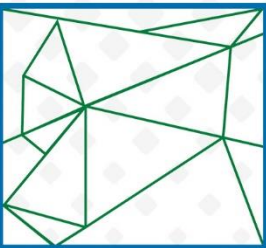


Syria/al-Hasakah: New Horrifying Details About IS Attack on al-Sina'a Prison



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IS militants executed over 70 of the employees and fighters they took as hostages. At least 10 were beheaded and their bodies burned.

Executive Summary

On 20 January 2022, militants of the Islamic State (IS)—identified locally as Daesh—attacked the [al-Sina'a Prison](#), located south of the [Ghweiran neighborhood](#) in al-Hasakah city, in northeastern Syria. The prison contained approximately 1000 extremist prisoners, including IS commanders. The attacking militants broke their way into the prison and were joined by hundreds of IS inmates inside.

The offensive unleashed an unidentified number of IS inmates, estimated in the hundreds by different sources, who fled the prison wards into nearby neighbourhoods. On the heels of the initial attack, violent clashes broke out and continued for 10 days, between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and other security forces affiliated with the Autonomous Administration on the one hand, and IS groups, which either fortified within the prison, or escaped to adjacent neighbourhoods and joined IS cells, on the other. The clashes killed and injured hundreds, including civilians.



Image (1) - Prisoners in the yard of al-Sina'a Prison, May 2021 ([source](#)).

In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documents the beheading of 10 prison employees and guards, whose bodies were also burned. This information builds on the testimonies of the victims' bereaved families.

Additionally, the report provides information about improvised, rudimentary military equipment IS inmates made in prison. The objects, discovered following the attack, confirm coordination between imprisoned IS fighters and the attackers outside.

Notably, reports remain conflicted on both the number of IS militants that carried out the attack and IS inmates that fled the prison. However, STJ verified that several of the escaped IS inmates have already arrived in border areas, particularly the region of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, which fell under the control of the Turkish army and allied armed opposition groups during Operation Peace Spring in October 2019.



Image (2) - SDF guards outside al-Sina'a Prison, May 2021 ([source](#)).

The prison attack rocked nearby neighbourhoods and spread horror among their residents. Both the attack and the response military operation launched to re-establish control over the prison forced dozens of thousands of residents to flee their homes, while several families remained in their homes, struggling in the throes of fear.

In addition to large-scale displacement, the SDF destroyed several houses with armored bulldozers over the course of the military operations as they targeted homes where IS militants had infiltrated and used for fighting purposes.

Background

Between 2019 and 2021, IS inmates organized seven riots at least, all of which had failed.

Earlier in December 2021, the SDF detained the spearhead of an IS cell, called [Rashid](#). Following the arrest, the SDF published Rashid's confessions, which included many details that bear a stark resemblance to the recent prison attack, pertaining to the use of car bombs to storm the prison and the "liberation" of inmates.



Image (3) - IS cell planning to attack al-Sina'a Prison, captured by Asayish in November 2021 ([source](#)).



Image (4) - 'Rashid,' leader of IS cell following his arrest in December 2021 ([source](#)).

The Location of al-Sinaa Prison

There has been some confusion about the exact location of 2022 January's attacks, with mixed reports on the assaulted prison due to the fact that the Ghweiran neighborhood hosts two prisons: the Central Prison, and the al-Sina'a Prison, where the attack was carried out. The [Central Prison](#) is located in the northern part of the neighborhood. It was built and designed by the Syrian government to be a prison.

The al-Sina'a Prison is located one kilometer away from the Central Prison and was formerly a high school and a vocational education institute. It falls within the range of several other educational facilities such as the *Ma'ahad al-Muraqibeen al-Fanyeen* (Institute of Technical Observers), the Faculty of Economics, and other centers affiliated with the Syrian government's Ministry of Higher Education.

The former school was turned into a detention facility, designated for IS militants in the aftermath of the Bāghūz Battle in 2019. Recently, the prison's facilities were expanded, with the addition of new sections dedicated to detention with funding from the U.S.-led Coalition. Notably, these sections were not in use and did not host any inmates during the last IS riot.

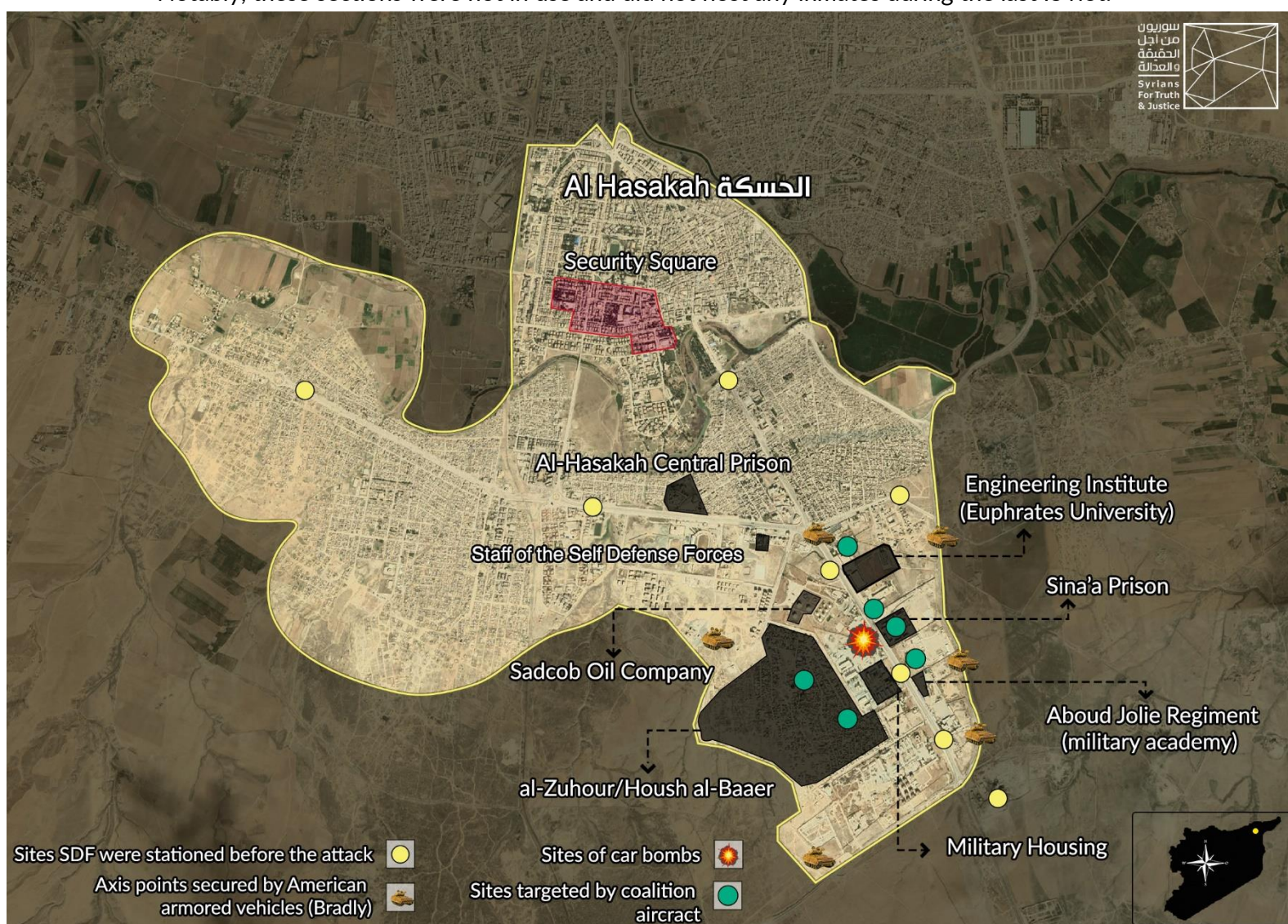


Image (5) - a map showing the prison, landmarks, and surrounding facilities. Credit: STJ.

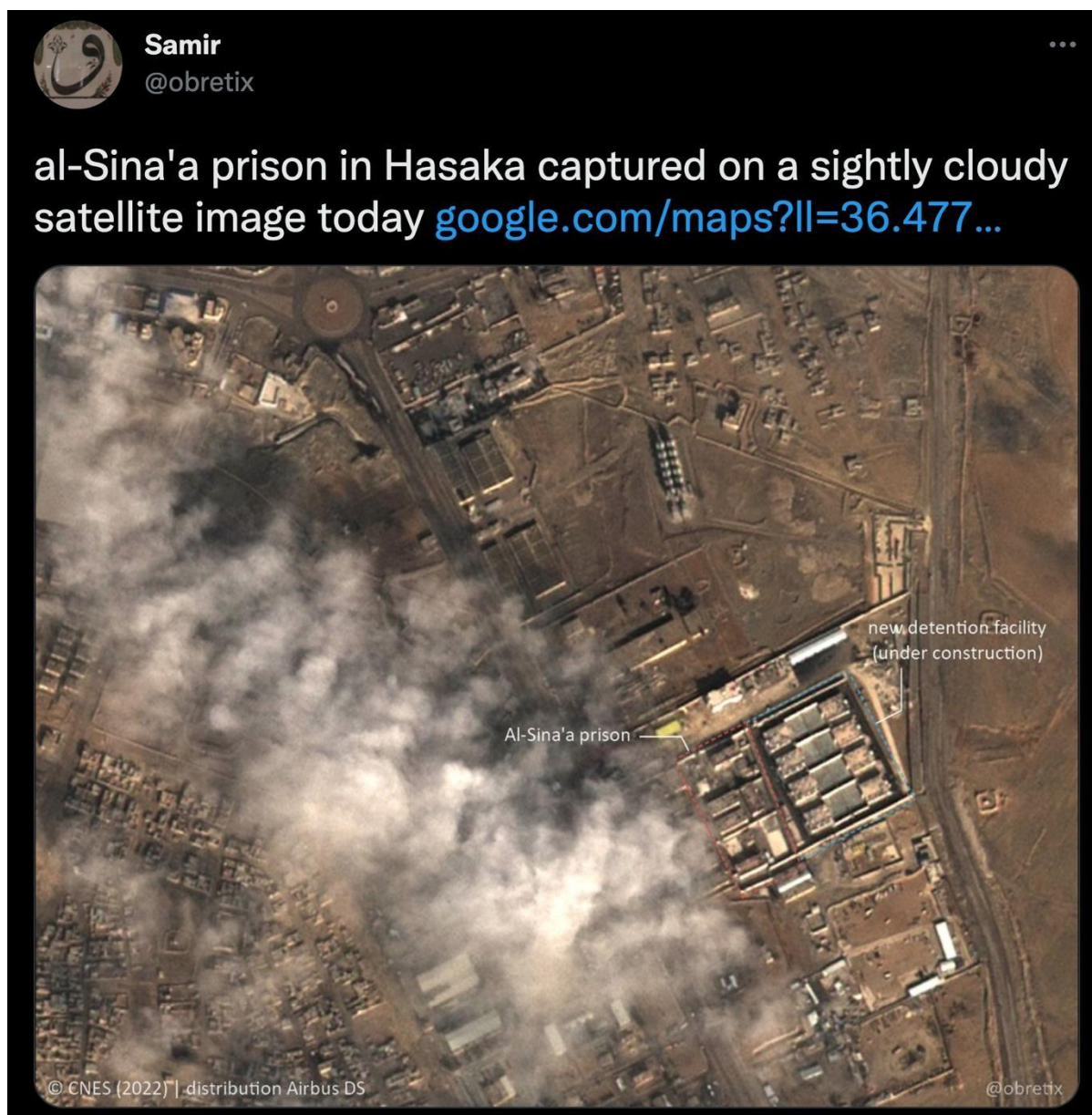


Image (6) - Satellite imagery of the expanded al-Sina'a prison and surrounding area, 25 Jan 2022 ([source](#)).

Methodology

For the purposes of this report, STJ carried out 15 interviews with families of victims, people who fled the prison's surrounding neighborhoods, and others who stayed in the neighborhood during the attack, and bore witness to the ensuing violent clashes.

In addition to interviews, STJ obtained a first-hand account of the location where the clashes occurred. A team of STJ's field researchers conducted several visits to the site of hostilities and personally examined the damages that befell the prison's vicinity and civilian houses.

Additionally, STJ's digital forensic expert matched live images from exclusive footage and videos obtained by STJ and others available in open sources with satellite images to capture the level of destruction and damage to residents' properties.

The Attack

According to the information obtained by STJ, dozens of militants from armed IS cells participated in the large-scale attack, waged by IS to facilitate the collective escape of its detained fighters, who hold over 50 nationalities. The attacking cells closed on the prison from both its southern and southeastern sides. The SDF estimated that at least [200](#) IS suicide bombers partook in the attack.

The attack was initiated with two car bomb explosions, which set off around 7:00 P.M. (Local Time). The first targeted a nearby [fuel warehouse](#), most likely to create a distraction. The second targeted the prison's main gate.

Following the bombings, the extremist militants occupied some of the prison's buildings. At the same time, inmates began organized riots and detained over 70 prison guards as hostages.

The inmates took these hostages after they smashed the doors down and obtained weapons, the source of which remains inconclusive, with sources speculating that the inmates received weapons from militants attacking the prison, from weapons depots inside the prison, or even from a potential security breach through associates within the ranks of the SDF. In a [video](#), the SDF said that a truck that IS loaded with weapons arrived at the arena across from the prison at the start of the attack.

It took the SDF over an hour to intervene. During that interval, dozens of IS inmates escaped into adjacent neighborhoods, such as Ghweiran and al-Zuhour/Housh al-Baaer, located south of al-Hasakah city, according to the accounts STJ obtained from these neighborhoods' residents and members of the prison's guard service.

On the first day of the attack, IS militants detonated a booby-trapped vehicle on the western side of the prison, near the Sadcob facilities, a company for the distribution of fuel. The blast set fire to fuel tankers parked across the area. Simultaneously, IS militants used another vehicle bomb to attack the prison's main gate, successfully entering the prison and engaging in clashes with prison's guards. This sent shockwaves among the rest of the prison security and employees.

According to STJ's information, several guards died in the first hour of the attack, and four employees lost their lives later. However, the majority of the prison's personnel, including civilian staffers, became prisoners after IS militants established full control over the prison.

In the first hour as well, IS militants demolished the prison fences and opened passages towards civilian houses in nearby neighborhoods, while they kept captured prisoners in their custody. When still alive, the hostages appeared in videos and presented their names, tribal affiliations, and home addresses. The videos were published on IS official platforms on 21 January. Families of the victims claimed that the videos that did not show all the hostages.



Image (7) – The fire at the Sadcob fuel depot following the 20 January car bomb ([source](#)).



Image (8) - Armed IS members inside the al-Sina'a prison yard (A'maq, 22 January 2022).



Image (9) - Armed IS members inside the al-Sina'a prison yard (A'maq, 22 January 2022).



Image (10) – Location of IS fighters seen in A'maq video.



Image (11) – IS members inside a prison block with slain captives (A'maq, 22 January 2022).



Image (12) – A hole punctured in the prison wall leading to outside neighborhoods (A'maq, 22 January 2022).

Displaced Families Sought Safety

The attack had an immediate impact on the residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the prison. Tens of thousands fled their homes, seeking relatively safer areas, mainly the areas in northern neighborhoods. According to [Stéphane Dujarric](#), Spokesperson for the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, approximately 45,000 persons were internally displaced and sought refuge in make-shift housing centers in the military zone, known as the security square, of the Syrian government forces, or neighborhoods controlled by the Autonomous Administration, which imposed a partial curfew in the city.



Image (13) – Local residents fleeing Ghweiran and al-Zuhour neighborhoods ([source](#)).

The next day, the SDF enforced a complete curfew across al-Hasakah and established a security belt around the area encircling the prison. As for the residents hoping to flee, the forces permitted people to cross into other neighborhoods through special security corridors and only after they subjected them to strict inspections. Additionally, the SDF [announced](#) they aborted a “collective escape attempt” of IS militants that broke away from the prison and that they arrested 89 militants within the prison’s surrounding area.



Image (14) – Local residents fleeing Ghweiran neighborhood ([source](#)).

The US-led Coalition partook in the military response on the first night of the attack. Coalition forces launched flare bombs over the prison's area and its surrounding neighborhoods to help the SDF and security units restore control over the prison and cordon the IS militants who escaped into the Ghweiran and al-Zuhour neighborhoods.

On 22 January, coalition aircraft bombarded the [Institute of Technical Observers](#), which is located very close to the prison and which IS militants used for fortification.



Image (15) – A U.S. Apache attack helicopter firing a rocket during the al-Sina'a prison attack ([source](#)).



Image (16) – A US F-16 flying over al-Hasakah during the al-Sina'a prison attack ([source](#)).



Image (17) - Destruction of the building of the Institute of Technical Observers by coalition airstrikes after it was infiltrated by IS militants ([source](#)).

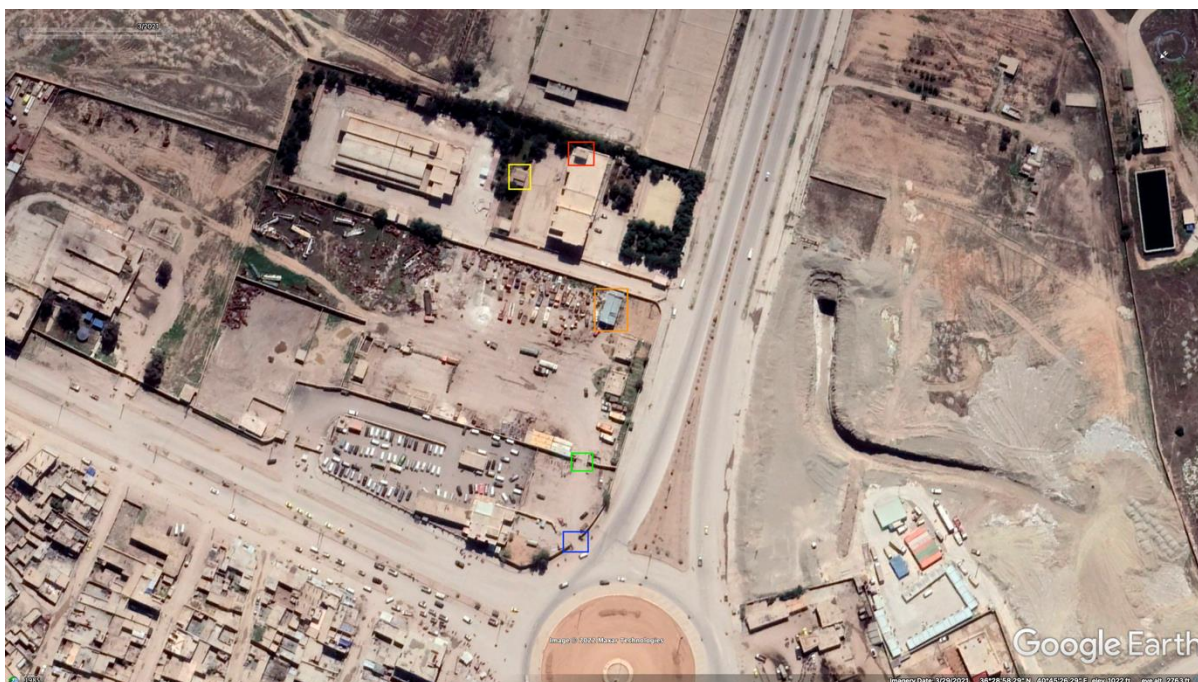


Image (18) – The location of al-Hasakah University's Institute of Technical Observers (36.482268, 40.757821).

Deaths

Two Brothers Slaughtered

Only hours into the attack, IS militants that infiltrated the streets adjacent to the prison committed several horrifying violations against the civilian residents. A female field researcher with STJ interviewed one of the area's displaced women, who narrated that an armed IS group, accompanied by "informers", stormed the house of brothers Ahmad and Muhammad lyada al-Ttabkhan. The militants slaughtered the brothers using knives near their house in the al-Qubour street, in Ghweiran neighborhood.

Notably, one of the brothers is a former member within the ranks of the SDF-affiliated Military Police and the other is still an active member within the same apparatus.

Related to the killings, a resident of the Ghweiran neighborhood reported that IS militants had slaughtered four other persons. STJ located the victims' families, who refused to comment on the issue, or provide additional details.

Prison Guards and Employees Slaughtered

The prison's guard service consists of members of various SDF military formations including the "Self-Defense Force". This force encompasses recruits performing mandatory military services and volunteers that enlisted into its ranks.

A large number of draft recruits and volunteers serve as civilian employees within prison facilities, either in service departments or ward security. All the prison's personnel perform

their duties unarmed for security purposes and due to concerns over potential riots on the part of the inmates who might attempt to take hold of the guards' weapons.

On the first day of the attack, IS published two videos showing a group of prison guards they captured during the attack. The civilian guards were imprisoned after the attacking militants entered the prison and clashed with them along the prison's fence, while the IS militants encircled the armed guard detachment at one of the prison's buildings.

The [videos](#) also show how IS militants separated Arab from Kurdish guards.



Image (19) - Captives taken by IS fighters inside al-Sina'a prison (A'maq, 22 January 2022).



Image (20) - Prison nurse Mahmoud al-Fayyad, taken captive by IS militants (A'maq, 22 January 2022).



Image (21) - Mahmoud al-Fayyad with SDF media officer Farhad Shami, after his rescue ([source](#)).

Over the course of the SDF-led military operation, SDF forces freed [23 prison guards](#), mostly civilians, through field negotiations with IS or security operations which the SDF described as complex.

However, nearly 70 employees and fighters were imprisoned and killed by IS over the course of the attack. Among the dead, STJ verified that at least 10 were beheaded, while other bodies were burned.

“Buried without Heads”

STJ reached out to Fahed Masoum, the father of one of the beheaded victims, who was born in Bar Kafri in the countryside of al-Dirbasiyah. The father narrated that they were delivered the body of their son, 22 years old, days after the attack on the prison. He added that the body showed no bullet marks, but the head was severed. The body was buried without a head within the village’s cemetery.

“We confirmed the death of our son through defining marks on his body. However, [our son’s] body was without a head, and this is how we buried him 10 days after the attack.”

The father said that his son had been on leave at home only four days before the attack. During his visit, he told them that the IS inmates were being well-treated, all their needs were being met, and even their food was of high quality. The father added: “We confirmed that our son was killed on the second day of the prison attack.”

The family buried their son in the village's cemetery 10 days after the attack. He was 23 years old.

While the Masoum family had closure, other families underwent tormenting experiences inquiring into the fate of their children, who remained held within the prison, while clashes continued. The families' fears were exacerbated after IS published videos and photos of piled dead bodies.



Image (22) - Over a dozen bodies of executed captives inside al-Sina'a prison (A'maq, 22 January 2022).

The family of guard Issa Abdullah spent days waiting for news about their son, who went missing following the attack. The family told STJ that they had not the slightest idea about their son's situation until three days into the attack, when they learned that he died inside the prison.

However, the family did not have information on how or when exactly he was killed and was subsequently forced to begin the devastating process of searching for his body. They awaited the body at morgues in al-Hasakah and Qamishli.

A family source narrated:

"I slept in morgues, near the rooms that hosted the dead bodies, hoping that Issa's body will be brought in. Later, there was only shock when I identified the body delivered to one of the morgues. I recognized the body through marks on the chest and the arms. The body was headless and had burns on the right side and lower part."

While checking the body, Issa's family looked for appendectomy scars; however, their son's body was too badly burned for them to identify them.

The source added:

"There were many dead bodies at the morgue, slaughtered, and some without heads and without bullet wounds. A different head was placed with Issa's body. We told them

that this was not Issa's head and that it was another person's, who we could identify. We buried our son's body without a head."

Early Preparations

Following leads on the attack, STJ reached out to a resident of the Ghweiran neighborhood, who, along with family and several neighbors, stayed at their homes on the al-Aghawat street, which lies nearly one kilometer from the prison. The resident recounted that he saw five IS militants enter a civilian house.

The witness said that the militants left behind an improvised belt made with materials from the prison, such as blankets and date seeds, which were pierced and shaped into buttons to fasten the belt. The militants also used materials from plastic gallons to create sheaths for knife blades and bayonets.

In a different location within the neighborhoods, an improvised bag was found, made out of the sheets covering the prison's foam mattresses, which resemble those distributed as relief aid. Inside the bag was medical gauze, disinfectant, syringes, drops, and a few fruits.

Both bags and belts, likely handmade, appeared in the videos IS published from inside the prison during their control of the wards. Masked militants also appeared in the videos. They wore bandanas of orange fabrics that resembled their prison uniforms.

In the same videos, one of the militants appeared carrying a sword, likely an improvised one. These items prove that the IS inmates had prepared for the attack in advance.



Images (23) and (24) - two photos showing a military quiver and a bag made by ISIS members inside the prison. Credit: "Syrians for Truth and Justice".



Image (25) - IS members inside the prison wearing headbands made from orange jumpsuits (A'maq, 23 January 2022).



Image (26) - IS members entering a hole in the wall of a prison block (A'maq, 23 January 2022).

Dozens of Houses Destroyed

The attack, infiltration of IS militants into nearby neighborhoods, and the SDF-led response, carried out in cooperation with the US-led Coalition, destroyed the building of the Institute of Technical Observers and parts of the facilities of the Faculty of Economics, in addition to several civilian houses.

According to information obtained by STJ, nearly 30 houses were completely destroyed or partially damaged due to the clashes and bombings.

Moreover, a resident from the neighbourhood who remained at home during the hostilities said that the SDF used armoured bulldozers to eliminate IS militants fortified within the houses they infiltrated.



Image (27) - Ghweiran residents sitting in the rubble of their destroyed houses ([source](#)).



Image (28) - Ghweiran resident Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman examining the wreckage of his house. The image shows evidence of bulldozer treads ([source](#)).



Image (29) - A few destroyed civilian houses in Ghweiran neighborhood, al-Hasakah city. Credit: STJ.



Image (30) - A few destroyed civilian houses in Ghweiran neighborhood, al-Hasakah city. Credit: STJ.

Demands to Relocate the Prison

A few months before the attack, the local radio Arta FM published a report, covering the demands of the residents of the Ghweiran neighbourhood. The locals asked for the removal of the al-Sina'a Prison from the neighborhood, while students expressed concerns over the prison facilities located just near their education centers. The SDF did not respond to the demands.

After the military action subsided on 16 February, a delegation of dignitaries and the tribes in the Gheiwran and al-Zuhour neighbourhoods met with the co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, Amina Omar. The delegation demanded the removal of the prison facilities from between the residential neighborhoods and also compensating the locals in both neighborhoods, particularly those whose houses were destroyed during the military operation. However, neither the SDF, nor the Autonomous Administration have so far announced any answers to these demands.

Military Intervention and Control

Ambulances, firefighters, and a few security forces (operations and checkpoint security) arrived in the area surrounding the prison. These units intended to respond to the massive fire that broke out near the Sadcob facilities during the attack's first hour. The units were met with heavy shooting from the IS militants at the prison's walls.

This intervention was supported by large reinforcements from the SDF and security forces, while US-led Coalition jets hovered over the prison.

Even though the intensity of the clashes was the highest within the prison's borders, the battleground expanded beyond the prison when IS militants snuck into landmark locations within the neighbourhoods of Ghweiran and al-Zuhour, including the surroundings of the bakery and the cemetery.



Image (31) - An SDF armoured vehicle during the battle to retake al-Sina'a prison ([source](#)).

On 23 January 2022, the SDF attributed their late work in reestablishing control over the prison to the fact that IS used the Ashbal al-Khilafa (cubs of the caliphate-minor IS recruits) as human shields.

The SDF said that 700 such minors were held in designated wards within the prison to be rehabilitated and rid of the extremist thoughts they were subjected to.



Image (32) - Footage from the YPG Press Office showing combat with IS members inside al-Sina'a prison ([source](#)).



Image (33) - IS members leaving the prison and surrendering to the SDF, 26 January 2022 ([source](#)).



Image (34) - Surrendering IS members lined up outside the prison, 26 January 2022 ([source](#)).



Image (35) - Satellite imagery of al-Sina'a prison taken 28 January 2022, showing the damage done to the facility during combat ([source](#)).

Contested Numbers

The [US-led Coalition](#) announced that the al-Sina'a Prison hosts approximately 5000 IS inmates, while the SDF announced that the number varied between 3000 and 4000 inmates at the onset of the attack.

With the end of military activities on 31 January, the SDF announced the death toll on both sides, with 374 IS militants, 77 prison guards and employees, and 40 SDF fighters, in addition to the four civilians killed by IS militants in adjacent neighborhoods.

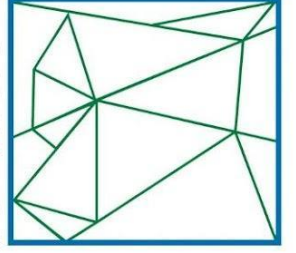
The SDF said that nearly 200 IS militants carried out the attack, who were also joined by several IS inmates from within the prison. However, the exact numbers of dead, surrendering, or escaping attackers remain unidentified.

STJ verified that seven of the escaping IS militants had already arrived in Ras al-Ayn/Serê region, and that their entry into the region was facilitated by a group within the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA).

During the 31 January [press conference](#), announcing the end of the prison military operation, SDF commander Mahmoud Barkhoudan said that all attackers have likely been killed and that the SDF started verifying the identities of the dead, while few IS militants might have escaped and fled the area.



Image (36) - SDF fighters combing Ghweiran neighbourhood for escaped IS fighters ([source](#)).



About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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