

Trapped in Hasakah after the ISIS Prison Attack

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic State's attack on the Hasakah prison, and ongoing fighting surrounding the facility, is creating a humanitarian disaster for the region's residents.

On January 20, as I was visiting my family's house over the weekend, a huge explosion occurred in the prison gates nearby in Hasakah's southern Ghweiran neighborhood. The sights and sounds of smoke and fire sparked terror in the hearts of the residents of the neighborhood and the surrounding areas. Initially, the question whether the explosion was accidental or man made lingered even in a country exhausted by war, while we also wondered what the consequences of the explosion would be.

Ghweiran's residents remained in their homes that day, afraid of what had been circulated on regular and social media. By this time, we had learned of the escape of many ISIS elements from this prison—and the thought of these people in our neighborhoods was naturally terrifying.

Late that night, as many as 200 fighters swarmed the complex, using suicide belts and two car bombs, while prisoners inside the facility rioted and overpowered some of the guards. The attack on Ghweiran prison, where an estimated 3,000 IS-suspected affiliates are held, was the Islamic State's most significant operation in Syria in years.

The wait that night was far from easy; no one could sleep between fears of the escaped prisoners and the sounds of artillery shells, warplanes and clashes that carried on throughout the night. We packed travel bags, amid children afraid of death and elderly people afraid of displacement. Many were particularly concerned about leaving on such a cold winter's night, when snow covered the road between Hasakah and Amuda, where I work.

The UN currently estimates that some 45,000 residents were displaced that next day, namely from the Al-Zohour neighborhood that faces the prison and the eastern areas of Ghweiran neighborhood. As the fighting continued, the U.S.-led coalition launched airstrikes and provided "limited ground support" to the SDF, according to a Pentagon statement. The total number of casualties, escapees, and recaptured fighters is unclear, but reports estimate that at

least 200 inmates and militants and 30 security forces have been killed.

Both clashes and the American air bombings failed to subside for more than five days. And despite headlines in the media claiming that matters were under control, raids and the sounds of gunfire continued. We in the neighborhoods do not know what caused them.

When clashes take place, the battle itself can become the ‘spotlight’ while its effects on the surrounding residents can fade into the background. While tens of thousands of people have fled their homes, for those who have remained in the neighborhood, life is quickly becoming increasingly dire as connection to outside supplies remains cut off.

There is no way for humanitarian aid to reach those who remain. Movement is prohibited, shops and pharmacies are closed, and outside forces seem indifferent as to whether residents can secure anything to eat, or their necessary medication.

When Umm Abdel Rahman, an elderly woman from the neighborhood, asked me: "My daughter, this is the last pill for my diabetes, what can I do if the war drags on?" I stood confused. I didn't have an answer for her, so I advised her to leave her house and go to a safer place. But she vehemently refused—she said that no car would take her, and that she was unable to walk the distance needed to leave. The issue was not only limited to medicine, as those who remained experienced a shortage of bread and food, and deprivation of public and private electricity due to lack of fuel as well.

On Thursday, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announced that Islamic State militants still held a section of Ghweiran prison in northeast Syria, despite a previous announcement on Wednesday that the SDF had regained control of the facility. For the eighth day in a row, despite the initial announcement of victory over these factions, the residents of the southern neighborhoods of the city of Hasakah are still suffering, due to the continuing siege, the shortage of basic necessities and the ongoing sounds of clashes in the background. ❖

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