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## More Than 800 IDPs Diagnosed as Malnourished in Idlib Camps

*Eating Fruits and Vegetables, that's a Big Dream for Children in Camps*

## **More Than 800 IDPs Diagnosed as Malnourished in Idlib Camps**

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## Summary

Malnutrition hit hundreds of internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly newborn, staying in makeshift camps northern and western Idlib. Statistics as of January 17, 2019, confirmed that more than 800 IDPs suffer from malnutrition<sup>1</sup>, many severely, due to the dire humanitarian and medical conditions, and they are in an urgent need for hospitalization.

Displacement camps in the north and west of Idlib; Atamah al-Janoubi, Atamah al-Shimali, Kafr Lusin, Darkush, Harem, al-Karama and Harem, shelter more than 120,000 IDPs from all over Syria, according to STJ's field researcher.

The alarming situation in the areas grabbed by the Syrian Army in early 2018; rural Damascus, northern Homs, southern Hama and Daraa, has resulted in a growing number of IDPs arriving Idlib's displacement camps which led to their overcrowding. STJ's field researcher reported the decline in support provided to these camps by the humanitarian organizations operating in northern Syria, and the residents' complain about the soaring prices, the poor services and the dire socio-economic conditions, as the single can of children's milk costs from 2000 to 3000 Syrian pounds, which led to the outbreak of malnutrition among the newborn.

STJ documented the death of a seven-month-old baby girl in one of Idlib's displacement camps after suffering acute malnutrition. It also reported the suicide of a father, in December 2018, being unable to support his family.<sup>2</sup>

In another report, STJ detailed the dire conditions of over 600 people, living in tattered tents in northern Idlib amidst shortages of food and medication, expecting to receive their share of the humanitarian organizations' concern.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Malnutrition remains one of the most serious health problems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. It is the single biggest contributor to child mortality: 15% of the global burden of newborn and child mortality occurs in countries of the Region", World Health Organization (WHO), <http://www.emro.who.int/en/health-topics/malnutrition/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Infant Girl Dies due to Malnutrition and Man Commits Suicide as Living Conditions Deteriorate in Idlib's Camps", STJ, December 21, 2018, <https://stj-sy.com/en/view/1127>

<sup>3</sup> "Idlib: The approaching winter threaten to increase IDPs' sufferings in Ekhwet Sa'dah Camp, southern countryside", STJ, October 10, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/848>



A side of the IDP camps in northern Idlib. Image taken in February 2019. Photo credit: STJ

## 1. “I'm a 15-year-old in an 11-year-old body”

Ismael Wissam Ismael, 15, from Kafr Oweid town in southern Idlib, has displaced with his family to Atamah camps in northern Idlib since 2012. Ismael suffers acute malnutrition which stunt his growth, according to doctors who estimated his biological age to be 11.

Ismael recounts<sup>4</sup>:

**"We forced to vacate our hometown to escape the regime's intense bombardment. We arrived Atamah makeshift camp in northern Syria after a long difficult journey. I'm staying here with my parents, my father's two wives and other 18 family members in two tents. We suffer dire humanitarian conditions; there are no drinking water, and we have not received food aid in the last two and a half years, except for the scanty stuffs granted by some organizations. Eating fruits, vegetables and meat is a kind of dream for the children here."**

Ismael's weak growth became apparent lately; he is only 144 cm height and 33 kg weight. This prompted his parents to seek medication in a free hospital in Atamah.

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<sup>4</sup> The interview was conducted in the presence of his parents.

Ismael added:

**“My health was seriously deteriorated. My father took me to the charity Atamah hospital, since and he couldn’t afford my treatment. There, I underwent several tests, which results showed that I suffer serious malnutrition and retarded growth, as my height and weight were the same of an 11-year-old boy, it was noticed also that my glands responsible for the growth of muscles, hair and body as a whole, weren’t working properly. The doctor said I should have proper meals which must contain nutrients like meat, vegetables and fruits. He also prescribed me 'Eutropin', injections for growth hormone deficiency. Each single box of this medicine costs around SYP 8,000, which was impossible for my father to secure alone, so he started looking for donors to help, he managed to find one after a long while, he offered to pay half the cost. However, that helped me get my medication but in every 10 to 15 days, not on a daily basis as the prescription says, which doesn’t make me that noted recovery.”**

Ismael tries to cope with his current situation. In 2018, he failed in the ninth grade because he could not concentrate or memorize anything<sup>5</sup>. Lately, he got pneumonia from the inhalation of the smoke coming from the stoves in the tents. On October 16, 2019, he went to the Orient charity hospital for treatment. He tried hard to get help from the humanitarian organizations, but to no avail.

## **2. “Acute malnutrition brought my little boy to “brain atrophy**

Ali Hussein al-Sheikh, 40, from al-Qunaitra town in the Kurd Mountain in Latakia, was displaced with his family to Darkush camps in Idlib in 2016. Ali has a one-year-old boy who suffers acute malnutrition because he wasn’t breastfed and got formula milk instead, but in insufficient rations due to it's overpriced:

**"As a result of incessant bombardment, we fled the Kurd Mountains in early 2016, and sought shelter in al-Farouq camp within Darkush concentration camps, western Idlib. I’m the sole provider for my five-member family, Hussein is the youngest, he was born on August 8, 2017, he is only a year and a half. He suffered breathing problems since he was born, doctors at the Darkush hospital recommend placing him in the incubator, where he indeed remained 20 days during which the doctors fed him formula milk. After the treatment period ended, I took him to the camp. His mother hasn't got enough milk due to the stress and the depression she**

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<sup>5</sup> “If the Hazard Gap is Not Bridged, An Illiterate Generation Would Arise”, STJ, January 30, 2019, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/1165>.

had, as the doctors said. Therefore, we obliged to give him formula milk which price is so high as the single can sold for 2,500 to 3,000 Syrian pounds in the camp and the surrounding villages. Due to this fact we decreased his milk intakes. As a consequence, and after the passage of four months, Hussein's health deteriorated once again and he was diagnosed with brain atrophy, which resulted from malnutrition by a specialist doctor in Jisr al-Shughour.", said Ali.

The doctors confirmed that Hussein got cerebral atrophy due to the chronic undernutrition he has.

"We still hope that Hussein will be better soon, though he got the prescribed medications and showed no signs of recovery. In general, the living situation across Darkush camps is horrific. The concentration contains 15 camps which shelter 1,400 families, who all denied basic human necessities including food and medication. The latest floods and torrents doubled the suffering, as six tents were damaged and approximately 1,200 families were left in the open. Living in the camps has become extremely difficult."

### **3. "The majority of malnutrition cases are severe and in need for urgent hospitalization"**

Khalid al-Khateeb, one of Idlib camps' management officers talked to STJ about the outbreak of malnutrition among the IDPs, saying that the affected are in the hundreds and are mostly children, according to a statistic conducted by the camps' administration in January 2019. He added:

"The displacement makeshift camps alongside the Syria-Turkey border started to be erected from 2012 until 2014. Today there are approximately 10 camp clusters in northern and western Idlib, each camp contains 15 to 50 tents, which shelter thousands of IDPs. However, the living situation in all of them is extremely difficult. The inaction of many organizations that used to provide support to these camps has caused the spread of drastic malnutrition. For more than two years, the organizations provided no assistance.

In collaboration with the parties wishing to support, we are working to address the hunger and the severe shortage of basic needs that the households suffer from. However, some humanitarian organization still provide aids from time to time, but we are still in need of foodstuffs and medical materials. Winter is coming and thousands of families are homeless because rainstorms hit their tents in late 2018."

Al-Khateeb confirmed that the administration of the displacement camps in western Idlib conducted statistics on the incidence of malnutrition on January 17, 2019, which showed that 90 per cent of those infected are children, due to the lack of formula milk and medical care.

**"The survey indicated that there is malnutrition among adult and elderly IDPs, though children were the most affected. The statistics confirmed 15 malnutrition cases in Kafr Lusin, 143 cases in Atamah al-Janoubi, 185 cases in Atamah al-Shimali, 144 cases in al-Salam, 190 cases in al-Karama, 127 cases in Liajlikom, 7 cases in Salqeen, two cases in Darkush, and two cases in Harm. In total, there are 815 malnutrition cases, most of them are acute and in urgent need to hospitalization, some abroad.**

Those figures revealed are alarming, given that the survey didn't include all the displacement camps inside Syria like those in Aleppo, Deri az-Zor, and Raqqa and other areas, it only covers the camps in northern and western Idlib. We are expecting the worst amidst the continued shortages of food and medication and the squalid living conditions in the camps."

#### **4. "The medical points in the camps are insufficient"**

Mohammed Rajab, the physician in charge of the vaccination team of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Atamah camps, revealed to STJ the causes behind the spread of malnutrition through the IDP camps in northeastern Syria, and confirmed the referral of some adults and children patient to the medical points in north Syria. He indicated the severe shortages of medical posts and staff, especially those specialized in dealing with malnutrition.

**"Malnutrition is the lack of the essential nutrients like protein, carbohydrate, vitamins, and minerals. Deficiencies in any or some of these substances cause malnutrition. A human being might suffer malnutrition for two main reasons. First, a diet in which one or more nutrients are not enough due to psychological or health reasons or because of shortage of food. Second, food scarcity in overcrowded areas. Malnutrition is a serious common disease, which symptoms appear gradually as losing weight, fatigue, tiredness, the inability to do daily tasks in a proper way. Malnutrition affects people from all ages, particularly, the newborn. its complications involve rickets, retardation of growth, cerebral atrophy, osteoporosis, goiter, and anemia."**

Rajab added that every month they receive scores of malnutrition cases from the camps of Atamah, Kafr Lusin, al-Karama, and others in northern Syria.

**"The disease is on the rise amongst the vulnerable children who aged one to five years old. We are doing our best to treat them by providing dietary supplements and specific kinds of medications. Most of the cases are sent to hospitals and medical points in northern Syria including that of the organization Yad B'Yad in Atamah. Specialists there supervise the treatment and prescribe medication. We are still providing the needed vaccination and medications in the camps of Atamah, Kafr Lusin, Liajlikom, al-Rahma, al-Salam, al-Karama, in northern Idlib, where the population estimated at 120,000 IDPs.**

Regarding the medical conditions in the camps; there are insufficient number of health centers and a shortage of health personnel. There is no specialized center for malnutrition treatment, which is vital in view of the seriousness of the disease that threatens the lives of hundreds among IDPs. In addition, the camps suffer severe shortage of food and formula milk for the newborn, whose mothers cannot breastfeed them for various reasons.

That is why we urge relevant organizations, and all those concerned to scale up support to the camps through providing adequate diversified food aid, which contain the needed nutrients, in order to evade more malnutrition infections."



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## 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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  - ✉ [editor@stj-sy.org](mailto:editor@stj-sy.org)