

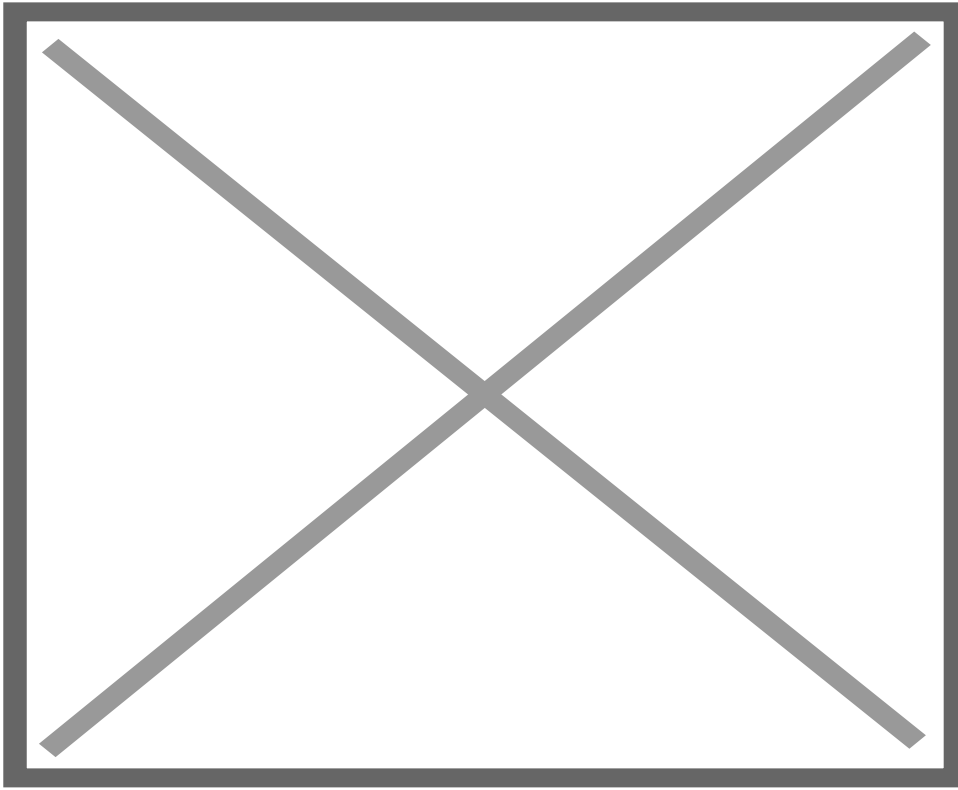
Raqqa

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: November 2021

[Main COI reference: [Security 2021](#), 2.8]

General information

Ar-Raqqa (hereafter 'Raqqa') governorate is located in the north-central part of Syria. The governorate has international borders with Turkey to the north, and borders to the west with Aleppo governorate, to the east with Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates and to the south with Hama and Homs Governorates. The governorate is divided in three districts, with the respective district capitals: Ar-Raqqa (Raqqa city), Al-Thawra (Al-Tabqa), and Tall Abyad. In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Raqqa governorate to be 707 696 inhabitants.



The majority of Raqqa's population is Sunni Arabs, constituting approximately 90 %.

Background of the conflict

The first attack on Raqqa governorate was on 1 August 2012 by the opposition forces and Raqqa became the first governorate centre completely taken from the Syrian government's control. On 15 August 2013, fighting broke out between the armed opposition forces and the emerging ISIL, which led to the complete takeover of Raqqa city by ISIL at end of December 2013. On 29 June 2014, ISIL declared a 'caliphate' with its capital in Raqqa city. Towards the end of 2016, international coalition forces started offensives against ISIL in Raqqa and other places and on 17 October 2017, the last ISIL fighters in Raqqa surrendered and it came under SDF control. Between 2016 and 2017, ISIL worked together with local affiliated groups in its actions against the SDF and GoS military forces in Raqqa. In 2017, SDF took control of Raqqa governorate, although ISIL-linked activity was still reported. [[Security 2020](#), 2.8]

Following the Turkish-led incursion into northeast Syria in October 2019, the SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of the so called 'safe zone' established between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate). After an agreement was reached between Turkey and Russia on 23 October 2019, the SDF withdrew from this area on 28 October 2019,

giving way to Turkish-supported non-State armed groups. In December 2019, Russian troops moved into Raqqa, following an agreement with the SDF, to guarantee safety after the departure of the US forces. Russia, in collaboration with the GoS, also deployed forces to the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River west of Raqqa city. [[Security 2020](#), 2.8]

Actors: control and presence

The central parts of Raqqa governorate are under the control of the SDF. The GoS and its allies control the southern parts of the governorate. As the result of the Turkish military incursion in October 2019, the GoS forces and/or their Russian allies have been present along the main roads in the SDF-controlled areas and in the frontlines separating the SDF-controlled parts of Raqqa from the Turkish-controlled area in northern Raqqa governorate. A report of February 2021 notes the presence of GoS forces in the town of Ayn Issa and in Al-Tabqa.

Since October 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces and the SNA have been in control of most of the territory north of M4 highway in northern Raqqa governorate, including the border town of Tall Abyad and its surroundings and the district of Suluk.

The information concerning the US-led coalition's military presence in Raqqa governorate is ambiguous. On the one hand, conflict maps show that the US has no military sites in the governorate and it is the US-led Coalition's position that Coalition forces operating in northeast Syria have 'limited their ground movements' to Hasaka and Deir ez-Zor governorates. On the other, a map of January 2021 contains information on 2 US military sites in Raqqa governorate: one immediately to the west and one immediately to the east/northeast of Raqqa city.

The Russian forces are present in the GoS-controlled Raqqa governorate and, to a limited extent, in the SDF-controlled parts of the governorate. Since late 2020, the Russian forces have increased their presence in the Ayn Issa frontline.

In 2020, Iranian-backed armed groups control the town of Resafa in southern Raqqa governorate and have influence in the Euphrates river valley in the eastern part of the governorate, near the administrative border between Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The Iranian-backed groups are reported to have influence also along the main roads in GoS-controlled parts of the governorate. Moreover, Iranian-backed armed groups are depicted to have a pocket of influence in the Ayn Issa area.

ISIL has a presence in GoS-controlled southern Raqqqa governorate. According to March 2021 analysis, ISIL controls small patch of territory east of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa Air Base (in Thawra district).

Nature of violence and examples of incidents

During the reference period, the security situation in Raqqqa governorate has been affected by ISIL's growing insurgency. In 2020, ISIL's activities increased especially in the GoS- controlled southern parts of Raqqqa governorate. In the last three months of 2020, GoS and Russian forces engaged in regular airstrikes targeting static ISIL targets in Raqqqa governorate. In early 2021, ISIL's attacks increased also in the SDF-controlled parts of the governorate.

There have also been reports of recurrent shelling and armed clashes between the Turkish forces/ Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF along the frontlines between the 'Operation Peace Spring' area and the SDF-controlled areas in the governorate, notably around the town of Ayn Issa. These clashes resulted in the death, injury and displacement of civilians. Tensions along the Syrian-Turkish border 'remained high' between January and March 2021 with Turkey launching its first airstrikes in 17 months against the SDF positions around Ayn Issa on 20 March 2021.

According to the report by the CoI discussing the situation in Syria in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020), displaced families from Tall Abyad claimed that they were unwilling to return to their homes because they were afraid of rape and sexual violence at the hands of the members of Turkish-backed armed groups. During the reference period, human rights violations as a result of armed confrontations, bombings and assassinations, shelling and attacks with VBIED, were reported especially in the eastern part of the 'Operation Peace Spring' area. However, similar violations as a result of IED and VBIED attacks, as well as attacks conducted with small firearms have been reported also in the western part of the area. During the reference period, there have been reports on violations by the YPG, the SDF and their affiliates, targeting Raqqqa governorate's civilian population, e.g. seizing civilian property and forced military conscription.

It was also reported that the retreating 'Islamic State' fighters 'left massive contamination of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices' causing heavy damage to the returning civilians in areas under ISIL's former influence in Raqqqa governorate.

Incidents: data

ACLED recorded 1 238 security incidents recorded in Raqqqa governorate (average of 19 security incidents per week) in the period from 1 January 2020 to 31 March 2021. Of the reported incidents, 703 were coded as 'explosions/remote violence', 303 as 'battles', and 232 as incidents of 'violence against civilians'. The number of security incidents remained steady for the first half of 2020, registering an increase in security incidents between October 2020 and February 2021.

Geographical scope

Security incidents were recorded in all Raqqqa governorate districts during the reporting period, with the highest number overall recorded in Tall Abyad.

Civilian fatalities: data

VDC recorded 140 civilian fatalities in 2020 and 17 civilian fatalities in the first three months of 2021. SNHR recorded 108 civilian fatalities in 2020 and 16 civilian fatalities in the first three months of 2021. For the full reporting period, this represented 157 civilian fatalities in total or approximately 22 civilian fatalities per 100 000 inhabitants according to VDC data; and 124 civilian fatalities in total or approximately 18 civilian fatalities per 100 000 inhabitants according to SNHR.

Displacement

Approximately 7 000 IDP movements from Raqqqa governorate were registered in 2020. Of these, approximately 5 000 were IDP movements within Raqqqa governorate, while significant numbers of displacements to Deir ez-Zor (1 400) and Hasaka (900) governorates were also documented.

UNOCHA recorded approximately 7 000 return movements to the governorate of Raqqqa in 2020 and less than 600 IDP return movements to Raqqqa governorate in the first three months of 2021.

Further impact on civilians

A policy of 'demographic change' is reported to be implemented in the 'Operation Peace Spring' area. Specifically, the regions of Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad are repopulated with IDPs from other parts of Syria and with families of Turkmen fighters deployed to the area who take over the houses of civilians displaced from their homes or of those who were associated with SDF and forcibly displaced from the area. It has been reported that civilian houses have been appropriated by the

Turkish armed forces in Dawoudiya village, north of Tall Tamer, and utilised thereafter for military purposes. There are also observations of ‘repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation’ by various Turkish backed armed groups who have even forced some residents, most of them ethnic Kurds, to flee their homes.

The damage to the physical capital of Raqqa governorate was reportedly around 6.7 billion USD (8.3 % of all the damage inflicted on Syrian physical capital) between 2011–2018. It was further noted that the US-led coalition’s bombing campaign against ISIL in 2017 ‘destroyed the entire urban system’ in the governorate. The heavy contamination with unexploded remnants limited access and delivery of humanitarian aid [see also [Security 2021](#), 1.6.1]. Humanitarian demining organisations and commercial companies have reportedly carried out ‘large-scale clearance’ in former ISIL areas, focusing on critical infrastructure (healthcare, schools, water and electricity).

Looking at the indicators, and in particular the presence of multitude of armed actors and the fragmentation of territorial control, including ISIL’s growing insurgency in the governorate, the generally volatile security situation and widespread human rights violations, as well as the overall increase in the frequency of security incidents compared to 2019, it can be concluded that in the governorate of **Raqqa**, indiscriminate violence reaches such a high level, that substantial grounds are shown for believing that a civilian, returned to the governorate, would, **solely on account of their presence on its territory**, face a real risk of being subject to the serious threat referred to in Article 15(c) QD.