

Brief Report

Human Rights Implications of the Withdrawal of US Forces from Syria

The United States Must Compensate the Families of Some 3,000 Syrian Civilians Killed by International Coalition Forces Before Leaving

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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I. Introduction

On Wednesday December 19, 2018, US. President Donald Trump announced, via his personal account on the social networking platform 'Twitter', his willingness to withdraw his military forces from Syria. This announcement was followed by an official statement issued by the White House confirming the withdrawal of US. troops stationed in northeastern Syria, in a region extending across the entire area to the north of the Euphrates River, up to the Iraqi borders to the east and the Turkish borders to the north. We at SNHR believe, however, that from a human rights perspective US. forces cannot simply leave after four years of military intervention without contributing to the resolution of cases that are still pending, some of which occurred as a direct result of this military intervention. These concerns are the subject of this report, in which SNHR attempts to shed light on from human rights and social perspective as a means of helping to ensure the stability of the North Euphrates region.

II. Six Major Issues That the United States Must Consider and Resolve Before Leaving

1- Compensation for victims of US. bombardment and reconstruction of facilities and buildings they destroyed:

Over the past four years, US-led Coalition forces have committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law, many of which constitute war crimes, including attacks which caused civilian deaths, including women and children.

According to the SNHR's database, bombardment by International Coalition Forces between September 23, 2014, and January 5, 2019, resulted in:

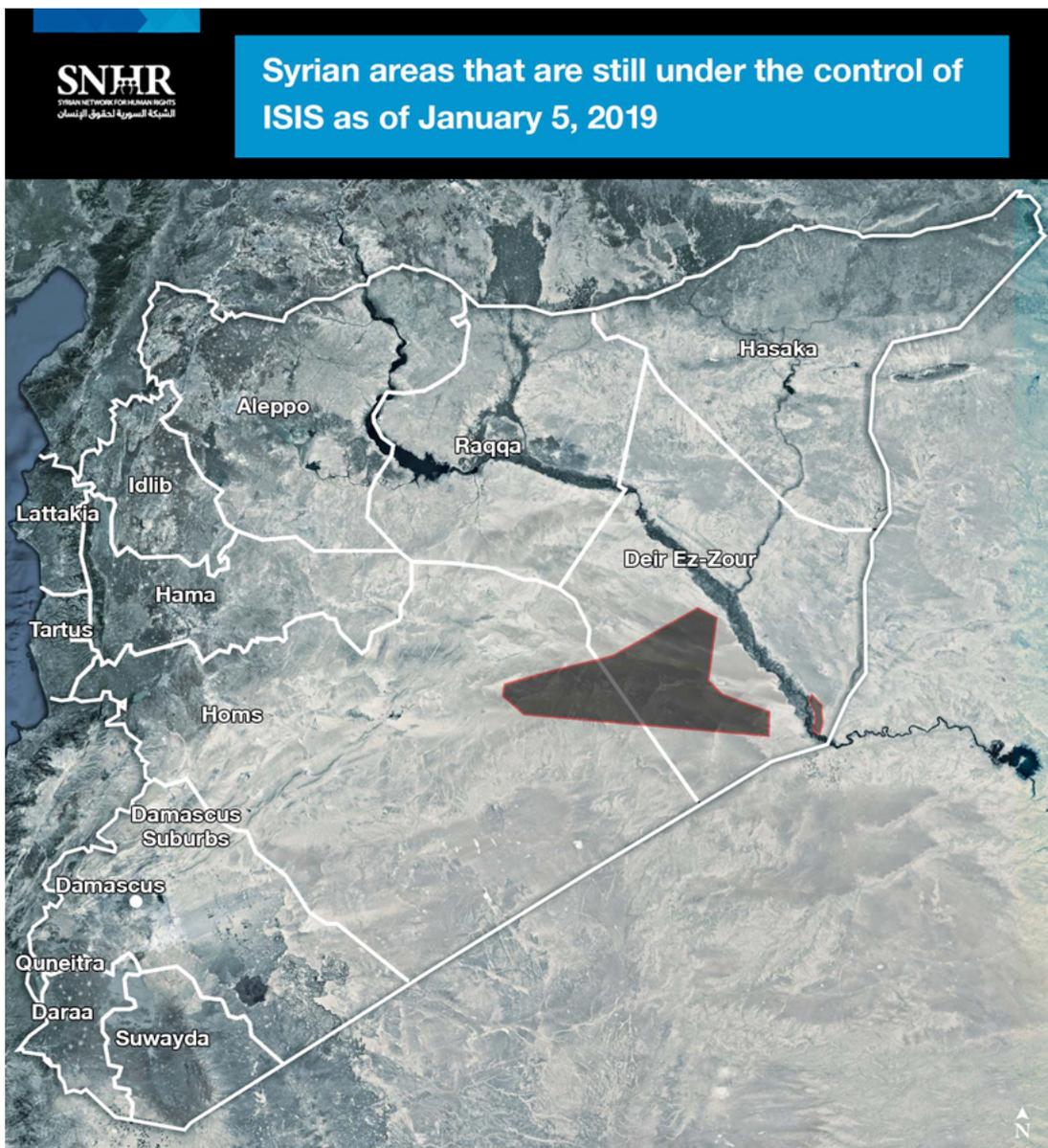
A: the killing of 2,984 civilians, including 932 children and 646 women (adult female), including at least 168 massacres, in which five individuals or more were killed in the same attack.



B. At least 182 attacks on vital civilian facilities, including 25 schools and 16 medical facilities. These figures do not include facilities where ISIS terrorist elements or equipment were based.

2 - The ISIS organization still controls 2,150 square kilometers in Syria:

The United States of America asserts that it leads the countries fighting terrorism around the world, and accordingly intervened in Syria in September 2014 with the aim of eliminating ISIS terrorist organization. We, at SNHR, had hoped that this brutal organization would be eliminated in a much shorter time than has been the case, particularly in light of the wide scope of the International Coalition and the forces fighting this organization. Whilst no-one can deny that the International Coalition forces have significantly undermined and depleted ISIS, which inflicted horrendous losses of human lives and territory on the Syrian people, unfortunately the group still controls large areas in Syria, and is still fighting up to the time of this report's publication, with ISIS currently controlling an area estimated at approximately 2,150 square kilometers, as shown by the following map:

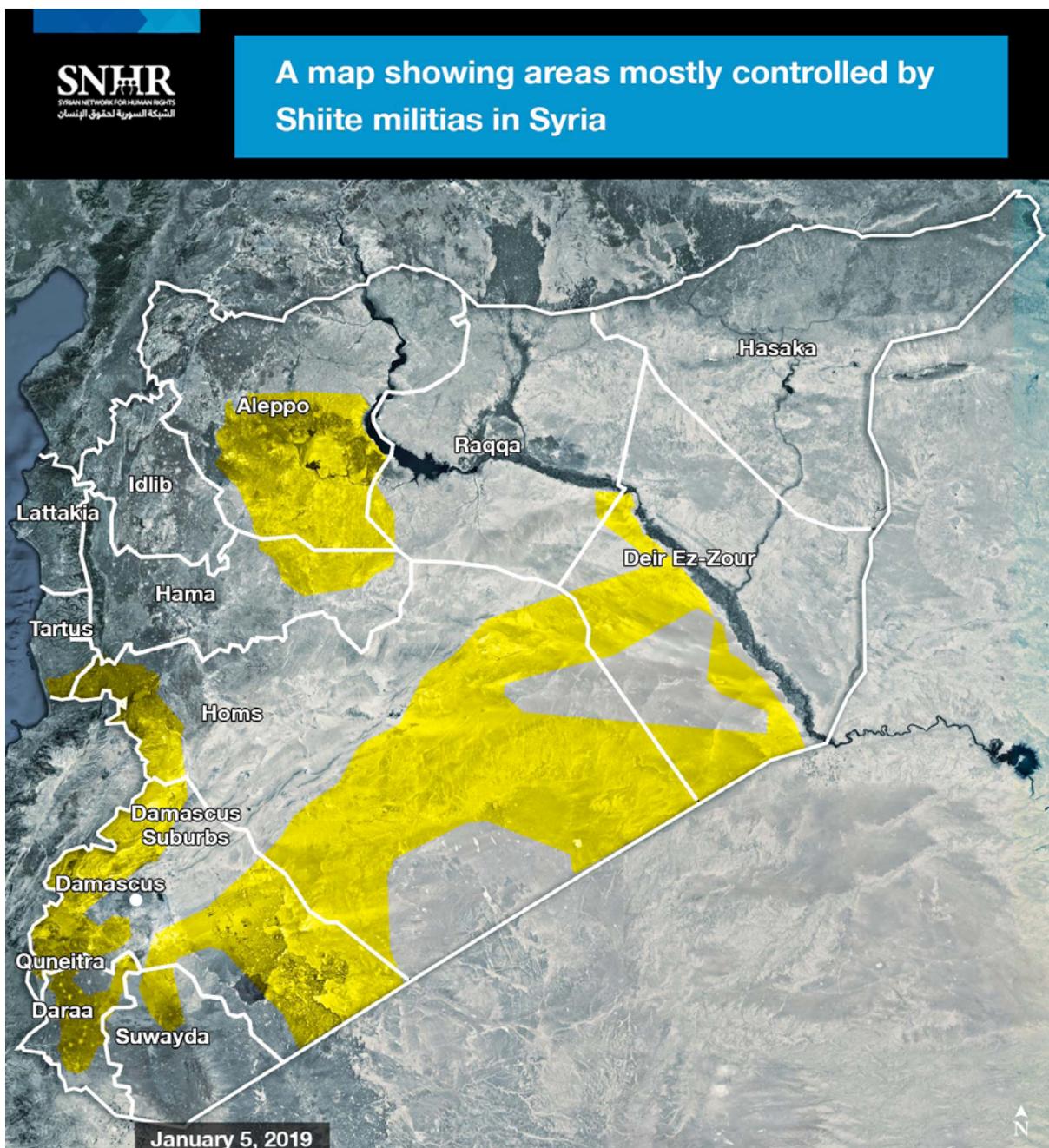


In addition to ISIS, other terrorist organizations are also present in Syria, and Syrian society is suffering from their presence in Syria, and desperately needs help to eradicate them. The following map shows the areas where Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (al Nusra Front affiliated with al Qaeda) is present in Idlib governorate. The US withdrawal and the suspension of aid provides a golden opportunity to ISIS and al Qaeda to re-expand in Syrian territory again in the form of firstly local then secondly regional and global organizations.



3- Extremist organizations backed by the Iran are also terrorists and will expand in Syria as they did in Iraq:

The fight against terrorism in the world should be indivisible, and the withdrawal of US forces without establishing a strong political structure in the areas of East Euphrates will leave vast tracts of land not only at risk of an expansion by ISIS, but more dangerously to expansion by Iranian militias since these groups are explicitly supported by a state, namely Iran, making them more powerful and sustainable than ISIS, Indeed, it seems that Iran is the biggest beneficiary of the withdrawal of US forces due to its penetration and spread across large areas of Syria, which means that the withdrawal could be considered a consolidation of the Iranian presence in Syria rather than an expression of opposition to it. The following map shows the approximate locations of deployment of militias affiliated with Iran, including Lebanese Hezbollah forces, which are largely intertwined with Syrian forces.



Iran has not only deployed its military in Syria, both within its own bases and through a strong presence in the ranks of the Syrian regime, but has gone far beyond this, working intensively since early 2015 to infiltrate every level of the regime's political and economic system, building up an extensive network of trade deals, business partnership and investments with a large number of local groups loyal to the Syrian regime.

4. Securing political and economic stability:

In its war against ISIS, the United States supported the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). This support has extended far beyond the military sphere, with the radical organization being effectively appointed to govern massive areas after they've been cleared of ISIS' presence. Although many areas have been out of ISIS control for more than a year, the United States has made little effort to achieve democratically elected local governance, and thus support locally elected bodies economically and politically, helping to achieve security, political and social stability in the region. Instead, the de facto control of all areas east of the Euphrates has remained in the hands of Syria's Democratic forces, whose Democratic Front and its military forces are its backbone. Despite this, these areas have not even seen the removal of rubble, or the rehabilitation of the most important vital facilities such as hospitals, schools and markets. Due to this political and economic failure, most of the people in these areas have not returned to their homes, instead remaining displaced in tents or in countries of asylum.

5. Strengthening Russia's position in the political process, and encouraging more countries to deal with the Syrian regime despite its involvement in thousands of crimes against humanity:

The withdrawal of US military forces reflects an attitude of negligence and indifference to the Syrian issue, and constitutes an additional appeasement of Russian expansionism. For the Syrian community, this is reminiscent of the veto on the agreement in South Syria, which also went in Russia's favor. All of these points pave the way for the imposition of the Russian solution based on the establishment of a formal constitutional committee, along with imaginary reforms that do not change anything tangible in the security structure of the Syrian regime and its brutal treatment of the Syrian people, and allow the Assad family to rule over Syria indefinitely, consequently ending the process of transition towards democracy, pluralism and justice. In addition, the withdrawal of US troops encouraged some countries to reestablish their relations with the Syrian regime, despite its involvement in the killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, and in thousands of crimes against humanity. The United



States, which had multiple opportunities to contribute to the process of democratic change and to help the Syrian people to build a modern democratic state to take its place alongside civilized advanced democracies, has squandered these opportunities.

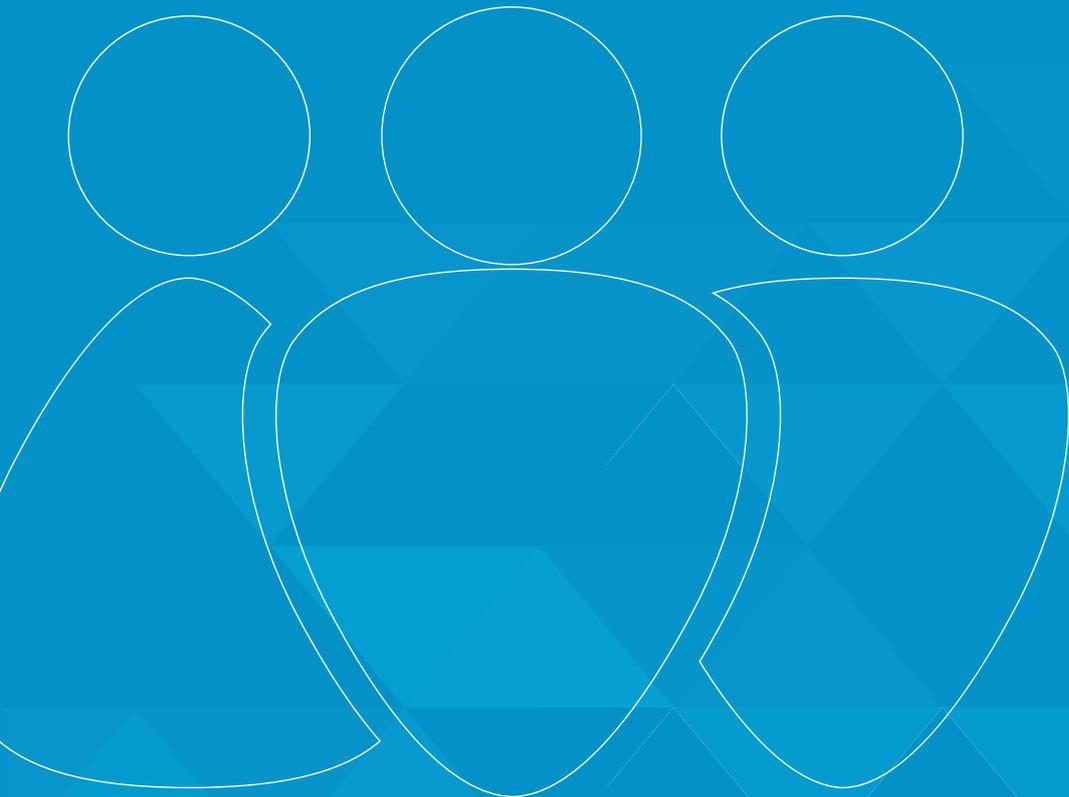
6. Securing the fate of nearly 50,000 Syrian citizens in the al Tanf area:

Thousands of residents have fled to al Tanf area and al Rukban Camp for one main reason; the existence of the American Tanf military base and its sponsorship of factions of the Armed Opposition there; this kept the region safe from attacks by Russian and Syrian warplanes, as well as from ground offensives. If Syrians in northeastern Syria have other alternative areas to flee to in order to escape from Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias, such as areas controlled by the Euphrates Shield forces, the displaced and military factions are completely trapped in al Tanf area, and with the withdrawal of US forces without securing a proper place for tens of thousands of Syrians to go to will put them at risk of arrest, torture and murderous retaliation by Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias.

III. Recommendations

- The United States of America must reassess its decision of the withdrawal of US forces, and in particular, for us, the implications for the stability, security and rights of Syrian society in areas supervised by these forces.
- Start the process of compensating the victims and rehabilitation destroyed facilities and provide expenses for maintenance and supervision through a committee composed of representatives from the countries of the International Coalition, rather than leaving this to other countries, which means politicizing the process of compensation and reconstruction.
- Emphasize support for building a local democratic political system that enjoys local legitimacy and protection by coalition countries.
- Contribute to leading the process of genuine political transition in Syria based on the sequence of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, starting with a Transitional Governing Body, a constitutional committee, and internationally sponsored elections; this could contribute massively to ending the Syrian disaster, enabling US and all other foreign forces to withdraw permanently.





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