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The IS fighters' Only Concern was to" "Flee Al-Baghuz

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Introduction:

Meditating in the endless fields of wheat-stretching as far as the eye could see- from the yard of the Yazidi House, Jihan Khairo Qasim, 19, was reliving the painful memories of her harrowing last five years during which she was kept as a slave by the Islamic State (ISIL) militants in Syria and Iraq. She was tired - indeed, exhausted - judging from the way she looks, which made her seem much older. Jihan managed to flee, with the influx of civilians, the last IS stronghold in Syria; the town of Al-Baghuz,¹ in the east of the province of Deir ez-Zor, when the battles raged between IS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and shortly before the last took full control over the town on March 22, 2019.² Jihan headed towards SDF- held areas, specifically to the village of Qazlajoukh, in rural *Amuda* to settle in the Yazidi House.³ Jihan recounted her story in detail to STJ on February 25, 2019.

According to STJ field researcher, large numbers of Yazidi women and children, who were abducted by IS in the Iraq's Sinjar district and surrounding villages in August 2014, were among the civilians who fled the Syrian town of Al-Baghuz recently.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said on February 19, 2019 that some 20 thousand civilians who fled IS-held areas in the province of Deir ez-Zor, in eastern Syria, are confined to temporary IDP camps run by Kurdish militant groups including the US-backed SDF.⁴

I. "IS members captured our women and children, killed many of Sinjar people"

Jihan was in the Iraqi town of Sinjar, when IS attacked it on August 3, 2014, as she used to live there with her family. She confirmed that IS fighters captured Yazidi women and little children in the town and killed lots of its people, mostly Yazidis.

¹ Gabriel Keno, the spokesman for SDF, said during an official press conference held in the town of al-Susah close to Al-Baghuz town on March 17, 2019, that some 30,000 IS members and their families surrendered to SDF, since January 9, 2019, including more than 5,000 fighters, in addition he reported the evacuation of more than 34,000 civilians from the last IS enclave in Syria, Sky News Arabia, on March 17, 2019:

<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1236539-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%83%D8%AB%D8%B1-60-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%88%D8%B2>

² On September 9, 2017, SDF launched the al-Jazeera Storm operation against IS fighters in the eastern part of the province of Deir ez-Zor concurrently with a campaign by the government forces against those in the western province and the Euphrates line. Those battles resulted in the full control over the eastern part of Deir ez-Zor on March 22, 2019.

³ The Yazidi House is a civilian establishment founded in 2012 to handle the people's affairs in north and north-east Syria and to accommodate the Yazidis fleeing IS thus to contact their relatives and get them back to their hometowns in Sinjar.

⁴ "Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib", February 19, 2019: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24178&LangID=E>.

"After we were captured in Sinjar, IS fighters transferred us to the Iraqi city of Tal Afar, where I was, initially, held as a slave to an Iraqi IS fighter for nine months.", said Jihan.

Tal Afar was the main destination for IS fighters to round up the Yazidi women and girls they captured, and it was the last IS-held pocket, which the Iraqi government forces managed to retake in August 2017.

II. Jihan sums up her five years of suffering

Jihan was held as a slave for five years by IS fighters, who bought and sold her. In this regard, she said:

"An Iraqi IS fighter sold me to an Algerian one, who resold me to a Tunisian. That was through the first year of my captivity"

Jihan mentioned that the Tunisian IS fighter treated her so badly, and she only spent a short period in his service, during which she met his wife's brother, who promised to buy her in order to set her free and marry her, but that didn't happen. She added:

"I was held captive as a slave to the Tunisian IS fighter for some four years, and he used to take me wherever he moved, until we end up in Deir ez-Zor, specifically in the town of Al-Baghuz. After the truce signed between IS and SDF in February 2019, women, children and injured fighters, among them was my owner; the Tunisian, were removed to al-Hawl camp in the province of al-Hasakah."

Simultaneously, civilians, mostly women and children, fled Al-Baghuz in thousands, towards SDF-held areas, to be transferred to al-Hawl camp in al-Hasakah by the International Coalition Forces after registering their fingerprints. The World Health Organization (WHO) said on January 31, 2019 that more than 23.000 people arrived al-Hawl camp, which houses today some 33.000 IDPs.⁵

III. "Bitter cold killed many children"

Jihan described the situation in the town of Al-Baghuz, the last IS stronghold in Syria, as tragic, she said:

"We had no access to water or food, and we used to collect firewood. There was no roof over our heads, we shelted in the shadow of tattered tents which contained nothing, even blankets."

Jihan witnessed several deaths in the town of Al-Baghuz before she left it. In this regard she said:

⁵ "Children, babies dying from cold at camp in northeast Syria: WHO", Reuters, January 31, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-camp/children-babies-dying-from-cold-at-camp-in-northeast-syria-who-idUSKCN1PP1K4>.

"Our torn tents didn't protect us against heavy rainwater or bitter cold, which led to the death of children."

Al-Baghuz lacked the most basic necessities of life during the military operations led by SDF-backed by the International Coalition Forces- against IS militias holed up in the town. Only IS fighter could afford the high cost of foodstuffs resulting from shortages. Jihan described the conditions in the town at the time saying:

"We used to sleep in fear then get up in the morning had nothing to eat. We had to go and look for food everywhere, while IS fighter had plenty, but they didn't allow us to reach. There was foodstuff, however, sold in the town's market, but at prohibitively high prices."

IV. "He spent all the time doing nothing, and never participated in the fight"

Jihan Qasim recounted that the only concern of all IS fighters in Al-Baghuz was to flee the town and they never cared about fighting.

"I remember how the Tunisian, my owner, spent all the time doing nothing and never participated in the fight, and how IS fighters, who were mostly immigrants from Tunisia, France, Morocco and other countries, the French were the majority, fled Al-Baghuz.", she said.

SDF said on March 14, 2019 that some 3.000 people, mostly IS fighters who were trapped in Al-Baghuz town in Deir ez-Zor, surrendered to it.⁶

Head of the Yazidi Abductees' Affairs' Office in Iraqi Kurdistan Hussein al-Qaidi disclosed on March 28, 2019 the release of 45 women and children Yazidis from Syria since the beginning of the year, and that there is no information available about mass graves containing Yazidi women in the town of Al-Baghuz, as the Office's task force in Syria found no physical evidence.⁷

⁶ "SDF: 3000 ISIL members surrender in Baghouz", Yekiti Media, March 14, 2019: <https://ara.yekiti-media.org/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-3-%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81/>.

⁷ "The Barzani's party calls on the government to verify claims about finding heads of dozens of slaughtered women and releases children from ISIL grip", Al- Hayat Newspaper, February 28, 2019: <http://www.alhayat.com/article/4623139/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%88%D8%B3-%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1->

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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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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