More Like a Prison Camp: Al Hawl Camp Continues to Hold Tens of Thousands of IDPs in Inhumane Conditions

In Its Latest Report, the United Nations Independent International Commission on Inquiry Holds the PYD-Led Self-Management Responsible for the Unlawful Detention of Thousands of People

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. The Establishment of al Hawl Camp:

Al Hawl camp is located on the southern outskirts of al Hawl town, which is situated 42 km east of Hasaka city, about 14 km from the Syrian-Iraqi border. The camp, which extends over an area of approximately 1.8 square km was established in 1991 after the first Gulf War, at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, providing a safe haven for nearly 10,000 refugees from Iraq at that time. In late 2003, the Syrian regime reopened the camp during the US invasion of Iraq to accommodate the refugees from Iraq in the eastern region.

In mid-2013, ISIS closed the camp after taking control of al Hawl district, expelling nearly 50 displaced Syrian and Iraqi refugee families from the camp.

Since mid-November 2015, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), mainly from the Democratic Union Party, backed by the US-led coalition Air Force, have managed to take control of al Hawl district, which includes 22 villages with its center being al Hawl town. In April 2016, the camp was again reopened and restored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, due to the severe pressure that the area came under as a result of the waves of displacement coming from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa in Syria, and from the districts of Sinjar, Zammar, Rabia and Mosul in Iraq, as a consequence of the battles that took place between ISIS and Iraqi forces in that region.
II. Al Hawl Camp Structure:

The camp originally consisted of six sectors; this changed in May 2019 when the forces controlling the area, namely the Syrian Democratic Forces, expanded it, establishing two additional sectors which brought the total number up to eight. Later in 2019, the SDF added another area, dubbed the annex.

Each sector of the camp holds between 1,300 and 1,800 families, with the sectors being divided as follows:

1. Two sectors for Syrian civilian families.
2. Three sectors for Iraqi civilian families.
3. One sector for families of Syrian national associated with ISIS.
4. One sector for families of European nationals associated with ISIS.
5. One sector for families associated with ISIS of other nationalities (i.e. not Syrian or European).

We note that the sectors designated for families associated with ISIS are isolated from one another, and from the other camp sectors by metal fences and are subject to tight security.

Satellite images published by Human Rights Watch showing the scale of the expansion of al Hawl Camp between November 2018 and July 2019.
III. The Record of the IDPs’ Number in al Hawl Camp and the Waves of Displacement That It Has Witnessed Since the Beginning of 2016 to Date:

Al Hawl Camp witnessed five major stages between 2016 and the end of 2020, as follows:

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of people living in al Hawl Camp reached nearly 12,000 IDPs and refugees in 2016, most of whom came from Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa governorates, and from the State of Iraq.

The IDPs coming from Deir Ez-Zour were subjected to being left standing for several days at the Rajm al Sleibi checkpoint, where they were interrogated and their identities checked, then they were transferred to the camp; upon their arrival at the camp, they were subjected again to additional security checks by Syrian Democratic Forces responsible for the protection of the camp.

As for the most notable violations they were subjected to, these are exemplified by the SDF’s procedure of confiscating their identities and identity documents, which were then withheld from them, as the SDF has also prohibited leaving the camp without security approval.

The number of people living in al Hawl Camp reached nearly 18,000 IDPs and refugees, mostly from Iraq.

The camp residents suffered from a shortage of drinking water and toilets, as there were only two bathrooms and one toilet for each unit of tents in the camp (each sector of the camp is divided into several ‘units’ of tents, with each unit containing dozens of tents), leading to the spread of foul odors, and the outbreak of a number of diseases, in addition to the acute shortage of medical care, as the medical staff was limited to one doctor and a number of nurses. The camp also lacked regular vaccination campaigns for children by the World Health Organization and UNICEF. REACH issued an extensive report on July 13, 2017, which assessed the situation inside the camp, and confirmed the information we obtained about the camp.

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1 This is a border point between Syria and Iraq in a desert area on the Syrian side. A checkpoint for the Syrian Democratic Forces have been located in this area since mid-February 2016, when this checkpoint was considered to be the border line between the areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces and ISIS respectively in the southern suburbs of Hasaka. At the beginning of September 2016, Syrian Democratic Forces began to prevent the passage of civilians towards al Hawl Camp, without giving any reason for this restriction of movement, causing a crisis for IDPs and travelers, and leading to a large gathering of people building up around the checkpoint, with their numbers reaching about 4,000 civilians (mostly children, women and elderly people) from Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa, who were forced to endure living in this remote desert area near the checkpoint without any of the basic essentials of life (no tents, no drinking water, no healthcare). This restriction continued until the checkpoint was removed in mid-2017; the Syrian Network for Human Rights issued a statement regarding the humanitarian crisis caused by the Rajm al Sleibi checkpoint.

2 This is a joint humanitarian initiative of IMPACT, ACTED and the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT), established in 2010, that provides granular data, timely information and in-depth analysis from contexts of crisis, disaster and displacement.
The camp subsequently witnessed a decline in the number of refugees coming from Iraq, due to the end of the military operations in their areas there enabling their return; many of these refugees have returned despite the fact that the Iraqi government has placed obstacles and constrains to their return, including forbidding them from crossing the borders, while a number have remained inside the camp and did not return to Iraq, for fear of reprisals against them by the Popular Mobilization Forces (al Hashd al Sha’bi), which have carried out killings, arrests and torture simply on suspicion of belonging to ISIS, as documented by Human Rights Watch in its report issued in December 2017.

In contrast to the decline in the number of Iraqis residing in the camp, the camp witnessed an increase in the number of IDPs from Deir Ez-Zour governorate due to the ongoing battles in the governorate. By the beginning of 2019, the number of residents in al Hawl Camp reached 33,000 IDPs and refugee, according to the statistics of the World Health Organization, with the largest percentage of these coming from Deir Ez-Zour governorate, specifically from the Hajin area.

Finally, that year, the camp witnessed the withdrawal and disruption of some relief aid that was provided by a number of relief organizations; we noted that this included the suspension of the voucher system supervised by the World Food Program in mid-2018.

In the first third of 2019, al Hawl Camp witnessed an increase in the number of IDPs arriving there, especially from the Hajin area in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, as a result of the fierce battles taking place between ISIS and Syrian Democratic Forces. Andrej Mahecic, the UNHCR spokesperson, referred at a press conference in Geneva, on February 1, 2019, to the deterioration of the conditions of civilians due to this fighting and the inhuman conditions facing those displaced towards al Hawl Camp.

At that point, the number of camp residents had reached more than 70,000 IDPs and refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, most of whom came from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa; among the camp residents were a large number of families associated with ISIS, mainly those who surrendered to Syrian Democratic Forces following the defeat of ISIS in its last enclave (al Baghouz) in Deir Ez-Zour.
On July 23, 2019, Human Rights Watch published a report on the harsh conditions faced by families of ISIS suspects, calling on their countries of origin to take back their citizens and increase the aid provided to the camp; the report presented an image showing the massive scale of the expansion in the camp area that took place between November 2018 and July 2019.
The numbers of camp residents decreased due to the return of hundreds of families from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa to their villages following tribal mediation by tribal elders in the Eastern Region with Syrian Democratic Forces, with the latter allowing these families to leave the camp in exchange for guarantees confirming that these families were not related to ISIS. In addition to that, some countries have taken back some of their citizens from al Hawl Camp, who had traveled to Syria, due to their joining ISIS, including children.

Since June 2020, we have documented that Syrian Democratic Forces have transferred some families - especially those belonging to ISIS - to al Rouj Camp, with the purpose of this operation not yet being clarified as the SDF has released no statement about it.

The number of camp residents has reached 64,619 people, 48% of whom are Iraqis, 37% Syrians, and 15% of other nationalities, according to the report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued on October 11, 2020.

Al Rouj Camp, which is under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces, is located in Ginzro village in Ma'bada district in the northern suburbs of Hasaka, around 14 kilometers from the Iraqi border. The camp was established in February 2015 following ISIS' attack on the Sinjar district and Rabia sub-district of Mosul city in the State of Iraq, with hundreds of families being displaced as a result from there to villages in Hasaka governorate just across the Iraqi border.
Map showing the most notable waves of displaced persons heading toward al Hawl Camp due to military campaigns on their areas since April 2016 up until October 2020.
IV. The Most Notable Violations and Inhuman Conditions in al Hawl Camp:

Residents of al Hawl Camp have been exposed to a number of violations of basic human rights, such as the right to life, movement, health, education, and others, which can be summarized as follows:

First: The extrajudicial killing of 53 civilians in al Hawl Camp between April 2016 and October 28, 2020:
The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented the deaths of at least 53 civilians, including 25 children and 11 women, in al Hawl Camp, since it was reopened in April 2016 up until October 28, 2020, distributed as follows:

- Syrian Democratic Forces: 18, including 14 children.
- Parties that we have been unable to identify: 35, including 11 children and 11 women.

This is a dangerous indication of the deteriorating security situation in the camp, despite the heavy security measures imposed there by the SDF, with SNHR documenting a number of killings and assassinations inside the camp, some by Syrian Democratic Forces, and others by personnel affiliated with/loyal to the ISIS terrorist organization. Up to the date of issuing this report, the Syrian Democratic Forces / Self-management has not launched any independent investigation and published the findings of these investigations about these incidents, and we recorded that most of the killings were carried out through the use of sharp tools, strangulation, or arson attacks with the aim of killing camp residents inside their tent; this record does not include deaths due to fires or natural deaths, but only includes extrajudicial killings, and among the most notable killings are:

The male child Ali Adham Muhammad Khalaf, a 16-year-old Iraqi national, was strangled to death at the hands of unknown persons, with his body found buried under a tent on July 11, 2018.

Ms. Sodermini Sardi, a 34-year-old Indonesian national, the wife of an ISIS fighter, was killed by unknown persons, with her body found on July 28, 2019, by the camp administration, bearing signs of bruises and stabbing with a sharp tool.

Abdullah al Ahmad, aged 20, from Hasaka governorate, died on October 3, 2019 of wounds sustained when he was stabbed with a sharp tool by unknown gunmen in al Hawl Camp.

Ms. Asma Abdul Rahman, a 30-year-old Turkistan national, the wife of an ISIS fighter, was strangled to death on December 8, 2019 by unknown persons in al Hawl Camp.

Atallah Jasem al Hwaish, from al Sbaikhan city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, died on September 18, 2020, after being stabbed with a sharp tool by unidentified gunmen in al Hawl Camp.
The camp periodically witnesses peaceful protests from residents demanding improved conditions and fundamental human rights, with these demands often met with repressive measures such as physical and verbal assaults by the authorities in charge of the camp, and sometimes with the firing of live bullets to disperse the camp residents. The SNHR has documented the deaths by shooting of five IDPs, including one child, in the camp between April 2016 and October 28, 2020, with all the victims shot dead by Syrian Democratic Forces. In a press release issued on September 30, 2019, Doctors Without Borders stated that it had treated four women who were shot by members of the Public Security force at the camp in response to protests by a number of women and children in the foreigners’ sector.

Second: Nine dead due to fires, with tents made of poor plastic:
Most of the tents are built using a poor, highly flammable type of plastic, which is also ineffective in protecting residents from the harsh climatic conditions that characterize the region, namely searing heat in summer and bitter freezing cold in winter. We have documented a number of fires inside the camp, in which people have died, including children. The SNHR documented the deaths of at least nine civilians, including four children and one woman, as a result of these fires between April 2016 and October 28, 2020, among these cases we mention:

The nine-month-old female infant Israa Hamzah, from Hasaka governate, died on January 20, 2019, due to third-degree burns sustained in a fire that broke out in her family’s tent due to the heater.

The male child Zakariya al Ahmad, a two-year-old Iraqi national, died on February 17, 2019, due to a fire that broke out in the tent his family lived in.

Ms. Anoud Mesleh al Hasan, an Iraqi national, died on February 22, 2019, due to a fire that broke out in her tent after the heating device exploded.

The camp authorities attribute the incidents of fires inside the tents to several reasons, including those caused by the IDPs’ using heaters or cooking stoves inside the tents.

Third: an acute shortage of food, medicine, and water:
A: Insufficient quantity of food:
Some local and international relief organizations distribute vouchers for food to the people of al Hawl Camp, so that they can secure a food basket on a weekly basis (sometimes the distribution process takes place irregularly). Each basket contains foodstuffs such as: sugar, rice, pasta, legumes, along with cooking oil and household detergents, in quantities compatible with the number of the family members, while bread is distributed through centers spread within the camp. This distribution process sees crowds of residents gathering around the centers due to the density of the population compared to the number of those centers, sometimes leading to quarrels.
Many families complained to us that the contents of the food basket are insufficient, prompting some family members, including children, to work in order to buy more food from the shops spread inside the camp.
B: An imbalance in the provision of drinking water and in sanitation:

Despite the camps being open for years, the authorities controlling the camp still have not established any water distribution networks, with water being distributed in the camp via tankers loaded with water brought in from outside the camp, which are emptied into tanks distributed in the camp’s sectors; the insufficient volume of water provided by these tanks compared to the number of camp residents means that camp residents overcrowd the area in front of the tanks for many hours simply to get one gallon of water (each tank can accommodate five or ten liters). Some camp residents told us that this water is not clean and has led to the outbreak of some diseases such as dysentery, diarrhea, intestinal inflammation and other conditions in the camp, which prompted them to buy bottled drinking water from the shops at their expense. Due to these conditions, the camp residents generally suffer from a shortage of drinking water.

The camp is also not equipped with sanitation networks, forcing its residents to rely on public toilets distributed throughout the camp, which number nearly two thousand units. Many camp residents told us that many of these bathrooms are out of service, forcing them to relieve themselves in the open, which caused the spread of foul odors and diseases.
The SNHR spoke with Muhammad al Rabea, an Iraqi who had been displaced to al Hawl Camp. He said, “I left the camp two months ago after a stay of nearly eight months, which was like a period of detention in a prison. The Asayish forces [meaning Syrian Democratic Forces] prevented us from leaving the camp and they treated us very badly, as if we were slaves. The camp lacked the most basic requirements, such as washing and drinking water, so we had to pay a sum of money to fill a gallon of water. In addition to that, the aid that was delivered through the UNHCR was not enough, and we had to buy some goods from the stalls and shops in the camp.”

C: Lack of medical care:
The camp includes three field hospitals, in addition to about 24 mobile clinics, each of which operates in rotation in all camp sectors, but these medical points are generally not equipped to provide many medical services because they lack basic equipment and supplies for examining patients, with their medical staff also lacking specialist skills and being insufficiently trained. In general, their services are limited to first aid and treatment of mild and minor illnesses.

Specialist doctors visit the camp from time to time to check on difficult cases registered on waiting lists, with patients possibly having to wait for more than a week for a medical examination, which worsens their medical condition. As for patients who are examined and diagnosed with critical conditions or as being in need of surgery, they must be transferred to hospitals in Hasaka city; this procedure cannot take place before they obtain security approval from the Syrian Democratic Forces’ General Security in the camp, with the process of obtaining approval or rejection taking several more days.

The foreign fighter annex (not including Iraqis or Syrians), which includes nearly 10,000 people, has received special medical care supervised by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) since January 2019, while the sector that includes families allegedly linked to ISIS is the worst in terms of medical and living services, as security personnel supervising the camp restrict many of the mobile clinics’ services, and the patients’ transfer to city hospitals under the pretext that the residents pose a security risk, which is discrimination based on affiliation and identity.

SNHR spoke by phone with Abu Hussam, an IDP living in al Hawl Camp, from al Mayadeen city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour. He said, “Me and my family [consisting of eight members] fled from al Mayadeen city after the Syrian regime took control of it, and moved between several villages in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, and we ended up coming to al Hawl Camp nearly a year ago. At the beginning of our arrival at the camp, the situation was relatively acceptable, and the UNHCR was providing us with aid, such as food baskets. We were receiving medical care in a health center where a doctor and nurses were on duty, and we

4 Via Facebook on February 6, 2019
5 On February 8, 2019
had to wait for long hours until our turn came and were examined by the doctor. We have to buy medicine ourselves most of the time, and sometimes we get it for free. The tents are in a tragic and worn out condition and do not protect from the cold of winter or the heat of summer."

Children, and infants in particular, as well as pregnant and lactating women, are the worst affected by the adverse nutritional and medical conditions, with the lack of food and medical care having already caused a number of deaths among children. The SNHR has documented the deaths of seven children in al Hawl Camp between April 2016 and October 28, 2020, due to the lack of medical care and food, including:

The six-month-old infant Ahmad Hwaidi, from Hasaka governorate, died on January 19, 2019, due to lack of food and medical care in al Hawl Camp.

The six-month-old infant Ouf Mekhelf al Awwad, from al Muhasan city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, died on February 1, 2019, due to lack of food and medical care in al Hawl Camp.

The eight-month-old infant Eisa Ibrahim Hzouj, from Idlib governorate, died on May 2, 2019, due to lack of food and medical care in al Hawl Camp.

On August 12, 2020, Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, in a press release, clearly expressed her concern over the death of eight children under the age of five in al Hawl Camp in less than a week (between August 6 - 10). Four of these deaths were caused by malnutrition-related complications. The others were due to dehydration from diarrhea, heart failure, internal bleeding and hypoglycemia.
Fourth: At least forty thousand children need education, with the current educational facilities being insufficient:

There are about twelve educational centers for children of different ages in al Hawl Camp, which work to rehabilitate and provide educational and psychological support for these children by providing lessons and engaging them in various activities. We believe, however, that the number of these centers is very small compared to the amount of children in the camp whose number exceeds forty thousand children, with some being orphans who have lost their father, mother, or both parents.

For those wanting more detailed information on and insight into the harsh conditions suffered by the residents of al Hawl Camp, we recommend reading the July 2019 report by Human Rights Watch, which followed three visits to the camp by HRW personnel. This report provides extensive and detailed information about the harsh conditions which the camp residents suffer. Human Rights Watch also emphasized that the Self-Management authority, led by the Democratic Union Party, is holding thousands of people in appalling and sometimes deadly conditions in a locked desert camp. SNHR confirms that the harsh conditions detailed in that report have worsened significantly since the report’s publication.

V. Al Hawl Camp Conditions Constitute a Typical Environment for the Spread of COVID-19 Pandemic:

The aforementioned conditions constitute a breeding ground for an outbreak of COVID-19, as precautionary measures such as wearing masks and social distancing are also very limited; the camp’s lack of water and sanitation infrastructure is the most dangerous factor contributing to the spread of the pandemic.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced that on August 3, 2020, an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in al Hawl Camp had been confirmed, where three health workers tested positive for COVID-19. In the last OCHA report monitoring the situation in al Hawl Camp, which was issued on October 11, 2020, the organization stated that as of October 4 the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 had reached four, one of whom had died as a result.

In a press release, issued by Save the Children organization on May 10, 2020, Sonia Khush, Save the Children’s Syria Response Director, said that al Hawl Camp “was never meant to host as many people as it currently does – especially the high number of children – and the consequences of a coronavirus outbreak there are unthinkable.”
In its report issued on August 28, 2020, Doctors Without Borders warned that the medical services provided in al Hawl Camp have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as most of the health facilities there have closed. While an isolation facility has been built it isn’t ready for use and doesn’t have enough trained staff, the group reported, adding that there are also problems with medicines and medical equipment, including oxygen support.

VI. The Russian Veto Is a Major Reason for the Lack of Humanitarian and Medical Aid, and Is Contrary to Human Rights Principles:

The already dire conditions in the Syrian region of al Jazira (Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Raqqa) have worsened following the inhumane Russian veto that violates human rights, through which Russia opposed the renewal of Security Council Resolution No. 2165 on allowing cross-border aid delivery; to stymie the provision of aid, Russia and its ally China used their veto against the renewal draft resolution in December 2019, after which the al Ya’rubiya crossing was closed, meaning that UN aid has to be taken to Damascus before being returned again to Hasaka. We documented the Syrian regime’s looting of UN aid extensively in a special report previously, noting that this would not have been possible without Russia and China helping the regime to carry out this pillage through their use of the veto in the Security Council.

Due to this veto, UN aid is no longer entering the Syrian Jazira at the rate and quantity it was in before the Russian / Chinese veto, with these shortages clearly reflected in the deteriorating humanitarian conditions, especially the food and medical conditions for the residents of al Hawl Camp, as we mentioned in the previous paragraphs. Russia and China bear moral responsibility and responsibility for violating fundamental human rights through this arbitrary veto.

VII. Syrian Democratic Forces Are Inhumanly Detaining Tens of Thousands of People in al Hawl Camp, and the International Commission of Inquiry Directly Accuses Them:

The United Nations International Commission of Inquiry (COI) said in paragraph 71 of its latest report, “Tens of thousands of women and children, both Syrian and third-country nationals, have now been confined in Al-Hawl and other camps since the Baghuz offensive in early 2019, without access to the necessary legal safeguards.”

COI also clearly described this in paragraph 80 of the same report, stating, “The Commission also has reasonable grounds to believe that in holding tens of thousands of individuals in Hawl camp and its annex, the majority of them children, for 18 months with no legal recourse, the Syrian Democratic Forces have held these individuals in inhuman conditions,” stressing in the same paragraph that, “Therefore, in many instances, the ongoing internment of these individuals continues to amount to unlawful deprivation of liberty.”

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6 This allowed the United Nations to deliver cross-border aid without the permission of the Syrian regime, through the Bab al Salam, Bab al Hawa, al Ya’rubiya and al Ramtha crossings, and it was extended five times in a row.

We at the SNHR can confirm the facts stated in the COI’s report, namely that Syrian Democratic Forces prevent camp residents from leaving and returning, or from permanently leaving and returning to their villages and homes in areas where combat operations with ISIS ended many months ago, although combat operations in some of these areas ended nearly two years ago.

SNHR spoke with Ali al Hussein⁸, from al Sour city in the northern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, who is related to a family that left the camp in mid-October 2020. Ali says, “The family (consisting of two parents and six children) was displaced from al Mayadeen city to al Hawl Camp in late 2018, and they were living in inhumane conditions. At the medical level, they were forced to wait three days for the examination by doctors or nurses who had no experience. They had to buy medicines at their own expense, and they waited more than two hours to get two bread sacks, given the lack of bread distribution centers in their sector, in addition to the fact that their tents were of a very poor type, with fires breaking out in the tent the previous winter while they were lighting a fire to keep warm.” Ali added, “The camp guards used to treat them brutally, and they used to raid their tent and beat them, without distinguishing between men and women.” About the family’s current situation, Ali told us that they are currently living in a school in al Sour city until they decide where they can move to.

There are three basic ways for camp residents to leave it:

First: The tribes have contributed to the release of at least 3,000 detainees from al Hawl Camp: Tribal dignitaries ask the leadership of Syrian Democratic Forces to release some of the camp residents who are detained there, pledging to provide bail for their release; this is often done through statements, as families wishing to leave the camp are registered with the Internal Security Forces who summon the tribal dignitaries to consider which family members they seek to secure the release of; accordingly a decision is reached and approved as to which detained families or individuals will be allowed to leave the camp that has turned into a detention center.

We note that most of the detained families whose release was obtained through tribal mediation were displaced to the camp after Syrian Democratic Forces took control of the last ISIS enclave in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour.

Lists containing the names of some IDPs who were approved to leave al Hawl Camp following the payment of bail by tribal dignitaries - February 26, 2020

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⁸ Via WhatsApp on October 27, 2020
Even after the release process is finalized and announced, it may take several days to complete, with some families paying additional money to the security forces supervising the camp, in order to speed up the procedure of their release. Estimates from the region’s residents indicate that tribal mediation has contributed to the release of at least 3,000 detainees from al Hawl Camp, with those released coming from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Raqqa and Aleppo.

Second: Through smuggling or escaping:
The smuggling of detainees is carried out via smugglers who have relations with the Internal Security forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the authority nominally responsible for protecting the camp. The detainees’ families pay huge sums of money to both the smugglers and the internal Security forces (not less than two thousand US dollars), with most of those who use these services belonging to ISIS-affiliated families of foreign (non-Syrian) nationalities.

We noted through checking a number of photos and videos that the smuggling operation is carried out using harsh methods, such as hiding detainees inside tanks; sometimes the smuggling operation fails, with the families who tried to escape being arrested and taken to detention centers affiliated with Syrian Democratic Forces in Hasaka city.

The efforts of detainees living in the camp to attain their freedom are not dependent on smuggling operations alone. Rather, there are continuous attempts to escape from the camp, with most of the fleeing detainees traveling to north Syria before escaping to Turkey or Iraq; those of non-Syrian nationality will generally try to return to their original country.

On September 19, 2020, the spokesman for the Internal Security Forces in northern and eastern Syria, Ali Hassan, told Hawar News Agency that Syrian Democratic Forces had thwarted more than 700 attempts to escape from the camp.

Several videos were published showing attempts to escape from al Hawl Camp, some of which show the authorities there thwarting those attempts, most notably:
A video published by North Press Agency on July 25, 2020, showing the moment of arresting four women who tried to escape inside one of the tanks used to transport drinking water to the camp, near one of the SDF checkpoints in the southern suburbs of Hasaka.

Two videos by North Press Agency and ANHA published on August 7, 2020, show two foreign women talking about their attempt to escape from the camp through smugglers.

A video, which was circulated on social media on September 13, 2020, shows Syrian Democratic Forces thwarting an escape attempt by a group of children and women from al Hawl Camp who hid inside one of the tanks used to transport water to al Hawl Camp.

A video, which was circulated on social media on October 3, 2020, shows Syrian Democratic Forces thwarting a similar escape attempt by children and women from al Hawl Camp who hid inside one of the tanks that transport water to the camp.

Third: When some foreign countries request repatriation of their citizens:

As we mentioned earlier, one of the camp’s sectors is dedicated to ISIS-affiliated families of various non-Syrian nationalities from around the world. We at the SNHR again call on these countries to repatriate their nationals and prosecute them in their home countries rather than leaving them to be detained by Syrian Democratic Forces. Some estimates indicate that the total number of these people may exceed two thousand, mostly women and children. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) told the Telegraph in a report published on October 17, 2020 that, “All countries need to make all possible efforts to repatriate their citizens, lawfully and respecting fundamental rights. The fate of thousands of women and children stranded or detained in horrendous conditions must be a priority for all countries. It is essential that children are treated first and foremost as victims, irrespective of who they or their parents were associated with…” According to the newspaper, the British Government said it will only repatriate orphaned or unaccompanied children from camps in northeast Syria, including al Hawl.

In its latest report, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry also called on UN “member States to repatriate children and mothers in camps in accordance with their obligations under international law.”

On October 16, 2020, the Russian Interfax Agency announced the arrival in Russia of 27 children aged between two and 13 years old who had been detained in al Hawl Camp. The press service of Anna Kuznetsova, the Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights, stated that other children would be transferred later after completing the necessary procedures.
Within this context, and since the beginning of 2020, Syrian Democratic Forces have transferred a number of foreign families affiliated with ISIS from al Hawl Camp to Rouj Camp in al Malikiya area in the eastern suburbs of Hasaka, in order to relieve pressure on al Hawl Camp. On October 1, 2020, the director of Rouj Camp, Nora Abdo, told North Press Agency, that the total number of families transferred from al Hawl Camp to Rouj Camp had reached 179, consisting of 546 people of different nationalities.

VIII. International Commission of Inquiry and International Organizations’ Criticism of the Detention of Thousands of People Contributed to a Decision That Could Lead to Their Release:

The human rights and humanitarian reports issued by several United Nations bodies, in particular the recent report by the International Commission of Inquiry, as well as reports by international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and local human rights organizations, have all helped to put accumulated pressure on the Democratic Union Party-led Self-Management authority and its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces, prompting an announcement on October 4, 2020, by Ilham Ahmed, President of the Syrian Democratic Council, that a decision to evacuate Syrian citizens from al Hawl Camp would be announced, and that the situation of non-Syrians would be considered. She attributed the eviction decision primarily to the wish to reduce the financial burden incurred in detaining so many people there. SNHR further notes that we have seen no financial reports issued by the Self-Management throughout the period of its control over large areas of Syria, which include lucrative oil and gas fields whose resources the Self-Management authority sells to several parties, including the Syrian regime, as we explained in a previous report, with this trade continuing even after the Caesar Act came into force.

On October 10, the Syrian Democratic Forces’ Self-Management authority issued Decision No. 146, which allows Syrians wishing to leave the camp to do so after completing the necessary procedures. However, through our monitoring of the implementation of this decision, we have seen no large-scale evictions or release of thousands of detained Syrians, and we have recorded that the releases have remained limited to the cases arranged via tribal mediation which we talked about previously.
IX. Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Syrian Democratic Forces are detaining tens of thousands of Syrian citizens and thousands of individuals of other nationalities, without any legal justification and without judicial arrest warrants; some of these people have been detained for years in al Hawl desert camp in extremely harsh conditions, with these cases classified as arbitrary detention, and as a form of collective punishment.

- Through these detentions, Syrian Democratic Forces have violated a large number of principles of international human rights law, including arbitrary deprivation of liberty, freedom of movement, the right to education, and the right to health care.

- Syrian Democratic Forces did not give these detainees any opportunity to defend themselves, to know the reasons for their detention, or to challenge them, through the opportunity to obtain a fair trial, despite the fact that the home areas of thousands of these detainees were purged of ISIS nearly two years ago.

- Syrian Democratic Forces have treated entire sectors of the camp, which include hundreds of people allegedly associated with ISIS, worse than others, with this distinction is based entirely on allegations that have not been proven through independent investigations.

- The forces in charge of the camp have gathered the people allegedly associated with ISIS with each other, enabling them to coordinate and operate within the camp and to spread extremist ideology, with the group’s supporters also carrying out some crimes such as murder, as well as issuing threats.

- Donor countries have not provided sufficient support allocated to the UN and international organizations working at the camp, exacerbating the already poor conditions in the camp; we cannot hold the Self-Management authority solely responsible for the poor living and medical conditions inside the camp, despite its lack of financial transparency in how the proceeds of the region’s wealth, especially oil and gas, are spent.

- Most of the world’s countries that have citizens who were associated with ISIS have made no real efforts to repatriate, prosecute, or reintegrate them. On the contrary, we have noted a repudiation of these people, a denial of their nationality, and a reluctance to give their children their nationality, resulting in the occurrence of hundreds of non-registered individuals.

- Nations have used their UNSC veto to obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid, and to support the Syrian regime in order to loot what UN aid is delivered in the country, in contravention of international law and human rights principles.

Recommendations:

The United Nations:

- Work to contribute to the release of thousands of detainees in al Hawl Camp, taking into account that the vast majority of these people are IDPs whose homes and villages have been freed of ISIS, with the vast majority wishing to leave the camp and return to their homes.
• Increase the humanitarian aid provided to the camp until a solution is found to the detainees issue.
• Put pressure on countries whose citizens are detained in the camp in order to expedite their repatriation and ensure that their children obtain their nationality, as stipulated in international law, in order to avoid creating hundreds of stateless persons.
• The UN veto must not be used to impede the delivery of humanitarian aid.

The US-led Coalition:
• Put pressure on Syrian Democratic Forces to release thousands of detainees in al Hawl Camp. The US-led coalition, as a primary supporter of these forces, bears responsibility for the violations they commit.
• Release all those who have not been proven guilty of a criminal offense according to a fair trial by a court formed in an impartial and independent manner.
• Compel the Self-Management authority to justify the reasons for detaining tens of thousands of people according to proper legal justifications and a fair trial, knowing that the IDP detainees’ areas are now free of ISIS.
• Request that the Self-Management authority prepares financial statements detailing the funds it obtains from the resources of the areas it controls and the mechanisms for their disbursement, and ensure that these statements are freely available and disseminated for public scrutiny, especially by the residents of that region, and allocate sufficient funds to spend on improving living conditions in al Hawl Camp.

Countries worldwide with citizens detained in al Hawl Camp:
• Must not repudiate their citizens and must work to repatriate and try them in accordance with the law, which will prevent them from rejoining terrorist organizations.
• Grant citizenship to children who were born to citizens outside their countries; this is a guaranteed right in accordance with international law.
• Increase humanitarian aid to al Hawl Camp, especially medical assistance in light of the second wave of COVID-19.

Democratic Union Party-led Self-Management authority:
• Detentions without any legal basis must be prohibited, and tens of thousands of detainees held in this way must be released to ensure their return to the areas from which they were displaced.
• Stop using discrimination against some sectors of the camp.
• Prepare financial reports on the amount of money obtained from the wealth of the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Raqqa and publish these for public scrutiny, as well as allocating funds to improve the harsh conditions of al Hawl Camp.
• Direct specific charges according to a fair court formed independently and impartially against persons alleged to have been involved in committing criminal acts, then detain them in accordance with the court’s decisions.

High Commissioner for Human Rights:
• Issue a report documenting the violations against tens of thousands of detainees in al Hawl Camp and ensure that the parties responsible assume their responsibility before the Syrian community in that area.

The UN Special Envoy to Syria:
• Shed light on this catastrophe through his upcoming briefing before the Security Council and accurately identify those responsible for it.

Thanks
We offer our sincere thanks to all the residents and local activists whose contributions have effectively enriched this report.