funeral was a demonstration that is considered to be one of the largest in Syria. During that demonstration, the Syrian government forces killed more than {50} civilian. Because of its location in the middle of the city at the famous Clock Tower Square, it was called "The Massacre of the Clock".

Factions affiliated with the Syrian armed opposition in Al-Raqqa unified the military action to drive the government forces out of the city, and began violent operations in the countryside. As a result, on March 04, 2013, the armed opposition forces took control of the entire city and the Syrian government forces retreated.

Responsibility of actors for unlawful killings

The incidents documented in this report can constitute crimes against humanity as defined by the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Courts as well as Article 7 of the Rome Statute. The killing of civilians is a violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), a "willful killing", and an act that constitutes a crime against humanity.

Attacks against the civilian population come in the context of a "widespread" and "systematic" attack, amounting to a crime against humanity. Moreover, the technique and frequency of attacks documented in this report, including "willful killing", are among the primary acts of crime against humanity.

A-Syrian government forces and their allies

All the mass graves discovered in the city contain bodies of those who fell in the period from July 2016 to October 2017, which is the same period of ISIS control on the city, and the completion of military operations by the International Alliance - led by the United States of America and the SDF. Hence, the majority of the bodies recovered from the twentieth graves belong to people who were killed by either the International Alliance or ISIS.

However, this does not mean that the Syrian government forces are not accountable for violations committed in the province during their control.

B. Armed opposition forces and jihadi organizations.

On the 4th of March 2013, as a result of brutal military operations, the armed opposition forces took control of Al-Raqqah city, to be the first governorate center free of the Syrian government forces' control.

Several factions of the Syrian armed opposition participated in the battles to control the city, both inside and outside the province. Among these factions are: Ahrar al-Sham, al-Faruq Brigades, al-Nasir Salah al-Din Brigade, in addition to Al-Nusra front/ HTS.

Al-Nusra front in cooperation with Ahrar al-Sham, have imposed control over the governorate building and took it as its official headquarters in light of the complete absence of the role of institutions and government departments in the city.

At a time when the factions shared control over the city, coordination committees and local councils appeared to fill the gap in the state's bodies, beside several civil and youth groups that were formed to provide services to the city.

When ISIS forces appeared in the province, a large number of Al-Nusra front dissidents joined ISIS, which gave ISIS the strength it needed to extend its control. Meanwhile, ISIS chased its opponents from moderate opposition factions and civilian activists. As a result, Al-Nusra Front moved back outside Al-Raqqah and handed over its headquarters to ISIS.

C- Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ ISIS

ISIS took control of Al-Raqqah in January 2014, after several battles with the armed Syrian opposition factions that had defeated the Syrian government forces in March 2013. ISIS took full control of the city in August 2014.

During the period from 2014 to 2017, ISIS took full control of the city. It has committed systematic violations of International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity in accordance with International Criminal Law². ISIS has also led extensive arrest campaigns and mass executions of dozens of civilian residents and activists.

D- Deaths of Syrian government forces and their allies

Execution of prisoners of the Syrian government forces by ISIS "a war crime"

² <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/28/18>

On the 24th of August 2014, the Syrian government forces announced the retreat of their personnel from Al-Tabqa Airport, in accordance with a plan called "Evacuation". The public identifiers of the Syrian government forces announced that the airport had fallen under ISIS control.

Dozens of members of the Syrian government forces tried to pull back towards the eastern countryside of Aleppo through Athreya checkpoint, however, ISIS managed to capture them. On Thursday 28 August 2014, they were all executed by ISIS near the brick factory, as well as other members who were captured near the Al-Ajrawi farm close to Al-Tabqa airport, when they were coming in a military convoy to break the siege on the airport.

ISIS, as an organized armed group that has control on the ground, has an obligation to ensure humane treatment. When the organization regularly and systematically commits violations against the right to life, torture, mutilations, and inhuman treatment, it violates the International Humanitarian Law. Those violations may be considered as war crimes and the leaders may be held accountable for committing them.

Considering that ISIS is an armed group, it is subject to the provisions of Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Customary International Law. ISIS has violated its obligations to civilians and non-combatants, which amounts to a "war crime". In the areas where ISIS established effective control, the organization systematically denied human rights and fundamental freedoms and committed crimes against humanity in the context of its attacks on the civilian population.

E. International Alliance forces led by the United States of America³

The United States of America and its allies in the "International Alliance against ISIS" started military strikes inside the Syrian territory on September 23, 2014, against ISIS. The international coalition took the SDF as an ally on the ground to fight ISIS, and it announced the start of their battle against it on November 6, 2016, as they launched a battle called "The Wrath of the Euphrates" aimed at liberating the city of Al-Raqqa from ISIS.

Violations committed in hostilities

In early May 2019, the "International Alliance against ISIS" released a statement indicating that it launched approximately 34,502 raids during the period between August 2014 and the end of April 2019. The international Alliance also acknowledged the killing of more than 1300 civilians "unintentionally" in raids launched in Syria and Iraq since the beginning of its operations to eliminate the Islamic State in 2014.

During this period and on the basis of available information, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve conducted an assessment, and it is likely that at least 1,302 civilians were killed "unintentionally" as a result of the Alliance raids and 111 reports of civilian deaths are still being considered.

³ It is a coalition led by the United States and includes 30 countries created in 2014 by the US Department of Defense under the name of the "Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve" to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq

Unlawful air attacks against civilians

Brutal attacks targeting both the civilian population and civilian facilities in Al-Raqqa, including hospitals, schools, and water sources, have resulted in massive number of civilian deaths and injuries, and widespread destruction of buildings aimed at providing basic services to the population. The deliberate targeting of medical facilities and personnel, which amounts to war crimes, has severely weakened health care infrastructure that has already been exhausted after nine years of conflict.

The city witnessed very violent battles by the International Alliance aviation and the SDF forces supported by the USA, and these military operations led to the fleeing of tens of thousands of people from the city during the period of its siege, as a result of the practices of ISIS members on the one hand and being targeted by the Alliance and the SDF on the other hand.

Although the Alliance claimed that it had taken all possible measures to limit the number of civilian casualties, hundreds of civilians were recorded killed by brutal airstrikes. One of the most prominent of these attacks occurred in the early evening of September 25, 2017, by an air attack launched by the International Alliance forces on a residential building near "Al-Maari School" in "Haret Al-Badu" in the city of Al-Raqqa. The school was a resort of four families who had fled from their houses and lived in the basement of the building. This attack killed the mentioned families, which were at least {32} civilians including {20} children. One of the families is called "Al-Salamah" and consists of {Ali Allawi Al-Nazzal, Khaled Khalaf Al-Salamah, Hussein Al-Salamah, Mohammed Khaled Khalaf Al-Salamah, Najah Khaled Khalaf Al-Salamah, Farah Khaled Khalaf Al-Salamah}.

Many of the operations lacked accuracy, and tens of thousands of artillery bombardments carried out by the SDF were indiscriminate, which explains the reason for the killing of hundreds of civilians.



"Al-Salamah" family who was killed by the airstrike of the International Alliance on the 25th of September 2017 | Source: public identifiers

In another documented incident, on the 28th of August 2017, an entire displaced family named “Al-Shaqran” originally from Palmyra, consisting of [ten people](#) (six children, two women and two men) was killed as a result of the bombing of International Alliance aircraft on residential neighborhoods in Al-Raqqa.

Eyas Daas, a journalist at the “Raqqā Post”, told the Violations Documentation Center:

“The SDF and the International Alliance led by the United States of America are the main reason of the deaths during the recent military campaign against the city.

”

The use of illegal weapons

Systematic attacks targeting civilian neighborhoods have been recorded unequivocally, causing severe human and material losses.

On the 8th of June 2017, Alliance warplanes bombed residential neighborhoods with white phosphorus⁴. [Photos](#) shows the phosphorus exploded in the air shortly before falling as flaming balls over civilian residences.



Photos showing the bombing of the city of Al-Raqqa with white phosphorous by the International Alliance.
Source: Raqqa is being slaughtered silently.

As a result of the bombing, at least {9} civilians, including children and women, were killed. [The International Alliance officially acknowledged these raids](#), justifying their use in the context of determination, and concealment in a manner that “fully takes into account the side effects on civilians and civilian buildings” but it did not mention those who were killed because of these attacks.

⁴ White phosphorus is a waxy solid which burns easily and is used in chemical manufacturing and smoke munitions. Exposure to white phosphorus may cause burns and irritation, liver, kidney, heart, lung, or bone damage, and death. For more information, please visit [here](#).

On the 8th of June 2017, the campaign “Raqqqa Slaughtered Silently”, which operates covertly in Al-Raqqqa and documents ISIS, released a [video](#) that shows the bombing of the Al-Raqqqa with white phosphorous.

These attacks resulted in the death and injury of a number of the civilian population and caused extensive damage to buildings and shops.

The basic rules of the International Humanitarian Law regulate the use of weapons that contain white phosphorus, just like any other weapon. These rules require conflict’s parties to distinguish between military and civilian targets, and the civilian population. International law also requires them to take all possible measures to spare civilians and civilian facilities. Attacks that lead to the indiscriminate destruction of civilians and civilian facilities are prohibited.

A- The Syrian Democratic Forces/ SDF⁵

On the 6th of November 2016, SDF, led by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units YPG, began an attack on ISIS under the protection of the International Alliance in the northern countryside of Al-Raqqqa.

Military operations caused the displacement of thousands of civilians and killed hundreds as a result of the heavy and systematic bombardment carried out everyday by the SDF’s artillery on civilian housing in the center of the city of Al-Raqqqa.

Violent practices against the civilian population by all parties to the conflict

Civilians in Al-Raqqqa governorate have been subjected to violent practices and violations by all parties to the conflict, especially during the recent military attacks on the province led by the International Alliance and the SDF.

The use of civilians as human shields

ISIS has used civilians as human shields to avoid air strikes by the International Alliance. It appears that ISIS used approximately 20 thousand civilians as human shields. ISIS members used the roofs and alleys of residential buildings to hide during the last period of the military attack on the city.

Journalist Eyas Daas commented to VDC:

“ISIS also used civilians as human shields. For example, it surrounded a 4-levels building full of civilians and prohibited them from leaving. The members were hiding next to the building to protect themselves from the attacks of the International Alliance and the SDF. However this did not prevent the attacks and all civilians in this building were killed

”

⁵ The Syrian Democratic Forces/ SDF is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance of Kurdish militias, as well as Arab and Assyrian / Syriac militia. The SDF is mostly composed of the People’s Protection Units YPG, which are mostly Kurdish factions.

In Armed Conflict regulated by the International Humanitarian Law, taking “human shields” is prohibited, and as such is a prescribed war crime.

“Human shields⁶” are defined as the deliberate use of the presence of civilians in order to make certain points, areas, or military forces immune from military attacks. It can be illegal to place forces, weapons or ammunitions in or near densely populated areas.

The use of mines by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ ISIS

ISIS intentionally used mines in large areas of the governorate to stop the SDF on the one hand and to prevent civilians from fleeing the city on the other hand. As a result, mines killed dozens of civilians. The Violations Documentation Center recorded the killing of at least {191} civilians as a result of landmine explosions.

In an incident on the 9th of June 2017, five children, including two girls from Al-Dahuk and Al-Hussein families, were killed by a mine explosion in the town of Ayn Issa (in the northern countryside of Al-Raqqa), which was under the control of the SDF.

Anti-personnel mines are one of the most common prohibited weapons. After the end of an armed conflict, landmines stay for a long time in the ground, killing or wounding civilians, and causing permanent disabilities. The convention on the prohibition of anti-personnel mines is named the “Convention on the Prohibition of Mines”, and is officially called the “Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction⁷”. This convention imposes a comprehensive ban on these weapons, by prohibiting their use, storage, development, production, acquisition and transfer. It also requires the destruction of all anti-personnel mines, whether stored or planted in the ground, during a specific period of time. With the adoption of this agreement, states agreed for the first time in the history of International Humanitarian Law to ban a weapon that was widely used throughout the world.

Preventing the civilian population from accessing safe zones

The SDF prevented civilians fleeing from areas controlled by ISIS from accessing safer places, forcing the civilian population to pay large sums of money to smugglers in order to transfer them to areas outside the city. The SDF also forcibly prevented tens of civilians from returning to their houses from which they had been displaced as a result of the recent military operations in the city. On the 30th of August 2017, the United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide expressed grave concern about the deteriorating situation of civilians trapped in Al-Raqqa (due to the fighting against ISIS), describing the situation as horrific. The statement mentioned that in addition to the poor situation facing the residents of the city, ISIS is killing those trying to flee, while Alliance forces are targeting boats on the Euphrates, which was one of the remaining escape routes for civilians.

Civilians in the south of the Euphrates also face indiscriminate attacks by Syrian government forces and their allies in military operations.

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/10/q-laws-war-issues-syria>

⁷ <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cpusptam/cpusptam.html>

Arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture

Dozens of civilians who have fled from ISIS-controlled areas have been kidnapped and arbitrarily detained by the SDF, and many have been subjected to torture in order to obtain information about the locations and headquarters of ISIS.

The SDF did not commit to laws relating to prisoners, and mistreated detainees on the basis of multiple charges.

Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, requires all parties to the conflict to protect all prisoners and detainees, including military personnel and civilians, from all kinds of killing, mutilation, cruel treatment, torture and assaults, in particular degrading treatment or humiliation. No punishments should be imposed except through courts that meet fair international standards.

On the 17th of October 2019, the SDF announced the liberation of the city of Al-Raqqa from ISIS.

Airstrikes launched by the US-led International Alliance have killed hundreds of civilians based on inaccurate and doubtful coordinates provided by the SDF.

Moreover, the SDF's artillery has carried out heavy attacks and mortar shelling of civilian houses in the city center, causing widespread destruction.

Targeting vital installations

The SDF's artillery has bombed several residential sites in the city of Al-Raqqa. On the 8th of June 2017, the SDF targeted the "Anizan Bakery", which is located on Al-Quitar Street, which destroyed it completely and left it out of service.

In one of the documented attacks on the 9th of June 2017, the SDF bombed the "Al-Sebahiyeh" Mosque, destroying it, despite the fact that no information has indicated the presence of a military target inside or around the mosque. These attacks may amount to war crimes of targeting a civilian object and intentionally attacking civilians.

According to United Nations estimates, 80% of the damages in Al-Raqqa were a result of both; the bombing launched by the International Alliance, and the battles that took place between the SDF and ISIS.

Mass graves in the city

The process of exhumation and examination of human remains that were buried in mass graves is a very difficult and complicated process, and it requires experience in gathering information, and sufficient ability to carry out excavation. The most difficult process is to identify bodies and determine the cause and manner of death. Excavation and exhumation, through primitive methods and without strict international standards and practices, can lead to the destruction or loss of important evidence. This also can play a role in getting more complexities in, and greatly complicate the identification process, which ultimately affects the ability of knowing the truth, achieving justice and making reparations for the affected families.

Likewise, any vandalism with mass graves can threaten compromise its the evidentiary value of it, undermining attempts to ensure justice and accountability. It is important to protect mass grave sites because they may contain important evidence that can be used in criminal prosecutions.

The dangerous security situation in many areas of the governorate is a major challenge in carrying out any work to open mass graves, especially in areas that are difficult for investigators and the concerned authorities to access to do their work, and requires more long-term procedures and investigations and this may not always be possible.

Initial Response Team⁸

According to the Initial Response Team, approximately {3310} corpses were found in 2018, under destroyed buildings and in mass graves within the neighborhoods of the city of Al-Raqqa. However, {5350} corpses were found since the beginning of exploration (in the period between January 2018 and the end of December 2019).

VDC team had a meeting with the director of the Initial Response Team, Mr. Yasser Al-Khamis, who said:



The Initial Response Team started its work on the 9th of January 2018. {26} mass graves have been found up to this moment, and we are currently working to recover bodies in the grave number {20}, which is the Western Salhabia cemetery, in response to the requests of people who live nearby.

The bodies buried in this cemetery belong to victims who were killed as a result of field executions.

We are working on taking samples from other graves, knowing that we have not been able to obtain samples for {3000} dead bodies as of this date.

We are preparing for the third stage which will start at the beginning of next year in which we will focus our efforts in obtaining samples for all the bodies that have been recovered in addition to those bodies that were previously buried without obtaining samples



⁸ A team that was established on the 9th of January 2018 that consists of 116 members. The team is divided into 4 teams which are the fire fighters team, the emergency medical team, the diving team, and exhumation team. The team works 24/7 to respond to all requests, and a Whatsapp number has been allocated for ease of communication since the city of Al-Raqqa has been out of telephone network for years.

On the mechanism of the work, Al-Khamis added:

“

Once a cemetery has been discovered, we will be informed by the people who live nearby. Then the work begins by exhuming the bodies under the supervision of the forensic team. All information is archived as paper and electronic copies. After that we exam the bodies and clothes to find anything that indicates the identity of a body. Later, three samples are taken from each unknown body and those are saved by the response team in the record of missing people

”

The process of identifying the corpses found in mass graves is a significant and important contribution to a criminal investigation. Forensic evidence such as personal possessions, “clothing and shoes” and other kinds of evidence like “number of bodies, gender, identification of ethnicity, type of injuries and whether the cemetery contains only the remains of civilians or bodies of non-civilians killed” leads to effective and successful outcomes that helps in identifying victims and giving the remains to the families.

The director of the Initial Response Team adds:

“

We receive many calls from the families of the missing people, despite the fact that no samples were taken except from {1400} bodies out of {5400}, due to the lack of equipment that helps in examining and analyzing the samples

”

The Initial Response Team includes {116} members who work in several specialties “rescue, first aid, fire fighters, forensic, and divers” in addition to a documenter whose mission is to record the basic details about the bodies that are found. The forensic department which includes {36} Physician, leads the entire process of documenting corpses and determines possible causes of death, injuries, gender, hair color, length, clothing, and approximate age. Age was possible to determine based on a visual evaluation of the corpses and without using modern or advanced equipment”.

Risks and challenges during exhumation

Based on similar experiences as in Iraq, one of the most important considerations during the exhumation is the risk of mines and explosive materials.

According to the United Nations Mine Action Service {UNMAS}⁹ and due to the heavy use of improvised explosive devices by ISIS, it is possible that some of the grave sites contain devices, which requires special efforts to neutralize them.

The United Nations Service believes that these mines are activated by pressure and would destroy graveyard sites, so it needs special exploration devices.

In early April 2018, the United Nations assessed the situation in Raqqa¹⁰. According to the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator on the situation in Syria, between 70 and 80 percent of all buildings inside the city of Al-Raqqa have been destroyed.

¹⁰ The United Nations Service was established in 1997. It leads, coordinates and implements United Nations efforts to eliminate landmines and explosive hazards and reduce their impact on people's lives. The United Nations Service has contributed to saving lives and protecting livelihoods in conflict-torn communities, including Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan (including Darfur), South Sudan, Syria, and Western Sahara.

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2018/04/1006302>

Since ISIS was forced to leave Raqqa in October, about 100,000 people have returned to the city of Al-Raqqa, although it is not safe, due to the increased number of unexploded landmines and improvised explosive devices, the extensive destruction of infrastructure, and the lack of basic services. Every week, more than 50 victims fall because of war remnants.

Mechanism for recording and documenting corpses

The Initial Response Team uses a special documentation form, which includes data of body condition, age, gender, clothing, cause of death, and finally the body burial data, such as location and identity of the person who buried it. The team recovered more than 100 bodies that were rotted or burned, where their sex or age was not recognized.

The team established two cemeteries to bury the bodies that are removed from the mass graves, one of which is the cemetery "Tel Al-Beyaa" located in the northeast of Al-Raqqa, and has become known as the cemetery "Tel Al-Shuhada". It contains most of the recovered bodies. Due to the increased number of bodies, the team established the other cemetery near "Al-Fakhikha" hill after the discovery of "Al-Fakhikha" cemetery.

Mass graves discovered in the province

According to the Initial Response Team, from the 9th of January 2018, until this moment, {26} mass graves have been discovered, and the team is currently working to exhume the bodies from cemetery number {20} which is the "Western Orchid (Al-Sahlabia) Cemetery". The team still has to recover the bodies from at least six graves.

Eyas Daas told the Violations Documentation Center:

“

The first mass graves were discovered in Al-Raqqa governorate during the siege of the city of Al-Raqqa by the SDF and during the bombardment by the International Alliance forces. They were discovered in "Al-Talae' camp" where most of the bodies were for ISIS members.

Then, other graves, such as the "Panorama Cemetery" and the "Zoo Cemetery", were discovered and they contained bodies of both civilians and ISIS members. Other cemeteries have also been discovered, such as "Haret Al-badu", "Al-Ta-wasoiya", "Al-Rashid Stadium", and other parks, most of which are mixed graves containing the bodies of ISIS members and civilians killed as a result of the bombing

”

1- "Al-Houta" hole of death

"Al-Houta" is the name of a deep landslide in the ground, located near the "Hammam Al-Turkman" area north of Al-Raqqa. It is located in the northern countryside of Al-Raqqa Governorate and is 65 km from the city center, specifically south of the town of "Al-Solouk". The hole was created as a result of natural factors, subterranean landslides and soil subsidence.

"Al-Houta" was used as the first mass grave in the province of Raqqa on the 15th of September 2012, by members of the former Al-Nusra Front/ HTS. The members of Front threw the bodies of dozens of members of the Syrian government forces.

There is no confirmed number of bodies, but according to many local activists we interviewed, "Al-Houta" hole may also contain hundreds of bodies from the region's residents, civilian activists, and members of the SDF, and others. VIDEO

After ISIS took control of the "Tal Abyad" region in July 2013, this hole has become the most suitable place to throw the bodies on a daily basis. Abu Yasser al-Iraqi, who served as the prince (Emir) of the organization in 2013, is one of the leaders who used this hole to throw their victims in dozens.

Hussein Khalaf, a pseudonym of a local resident, told VDC:

ISIS used "Al-Houta", or what is known locally as "Beit al-Sallaoua", as a mass grave to get rid of all of its opponents. This hole witnessed mass executions on a daily basis.

ISIS used death ceremonies as entertainment. On one occasion, members of ISIS brought about 6 handcuffed and blindfolded people, and made them stand just a few meters from the edge of the hole, without them knowing that. Then they said "you are free to go, but run fast if you want to survive". As soon as they started running, they fell deep into the hole and disappeared".

Hussein added, "ISIS was fair in selecting its victims, because this death hole includes the bodies of various factions, groups, and races, civilians and non-civilians, women and men, Arabs and Kurds, leaders and normal members. In order to erase all the evidence, ISIS members poured tons of oil into the hole and ignited it, which led to several days of continuous fire"

2-Al-Fakhikha cemetery

Located at the south of the river, in the village of Al-Fakhikha, 1.5 km from the Euphrates, within an agricultural field, and surrounded by dozens of earthen berms. Graves area is estimated at about 10 hectares.

The cemetery was discovered in the city of "Al-Fakhikha" on the 9th of January 2019 by the Initial Response Team. This is the 14th mass grave discovered in Al-Raqqa, and it contains {3500} for civilians and ISIS members.

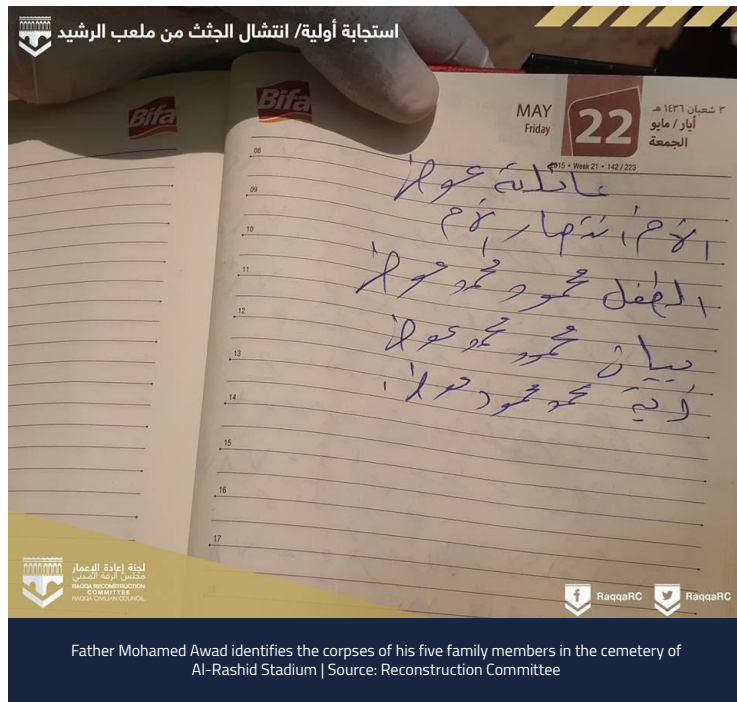


The Initial Response Team exhuming the bodies in "Al-Fakhikha" cemetery on the 20th of January 2019 | Source: Reconstruction Committee

The number of corpses that were exhumed from the first section of the cemetery were about {750}. Only {51} corpses were identified and returned to their families.

"Al-Fakhikha" Cemetery, is one of the largest mass graves discovered in the governorate. The bodies of non-civilians were identified by military uniforms and ammunition such as "explosive belt." In such cases, mine engineering team is notified to dismantle the remnants of ammunition. After that corpses are photographed and officially documented and buried in specially graves near "Tal Al-Bayaa". Corpses with IDs are documented at the Shariah office of the Initial Response Team.

3-Al-Rashid Cemetery.



Located near Al-Rashid Stadium, in Adnan Al-Malki Street, in the center of the city of Al-Raqqa.

On the 21st of April 2018, the residents of Al-Rashid neighborhood found the remains of unidentified bodies and informed the Initial Response Team. About {553} bodies of civilians were discovered in the cemetery, moved and buried in other civilian cemeteries such as "Al-Shohada (the martyrs)".

F.A. is the father of one of the children "a 6-year-old girl" who were killed as a result of artillery shelling during the siege of Al-Raqqa. He said:

"We were all sitting in the living room except for my daughter who was with her mother in the kitchen. An artillery shell targeted the back of the house, which led to the collapse of the kitchen ceiling on the girl and her mother. We transferred them immediately to the city's national hospital, but in vain. The girl died one hour after the bombing and my wife survived, but she still suffers from back pain and cuts all over her body. The next day we buried the girl in Al-Rashid cemetery due to the intensity of the bombing and the difficulty of moving between the neighborhoods. When the bombardment calmed down, we moved her body to Al-Shohada (the martyrs) cemetery".

The forensic department of the Initial Response Team that supervised the exhumation said:

"The cemetery was excavated in longitudinal lines and the bodies were buried randomly and unevenly. The cemetery contained both civilian and non-civilian corpses in addition to the bodies of children and women. The decomposing remains of these bodies caused many epidemics and diseases, especially for children".

4- Al-Taj Cemetery

Located at the south of the "Zoo park" near the old bridge, south of Al-Taj hall, Al-Raqqa city.

On the 19th of June 2018, the Initial Response Team began working on the exhumation of bodies that had been buried in Al-Taj Cemetery. After 20 days of continuous work, the team was able to exhume about {400} bodies, whereas {30} bodies were identified and returned to their families by the forensic department, to be buried at "Al-Shohada (the martyrs) cemetery".

The Reconstruction Committee estimated the number of corpses in "Al-Taj Cemetery" at more than {1,200}, while search operations continued.

The cemetery includes corpses of civilians in addition to ISIS members.



5- The White Garden Cemetery, Al Nahda District



Located within the white garden in the middle of Al-Nahda neighborhood.

On the 06th of May 2018, the residents of Al-Nahda neighborhood informed the initial Response Team about a mass grave within the garden.

Exhumation of the bodies started in the beginning of March 2018, {33} bodies were found including {12 bodies of males - 7 females - 3 male children - 1 female child}. Ten bodies were unidentified.

Unlike the rest of the mass graves, the White Garden cemetery is known to residents, as it contained the remains of civilians who were buried by their

relatives. During the bombing by the International Alliance and the SDF, people were unable to move the dead bodies to the official cemeteries since they are located on the lines of fire. Therefore, they had to bury them in the White Garden which was closer.

6- “Al-Najareen Avenue Garden” Cemetery

Located at Al-Jumaili Building in “Al-Najareen Avenue” south of the White Garden, in Al-Nahda neighborhood.

Within Al-Jumaili building, the residents worked for 5 days on exhuming the bodies from a mass grave. {27} bodies were found {11 male - 9 females - 4 male children - 3 female children}, identified and returned to their families.

7- “Haret Al-Badu” Cemetery

Located in Al-Badu neighborhood, north of Al-Raqqa city.

Many violent battles happened in the area, subsequently, doubts were raised about the existence of mass graves. With the help of local residents, the Initial Response Team found several cemeteries within the residential buildings in “Haret Al-Badu”, to be the 16th mass grave in Al-Raqqa. Work on exhumations began on the 3rd of July 2018, and finished on the 16th of September 2019, after {64} bodies were found.



A photo showing the Initial Response Team exhuming bodies that were discovered in a house in “Haret Al-Badu”, southeast of the yellow warehouse in the city of Al-Raqqa
Source: Reconstruction Committee

In the first stage of work, the Initial Response Team exhumed {8} bodies from a house in “Harte Al-Badu”, southeast of the yellow warehouse in the city of Al-Raqqa, after it was reported by the residents of the neighbourhood. The forensic examination showed that the bodies belong to {4} women and {3} men, while the gender of the remaining body was undetermined.

According to the forensic team, the bodies of the men discovered belong to ISIS fighters and their families, according to the evidence found in their possession.

After taking the necessary samples, the bodies were buried in a special cemetery that the team had previously established in “Tal Al Bayaa” Cemetery in the city of Al-Raqqa.

There are other mass graves discovered in Al-Badu neighborhood:

● A mass grave in the house of Ahmed Al-Shihabi:

Location: south of the yellow warehouse in Al-Badu neighborhood.

The Initial Response Team was able to exhume {23} bodies from the inner courtyard of the residential home of Ahmed Al-Shihabi.

Forensic team identified two bodies, and returned them to their families.

● A mass grave in the house of Fayyad Al-Akkari

Location: south of the yellow warehouse in Al-Badu neighborhood.

In early July 2018, the Initial Response Team began the exhumation of the bodies that had been buried in an apartment house belonging to Fayyad Al-Akkari.

The team was able to find {41} bodies of civilians, including women, children, and ISIS fighters.

● "Al-Hai Garden" Cemetery

Location: East of Hawari School, west of the Shuhada Mosque, opposite to "Farouj Al Bayan" store in Al-Badu neighborhood.

The Initial Response Team began working on this cemetery in early July 2018.

It is a cemetery located within the neighborhood garden in the Bedouin Quarter,

The team managed to exhume {12} bodies. According to forensic team, the bodies belong to {4} women and {3} Men. Moreover, the gender of {5} bodies was undetermined.

8- "Panorama" Cemetery

Location: within the "panorama" park, north of the new bridge.

The mass graves were discovered on the 11th of August 2018. Nevertheless, exhumation was postponed until the civil defense teams finished cleaning the remnants of ammunition and explosive belts that were buried with their owners, who belong to ISIS. The exhumation began on the 1st of October 2018.

The Panorama Cemetery is one of the largest mass graves in Al-Raqqa. Graves were dug regularly in longitudinal trenches. Bodies were buried in an organized manner unlike the rest of the graves



A photo showing the Initial Response Team exhumating the remains of the bodies in Panorama Cemetery
Source: Initial Response Team

and they contained the bodies of a large number of ISIS fighters in addition to the bodies of civilians who died as a result of bombing by the International Alliance and SDF forces.

On the 1st of January 2019 work was completed and {793} bodies were exhumed and reburied in the "Al-Shuhada" cemetery.

Q.R. is a young man from the city of Al-Raqqa. He told VDC:

“

On the 10th of July 2017, at 11:50 midnight, I was standing in the residential street near my family's house. A number of SDF artillery shells were falling on our house and the surrounding houses. I heard the screams of the women in our building as I was running home. I entered my father's room. He was lying on the floor and bleeding profusely from his head as a result of shrapnel wounds. Then my nephew entered the room and he was also seriously wounded in the head, which led to his death shortly after. When the bombing subsided, we buried all the bodies in the Panorama, because we could not reach official graves as a result of the severity of the bombing. Later when the military operations stopped, we individually moved all the bodies to "Tal al-Bayaa" cemetery

”

مقبرة البانوراما الجماعية

مجلس الرقة المدني
لجنة إعادة الإعمار

فريق الاستجابة الأولية
الطبيب الشرعي

(محضر توثيق التنشيل ودفن جثة)

تاريخ: ١٠/٧/٢٠١٧
ساعة: ١١:٥٠
موقع: شارع...
مكان الدفن: ...
اسم الأب: ...
اسم الأم: ...
مكان وتاريخ الوفاة: ...
العمر: ...
الجنس: ...
وصف الشظايا: ...
حالة الجثة: ...
وصف ملابس الجثة: ...
سبب الوفاة: ...
ذكر الأمراض إن وجدت: ...
ملاحظات مستحضرة الجثة: ...
اسم الطبيب: ...
اسم الأب: ...
اسم الأم: ...
توقيع المستم: ...
التاريخ: ...
الساعة: ...
اسم الشرطة: ...

لجنة إعادة الإعمار
RAQQA RECONSTRUCTION
COMMITTEE
RAQQA CIVILIAN COUNCIL

فريق
الطبيب الشرعي
محمود حاج حيدر

قائد الفريق
ياسر الخسيس

لقد الموقعة
عبد الشيوخ

RaqqaRC

Sample of the documentation paper for the exhumation and burial of bodies
Source: Initial Response Team.

9- Triangle Garden Cemetery at "Al-Jazara" junction

Located in a park facing "Bilal Bin Rabah" mosque, east of "Al-Jazara" junction.

The Initial Response Team received reports of finding a mass grave containing dozens of bodies. On the 13th of December 2018, the team members began working on exhumation of {7} bodies of civilians who were killed as a result of the bombing of the International Alliance.



10- Children's Garden cemetery.

Located in the middle of the Children's Garden, next to "Al-Firdous" Mosque, in Al-Firdous neighborhood in Al-Raqqah city.

It is one of the cemeteries known to the local residents, where the bodies of the dead were buried by their relatives, due to the difficulty in reaching official cemeteries.

The Initial Response Team began the work their on the 16th of April 2018, and {5} bodies of civilians were exhumed {2 males - 1 female - 2 children, including an unidentified child} who were killed as a result of the bombing of the International Alliance and the SDF forces.

11- The old mosque "Al-Atiq" cemetery

Located at the north of 23 February Street - near the old mosque.

The old mosque garden in the city of Al-Raqqah was transformed into a cemetery for the burial of bodies, due to the inaccessibility to the city's official cemeteries.

Work began on the 26th of August 2018 and approximately {94} bodies were exhumed {45 males - 13 females - 20 children - 15 children and an unknown body} and {68} bodies were handed over to their families after identification.

According to the Initial Response Team, bodies were first examined by the forensic team, documented, and buried in the cemetery of "Tal Al-Baya".

Finally

The provisions of international humanitarian law albeit limited are applicable to the armed conflict in Syria. In this regard, in relation to international armed conflicts, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, in addition to the 1977 Protocols, contain special provisions for dealing with human remains, sites of disposal and graves. During non-international armed conflicts, parties to the conflict are required to respect International Humanitarian Law, including Customary Law.

International Humanitarian Law affirms the obligation of parties to a conflict to search for those who may be missing during or after the conflict, to facilitate family reunification and inform families of the fate of their relatives.

Measures to locate missing persons, identify human remains, and investigate the cause and manner of death are central to the human rights framework which applies also during armed conflict and therefore are applicable in Syria. All Syrians have the right to an effective remedy, which is composed of the right to an effective investigation and to the protection of the rights to life, liberty and security. For this right to be effective, authorities shall ensure the collection reports of missing persons, apply international standards in the recovery, exhumation and analysis of human remains, preserve the information stemming from such forensic activities, and conduct identifications in a scientific manner. These rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights to which Syria is a party. These rights are further reflected in the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005, which included the positive vote of the Syrian Government. Through these principles UN member states agreed to provide victims and their families with truth about the violations of their rights. In line with the Paris Principles of the International Commission on Missing Persons States bear a responsibility for ensuring lasting peace, reconciliation and social cohesion. Resolving the fate of missing and disappeared persons and protecting persons against disappearance is an integral element in securing this objective.

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance refers to the right to the truth and the continuous investigation in enforced disappearances, as well as the prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators of these acts.

The Convention also states that states parties must inform families about **the truth regarding the circumstances of enforced disappearance, the progress of the investigation, its results, the date of the disappearance, and providing the necessary compensation.**

As mentioned above, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted the fundamental principles and guidelines of the United Nations on the right to justice and reparation for victims of gross violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law. Through these principles UN member states agreed to provide victims and their families with information about the causes that led to their abuse, the causes of the violations of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, and to let them know the truth about those violations.



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا
Violations Documentation Center in Syria

www.vdc-sy.net

لأية ملاحظات أو استفسارات يرجى التواصل معنا على الإيميل:
inquiry@vdc-sy.info

للإطلاع على تقاريرنا السابقة باللغة العربية
[/http://vdc-sy.net/category/reports_ar/monthly_reports_ar](http://vdc-sy.net/category/reports_ar/monthly_reports_ar)

للإطلاع على تقاريرنا السابقة باللغة الانكليزية
[/http://vdc-sy.net/category/reports/monthly_reports](http://vdc-sy.net/category/reports/monthly_reports)