

Al Qayyarah town, 27 August

Situation

Al Qayyarah town has very recently been recovered from ISIS control by the ISF and ISOF (Iraqi special forces). It has a current population of 13-15,000. There are heavy levels of building and infrastructure damage and reported IED contamination.



Destruction in Al Qayyarah town. The air is extremely polluted with the smoke of nearby oil wells which have been burning non-stop for months.

Delivery of food and water:

On 27 August 60 trucks carrying food and water arrived in Al Qayyarah town and the villages to the south. They contained mainly bottled water and sacks of rice and flour, in addition to MOMD food boxes. The vast majority of these trucks were sent by the office of the Ninewa Governor (who personally accompanied the convoy along with several other political dignitaries including the mayors of Mosul and Qayyarah), although there was also an independent contribution of two trucks from a local group of volunteers.

There was over an hour's delay at the final Peshmerga line, 10 km west of Makhmour, because the convoy had not been given permission by the peshmerga to go to Al Qayyarah. Whether there had been any prior coordination with the peshmerga is unknown, but this checkpoint remains a potential issue for access to Al Qayyarah.

It was not possible to track where all the 60 trucks went. They stopped at points along the road that leads through Argubah Garbie, Jadaa, Argubah Sharqi/Juana to Al Qayyarah town, and a number reached Al Qayyarah town itself. En route through the towns, a number of trucks were boarded by what seemed to be Hashd units (difficult to distinguish from ISF). These military personnel managed to take possession of some of the food supplies for themselves.

When it came to distribution for the civilians, there was no system in place at all. In Al Qayyarah trucks were opened up and crowds poured into them, grabbing what they could. Some people even jumped onto moving vehicles to take what was available. There were clear signs of desperation among some residents. The ISF fired their weapons into the air on a few occasions, presumably to disperse the crowds.

Because of the lack of organisation with this distribution, many people will not have received anything. Although it is not confirmed, it seemed that Ijhalla, where large crowds gathered to welcome the trucks that came across the military bridge, was left out of this delivery of food supplies.



Sixty trucks lined up outside Makhmour, ready to depart for Al Qayyarah. A mobile clinic was among them. Each truck displayed a banner saying 'Ninewa Campaign to Support Families of Al Qayyarah'.



There was no organised system of distribution.

Reaction of civilians:

The arrival of the aid convoy in Al Qayyarah coincided with a victory celebration in which Najim al Jibouri, commander of the Ninewa operations, made a personal appearance. There was an apparent genuine show of happiness among civilians and people were seen smiling and embracing soldiers. Very few women were seen on the streets but this is not surprising considering cultural practices and two years of ISIS influence. There were some who did not join the celebrations although it is not possible at the moment to draw conclusions from this.



Scenes of celebration in Al Qayyarah town.

Security screening:

A formal process of security screening has already taken place, although when we were there on 27 August ISIS collaborators were still being rounded up and arrested. For the screening process, people were initially told to remain in their homes until called out by the Iraqi military authorities. They were then taken to a public building where their names were checked against a list of suspected ISIS collaborators. Once checked and cleared they were free to return to their homes. The process mostly took a few hours and residents understood that it was necessary and important.

Summary:

The markets in Al Qayyarah town have been closed for around a month and some residents complained of not eating for 10 days. Food has been available but at a premium and those with little money have gone hungry. Some civilians showed visible signs of malnourishment. There has also been no electricity for a long period and drinking water is scarce. The IED and UXO threat remains significant and the frontline is very close. However, IDPs are already returning only days after liberation, favouring being able to live in their home than in a camp or another village.



Destroyed buildings in Jadaa and Juana along the road leading to Al Qayyarah town.

Priorities in Al Qayyarah include the full restoration of the electrical and water supply and the speedy recovery of the market. Even with the recovery of the market there will still be a need for humanitarian assistance as many civilians do not have money to buy goods. From Hajj Ali on the east bank to Al Qayyarah on the west, the general movement is that of return, and given the lack of services and support we must be able to respond.

Analysis

Operational complexities:

Al Qayyarah sub-district is currently the staging area for further operations towards Mosul. It is therefore a heavily militarized area with ISF, ISOF (Iraqi special forces), Hashd, Police and other armed groups. Tribal and political dynamics are also significant influencing factors. The front line with ISIS is in close proximity and within indirect fire range. IDPs are arriving from different locations often in need of immediate assistance, having just escaped from conflict. Aside from the significant protection concerns, there is also likely to be an issue with diversion of aid. The de-facto authority on the ground is the military and they are the primary source of support to arriving IDPs. This area represents an incredibly complex operating environment but given the way in which the campaign is unfolding and the ensuing patterns of displacement, we can expect to see this kind of set up continue. It is therefore paramount to balance humanitarian concerns with pragmatic and flexible policy.

Minimizing displacement:

Although messaging has been mixed throughout the campaign (ISF changed its messaging to civilians multiple times in relation to displacement and staying at home during the liberation of Al Qayyarah) there has been a significant shift to a policy of limiting displacement by attempting to keep civilians in their homes. Security forces initially attempted to support escape/access corridors in the Anbar campaign as well as in the initial stages of the Makhmour campaign. After facing many difficulties and complications (and noticing the humanitarian community's inability to keep up or respond effectively), it appears we are now witnessing something new. Although displacement can never be fully controlled and there are still large numbers of civilians that would rather displace to escape conflict or move in the hope of more favourable conditions, it is likely that as the Mosul campaign pushes north, we may see a larger percentage of civilians remaining at home.

Humanitarian strategy:

Protection concerns are ample given the complexity of the environment, but such concerns should not outweigh the facts and resulting needs. People are returning, some aware of the risks, others not. Advocacy, therefore, should focus on informed consent, not prevention of return. Aid agencies need to develop flexible

structures that do not prevent action, especially in relation to policy and security¹, while obviously mitigating risk where possible. Local partners need to be quickly identified and supported both through development of capacity and material support as they, along with the host government, are the only ones with ability to directly implement. In Tinah there are 6-8,000 IDPs currently living in extremely poor and un-serviced conditions. Approximately half the population of Al Qayyarah fled, many of whom ended up in Debaga camp. Although camps are, and will continue to shelter a portion of IDPs, there must be a shift in focus to out-of camp support. As the frontline moves towards Mosul, urban areas will continue to be liberated and it is likely that people will be encouraged to remain in their homes and those that are displaced, may return quicker than expected.

Coordination and protection:

Continuous and regular coordination with local partners, INGOs and the UN is essential, not only for the sharing of information but in ensuring that all sectoral needs of the target population are met. Coordination with cluster coordinators is fundamental to this. Protection will prove to be a challenge given the current facts on the ground and the way the campaign is likely to progress. Providing humanitarian support that may create pull factors to an area which may still have security risks is troublesome, but the fact is returns are happening whether we help those that have returned or not. We must operate on pillar of 'protection by presence'. By being there, monitoring, supporting and advocating, we are more beneficial than being debilitatedly principled and inactive throughout an emergency situation.

¹ It must be accepted that we will be operating in a highly militarized area with multiple political powers at play. IED and UXO contamination will remain a risk due to the lack of capacity for clearance and there is likely to be a level of aid diversion.