

The Old City and adjacent neighbourhoods to the south, 4 May

The lack of any significant recent displacement from the Old City south towards the airport demonstrates the efficacy of the ISIS strategy to subdue the population through fear. Civilians represent the main strategic advantage held by ISIS in this battle; the brutality of their efforts to maintain it – demonstrated by the public executions of families caught attempting to escape – is without limits. Whether ISIS uses human shields to defend strategic assets such as sniper or mortar positions, to cover the movement of fighters and supplies, to obstruct or confuse an offensive with an enforced mass movement, to conceal a suicide attack, or simply to slow the advance, the death of civilians equates to a failure for the Coalition and thereby a propaganda victory for ISIS.

In the Old City, families are reportedly living underground in crowded basements to escape the notice of ISIS and to protect themselves from airstrikes and artillery bombardment. The fear of the latter – of indiscriminate bombardment and being buried beneath rubble – is for many greater than anything else. The psychological trauma caused by the noise of nightly explosions, week after week, should not be underestimated. In addition to this, living conditions are unimaginably bad. In retaken neighbourhoods, household stocks of essential supplies have long run out and those unable to buy more have been impelled to leave their homes for IDP camps or the hospitality of relatives. In the congested Old City, where up to 350,000 people are reported to be, there is no way to replenish supplies; most families will have run out of food and water and it is unclear how long they will be able to survive. On top of this, all basic services are lacking, particularly medical care.

For most, liberation from the Old City will carry further fear and uncertainty. Families, particularly men and boys, will worry about being mistaken for ISIS and killed during the operation; as we have seen elsewhere, years of ISIS propaganda will have heightened expectations of harsh sectarian-inclined treatment from attacking forces. Beyond the operation, most families will not know how they will be treated or where they will be sent.

The extent of physical and psychological suffering whole families are having to endure should be fully appreciated by humanitarian partners in preparation for greater displacement out of the Old City. Particular emphasis should be placed on children as they make up the majority of the captive population.

Neighbourhoods immediately south of the Old City

Al Akidat

Of the FedPol-controlled neighbourhoods stretching along the southern edge of the Old City, Al Akidat is by far the safest and most populated, although snipers and mortar fire still threaten northern parts close to the frontline; few families live in these areas.

Overall, the population in Al Akidat stands at around 50%. There have reportedly been many returns in the last two weeks due to a recent improvement in security, but some families are still leaving because they cannot afford to buy food and water. A significant number of families are also unable to return because their houses have been destroyed.

The PMF have reportedly been handing out hot food and clothes in two locations in the neighbourhood until recently, but it is not known why this has stopped for now. We were also told of an NGO food distribution in Al Akidat on or near 1 May, but that it was only partially carried out due to large crowds gathering and the situation becoming unsafe. The Public Distribution System is reportedly not functioning in the neighbourhood. There are some very small markets in Al Akidat but most people who can afford to purchase goods walk the short distance to Wadi Hajar where there are more markets with produce at a reasonable price. We were told that those without money often rely on the FedPol to provide them with essential supplies – the FedPol in the area receive extra supplies to give to civilians but these are usually inadequate.



Water trucking remains the priority need. There are some commercial water tankers that visit the neighbourhood, although a lot of residents cannot afford to buy the service. Many people drink from boreholes, which is the main cause of the medical complaints dealt with in the FedPol PHC/TSP in Al Akidat. This PHC/TSP mostly treats civilian patients and rarely has trauma casualties. We were told that around 200 civilian patients were treated in April, chiefly for conditions brought on by drinking bad water, as well as diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.

There are FedPol checkpoints guarding the entrances to the two main streets into Al Akidat from the perpendicular road leading to the 4th bridge. However, access can be negotiated easily, although northern areas are restricted due to the ongoing threat from snipers. A number of roads are blocked with earthen berms. IEDs have reportedly been cleared from the neighbourhood although some UXOs remain. Mortars are now fairly rare although some threat remains.



Street in Al Akidat, looking north.

Al Nabi Shiet, Al Dawasah & Al Dandaan

Al Nabi Shiet is located next to Al Akidat but is starkly different. On the frontline, the gap between FedPol forces and ISIS is around 60m and fire is exchanged frequently. The neighbourhood has seen heavy fighting and many of the houses have been destroyed. Only around 30 families remain in total, clustered in small groups near houses inhabited by FedPol. These families have chosen to stay because they do not want to go to an IDP camp where they have heard conditions are crowded and undignified. They do not have money to go elsewhere so they rely on the FedPol for food and water. The neighbourhood is not safe and parts of it are still contested.

We last visited Al Dawasah on 20 April (see/request earlier report) and the situation has not changed. Like Al Nabi Shiet, there are very few families living in Al Dawasah and Al Dandaan. The families that do remain rely on the FedPol for support. The security situation is not entirely stable although it is better than Al Nabi Shiet. We were advised against visiting the water project in Al Dandaan, although humanitarian partners have been there around a month ago. The frontline with the Old City has shifted only slightly since then but the security of these neighbourhoods fluctuates.

The close proximity but contrasting nature of Al Akidat and Al Nabi Shiet demonstrates the localised nature of this conflict. While one area might be considered relatively safe by locals and security forces and appropriate for returns, a few blocks away across streets jammed with earthen berms and the piled wreckages of burnt-out cars, another area may be considered an active battlefield.



Street in Al Nabi Shiet.