



**Screening and Sponsorship Procedures:
Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo Governorates**
Update No. 1, June 2017



This update provides some insight into the screening and sponsorship procedures established in Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates for internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the ongoing Ar-Raqqa offensive. This update compiles and summarizes data available to four members of the Protection Cluster and should not be understood to reflect a complete overview of screening procedures in these areas which continue to evolve. The update is valid as of June 2017. Supplemental updates may be produced as needed.

Key Findings

- Both Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the “Democratic Self-Administration” (“DSA”) enforce screening procedures in SDF-held areas.
- Numerous protection concerns arise from screening procedures, such as [lack of freedom of movement](#), [multiple phases and long waits](#), [lack of humanitarian services](#), [confiscation of IDs and telephones](#), [arbitrary detention](#), [limited access to health care](#) and [concerns for specific groups](#).
- The strict sponsor system enforced by the local “DSA” authorities increases the restriction of movement for IDPs, at times resulting in forced movement.

Background, Actors, and Locations

In Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates, screening procedures are carried out by the SDF and the “DSA”. The SDF is a coalition of multiple armed groups, mainly composed of Kurdish and Arab fighters, established in October 2015 in coordination with the U.S.-led coalition. The “DSA” is a self-proclaimed civilian administration that governs areas under SDF control.

In August 2016, SDF captured Menbij from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In early November 2016, SDF launched an operation to take over northern areas of Ar-Raqqa governorate and ultimately Ar-Raqqa city from ISIS. The Ar-Raqqa offensive has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians to other areas inside Ar-Raqqa and to Aleppo.

Both SDF and “DSA” regulate IDP flow and implement decisions regarding IDP screening and movement in SDF-held areas, although these vary depending on the location and circumstances. Protection actors observe that the SDF generally operates screening centers, directs IDPs to informal settlements or transit sites, and conducts ID checks, while the “DSA” implements the sponsorship program and determines who stays in the various IDP sites. These entities implement strict screening procedures for IDPs for security reasons, to prevent the infiltration of ISIS members and explosives into SDF areas. However, observations by protection actors indicate that the implementation of these screening procedures may create and contribute to protection risks for IDPs. This update overviews the protection risks resulting from SDF and “DSA” screening and sponsorship procedures.



Screening Activities in Ar-Raqqa and Aleppo Governorates

The SDF undertakes screening procedures in various locations in Ar-Raqqa governorate, including towns of Tal Abiad, Ein Issa, Al Jurnyyeh, Tal Al-Samen and Sad Teshreen. The screening takes place at checkpoints, informal settlements or transit sites, for the purpose of determining entry or onward movement. Identity checks take place through the collection of identity documents such as a national ID, family booklet and/or passport. In addition, for certain destinations the family is required to provide a sponsor for onward movement.

In Menbij district of Aleppo, the “DSA” carries out screening procedures for IDPs. Information about the freedom of movement of IDPs in “DSA” areas vary. Although it is observed that all IDPs face some restrictions of freedom of movement, protection actors report that IDPs fleeing Ar-Raqqa city face the greatest restrictions. In some instances, IDPs from Ar-Raqqa city are not permitted to leave IDP sites. In other instances, they are forced to leave the sites and are directed to specific locations inside Menbij or Jarablus of Aleppo governorate. They are unable to move from these locations, which often lack basic facilities and humanitarian assistance.

The “DSA” Sponsorship System

“DSA” has, up until the time of this reporting, enforced a sponsorship system for IDPs which determined whether they can leave the IDP sites and what their destination will be. After the sponsor completed several administrative steps with civilian and police authorities, authorities required that the sponsor approach the location of the IDP (informal settlements or transit sites) and physically identify the individual or household. The authority registered the names of the sponsor and individual and required the sponsor to sign a document guaranteeing that the individual has no links to ISIS. The sponsor then escorted the IDP family to his/her location. For example, many IDPs joined their relative-sponsors in Al Jurnyyeh and Menbij. If IDPs were not able to provide a sponsor, they were not allowed to leave the IDP informal settlements or transit sites or move onward.

While previously a sponsor was able to sponsor numerous IDPs, the updates to the system allowed only one family per sponsor, making it more difficult for IDPs to meet the criteria for sponsorship. Although it is not known exactly when the new updates came to place, as recent as March 2017, one sponsor was still able to sponsor numerous IDPs.

It should be noted that while certain standard criteria for sponsorship had been established, protection actors also observed that the implementation of these procedures by local authorities differed based on circumstances and location. Therefore, while it is clear that failure to meet sponsorship criteria resulted in some protection risks for IDPs, it is not possible to make generalizations about the impact for all IDP groups.

Available data indicates that the “DSA” may be implementing procedures differently based on the origin and destination of the IDP—where they are from and where they wish to go. While the movement and destination requests of some IDPs are treated favorably, others are not.



For example, it has been reported that IDPs who wish to travel to Damascus may receive an expedited procedure, while those who wish to travel to Tal Abiad or Ein Issa in Ar-Raqqa may not be permitted. Greater restrictions are reported to be placed on IDPs from Ar-Raqqa city in regards to freedom of movement.

Additionally, it has been reported that some groups of IDPs who failed to provide a sponsor while staying at the Ein Issa Cotton Factory were escorted into Menbij or Jarablus areas. While others are not even granted access to collective centers, informal settlements or transit sites, and are made to wait for long periods at the outskirts of towns and cities for screening procedures. One such case was in May 2017 when around 3,000 households were not granted entry into Tabqah city of Ar-Raqqa and were made to wait at the outskirts of Tabqah city for the completion of their identity checks. By June 2017, although most of these households were able to move onward, 400 families remained, waiting for the return of their identity documents. It was noted that the families wish to reunite with family members in Ar-Raqqa governorate, Menbij and other areas¹.

While there are conflicting reports, one report states that as of end April 2017, the “DSA” increasingly restricts the sponsorship system and prevents IDPs from leaving sites, except for those IDPs headed to A’zaz, Aleppo are permitted to leave².

Protection Concerns Arising from Screening and Sponsorship Procedures

Lack of Freedom of Movement – While restrictions on movement are permissible to accommodate security imperatives in a conflict scenario, limited and lack of freedom of movement is a significant consequence of screening procedures implemented by SDF and “DSA.” Screening procedures and the origin of IDP households or individuals generally determines where IDPs must remain for how long, and which areas they can or cannot travel to. Even IDPs who successfully pass screening procedures and meet sponsor criteria are not given freedom of movement, and are required to travel to and reside in a specific location. They are accompanied by their sponsor to the sponsor’s place of residence.

Multiple Phases and Long Waits - After entering SDF areas, IDPs face a long process involving movement between several locations. IDPs first approach an initial gathering point or screening center. After completing initial screening procedures including ID checks, IDPs transit to collective centers, informal settlements, or transit sites, where it takes a minimum of two or three days for the registration and background checks to be completed.

Lack of Humanitarian Services - Incoming IDPs rely on humanitarian aid, support from host community, and limited personal savings or food sources with them for survival. The long waiting periods, in addition to lack of basic services and goods at these locations, create challenging living conditions for IDPs. Humanitarian actors note a lack of tents, food, water, and medical supplies available to IDPs as they wait for the completion of registration and background checks in informal settlements or transit sites. Living conditions for IDPs vary from location to location. Locations that are easier for NGOs to access provide more access to basic services. For example, in the Ein Issa Cotton Factory (an informal settlement also known as Aktan/Aqtan) located in Ein Issa district, Ar-Raqqa governorate, NGOs provided portable water and medical services. In other locations, IDPs face dire conditions with very limited access to humanitarian aid and basic services. This is particularly a concern when IDPs are forced to wait at the outskirts of towns and cities, often plain areas without infrastructure, water, and other basic living necessities.

Confiscation of IDs and Telephones - ID checks and the sponsor system present many risks for IDPs. Local authorities require identity documents from households for the screening procedures with the assurance that they will later be returned. However, they are not always returned on time, and may be lost during these procedures. Lack of identity documents will create significant limitations in the freedom of movement and enjoyment of rights by IDPs as identification is required to access them.

¹ Information by CCCM June 2017

² Information by NPM June 2017



It should be noted that detailed background checks and temporary confiscation of identity documents mainly pertain to the head of the family and not every family member. Although it is known that there are a number of female-headed households among IDPs, for example in the Ein Issa Cotton Factory, it is not certain whether “DSA” procedures impact these households differently than male-headed households.

In addition, electronic equipment such as phones and laptops are also sometimes confiscated at IDP sites. This has been reported in informal settlements in Al Jurnyyeh and in Tal Al Samen. As IDPs rely on their phones to maintain contact with other displaced family members and relatives, humanitarian actors believe that the confiscation of these items contributes to family separation in some instances. Confiscation of humanitarian aid distributed to IDPs was noted once at an informal settlement in Al Jurnyyeh.

Arbitrary Detention - In the Ein Issa Cotton Factory of SDF-controlled Ar-Raqqa governorate, where IDPs undergo screening, the risk of ill-treatment and arrest was identified by protection actors. For example, those above the age of 18 who cannot produce identity documents can be at risk of arbitrary detention, since Kurdish local authorities require identification to confirm that individuals have no links to ISIS.

Limited Access to Health Care - It was observed by some humanitarian actors that although critical medical cases could leave sites for treatment, sometimes IDPs with less serious medical conditions were not permitted to leave their locations or move onward if they did not meet the background check and sponsor criteria. It was also noted that the lack of basic services, such as sanitation facilities and water at many IDP sites, resulted in illness causing diarrhea. In light of this information, humanitarian actors observe that the current criteria for the sponsor system also curtails the mechanisms for prioritizing the needs of vulnerable IDPs.

Concerns for Specific Groups - Due to varying and changing screening procedures and limited access to information about these procedures, the long-term consequences and impact of the described procedures in Syria are yet to become clear. However, considering the protection risks that resulted for Syrian IDPs and refugees in similar situations, there may be negative implications for specific groups such as women and girls, children, and elderly. For example, it is known that the sponsorship system implemented for Syrian refugees in Jordan resulted in protection risks for women and girls. This sponsorship system required Syrian refugees to find a Jordanian national sponsor in order to leave the refugee camp. This criteria is believed to have contributed to high rates of forced and early marriage, and sexual exploitation among girls in the camps in Jordan³. Although it is not clear whether the “DSA” sponsorship system in Syria will have similar ramifications, the heightened risk is to be noted.

It is also noted that long screening procedures and prolonged stays at informal settlements or transit sites without basic services at times affect IDPs differently based on gender. For example, the lack of latrines and bathing facilities, or their limited availability and poor condition, has created additional challenges for girls and women. It was noted that at IDP sites like the Ein Issa Cotton Factory, girls and women have had to wait until dark for bathroom use in open areas. This has been a cause of stress and physical discomfort for them.

Another issue to be noted is that many incoming girl and women IDPs have chosen to continue covering their faces after entering SDF-held areas as they did in ISIS areas for fear of harassment.

Precautions Taken by SDF to Increase IDP Safety

SDF in Aleppo and northern Ar-Raqqa governorate manage large and complex operations for the entry, screening, and directing of IDPs in their areas. For example, as of 14 June 2017, 6,000 IDPs are present in Ein Issa Cotton Factory of Ar-Raqqa⁴. During the IDP influx, the Ein Issa security screening processed 1,500 new arrivals per day. There is a high turnover of IDPs in the site. According to site management, 38,000 IDPs left the site after a short stay within the past thirty days⁵.

³ Women's Refugee Commission, Unpacking Gender - The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan, March 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53c4f7524.html> [accessed 31 May 2017]

⁴ Information by CCCM June 2017

⁵ Information by OCHA May 2017



The majority of those entering the site, leave within a matter of days. The highly fluid and complex situation presents challenges for humanitarian actors to track IDP movement and respond to needs.

As previously mentioned, SDF and “DSA” are concerned about infiltration of explosive devices and members of ISIS among IDP populations. This is the main reason for the employment of extensive and strict screening procedures in these areas. SDF screens for explosives in the initial stages of the screening process, after IDPs enter SDF-held areas. It is reported that SDF identifies ISIS members and explosives among incoming IDPs daily. However, information on what actions SDF takes for individuals identified to be affiliated with ISIS is unavailable, and the process for identification of these individuals is not clear either.

It is also not clear whether local authorities take any precautions during routine screening for explosives in order to ensure safety of other IDPs. However, it has been reported that local authorities have taken certain precautions in other stages of the screening process. For example, the well-traveled routes between IDP gathering points, settlements, and sites are noted to be far from frontlines and free of explosive hazards. While well-traveled routes are reported to be mine-free, the same cannot be said for surrounding areas of IDP sites. For example, it is noted that IDPs in Jub Shaer transit site in Ar-Raqqa governorate were unable to access a nearby water source due to landmines. Additionally, as SDF and “DSA” increasingly enforce ad-hoc and unpredictable IDP placement, the risk of mines may be of greater concern.

Conclusion

The SDF operation to overtake ISIS-controlled areas of Ar-Raqqa governorate and implementation of screening and sponsorship procedures for IDPs incoming from these areas raises concerns about IDP safety, freedom of movement, and access to basic services. While humanitarian actors recognize that these procedures are aimed to reduce security risks associated with ISIS, it is recognized that their implementation also raises protection risks for IDPs. The most prominent risks are lack of freedom of movement and lack of access to basic services and health care.

The Protection Cluster also recognizes that information available to protection actors about these screening and sponsorship procedures are not yet all-comprehensive. As changes in the procedures, as well as the complex conflict situation, are frequent, it is challenging for humanitarian actors to closely track these changes and shape response promptly.

Initial findings about the screening and sponsorship procedures raises concerns about various points. For example, the process SDF and “DSA” follow to identify members of ISIS among IDP populations is not clear and raises concern about treatment of civilian IDPs and possible arbitrary detention during the process. Additional information is also required to better understand the consequences faced by IDPs who fail to successfully complete the screening processes.

Members of the Protection Cluster will continue to monitor developments and their impact on internally displaced persons. Meanwhile, humanitarian actors can assist IDPs undergoing these processes by providing access to basic services such as housing, water, food, and medical care.



Ar-Raqqa Screening Procedures

The below chart describes the screening procedures an IDP in the SDF-held Ar-Raqqa governorate may undergo. This is one example of standard procedures and may not reflect experiences of all IDPs.

