

FLASH UPDATE: US FOREIGN AID FREEZE – IMPACT ON NES REGION



Al-Hol camp, foreigners section, 24/01/2025 [RIC]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- US foreign aid freeze amounts to “murder” and will have “devastating” affect on millions living in the North and East Syria (NES) region, with “majority of key life-saving services” set to be affected, a senior humanitarian official says
- Freeze already poses grave security and humanitarian risks in 42 camps, including al-Hol Camp and Roj Camp – sites housing over 40,000 ISIS-linked women and children – such as looting of service supplies and an ISIS resurgence
- Over 300,000 other internally displaced people in “last-resort sites”, including those displaced in ongoing Turkish offensive against NES, are also at immediate risk following the freeze
- 17 out of 26 key life-saving programmes covering 85% of NES territory set to be directly affected, with the rest also indirectly impacted
- In an emergency survey, 23 of the 38 NGO respondents reported having US funds; but the operations of those not reliant on US funds are destabilized if

there are not coordinators in place to organize the humanitarian response, and 30 of NES' 36 coordinators fully or partially depend on US funding.

BACKGROUND: HUMANITARIAN AND SECURITY CRISES

– Up to 4 million residents in NES face compound crises including massive internal displacement; ongoing Turkish airstrikes targeting critical humanitarian infrastructure throughout the infrastructure; power outages leaving the majority of the region without drinking water or mains electricity; and the burden posed by 10,000s of highly-radicalized ISIS affiliates held in the region

– Turkey profited from instability following the collapse of the Assad government in Damascus to launch an ongoing military operation aimed at occupying western regions in NES, seizing all NES territory east of the Euphrates including the Shehba/Tel Rifaat refugee camps and key city Manbij

– These ongoing attacks now concentrated along the Euphrates, described by Human Rights Watch (HRW) as marked by potential war crimes including air strikes targeting ambulances and civilians, have killed over 100 civilians since 1 December 2024 (RIC data) and worsened the severe humanitarian challenges faced by the region

– Humanitarian services provided by the governing Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria region (DAANES), local and international NGOs are all highly reliant on US foreign aid funding, meaning US president Donald Trump's 20 January Executive Order freezing such development assistance has had immediate humanitarian and security outcomes



Tel Samen IDP camp, 17/07/2024 [RIC]

ROJ AND AL-HOL CAMPS: ISIS RESURGENCE

- Hol Camp is home to c. 40,000 primarily ISIS-linked women and their children, including 7,000 generally highly-radicalized third-country nationals from around 50 countries, alongside 16,000 Syrians and 19,000 Iraqis, both ISIS affiliates and non-affiliated displaced people; half the camp’s residents are children under the age of 11
- 2,500 ISIS-linked women and children are also held in Roj camp, plus 4,500 fighters in the main detention facility for male ISIS fighters, with around 9,000 ISIS fighters held in the region overall
- These camps depend on funds from the USA’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BRPM) and Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) for camp management, essential service provision, and paying the internal civilian guard force
- Funds are sent on a day-by-day basis meaning there were immediate humanitarian and security impacts
- An initial three-day shut down prevented delivery of water and kerosene, and stopped the work of the civilian guards who watch over the in-camp humanitarian supplies storage sites, leading to looting
- DAANES recently announced plans to complete the repatriation of all Syrian and Iraqi residents who wish to leave within 6-12 months, but the ongoing repatriation programmes have also been frozen after funding to Iraq was also cut, per camp manager Jihan Hanan
- External camp guards – SDF and Asayish forces – funded by the DAANES and US Department of Defence, remained in situ
- BRPM was given a suspension order for its work al-Hol and Roj camps – but has been issued a 15-day waiver
- Senior Western intelligence figures have warned that a permanent end to US funding streams will contribute to an ongoing ISIS resurgence
- Looting already began during the three-day shut down, with a senior humanitarian official describing “catastrophic” outcomes and warning: “You can’t leave a closed camp in that situation. It’s murder.”



Al-Hol camp administrator, Jihan Hanan, briefs journalists on camp security situation, 24/01/2025 [RIC]

OTHER DISPLACED PEOPLE AND BROADER CRISIS IN NES

- Food, fuel, and water will no longer arrive to crucial camps, leaving them “destabilized beyond being able to continue operations”, senior humanitarian official says, adding: “I have been here several years and I have never used the word ‘catastrophic’ before. And we have gone through some stuff!”
- This will include 66 collective centers supported solely by US BHA funding
- Over 300,000 other internally displaced people in “last-resort sites”, including those displaced in ongoing Turkish offensive vs NES, are at immediate risk, including 124,000 people in camps; 159,000 in collective centers including 25,000 displaced from the Shehba/Tel Rifaat IDP camps occupied by Turkey in December 2024
- For example, one NES-based NGO has already had to lay off 635 local employees, and states it will be unable to complete payments for prior work due to the funding freeze
- NGOs in Raqqa working with some of the thousands of women already returned home from al-Hol camp to their local communities state their funding has also been severed by the freeze, raising the risk of further ISIS resurgence
- Even a surge in funding from other NGOs and states would not mitigate

the crisis given the key role of US-funded programs and organizations in coordinating humanitarian provision throughout the region, senior officials warn



Shehba IDPs newly arrived in Tabqa camp receive bread, 05/12/2024 [RIC]

POLICY PROPOSALS

- Humanitarian officials on the ground in NES urge the Trump administration to ensure that NES, which plays a key role in ensuring US security interests by preventing an ISIS resurgence and maintaining stability throughout North and East Syria, is exempted from the permanent cuts to US funding expected worldwide
- The most realistic way to prevent total collapse in NES is for a Syria-wide funding exemption to be introduced, senior humanitarian officials say, while nonetheless describing broader exemptions as a “long shot”
- The initial exemption for services in al-Hol and Roj camps, which reportedly saw emergency funds transferred via the US-led International Coalition to Defeat ISIS, could offer a model for broader exemptions in NES or across Syria
- DAANES-led repatriation programs have enabled 30,000 Syrian and Iraqi nationals to leave Hol camp to date; international actors can support and accelerate these programs to lessen the burden on the camps
- Other countries can repatriate their own nationals from Roj and al-Hol camp, further lessening the security and humanitarian crisis
- Other countries should consider surging funding to INGOs and local organizations working in NES to help mitigate the scale of the crisis



Shehba IDPs set up makeshift barbershop in Tabqa camp, 11/12/2024 [RIC]

CONTACT

Contact Rojava Information Center via WhatsApp or Signal on +963 992 461 683 for photos, videos, comment and contact to interviewees on the ground coordinating humanitarian provision throughout the region.