

# ISIS prison break clashes displace thousands in Al-Hasakeh

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Situation report



February 2022

# Introduction

In late January, ISIS conducted a wide scale attack on Sina'a prison in Ghweiran neighborhood, Al-Hasakeh city, in an apparent attempt to break out prisoners held under accusations of ISIS affiliation.<sup>1</sup> The scale of the attack indicates a potential increase in ISIS activity and capabilities in the northeast, with Iraq also showing concern by fortifying its borders to prevent escapees

entering the country. The humanitarian ramifications of the attack continue to be felt today, as civilians in Ghweiran and Al-Zohour neighborhoods are facing access limitations, livelihood losses, and a reduction of basic service provision.

On the evening of 20 January, ISIS sleeper cells in hiding around Sina'a prison, located in the Ghweiran neighborhood, set off two car bombs, one at the entrance of Sadcop fuel company and another at the prison's entrance, in an apparent attempt to break out suspected ISIS prisoners held

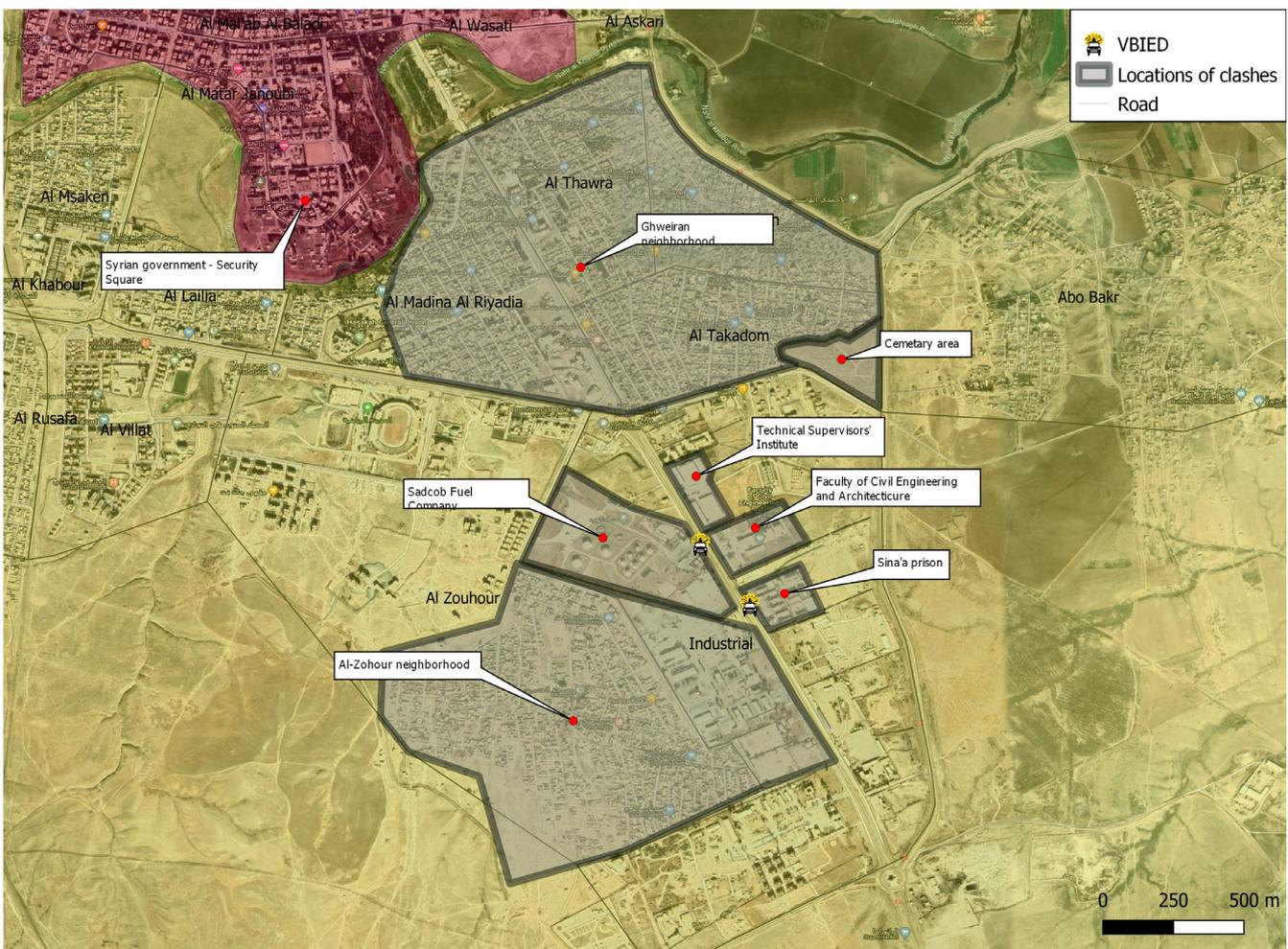


Figure 1: Locations in southern Al-Hasakeh where clashes with ISIS fighters took place (Source HAT)

1 Humanitarian Access Team.Syria, [HAT Monthly Update](#), January 2022.

captive there. The attackers were assisted from the inside by the prisoners who had started a riot, overwhelming the SDF prison guards, ultimately taking hold of the prison's weapons depot. Clashes ensued between the SDF and ISIS fighters, with International Coalition (IC) forces later stepping in, deploying infantry and armored vehicles in addition to providing air support using jets and attack helicopters. Clashes were not limited to the prison but spread to various locations (shown in Figure 1) across southern Al-Hasakeh, resulting in significant material damages to facilities and civilian houses where ISIS fighters were reportedly hiding.

Following the six days of fighting, the SDF released a [statement](#) on 31 January stating 40 fighters and 77 prison guards had been killed. The statement added that more than 3,500 prisoners were forced to surrender, with another 374 ISIS fighters and prisoners killed in combat. Reports also have come in that four civilians were killed. So far, questions remain about the exact number of prisoners held in Sina'a prison, with estimates placing that number at up to 5,000.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that hundreds of prisoners suspected of having ISIS affiliation remain at large, potentially explaining why clashes and neighborhood closures in Ghweiran and Al-

Zohour neighborhoods continued for a short period following the conclusion of the fighting.

The SDF declared the end of combat operations on 26 January around the Sina'a prison, and the end of combat operations against sleeper cells on 30 January, however there remains ongoing search and arrest operations and sporadic clashes in Ghweiran and Al-Zohour neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> The SDF also cordoned off Ghweiran neighborhood on 31 January, denying the entry or exit of vehicles and motorbikes, restricting the movement of civilians while searching for escaped prisoners.<sup>4</sup> Local sources also reported that sporadic gunfire and explosions could still be heard in the southern neighborhoods up until 5 February, pointing to the possible continued presence of suspected ISIS sleeper cells.<sup>5</sup>

## Analysis and forecasting

### *Attack likely premeditated*

Specific events over the past six months show that the attack on Sina'a prison was likely to have been premeditated.<sup>6</sup> HAT reported on a prison riot back

2 UN OHCHR [Press Briefing on Syria](#). January 2022.

3 Facebook. [Farhad Shami](#) - January 2022.

4 SDF Press. [SDF Press Release](#). January 2022.

5 Enab Baladi, [Clashes between SDF and Islamic State on outskirts of Ghweiran neighborhood](#). February 2022.

6 SDF [Press Release](#). January 2022.

in October 2021, during which suspected ISIS prisoners rejected the relocation of 40 prisoners from Sina'a prison to Shaddadi prison.<sup>7</sup> Further, on 13 August, similar reports came in of a thwarted prison escape in which the SDF and IC forces prevented prisoners escaping through tunnels leading out.<sup>8,9</sup> There have been numerous arrests by the SDF of individuals suspected of planning attacks on prisons where suspected members of ISIS are held, and of prisoners planning an escape from within – including the prominent arrest of Mohamad Abed Al-Awwad in Ghweiran, who was accused of planning a prison escape for Sina'a prison.<sup>10</sup>

### *SDF prisons vulnerable*

The poor conditions of the prisons themselves have also increased the likelihood of an attempted escape by the prisoners who live in overcrowded cells and do not receive proper medical care. The Autonomous Administration has cited a lack of resources which have forced it to set up makeshift prisons in schools and civilian buildings, (including Sina'a prison) – these makeshift arrangements prompted a prediction by US

officials and coalition officers that ISIS could target these prisons for jailbreaks, while riots inside them were also likely.<sup>11,12</sup> There have since been reports that the IC is funding a prison expansion in Sina'a prison.<sup>13</sup> The Autonomous Administration also continues to plead with the international community to repatriate and prosecute foreign detainees held in its prisons.

### *ISIS moves into Iraq, Syrian desert*

The attack on Sina'a prison coincided with large-scale ISIS attacks in Iraq, suggesting again that the incident was planned and premeditated. On 21 January, reports indicated that ISIS fighters attacked an Iraqi army barrack in Diyala province, killing 11, in what was the largest ISIS attack on Iraqi forces in months.<sup>14</sup> Further, on 26 January, media sources had reported on a thwarted smuggling operation by ISIS as they attempted entry into Sinjar province.<sup>15</sup> The border in Nineveh governorate, Iraq, was reinforced by Iraqi security forces, as earth mounds were created, trenches were dug, and advanced thermal cameras were set-

7 Humanitarian Access Team. [HAT Weekly Report](#). November 2021.

8 Prisoners were then separated and placed in different cells under heavier guard protection, as the SDF deployed further personnel into Ghweiran neighborhood and closed the southern entrance of Al-Hasakeh city.

9 Al Araby. [SDF thwarts escape attempt of ISIS](#). August 2021.

10 SDF Spokesman Farhad Shami stated that Al-Awwad was planning to plant two bombs outside the prison and gather an estimated 16 ISIS members to attack the prison.

11 International Crisis Group, [Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria](#). October 2019.

12 This is not the first time that ISIS prisoners have escaped from Sina'a prison. [In March](#) 2020, four ISIS prisoners reportedly escaped from the prison following a riot. [According](#) to former member of the SDF Media and Information Office, the group “managed to take over the first floor...removing internal walls & doors” while “some of them managed to escape”. Media sources later [added](#) that approximately four riots had previously taken place in Sina'a prison.

13 A reason behind expansion efforts is to decrease suspected radical networks that may be forming. [Coalition Plans To Expand Giant ISIS Prison In Syria](#). Defense One. February 2021.

14 Al Jazeera, [Suspected ISIL fighters kill 11 soldiers in their sleep](#). January 2022.

15 Enab Baladi. [The events of Ghweiran prison prompt Iraqi Prime Minister to visit border with Syria](#). January 2022.

up, in an attempt to prevent the infiltration of ISIS into Iraq. Iraqi forces also reportedly conducted a security inspection of Iraqi prisons.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, HAT reported in August 2021 that increased IC and SDF anti-terrorism operations in the northeast had pushed ISIS to adopt a new strategy.<sup>17</sup> This included expanding its operations from eastern Deir-ez-Zor and into Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and western Deir-ez-Zor, as well as reshuffling of its personnel. Therefore, it is likely that ISIS continues to expand its operations in these areas. Reports also indicated that a large number of ISIS fighters had left Syria due to the anti-terrorism raids and entered Iraq.<sup>18</sup> These anti-terrorism raids are also likely to continue, with anti-SDF sentiments within Arab majority communities likely to worsen.<sup>19</sup> As such, the increasingly linked relationship between ISIS attacks in the Syrian northeast and ISIS in Iraq causes concerns at the groups growth, and indicates a need for better collaboration between security forces from both countries.

## *Security and army on high alert*

With clashes in Sina'a prison underway, reports indicated that first- and second-tier ISIS

commanders had escaped from the prison and were being smuggled into the government-held desert through the illegal river crossings along the Euphrates river. This is likely not difficult given the presence of ISIS sleeper cells in some areas along the eastern bank of Deir-ez-Zor. Other reports suggested ISIS members were smuggled out of prison in civilian cars, many fleeing to areas near the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>20</sup>

While these reports are hard to confirm, the 17th Division and units of the Republican Guard deployed along the Euphrates, near illegal river crossings on 23 January, to stop any infiltration attempts by ISIS, while the Russian-backed 5th Corps was put on high alert to any ISIS activity. Additionally, the Russian Air Force reportedly deployed Su-34 fighter jets following the clashes in Ghweiran, with a senior Russian diplomat to the UN citing “serious concerns” at the level of ISIS activity in the northeast.<sup>21</sup>

While the SDF were fighting ISIS in and around Sina'a prison, Syrian government forces came under attack in areas of the Syrian desert. On 22 January, media sources reported on a large-scale ISIS attack against National Defense Force (NDF) positions in both the Rasafa desert in the southern Ar-Raqqa countryside, and southern Al Mayadin

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16 Jesr Press, [The Iraqi authorities publish information about the events of Ghweiran](#), February 2022.

17 [HAT Weekly Report](#). Humanitarian Access Team. August 2021.

18 Iraqi officials have stated that an estimated 20 ISIS members escaped Ghweiran and into Iraq. This number is unconfirmed. February 2022.

19 Tensions between the Arab community and the SDF usually worsen with every search and arrest operation, including the ones specifically targeting the capture of suspected ISIS members. At times, the tensions have led up to armed clashes and protests in what the Arab communities view to be unjust targeting by the SDF. [Civilian Protests Turn Violent in Eastern Deir-ez-Zor](#). Humanitarian Access Team. September 2020.

20 Middle East Institute, [A closer look at the ISIS attack on Syria's al-Sina Prison](#). February 2022.

21 Sputnik News, [Russia requests a meeting of the UN Security Council on Syria](#), January 2022

city, killing and wounding dozens of fighters.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, local sources reported that ISIS fighters attacked positions belonging to the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) 17th Division in the Sbeikhan desert amid sounds of three large explosions in Al Mayadin desert in Deir-ez-Zor governorate.

If escaped ISIS commanders did indeed manage to escape into the desert, the Syrian government's security problems' are likely to worsen. ISIS represents a real threat to Syrian government forces and have been involved in destabilizing the area for some time – they are well equipped and able to hide out in large numbers relative to other parts of the country.

The government has continuously failed to contain the group, despite a number of anti-ISIS campaigns. The last one reportedly took place on 15 January, and involved combing operations by the NDF with Russian air support in government-held Deir-ez-Zor.<sup>23</sup> Regardless, it remains to be seen whether the attempted prison break and fallout will have an impact on ISIS activity, and the frequency and intensity of ISIS attacks.<sup>24</sup>

# Humanitarian impact

## *Majority of IDPs return to their homes*

OCHA reports that 90% of IDPs from Ghweiran and Al-Zohour neighborhoods have returned despite the precarious security situation.<sup>25</sup> According to OCHA 45,000 IDPs had fled to neighboring residential neighborhoods to escape the fighting, opting either to stay with relatives or in makeshift temporary shelters located in mosques and wedding halls (shown in Figure 2), with those located inside the Syrian government-held security square receiving assistance from local humanitarian organizations. Some however have not returned, either because their houses were destroyed, or out of fear that the fighting might be renewed.<sup>26</sup>

The security situation remains uncertain with movement restrictions in Ghweiran and Al-

22 SOHR, [In Absence of Russian Warplanes | ISIS Fighters Attack Regime Military Position in Syrian Desert • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights](#). January 2022.

23 Humanitarian Access Team Syria, [Syrian Government Fails to Contain ISIS in Badia](#). April 2021.

24 ISIS attacks in the Badia are common. SOHR reported 638 airstrikes against ISIS fighters in January alone, possibly explained by the abovementioned latest anti-ISIS campaign in the area.# Additionally, 20 NDF and other government fighters have been killed and 14 wounded in ISIS attacks since the beginning of the year.#

25 UNOCHA, [90% of Al-Hasakah residents return to their homes after the end of the fighting in the vicinity of Ghweiran prison](#), January 2022

26 Local sources have stated that between 30 – 50 houses in Ghweiran neighborhood were damaged due to the fighting, however the numbers remain contested. Additionally, the amount of damaged houses in Al-Zohour remains uncertain, however, the level of destruction there is notably higher than in Ghweiran.

Zohour neighborhoods, where curfews are preventing residents from entering or leaving between 06:00 and 18:00. Moreover, Ghweiran and Al-Zohour neighborhood residents are reportedly on edge due to rumors about the continued presence of ISIS cells and of impending SDF raids.

### Access restrictions humanitarian conditions

The SDF had initially cordoned off both Ghweiran and Al-Zohour following the fighting, leaving just one entrance open, while civilian vehicles and

motorcycles are reportedly forbidden to enter or exit the neighborhood. However, on 11 February the SDF seemingly allowed both pedestrian and vehicle movement through all the neighborhoods' entrances, while some sources claim that the movement of civilian vehicles is only allowed through al-Nashwa neighborhood checkpoint or the government's security square. Moreover, vehicles passing in and out of the neighborhood are reportedly being subjected to thorough searches at the SDF checkpoint, an expected outcome of prisoners escaping.

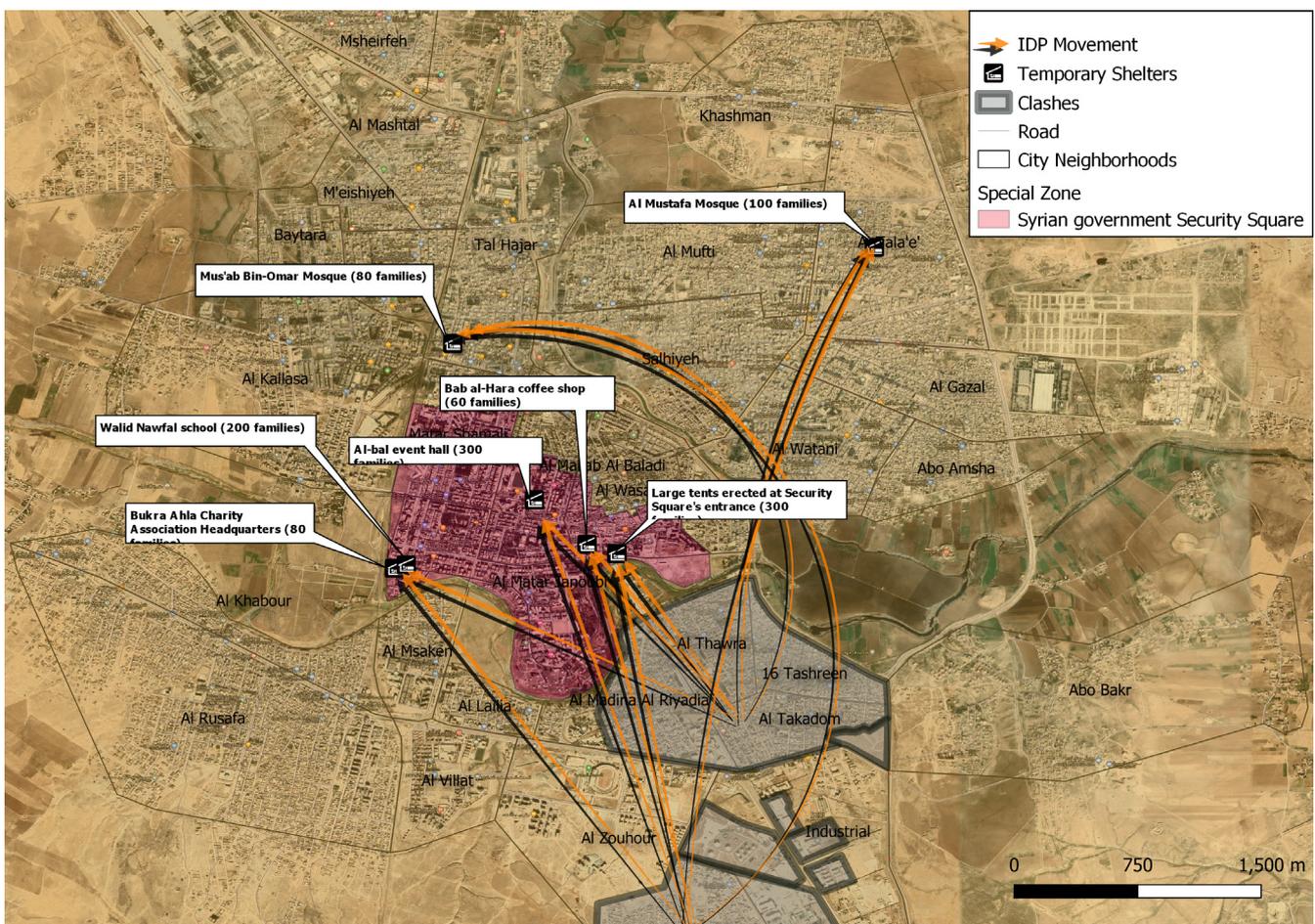


Figure 2: Locations where Ghweiran and Al-Zohour IDPs fled due to the fighting (Source HAT)

Residents' abilities to procure essential food items, medicine, and fuel has been made more difficult, particularly at a time when for example there is a diesel shortage throughout the city due to high demand in winter coupled with short supply. The heightened security measures have also affected the livelihood of many Al-Hasakeh city residents. The SDF reportedly banned motorcycle use throughout Al-Hasakeh city, denying many residents who work as motorcycle taxi drivers their daily wage, resulting in motorcycle owners later protesting the ban on 13 February.

Local sources stated that some international and local humanitarian organizations have opted to avoid direct humanitarian programme implementation in Ghweiran and Al-Zohour neighborhoods for security reasons. However, they have conducted emergency response indirectly through the Kurdish Red Crescent, distributing food baskets and water with some sources also reporting about the Syrian Arab Red Crescent providing food baskets in the area in coordination with the World Food Programme.<sup>27</sup>

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27 OCHA [via Reliefweb], [Situation Report: Displacement in Al-Hasakah Governorate](#), February 2022

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The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. HAT's most important function is to collect and analyze disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict.

