

Urgent Action Must Be Taken to Save Nearly 6,000 Civilians in Hajin District

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



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I. Introduction and Methodology:

The International Coalition forces, in cooperation with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party), recovered large areas in northeastern Syria from the ISIS terrorist organization, culminating in the return of the entire governorate of Raqqa in October, 2017, in addition to several villages in the southern suburbs of Hasaka and the villages of Deir Ez-Zour to the north of the Euphrates River (the villages of al Jazeera). Due to these operations, there has been a decline in the presence of the ISIS organization in some areas on the Syrian-Iraqi border between the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka (which are Hajin city, al Bahra village, Abo al Hasan village, al Kashma, al-Sh'afa, al Sousa town, and a part of al Baghouz village near the Iraqi border). We have observed since July, 2018, that clashes with ISIS have almost ceased, and the frequency of attacks by the International Coalition forces against ISIS has also decreased, and we believe that there is no serious intention to eliminate ISIS from this confined area, although it's possible to do so and could be more easily achieved than it was in the case of the battle of Raqqa.

On September 11, 2018, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces announced the resumption of their fight against ISIS in the areas still under its control in the far east of Syria in Deir Ez-Zour governorate. The SDF launched heavy artillery and rocket attacks, supported by intensive air strikes by the International Coalition forces.



As of the time of the preparation of this report, according to statistics provided by the United Nations Office of Humanitarian Affairs, [approximately 6,000](#) civilians remain stranded in several villages and towns (al Hasan village, al Kashma village, al Sh'afa town, al Sou-sa town, and al Baghouz town) after Syrian Democratic forces seized full control of Hajin city on December 15, with civilians there being subjected to indiscriminate and repeated bombardment by the alliance forces (Syrian Democratic Forces and International Coalition forces).

Meanwhile, we have also recorded that civilians are being used as human shields by ISIS preventing them from leaving its areas of control. They are also subjected to mortar and artillery attacks by Syrian Regime forces to prevent them from fleeing towards areas under regime control.

Methodology:

This report highlights the most prominent human rights violations committed by both the International Coalition forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces in areas still under the control of ISIS in Deir Ez-Zour governorate, which we will refer to collectively as the “Hajin district”, from September 11, 2018, up until December 20, 2018.

The report focuses on the dire humanitarian situation of thousands of civilians trapped between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Regime forces, as well as their suffering, as a result of ISIS tightening its security grip over them and using them as human shields.

After several weeks of repeated daily attempts to make contact, and despite our extensive network and various contacts, we have been unable to communicate directly with people living in Hajin district because of the frequent interruption of communications and the people's fear of contacting human rights organizations in areas controlled by ISIS, which the terror group deems a criminal offence and punishes people for. Given the seriousness and sensitivity of the situation and to obtain the largest possible amount of data and information in order to achieve a sufficiently objective investigation, we resorted to contacting relatives of the Hajin residents living outside the Hajin area, who provided us with extremely credible information about what their family members have been exposed to in Hajin area, with their statements being very similar.

We explained the purpose of these interviews to the eyewitnesses, who gave us permission to use the information they provided without our offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR tried to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible, and gave assurances of concealing the identity of any witness who preferred to use an alias.



SNHR has also analyzed many videos and pictures posted online, or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some of the videos posted by activists showed the locations of attacks, as well as victims' bodies, wounded people and some of the immense destruction caused by attacks.

We have retained copies of all the videos and pictures included in this report in a secret online database, as well as keeping backup copies on hard drives. Nonetheless, we can't claim to have documented all cases in light of both the Syrian regime's continuing media blackout and the persecution of citizens by Syrian regime forces as well as other armed groups.

We confirm that, according to our investigations, all of the attacks we have documented, the most notable of which we included in this report, targeted civilian communities, with no military bases or armories found prior to or during the attacks on these areas. We documented no trace of any warnings to civilians by the International Coalition forces or the Syrian Democratic Forces prior to these attacks as required under international humanitarian law.

This report only represents the bare minimum documentation of the actual magnitude and severity of the violations that have occurred. It also doesn't cover the social, economic, and psychological ramifications of these events on the people.

II. Record of most notable violations in Hajin district perpetrated by the alliance forces (Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and International Coalition forces):

First, the Syrian Democratic Forces imposed a blockade on Hajin city, Abu al Hasan village, al Kashma village, al Sh'afa town, al Sousa town, and al Baghouz village, all of which are under the control of ISIS, and prevented the entry of food and medical supplies to these areas. Secondly, they launched attacks using missile launchers and mortar shells, and established several sniper positions on the outskirts of these villages and towns. Finally, the International Coalition forces, supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces on the ground, launched hundreds of air strikes.

The SNHR documented the use of artillery shells by the International Coalition forces stationed in the area around Hajin city, as well as recording at least two attacks using incendiary weapons in populated areas far from the front lines. These attacks, which took place on October 8-12 in Hajin city, were indiscriminate and mostly targeted residential neighborhoods and displaced civilians.



Between September 11, 2018 and December 20, 2018, we recorded the deaths of 165 people, including 74 children, and 29 women (adult females), distributed here according to the perpetrator party:

Syrian Democratic Forces: 12 civilians, including 3 children.

International Coalition Forces: 153 civilians, including 71 children and 29 women.

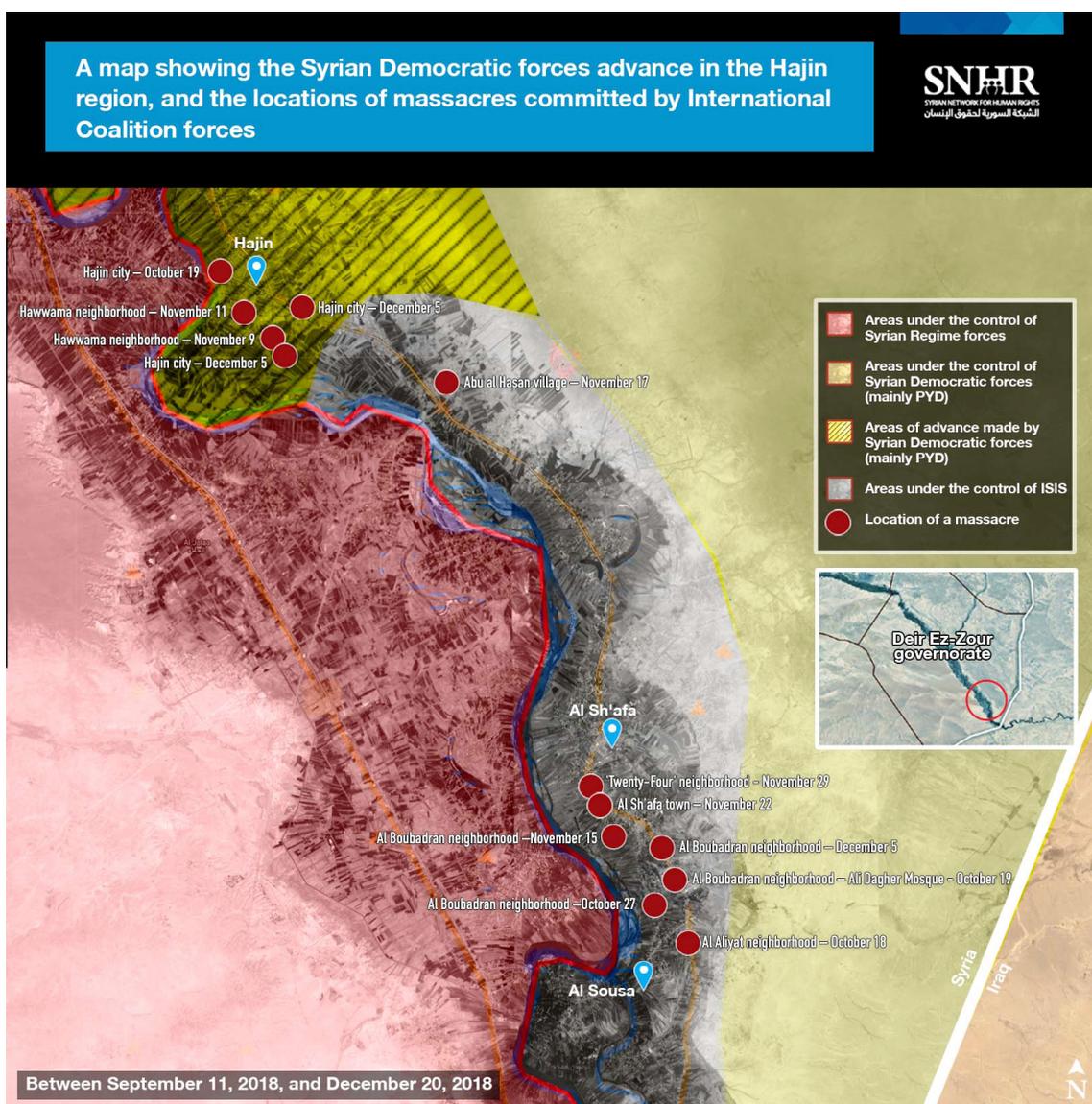
We also recorded at least 13 massacres in the same period, all of which were committed at the hands of International Coalition forces.

The SNHR documented at least 13 incidents of assault against vital civilian centers in this period, distributed according to the perpetrator party as follows:

International Coalition forces: 11 incidents, including two against medical facilities.

Syrian Democratic Forces: 2 incidents.

A map showing the Syrian Democratic forces advance in the Hajin region, and the locations of massacres committed by International Coalition forces



Here we review the most notable attacks:

On Friday, October 19, 2018, at around 12:00 – at Friday prayer time according to local time in Syria - we documented that fixed wing International Coalition forces warplanes fired a number of missiles targeted the mosque formerly known as al Mustafa Mosque (also known as al Ali al Dagher), subsequently renamed the Ammar bin Yasser mosque by ISIS, which is located in al Boubadran neighborhood in al Sousa town of al Boukamal area in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, killing 16 civilians, including five children.

On Sunday, November 11, 2018, wing-fixed international coalition warplanes fired a number of missiles at the Hawwama neighborhood in Hajin city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, which resulted in the deaths of 12 civilians, including four children (all female), and two women

On Thursday, November 15, 2018, at around 05.30, wing-fixed international coalition warplanes fired a number of missiles at al Boubadran neighborhood in al Sousa town, which is administratively a part of al Boukamal in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour. This attack resulted in the deaths of 18 civilians, including 14 children (nine females and five males), and three women, all of whom were members of one family of IDPs who had been displaced from al Baghouz.

On Wednesday, December 5, 2018, wing-fixed international coalition warplanes fired a number of missiles at Hajin city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, which resulted in the deaths of 13 civilians, including seven children, and three women.

III.Civilians in Hajin district trapped between SDF, Syrian Regime forces and ISIS:

The indiscriminate attacks and intensive bombardment coincided with an ongoing blockade imposed by Syrian Democratic forces on the areas under the control of ISIS, where we recorded ISIS prohibiting commercial trucks from entering Hajin district since September 11. Within three months, the warehouses in the area had run out of food, and the agricultural land on which the residents depend could no longer meet their needs. Given these facts, we documented the deterioration of the living conditions of thousands of people; where food prices, if any, have skyrocketed, medical materials and supplies have run out, and all medical centers have been put out of service after being targeted by International Coalition forces warplanes. This has contributed to a complete lack of any form of healthcare.



Here is a table showing the prices of the most prominent items before and during the siege:

Item	Price before siege	Price during the siege
Flour: one kg	100 Syrian Pound	1,000 Syrian Pound
Sugar: one kg	500 Syrian Pound	7,000 Syrian Pound
Vegetable oil: one liter	500 Syrian Pound	1,100 Syrian Pound

The SNHR contacted Mr. Abu Ahmad¹, whom family lives in al Sousa town, and he told us about his family's tragic situation following the siege imposed on their town: **“My family did not have bread for three days, the shops are empty of goods, and all the pharmacies in town were closed. There's only one field hospital, which is not in service. The bombardment by the Coalition forces never stops, either with warplanes, artillery or mortar shells, especially in the morning and at midnight. My father told me that they tried to flee the town, but ISIS elements told them they could not leave because there was no safe way out, and snipers of the SDF were spread all over the route. “**

Abu Ahmad also says that all the civilians trapped in al Sousa town only want one safe way out to escape the hell of bombardment and air strikes.

As a result of the bombardment and the ISIS presence, some civilians have been forced to flee to areas under the control of Syrian Regime forces on the opposite bank of the Euphrates River, despite the fact that this displacement carries the risk of their possibly being subjected to arrests and torture by the Syrian Regime forces. The SNHR has documented attacks by snipers and mortar shells being fired by the Syrian Regime forces on boats full of civilians who were trying to flee to areas under their control. We documented the death of a girl, Elaf Suleiman Khaled al Arran, in one such attack by the Syrian Regime forces on Saturday, November 17, as well as the death of a child, named as Abdulaziz Maher Jamal al Khabour, in a similar attack on Tuesday, December 4.

Meanwhile, the SNHR also documented multiple cases of ISIS preventing residents from leaving areas under their control in villages and towns all the way from Hajin to al Baghouz in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, and on October 11, 2018, we recorded an attack by ISIS on Hajin camp, which was established by the Syrian Democratic Forces, and included displaced persons from Hajin district. ISIS elements burned tents and forced hundreds of displaced persons to return to areas under its control.

¹ We contacted him on his personal account on FB on November 12, 2018



IV. The Syrian Democratic Forces' practices may impede the safe displacement of civilians:

Syrian Democratic Forces did not seek to secure any safe corridors for displaced persons escaping the inferno of military operations in the Hajin district, but rather detained civilians who went to the area surrounding the Hajin camp, which was established by the Syrian Democratic forces on September 20, 2018, and imposed house arrest on these individuals, among which were families of ISIS fighters.

The Syrian Democratic forces prevented the civilians from leaving the camp until completing verification of their identity papers, and interrogated many of them, fearing the presence of elements affiliated to ISIS. Some of the residents who were able to get out of the camp told us that they had to pay large amounts of money to elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces that control it.

Since mid-November, we have recorded rounds of civilians fleeing towards areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, but displacement has remained very limited.

On Saturday, November 17, 2018, at least 200 civilians, most of whom were children and women, were displaced from Hajin district, with the Syrian Democratic Forces transferring them to al Bahra camp and the Sh'aitat area in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour after detaining and interrogating them for a whole day in the desert.

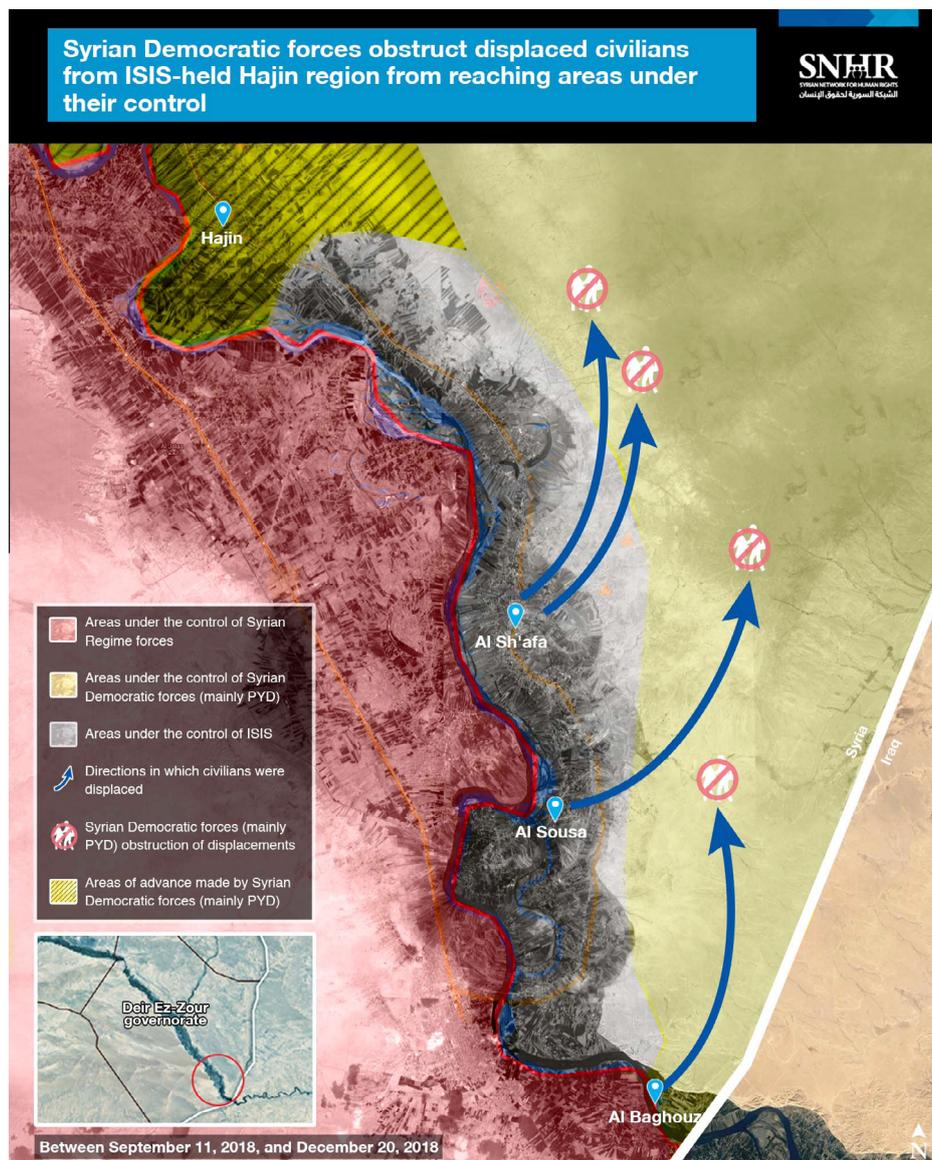
On Friday, November 30, 2018, nearly 300 civilians, most of whom were children and women, were displaced from Hajin district. The Syrian Democratic Forces transferred them to some schools in the villages of the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, such as al Bseira city. They were also interrogated about the movements of ISIS in the Hajin area.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, December 4-5, 2018, nearly 500 civilians, most of whom were women and children, were displaced. The Syrian Democratic Forces transferred most of them to al Hawl camp near the Syrian-Iraqi border in the eastern suburbs of Hasaka.

The displaced civilians suffer from deteriorating humanitarian conditions, with many forced to live in the open for several days until they are transferred to camps and shelters controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Some displaced people in the camp told us about a severe shortage of food and medical assistance, with limited aid being delivered from residents of villages and towns in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour.



A map showing the directions in which civilians were displaced:



V. Conclusions and Recommendations:

The alliance forces (the Syrian Democratic Forces and the International Coalition forces) have committed multiple serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law amounting to war crimes. These parties have directed numerous attacks against civilian populations, including aerial and ground bombardment of densely populated areas. We documented no trace of any warnings to civilians prior to the attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

Attacks carried out by the alliance forces have incidentally caused loss of civilian lives, injury to civilians or serious damage to civilian objects. There are very strong indications supporting the belief that the damage was excessive in comparison to the desired military advantage.



ISIS has also committed widespread violations of international humanitarian law against the people in the areas under its control; we have documented multiple instances of the terror group preventing residents from leaving areas under its control and of failing to protect them and using them as human shields, which constitute war crimes.

Syrian Regime forces, meanwhile, have attacked civilians who tried to flee towards areas under their control. These attacks violated international humanitarian law and human rights law and escalated into war crimes.

Recommendations:

The Coalition (International Coalition forces and SFD):

- International Coalition forces must respect international humanitarian law and customary international law, according to which the countries of the international coalition bear responsibility for the violations that have occurred since the attacks began, some of which have been documented through this report, and must bear the consequences of all these violations, and try as much as possible to avoid repeating them.
- Increase the working team responsible for the monitoring and investigation of incidents, and make greater effort to find new possibilities for positive advances in this area.
- Prepare a data map showing the areas worst affected by air attacks.
- Push to begin addressing the economic and moral consequences of such attacks.
- Serious efforts should be made to provide a decent life for displaced persons in displacement camps.
- Publicly hold accountable and isolate all those who have proved to be involved in attacks that have caused massacres of civilians.
- All supplies of weapons and other forms of support must be stopped until Syrian Democratic Forces comply with the previous demand. This is the responsibility of the main supporting countries since providing the Syrian Democratic Forces with weapons and monetary support knowing that these can be used in war crimes or crimes against humanity, which is a contributory factor in these crimes.
- Syrian Democratic Forces must secure a safe passage for civilians fleeing ISIS-controlled areas.
- Syrian Democratic Forces must improve the status of the camps they supervise, allow displaced people freedom of movement, provide food and medical assistance, and those countries supporting the SDF must put pressure on them to stop all human rights abuses.



Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Launch investigations into the cases included in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide further evidence and data.

OHCHR

- Monitor the situation of the forcibly displaced in the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, and issue a report on the violations they have been subjected to and the consequences of the bombardment by the International Coalition forces of those areas.

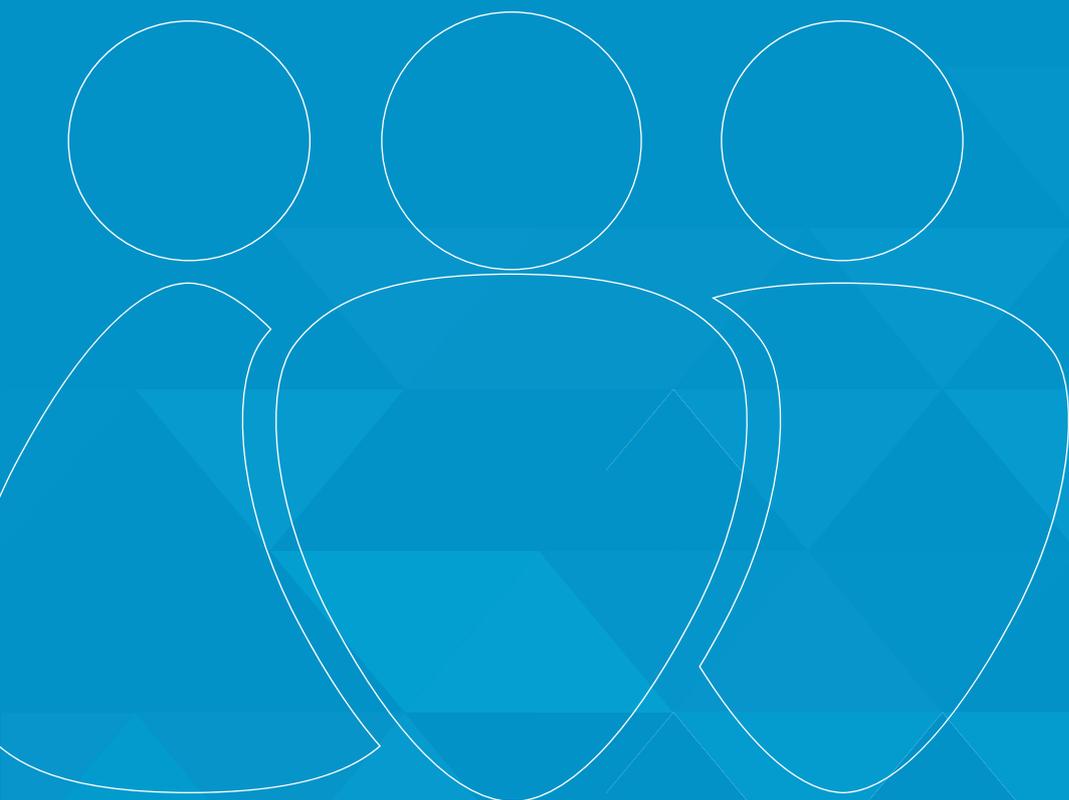
UNOCHA

- Find ways to deliver food, water and shelter to the displaced from Hajin district, who have settled in several areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

- Our most heartfelt condolences to the victims' families and to those directly affected, whose identities we were able to confirm and document, and our thanks to all the residents, victims' families and local community activists who contributed effectively to this report.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

