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## ***Increased Arrests Among the Returnees to Sinjar, Idlib***

*A special report on the pro-government forces'  
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## **Increased Arrests Among the Returnees to Sinjar, Idlib**

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Sinjar district in Idlib endured many practices against civilians carried out by the Syrian army and its pro-militias in November and December 2018. Testimonies obtained by STJ said that since the Syrian army fully controlled Sinjar in January 2018, it arrested many returnees, and its fighters seized, confiscated and looted public and private properties.

The residents reported that the Syrian army prevented them from returning home until they paid big amounts of money. Numerous of media activists also confirmed that the Syrian army bombed their houses because they were regime opponents.

Sinjar is a tribal area where the clan law dominates. Several armed groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have controlled Sinjar since 2015, but the actual influence was that of the clans, STJ's field researcher said.

Sinjar, before the Syrian army controlled it, was inhabited by about 500,000 people, mostly those who displaced from east Hama and south Aleppo. Knowing it contained 75 agglomerations, such as farms, villages and towns like Khayara, Hawa, Ejaz, al-Jahman, al-Mutawasita, Bekrateen and Sinjar.

## I. How the regime forces gained control over Sinjar?

On August 12, 2017, the Syrian army and their allies launched a fierce military operation on Sinjar, forcing more than 5,000 people to flee. On January 22, 2018, the Syrian army controlled all of it. Sinjar has a strategic location since it relatively overviews the other cities in Idlib. Therefore, the Syrian army desired to secure the strategic road that leads to Hama, Aleppo and Damascus. In addition, Sinjar is close to Abu Duhur<sup>1</sup> Military Airport, one of the Syrian army's most important airbase in Idlib.



A satellite image illustrates the strategic location of Sinjar.

<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, several armed opposition groups, notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have controlled Abu Duhur Airport, but the Syrian army regained control over it in late January 2018.

Mohammed Bal'as, a media activist from Sinjar, reported to STJ that the Syrian army called up the displaced people in other areas to come back home to Sinjar, promising that it would not retaliate or tax the returnees. However, the Syrian army broke its promise and taxed the returnees with sums that sometimes reached 3 million Syrian pounds in order just to allow them access their possessions and livestock.

The activist said:

**"The Syrian army abruptly launched its fierce military campaign on Sinjar in August 2017 and giving the people no time to take their belongings. Up to 75 per cent of the people fled with just the clothes they were wearing. As soon as the Syrian army captured all of Sinjar, which includes some 75 villages and towns, it looted them. Some hospitals and medical facilities were completely pillaged. The only hospital in Sinjar namely Martyr Miyasser al-Hamdo hospital was turned into a military barrack with tanks inside."**

Numerous local sources agreed on what the activist said, adding that Sinjar-based biggest electricity distribution company and the silos were also looted and turned into military positions.

The sources confirmed that fighters of the Syrian army and militias of the National Defense Forces (NDF) seized civilians' houses, including al-Hamdo's in Bekrateen, Ziad al-Hamadi's in Khayara villages, and Salah Hlal al-Hamadi's house on the road that links the villages of Ejaz and Shaghara and turned them to military headquarters.

Similarly, the Air Force Intelligence branch confiscated industrial chicken coops that belonged to the Deimes family in Ejaz and turned them to a military headquarters. Other houses belonged to the family of Ibrahim al-Kajo were confiscated as well.

## II. The Returners face arrest

As of May 2018, arrests occurred among civilians who started to return to Sinjar. Yaser Ghethwan al-Hussein, from Hawa, was one of them.

A source from his family recalled to STJ:

**"Yaser and his brother Amer returned home on the basis of the promises made by the Syrian regime, to not to arrest any civilian. Yaser, born in 1973, was an employee in Ihsan Relief and Development organization. On December 16, 2018, he returned home with his family and was forced to bribe the Syrian Army's checkpoint at Abu Duhur town to let them enter some mattresses with them. His house's all stuff was looted, even the doors, windows, and power wires. Therefore, Yaser was forced to make wooden doors and windows to protect his family from the freezing cold in winter. Two days after his return, Yaser and his brother were arrested and were sent to the military security branch in Hama. Their fate is still unknown."**

Mohammed as-Salih, 35, a pharmacist from Merejeeb town was arrested on December 8, 2018. A source from his family said elements of the Syrian forces took him from his pharmacy after he returned to Sinjar. His fate is still unknown. However, the source is likely that Mohammed was detained because of old scores between his family and his cousins who are regime loyalists.

A media activist from Sinjar said that on December 15, 2018, pro-regime forces arrested Abdulkarim al-Khleif and Bashar Ahmad al-Ghemra, from Tell Amara village, on their way to Lebanon.

### III. Pillage of civilians' houses in Sinjar

The Syrian army and its pro-militias not only held civilians, but also looted their properties.

Samir Qazouh was born in 1975 in Khayara. He displaced but has returned recently. He recalled to STJ:

**"I have nine children. I paid four million Syrian pounds at the Abu Duhur checkpoint to allow me to enter flock of 100 ewes. On November 5, 2018, I found out that the Syrian army seized all my properties, including the agricultural land, which is 350 dunum and an orchard that contained 600 olive trees. They also seized the well, which I used to irrigate the land, in addition to my house. They stole everything; windows, doors and flagstones. They turned my house into a military headquarter and ordered me to live somewhere else, so, I went to live in a nearby village."**

Ali. M. born in 1979 in Bekrateen, was shocked to see his house turned into a military headquarter by the regime militias.

He said:

**"On November 11, 2018, I came back to my village after I paid bribes. I was shocked to see the Syrian army residing my house and all of its furniture stolen. They installed a checkpoint near it. They told me to live in another village. An officer identified as Brigade Juma al-Jasim and his brother Raed seized a well and an agricultural land that was worth ten million Syrian pounds."**

Khalid al-Ismael, from al-Mutawasita town, said he returned to his town in November and was stunned that the Syrian army seized his house.

Khalid recalled to STJ:

**"I have three houses in the town. I fled the military campaign with just my clothes that I was wearing. When I returned home, I discovered that fighters of the Syrian army seized one of my houses. They looted the two remaining houses. In one of the houses, there was furniture that belonged to my friend Nawfal Ibn Issa al-Mateer, but it was looted as well. I also had a store to keep wheat, barley, and lentil, which was looted as well. The store was 11 meters long and 6 meters wide."**

## IV. Bombing activists' houses in Ejaz

The house belonged to Mohammed Bal'as, a media activist in al-Khayara, was bombed on December 12, 2018. Mohammed and his family displaced in early 2018.

**"I am from al-Jmajmeh family that belongs to al-Mawali tribe, which was denied returning home because they were regime opponents. In December 2018, one of my relatives told me that activists' houses, including mine, were bombed. The Syrian army also seized my orchards that contained 400 olive trees arguing that the regime martyrs' families have the right to take it."**

Local sources confirmed the veracity of the news saying that the Syrian army bombed activists' houses in Sinjar.

## V. The Syrian army confiscates crops

Since October 2018, the Syrian army has confiscated the crops which the residents planted months before their displacement.

Abdulfatah. A., 60, is from al-Mutawasita. He told STJ that the Syrian forces confiscated his orchard that contained 650 olive trees and the pistachio harvest.

**"I have four sons and four daughters. In October 2018, I returned home after I bribed soldiers at Abu Duhur checkpoint with large sums. I was shocked to see the Syrian forces staying in my house, and to know that they seized my entire crops of pistachio. I asked them to give me only half of the harvest, but they refused. They also prevented me from restoring my house."**

One of the Khayara residents reported that the Syrian forces picked up the olive harvest on December 12, 2018.

He recalled:

**"I have one thousand olive trees in Khayara. Therefore, I contacted one of my acquaintances in the regime forces to gain me a permit through which I can pick my olive harvest, which is equivalent to 71 boxes of olive oil, but that did not work."**

## VI. Women were not spared either

The women in Sinjar also burdened practices carried out by the Syrian army and its militias. A woman from al-Sheikh Barakeh town testified that after she returned home in November 2018, she discovered that the furniture of her house was looted. Therefore, she paid some money to the Syrian forces to take back some of her belongings.

She added:

**"The Syrian army officers in the village forced the residents to send their daughters in turn to serve them each for a whole day. The girls used to cook, do the washing and clean headquarters. None of the residents dare to object or even utter a word since they consider it such a shame."**

According to residents from al-Jahman, an officer in the Syrian army seized a house and a land that belonged to the widow of Daham Dablash. When the widow returned home in December 2018, she discovered that the officer was staying in her house. The woman was detained for some days because she demanded to restore her properties.



## About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

**STJ** is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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