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The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations against Media Workers in Syria on World Press Freedom Day

711 Journalists and Media Workers Have Been Killed Since March 2011, Including 52 Due to Torture, by the Parties to the Conflict and Controlling Forces

Wednesday 4 May 2022

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.

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. Syria Is among the Worst Countries Worldwide in the Freedom of Press, Opinion and Expression

May 3rd this year marks the 29th anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly's declaration that this date would mark the annual World Press Freedom Day¹, in accordance with the [recommendations](#) of the twenty-sixth session of the General Conference of UNESCO in 1991, which stipulated that "Free, independent and pluralistic media is a core element of any functioning democracy."

On December 18, 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. On May 27, 2015, the UN Security Council adopted [Resolution](#) No. 2222, in which it condemned all violations and abuses committed against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel in situations of armed conflict, in addition to issuing numerous texts on freedom of opinion and expression in international human rights law.

Throughout the era of the despotic rule of Hafez al Assad and his son Bashar al Assad, Syria has never witnessed freedom in journalistic or media work; indeed, not even one newspaper, media outlet or journalistic website in Syria has enjoyed any freedom of speech or independence, since al Ba'ath Party seized power over the country in March 1963, banning all independent media², with the state retaining only those media mouthpieces speaking on the regime's behalf, namely al Ba'ath newspaper, first published in 1974, and Al Thawra ['The Revolution'] newspaper, launched after the Ba'ath Party coup in 1963; this title was chosen because the regime called its military coup the "March 8th Revolution", with the newspaper established to reflect this narrative. After Hafez al Assad seized power, the same oppressive practices of restricting freedoms continued.

Since the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011, the Syrian regime has increased its repression of journalists and media workers, expelling and completely banning all independent Arab and international media that had been allowed a presence in Syria, while allowing only the regime-affiliated Iranian, Russian and Lebanese media outlets, which are not independent media outlets but more mouthpieces enabling the regime to justify or deny its own violations and those of its allies. This complete ban on media freedom has continued for 11 years to date, with only rare conditional exceptions, which cannot be relied upon.

In order to fill this huge void and to provide credible coverage of the historical events taking place in Syria, activists took up this journalistic mission, with the idea of a citizen journalist emerging in the country as these activists assumed responsibility for reporting, filming and photographing news, at great danger to themselves, with many of these activists succeeding in working for some of the most distinguished media institutions worldwide.

¹ Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993.

² Legislative Decree No. 4 of 1963 issued by the Syrian People's Assembly, canceling the privilege of newspapers and periodical publications and sealing off and shutting down their printing places.

<http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=16478&RID=-1&Last=6&First=0&CurrentPage=0&Vid=-1&Mode=-1&Service=-1&Loc1=0&Key1=&S-Date=&EDate=&Year=1963&Country=&Num=&Dep=-1&>

The violations committed against journalists and media workers have not been limited to the Syrian regime although it is the main perpetrator, but extend to all parties to the conflict and controlling forces, most especially when engaged in exposing the violations perpetrated by the de facto authorities. In general, all these parties have practiced a policy of silencing voices, and as a result of these eleven years of accumulated and compound violations, Syria has become one of the worst countries in the world in terms of freedom of the press and of opinion and expression, according to the violations perpetrated against them, of which SNHR has documented an important part, and based on the reports issued by international organizations reporting on global press freedom, which make comparisons with the rest of the world's countries, including:

Syria is ranked 173rd (out of 180 countries), that is, it is the seventh worst country in the world according to [the 2021 World Press Freedom Index](#) issued by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

Syria received a rating of 1 out of 100³ in the 2021 [annual Freedom in the World report](#) issued by Freedom House, which rates people's access to political rights and civil liberties in 210 countries and territories,⁴ with Syria ranking the worst in the world in terms of countries lacking freedom, along with South Sudan and Tibet; the report stresses that "Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world's most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in an ongoing civil war."

The Freedom House report further notes that "The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of the press, but in practice, the media are heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists who report critically about the state are subject to censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody." The report adds that the privately-owned media in the Syrian regime-controlled areas are generally owned by figures associated with the regime.

On July 2, 2021, RSF published a group of 37 photos of heads of state and government who crack down massively on press freedom, calling them ["predators of press freedom"](#) in its 2021 list. The organization stated that Bashar al Assad has been and remains one of the most prominent predators in the gallery ever since its first list.

The Committee to Protect Journalists' 2021 Global Impunity [Index](#), released on October 28, 2021, showed that Syria is the second-worst country worldwide in terms of journalists being targeted for murder without the perpetrators being held accountable, with only Somalia ranking above it.

On December 14, 2021, Reporters Without Borders issued a [report](#) revealing that at least 65 journalists and media workers are being held hostage around the world, 44 of whom were kidnapped in Syria.

³ Evaluation is based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free).

⁴ An independent country.

On December 16, 2021, [the American Cato Institute](#) and the [Canadian Fraser Institute](#) issued a report on the '[Human Freedom Index](#)', which placed Syria in last place in the 2021 world rankings in terms of freedoms. The report ranks countries according to several indicators, including personal freedom and rule of law, safety and security, identity and relationships, freedom of movement, speech, assembly and religion, in addition to economic freedom, and the ability of individuals to make their own economic decisions.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), says:

"The Syrian regime rules Syria with an iron fist, banning all political parties, along with prohibiting the establishment of opposition or even independent media. There will be no freedom of the press, opinion, or expression as long as dictatorship and tyranny remain. Meanwhile, the areas outside the Syrian regime's control have provided no democratic model that respects freedom of the press, opinion, and expression."

Report's Methodology:

Since the very beginning of its work, SNHR has been concerned with documenting violations committed against workers in the media sector, which include killing, arrest, injury and persecution, whether through cataloguing these in daily news reports or via issuing [monthly reports](#) and [special reports](#) documenting these violations. On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day specifically, we are keen to publish a special report highlighting the violations committed by all the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria.

A citizen journalist is defined, according to the [SNHR's methodology](#), as an individual who plays or has played an important role in the reporting and dissemination of news; when anyone classified as belonging within this category takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, however, they are no longer categorized as citizen journalists, although this categorization can be restored once they abstain completely from any involvement in military action.

This report outlines the record of the most notable violations against journalists and media workers in Syria from March 2011 to May 2022, and highlights the most notable violations documented by SNHR in the past year (from May 2021 to May 2022), as well as including the most notable violations that occurred during the same period.

Through use of SNHR's extensive database, we can catalogue the victims who were killed and the cases of arrest according to the governorate where the incidents occurred, and also by the governorate from which the victims originally came. This report documents the death toll of victims and arrests/enforced disappearances according to the governorate in which the incidents occurred, rather than by the gov-

ernorate they originally came from. This method is used to identify the extent of the human losses and violence inflicted on media workers in each of the Syrian governorates.

Through field researchers working with us, we have obtained direct testimonies from survivors, eyewitnesses, and victims' relatives, none of which are cited from any open sources, with this report providing two of these testimonies. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the interviewees, who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without us offering or providing them with any incentives, as well as providing assurances to them that we will conceal the identity of any witness who prefers to use an alias. All these procedures are carried out under the terms of SNHR's internal protocols, which we have worked for years to perfect, and which we strive constantly to develop through our experience in order to consistently maintain the highest standards of care and reliability.

SNHR also analyzed videos and photographs that were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. Furthermore, we retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in this report in a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by Syrian regime forces and some other armed groups.

The information contained in this report only represents the bare minimum of incidents which we have been able to document, and of the severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

II. Eleven Years of Continuous Violations against Citizen Journalists and Freedom of Opinion and Expression

Since the outbreak of the popular uprising, the various parties to the conflict have engaged in practices that violate the freedom of the press, opinion and expression, and we have documented multiple types of grave violations, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests/enforced disappearances, torture, attacks on facilities, and enacting laws that restrict freedom of the press, opinion and expression.

Since [our previous annual report](#) in May 2021 up until May 2022, we have documented numerous atrocious violations, and we did not notice any tangible difference in the practices of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces against journalists and media workers during the past year compared to the previous years, and can therefore state with confidence that press freedom in Syria remains at the lowest possible level.

A. Syrian regime forces

The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the greatest responsibility for Syria's horrendous status globally concerning press freedom and media work, and for the grotesque misrepresentation of Syria and the Syrian people. The types of violations committed by the Syrian regime against journalists and media workers are wide-ranging and various, as the regime continues to generally prohibit all independent media, and to exert absolute control over state media. The regime restricts freedom of opinion and expression for media workers and citizens based on laws (issued via decrees, or through the People's Assembly, which is itself subject to absolute regime control) that expressly oppose international human rights law and wholly obstruct freedom of opinion and expression.

For instance, Article 12 of [the Media Law](#) includes five provisions for material banned from publication, including "any publication of content that affects national unity and national security, harms the holy religions and beliefs, or incites sectarian or confessional strife." The fifth provision also bans anything that "harms state symbols". All these are infinitely vague terms, whose use effectively allows the banning of almost everything.

This 'law' also grants the right to regulate the media sector to the National Council of Information, which according to Article 20 consists of "nine members, including the president and deputy of the Council, who hold Syrian Arab nationality, who are named by a decree issued by the president of the Syrian regime for a period of three years, renewable for one additional time." Under this legislation, the Syrian regime establishes autocratic domination over all state institutions and abolishes the independence and impartiality which media are supposed to enjoy.

The Syrian regime doesn't only crush freedom of speech via traditional media, with Bashar al Assad also issuing a decree aimed at restricting and proscribing it online via the Internet. On May 7, 2012, the regime issued [Legislative Decree No. 17](#) related to the application of the provisions of the Social Media Law and Anti-Cybercrime legislation; according to Article 28 of this legislation, the previous minimum penalty prescribed in Criminal laws is doubled in the event of any individual using a network, a computer device, or an information system, with this article stipulating in Paragraph (c) for several forms of crimes punishable by law, including "promoting terrorism by means of information". It is well known that the Syrian regime automatically labels all those who oppose it and anyone who publishes information exposing its practices and violations as "terrorist".

The most recent legislation restricting the freedom of the press, opinion and expression was issued on April 18, 2022, when the Syrian regime's President Bashar al Assad issued Law No. 20 of 2022, to restructure the criminal and legal rules for cybercrime included in Legislative Decree No. 17 of 2012.

We at the SNHR stress that what the law stipulates is a consolidation of the Syrian regime's policy of restricting freedom of opinion and expression, and an expansion of the broad accusations fabricated and invoked by the regime since March 2011 to legitimize its brutality, mass arrests and other crimes it has perpetrated and to give a free hand to its security forces. We note that the Syrian regime had already paved the way for criminalization of the 'offences' listed in Law 20 by preceding it with Law 15 of 2022 issued at the end of March, which included an amendment to the General Penal Code. In [our report issued on April 28, 2022](#), we revealed that the amendments to the General Penal Code issued by the Syrian regime according to Law 15/2022 has expanded it to include even more new and vaguely defined crimes than previously, to enable the targeting and persecution of an even wider range of civilians for exercising the slightest forms of expression of opinion or criticism of the state authorities. We believe that these amendments were issued in an attempt to quell the state of popular tension prevailing in the areas under regime control, even by the regime's loyalists due to the deteriorating economic and living conditions that civilians are suffering from; therefore, almost everyone who criticizes anything is arrested, further contributing to strengthening the existing pitiless iron grip of the authority and legitimizing further arrests.

The following is a brief analysis of Law No. 20 of 2022 related to cybercrime:

This law contains several vaguely defined articles, and we believe that it violates the right to freedom of the press, opinion and expression and threatens digital rights and privacy on the Internet. It consists of 50 articles that include tightening penalties for publishing any content on the Internet that the authorities find objectionable, as well as threatening both imprisonment and a fine together for whoever publishes digital content online with the intention of "overthrowing or changing the system of government in the country," or "undermining the prestige of the state and prejudicing national unity." It includes two main sections:

The first: Regulating network communication and the obligations of the provider of access and hosting services, and the provider of application services. Article (3) (a) Paragraph (1) obligates Internet access service providers to save traffic data of all subscribers for a period of time determined by the competent authorities; this means a blatant violation of citizens' digital privacy, giving security services full access to all information belonging to peaceful online activists.

Second: Acts that are considered crimes, which also consist of two main sections:

- a. Information crimes of a substantive or technical nature, such as hacking, malicious software design, information interception, and smart card crimes.
- b. Ordinary crimes committed by citizens while using the computer network: This criminalizes privacy violations and acts such as slander, denigration, humiliation, fraud, abuse of information credit, indecency or immodesty, promotion of drugs, and insulting religions, sanctities, and religious rituals. The new legislation makes the penalties for these offenses far more severe than those previously imposed by the General Penal Code. It also subjects those sharing any of these criminalized published materials to the same penalty as the original writer or perpetrator.

Here we shed light on the crimes mentioned by the law, which restrict freedoms of opinion, expression and criticism:

One: Crimes against the Constitution:

These shall be punished with imprisonment from 7 to 15 years and a fine of up to 15 million Syrian pounds for whoever establishes or manages a website or web page or **publishes material** on the Internet that advocates or encourages one or more of the following:

- Changing the constitution by illegal means
- Stripping part of the Syrian territory from the sovereignty of the state
- Provoking armed rebellion against the authorities established under the Constitution or preventing them from exercising their functions derived from the Constitution
- Overthrowing or changing the system of government in the country

We at the SNHR believe that by including a text like this, the ruling authority can punish any individual under the pretext of their calling for a change to the constitution currently in force in Syria, which is the 2012 constitution, and the same applies to any calls for federation, demonstration, or regime change. In a previous report, we detailed several points clearly showing that this constitution that contravenes international law.

Two: Undermining the prestige of the state:

The vague charge of 'undermining the prestige of the state' is classified as a felony with a penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to 10 million Syrian pounds; this differs from its legislative counterpart in Article 287 of the General Penal Code in that the crime stipulated in the common law affects only the citizen accused of broadcasting false news from abroad that undermines the prestige of the state and is considered a minor misdemeanor, punishable by imprisonment for up to six months, while this crime in the new law affects Syrians and non-Syrians in the homeland.

The fact that this new charge greatly expands the scope of this crime to include Syrians, as well as non-Syrians, inside Syria leads us to believe that this expansion aims to establish more repression based on the regime's introduction of legislative texts designed solely to serve its own interests, since the text defining this offence doesn't meet the standard required according to the general law, which states that the perpetrator must be aware of his or her offence, i.e. in this case the accused individual must be aware that he or she is publishing false news when doing so in order to be charged, exempting those who publish such false news by mistake from punishment. This condition is notably absent from the text of the new law, which means it may be used to severely punish people who mistakenly publish an incorrect news item in good faith. Therefore, it seems clear that this text is intended to help the regime further suppress the freedom of the press and opinion and attack anyone who publishes any news item that does not meet with the ruling authority's approval.

Three: Undermining the financial position of the state:

'Understanding the financial position of the state' is a broad and vague accusation enabling the Syrian regime to charge any activist, journalist or media person who criticizes the Syrian regime. The penalties stipulated are a prison sentence of up to fifteen years and a fine of up to ten million Syrian pounds for anyone who establishes or manages a website or web page, or published material on the network with the intent of causing decline, instability, or undermining confidence in the currency or its exchange rates specified in official publications.

Thus, the authorities can, for example, punish those who publish the true value of the Syrian pound in the market of neighboring countries, which differs greatly from the official price of the pound approved by the regime-controlled Central Bank, another clear repression of opinion and the press.

B. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS)

HTS has also routinely persecuted citizen journalists in the areas under its control, killing and arresting all those who it felt might pose a threat to its extremist ideology and policies. We have also documented the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists by HTS forces in retaliation for publishing material contrary to its policies or for participating in activism without obtaining permission. We also recorded the injury of dozens of citizen journalists by HTS forces while they were working on media coverage of anti-HTS protests; this has recently led many citizen journalists to either abandon their journalistic activities or flee their areas.

HTS has also exercised more control and cracked down on journalists by forcing them to obtain a press card to carry out their work with those wishing to obtain this card required to submit a request to the Media Relations Office of the Salvation Government, including detailed information about whoever submitted the request and his/her work; upon receiving this card, after a waiting period of up to two months, the citizen journalist pledges to abide by a number of stipulations, including refraining from filming via drones in areas under HTS control without first receiving clearance, and providing an explanation of the nature of the media material he/she is working on and the party to which it will be provided for each report.

On the occasion of the 2021 World Press Freedom Day, we recorded summonses being issued by the Media Directorate of the Salvation Government against journalists and media workers, after they published posts on their personal Facebook pages on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day. We recorded that Omar Haj Kadour, a French Press Agency correspondent, was summoned by the Information Directorate on Tuesday, May 4, 2021, in connection with posting a photo of himself



Photo of the post that Omar Haj Kadour published on his page on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day - May 2021

on his personal Facebook page, including a post about him being subjected to a violation nearly a year ago by HTS personnel; the Directorate officials defaced his press card issued by them as a preliminary penalty, and he was warned that publishing the same photo in the future would expose him to greater penalties escalating to preventing him from engaging in any media coverage and work permanently, and he was asked to pledge not to re-publish it.

Media activists in HTS-control areas have been specifically targeted in the form of lawsuits filed by HTS' Media Relations Office, in coordination with the Press Affairs Office of its affiliated Salvation Government; in the event that the media activist fails to comply with this summons, the security division responsible for the area where the activist lives is deployed to compel them to attend the court hearing. SNHR has documented dozens of cases of summons/ threats issued by HTS, and we've found that there is coordination between the various security apparatuses and the civil and judicial institutions established by HTS (which it denies being linked to) in organizing and issuing these summons/ threats.

Thaer al Abeid, a media activist and reporter for a local agency, from al Dana city, north of Idlib governorate, was forced by the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government's Directorate of Press Affairs, on May 20, 2021, to sign a pledge not to write news reports and press materials critical of HTS on his personal Facebook account.

The SNHR spoke with Thaer al Abeid⁵, who told us that he received a notification via WhatsApp from a person called 'Khattab,' an official in the HTS' Media Relations Office, "He asked me to visit them at their headquarters in Idlib city, on the pretext that I was being harassed during my media work, and they were communicating with me to solve these problems, but I refused to visit them. After I received several requests to visit them, which carried veiled threats, Khattab revealed the real purpose of the request to visit them, and the topic he wanted to talk to me about, which was the HTS's annoyance about some reports and press news condemning HTS's acts and violations against civilians and activists in areas of Idlib."

Thaer added that he received numerous notices from several officials in HTS' Media Relations Office, including a notice stating that the office had filed a lawsuit against him, in an attempt to force him to visit them before referring the case to HTS' Ministry of Interior. He said, "Once again, I refused to attend. So, the director of the Harem area in Idlib suburbs, known as 'Abu Islam al Raqqawi', summoned me to his office in Harem city, through my brother, threatening to carry out a raid and arrest [me] if I refused to visit him. I was left with no other choice but to submit to their demands. The next day, I went to Abu Islam's office, and he told me about their annoyance at my refusal to go to their headquarters in Idlib city and meet the so-called 'Khattab'; and told me that I should stop writing things against them.

⁵ Via phone on September 6, 2021.

On May 11, I went to the headquarters of the Directorate of Press Affairs of the Salvation Government accompanied by 'Abu Islam al Raqqaw' to meet Khattab, but Khattab did not attend the session and sent on his behalf the Director of Press Affairs of the Salvation Government along with several other people; they described the journalistic materials and reports that I write as fake and [said they] didn't bear any criteria of credibility, and aimed to discredit Hay'at Tahrir al Sham."

"Two days later, I was informed by a call from the phone number of the Directorate of Press Affairs of the Salvation Government about the date of a new session in the building of the Directorate on May 20, 2021, at noon, in order to meet this so-called 'Khattab'. Indeed, I went on schedule to the office of the Directorate of Press Affairs, and the same conversation took place between me and them about the materials I wrote, and the result was that the lawsuit would be waived in return for my signature on a pledge not to write again against HTS, and to apologize for the mistakes I made, as they put it."

Thaer continued, "I fingerprinted and signed a paper in which I apologized for the materials I had written about their practices and mistakes, in addition to my pledge not to repeat them again, and I left the Directorate and no one has spoken to me since then," adding, "I was sure that my fate would be arrest if I refused to sign."

As for the suppression of media institutions, HTS's Media Relations Office notified Orient TV reporters via WhatsApp on August 24, 2021, that it had decided to end all the Syrian opposition media channel's operations in the areas under the group's control in the Idlib region, in response to Orient's supposed "bias and anti-armed opposition policy." This came after the channel published or broadcast several reports and programs criticizing the practices of HTS and Armed Opposition factions in northwest Syria, in which they were described as 'militias'. [On August 25, 2021, we issued a statement of condemnation in this regard.](#)

C. All Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army

The areas under the control of the Armed Opposition/Syrian National Army have not been good examples of freedom of the press, opinion and expression. Instead, they've pursued a policy of harassment, extortion, intimidation, arrest, and torture against citizen journalists. Some of the factions have also practiced gender-based discrimination against female journalists in areas under their control. The Armed Opposition/Syrian National Army forces failed to provide a safe environment for practicing media work in areas under their control, where many assaults on media workers have occurred, while no serious investigations have been conducted, or any results revealed to the Syrian public.

In the past year, we have monitored incidents of abuse against journalists and media workers as a result of the security chaos; an assault on cartoonist Hadil Ismailon on July 16, 2021, is a blatant example of such attacks, with [SNHR issuing a statement](#) condemning the incident. The controlling forces in the areas under the control of the Armed Opposition/Syrian National Army must assume their responsibility for

providing and ensuring security and safety for the area's residents, prosecuting those involved in such attacks and holding them accountable, conduct investigations into these incidents and reveal their findings to the public as soon as possible.

D. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The SDF has broadly restricted the freedom of the press, in particular reporters and media of any orientation which oppose or report unfavorably on SDF policies and actions. The SDF has also restricted the movement of media workers on a number of occasions, with some of these media workers regularly persecuted, arrested, and harassed, prompting them to flee from the areas under SDF control. SDF also requires that all media workers must obtain a license to engage in media activity, with applicants routinely subjected to questioning and arrest. Some media workers also told us of intentional delays in the issuing of these licenses, and it seems that their issue depends on the applicant's identity and the extent of his or her compatibility with SDF's ideology.

The following is the record of the most notable violations that media workers have faced, according to the SNHR's database, from March 2011 to May 2022, and the record of these violations from our last annual report in May 2021 up until May 2022:

First: Since March 2011:

A. Extrajudicial killings:

The SNHR has documented the deaths of 711 journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2022, including seven children and six women (adult female), as well as nine foreign journalists, and 52 others who died as a result of torture, in addition to 1,563 others who were injured to varying degrees. These were distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

A. The main parties:

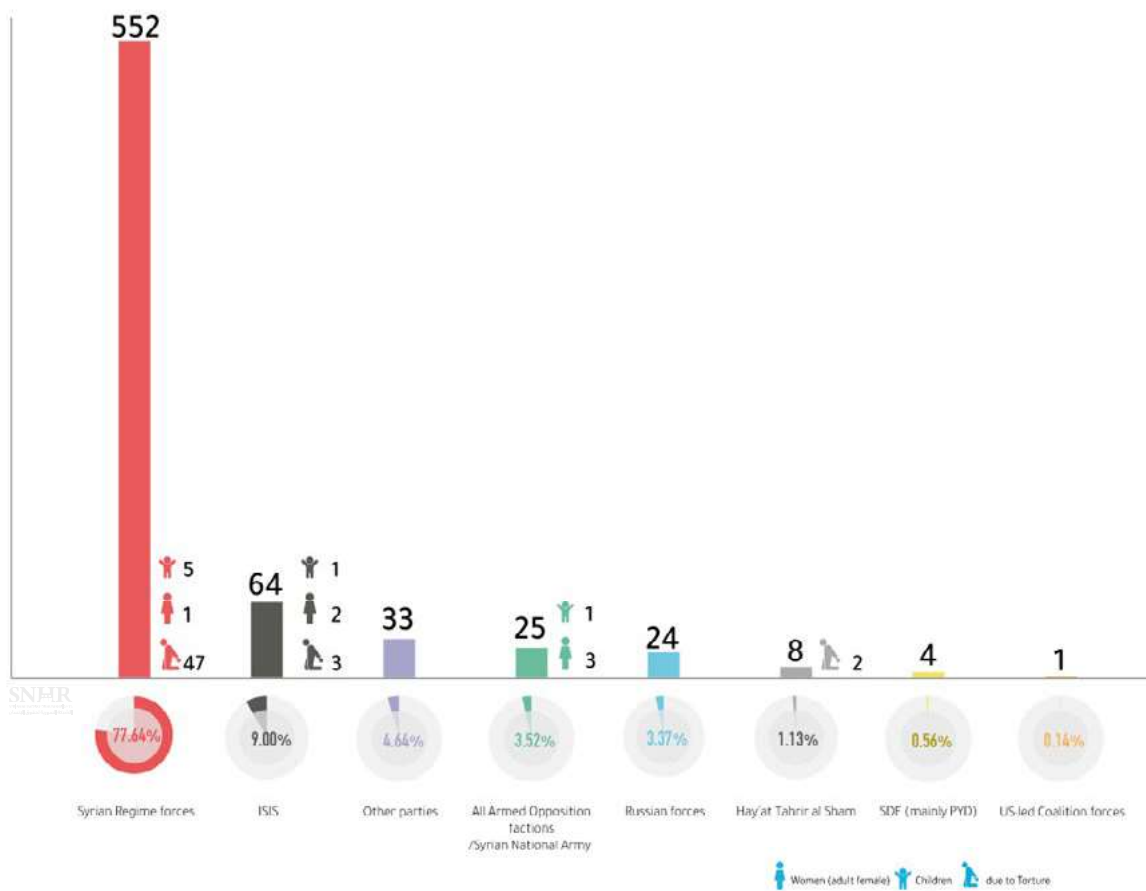
- **Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):**⁶ 552, including five children, one woman, five foreign journalists, and 47 who died due to torture in detention centers.
- **Russian forces:** 24.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):** 64, including one child, two women, three foreign journalists, and three who died due to torture.

⁶ We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is that of a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government's role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show; the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria.

Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government' in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:**⁷ Eight, including two who died due to torture.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army:**⁸ 25, including one child and three women.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Four.
- **US-led Coalition forces:** One.

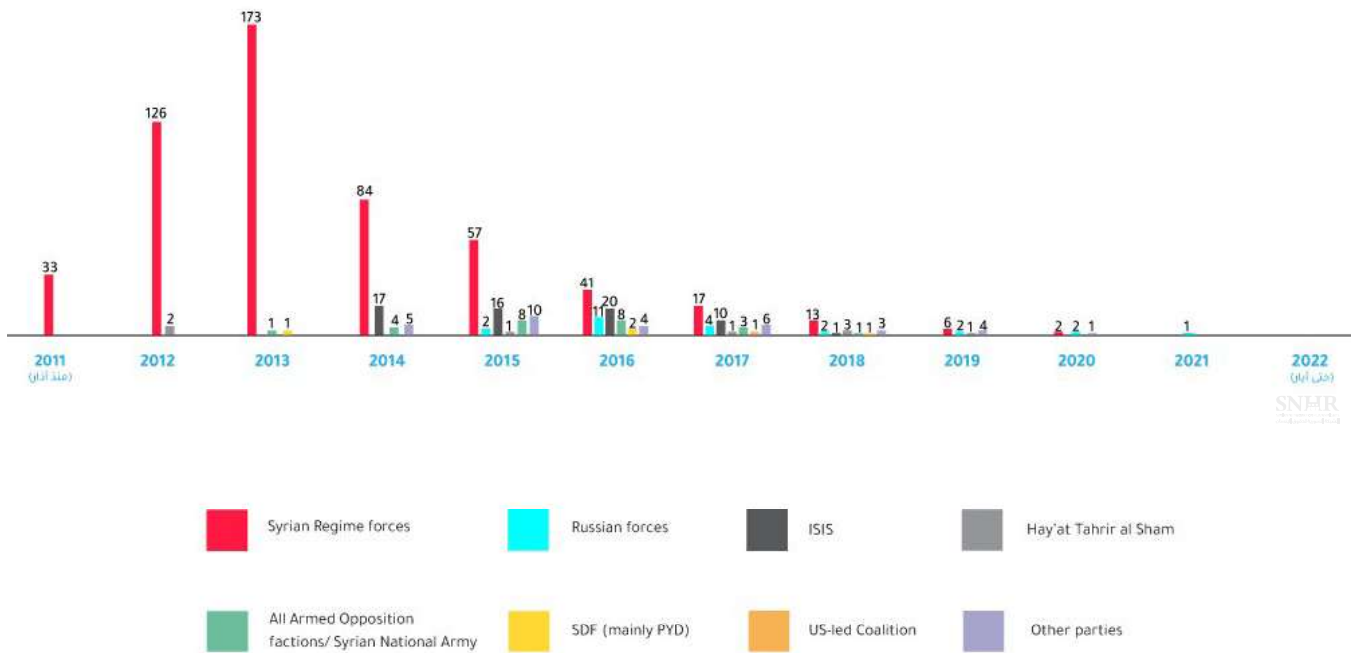
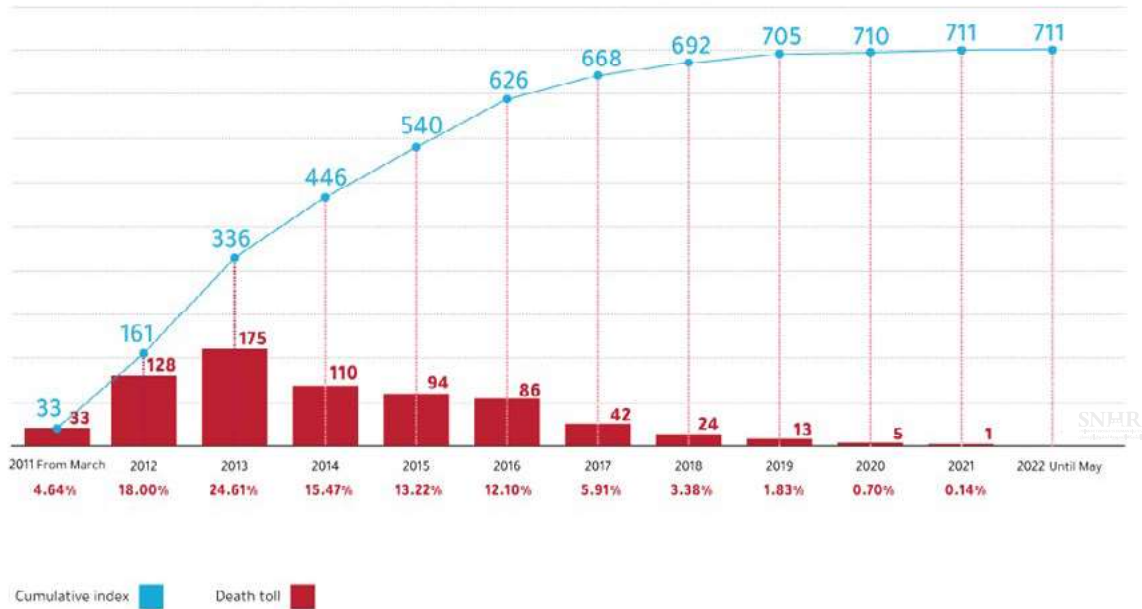
B. Other parties: 33, including one foreign journalist who was killed at the hands of the Operation Peace Spring alliance forces (Turkish forces and Syrian National Army forces).



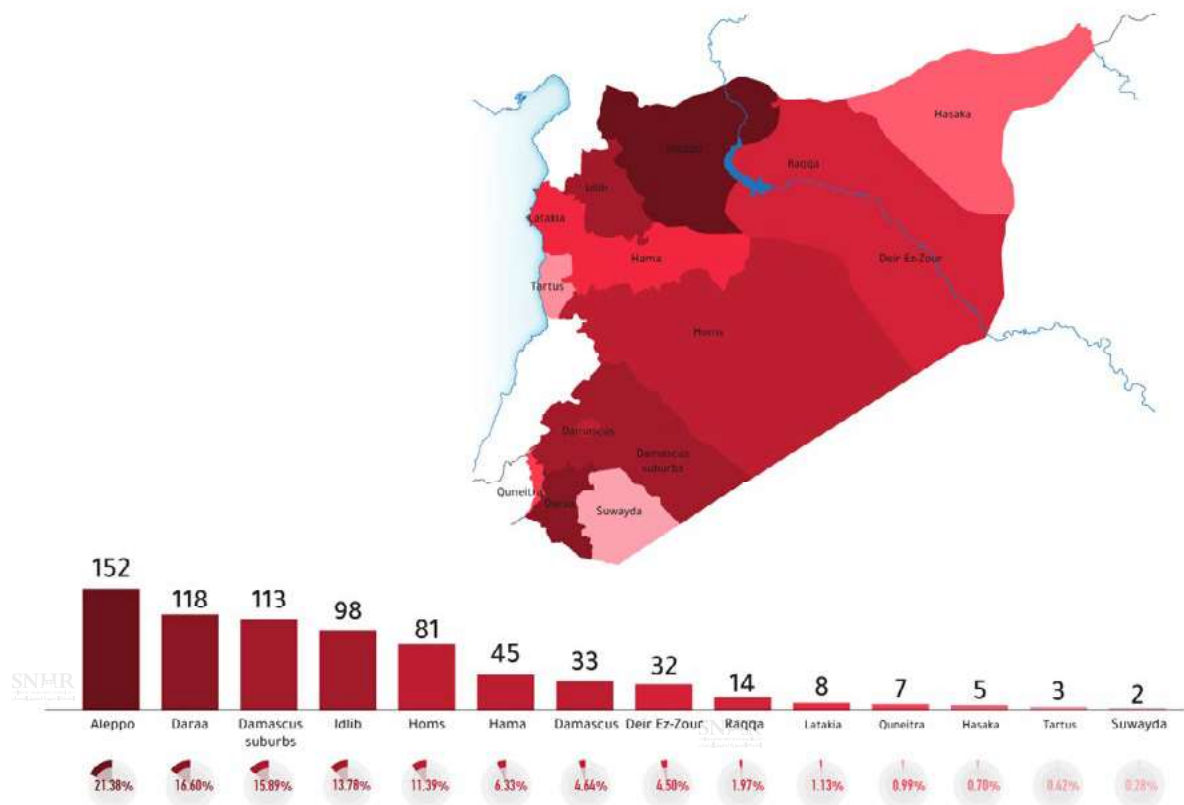
⁷ The United Nations has designated it as a terrorist organization.

⁸ Various Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army that emerged since 2011 to date in all areas that came under their control.

The death toll of journalists and media workers was distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces by years as follows:



The death toll of journalists and media workers was distributed across all Syria's governorates:



The statistics listed above show that the Syrian regime and its Russian ally are responsible for approximately 82% of the death toll of journalists and media workers, and the Syrian regime is responsible for approximately 91% of the death toll due to torture in the regime's official and unofficial detention centers. These figures also show that 2013 was the bloodiest year to date in Syria since 2011 for journalists and media workers (during which approximately 25% of the journalists and media workers documented as having died were killed), followed by 2012 (18%), and 2014 (16%).

Aleppo governorate saw the highest death toll among journalists and media workers, accounting for approximately 22%, followed by Daraa governorate with 17%, then Damascus Suburbs with 16%.

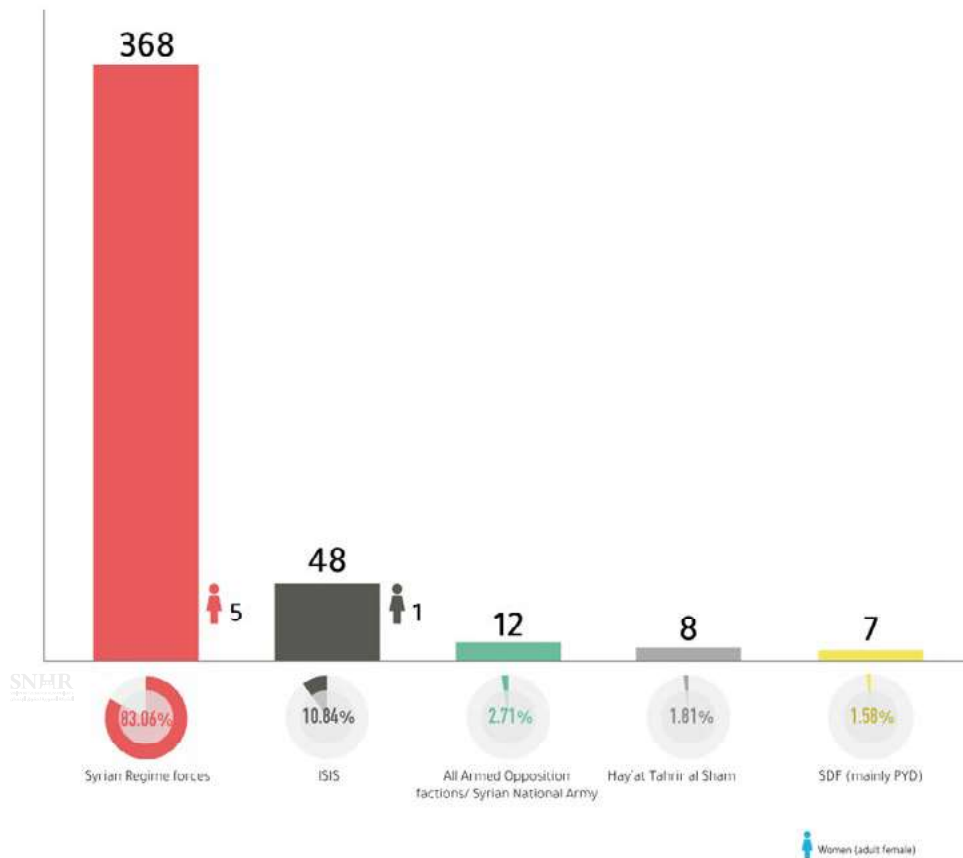
B. Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances:

The SNHR documented at least 1,250 cases of arrests and kidnappings of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2022, of whom at least 443, including six women and 17 foreign journalists, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in detention centers, distributed by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces as follows:

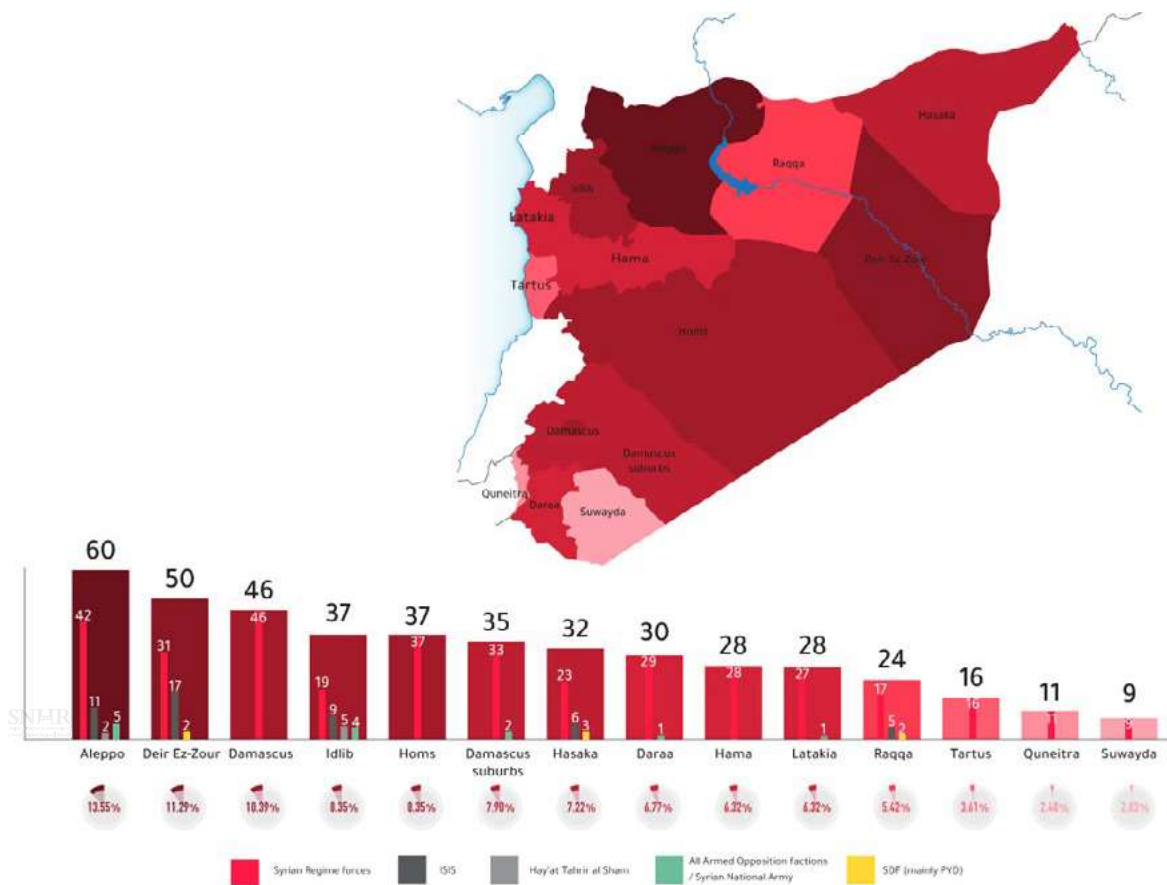
- **Syrian regime forces:** 368, including five women and four foreign journalists.
- **ISIS:** 48, including one woman and eight foreign journalists.

- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** Eight.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army:** 12, including five foreign journalists.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Seven.

SNHR expresses serious concern about the fate of the journalists and media workers arrested by the Syrian regime, especially in light of the fact that the Syrian detainees, including citizen journalists, are being held in extremely poor and inhuman conditions of detention, with the conditions being even more squalid in the solitary confinement cells located on the detention centers' lower floors which lack even light. Throughout the duration of their detention in the security branches, detainees are also prevented from going outside to get any exercise or exposure to fresh air or sunlight. Detainees are also able to shower or wash only very rarely throughout the period of their detention, which often lasts for many years, with all these factors contributing to and exacerbating the spread of the COVID pandemic and of any other disease epidemics that might emerge there.



The record of journalists and media workers who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces was distributed across the governorates as follows:



The above statistics show that the Syrian regime is responsible for approximately 83% of the cases of journalists and media workers who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared.

According to the data documented by SNHR, the largest proportion of journalists and media workers who are still detained or forcibly disappeared were originally arrested in Aleppo governorate (approximately 14% of the documented total), followed by Deir Ez-Zour governorate (approximately 12%), then Damascus (approximately 10%).

Second: From May 2021 to May 2022:

A. Extrajudicial killings:

The SNHR has documented the death of one citizen journalist between May 2021 and May 2022, who was killed at the hands of Russian forces.

B. Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances:

The SNHR has documented at least 39 cases of arrests and kidnappings of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between May 2021 and May 2022, distributed by perpetrator party as follows:

- Syrian regime forces: 13, including three women.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: 11.
- All Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army: Three.
- Syrian Democratic Forces: 12.

Prominent incidents in which the parties to the conflict and controlling forces have been documented committing violations against journalists and media workers between May 2021 and May 2022:

A. Extrajudicial killings:

Russian forces:

[Hammam al Asi](#), a Civil Defense media worker with the Bazabour center, [was killed](#) on Saturday, July 17, 2021, [as a result of shrapnel in the chest](#), when artillery forces, which we believe were Russian, fired a shell equipped with a Krasnopol laser guidance system near him [while he was providing media coverage of earlier shelling](#) by the same forces on the southeast of Sarja village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate.

Hammam, a 30-year-old man from Bazabour village in the southern suburbs of Idlib, and a first-year university student in the Faculty of Science/ Department of Physics at Tishreen University, was married with three children.

The [Civil Defense Organization](#) published an obituary mourning Hammam on its [official account on Facebook](#).



Hammam Muhammad al Asi, died following his injury as a result of a Russian ground attack targeting south of Sarja village in Idlib suburbs - July 17, 2021

SNHR spoke with Hassan al Asi⁹, director of the Civil Defense Center in Bazabour village, who told us: "On Saturday, July 17th, the southeastern outskirts of Sarja village in the southern suburbs of Idlib were subjected to artillery shelling by forces we believe were Russian, stationed in Khan al Sebel village,

⁹ Via WhatsApp on July 25, 2021.

which is under the control of Syrian regime forces, resulting in the deaths of a number of civilians. During Hammam's media coverage of the location of the shelling, the same forces repeated their artillery shelling with an artillery shell equipped with a Krasnopol laser guidance system, with reconnaissance aircraft, which we believe were Russian, flying overhead. The shell landed near Hammam, injuring him with shrapnel in the chest. He was immediately taken to al Shami Hospital in Ariha city, and then to the al Muhafatha Hospital in Idlib city for surgery, but he died during the surgery. It is worth mentioning that the double-tap attack caused a massacre of five civilians, including three children and one woman, and injured five others, including two Civil Defense personnel."

B. Arbitrary arrest/enforced disappearance:

1. Syrian regime forces:

On Thursday, June 24, 2021, Syrian regime forces personnel arrested journalist Bassam Safar, as he was passing through a regime checkpoint at the entrance to al Dwail'a neighborhood in Damascus city while returning to his home, before releasing him on Saturday, July 31, 2021.

Journalist and writer Bassam Safar, from Salamiya city, east of Hama governorate, who lives in Damascus, was born in 1962. A graduate of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts' Department of Dramatic Studies, he has been working as a journalist since 1992. Safar is a member of the Executive Office of the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change and an editor with the cultural section of the North Press Agency. In July 2021, we issued a [statement](#) of condemnation about the incident.



Bassam Safar

2. Hat'at Tahrir al Sham:

Muhammad al Na'san al Dabl, a media activist from Darkoush town in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, who also works as a photographer for the Orient News Channel, was arrested, along with his brother, Omar, by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel on Friday, May 7, 2021, in front of the town's al Rahma Hospital over an argument with HTS personnel in the same location. We documented their release the next day.



Muhammad al Na'san al Dabl

Bashar and Muhammad al Sheikh, two brothers, both media workers from Kafr Nbouda town in the northwest of Hama governorate, currently living in al Anadolu IDP Camp near Kafr Lousin village in north of Idlib governorate, were detained on Saturday, September 4, 2021, by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel in a raid on their residence in the camp on charges of dealing with the US-led coalition forces. We documented that Muhammad al Sheikh was released on September 6, 2021, while his brother, Bashar, was released on April 6, 2022.



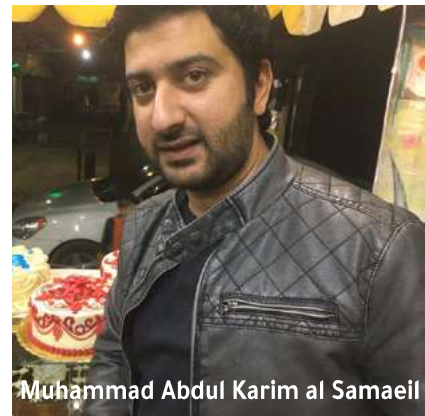
Muhammad al Sheikh



Bashar al Sheikh

Muhammad Abdul Karim al Samaeil, a civil society and media activist, born in 1984, who came from Saraqeb city in the eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate, works at the Start Point human rights organization. [On Thursday, January 20, 2022](#), Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel arrested Muhammad in Idlib city, before releasing him on Wednesday, March 23, 2022.

SNHR notes that, prior to this arrest, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham had arrested Muhammad on January 17, 2022, as he passed through an HTS checkpoint in Salwa village north of Idlib governorate while traveling to Afrin area north of Aleppo governorate, releasing him the next day, only to arrest him a second time two days later.



Muhammad Abdul Karim al Samaeil

Muhammad al Ismail, a media activist and a university student at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the International University for Science and Renaissance in Izaz city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo, from Sfouhen village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel on Thursday, February 10, 2022, after they assaulted him in Sfouhen IDP camp in Atama village north of Idlib governorate, over his participation in popular protests against HTS in connection with gunfire by members of an HTS-affiliated group in the camp which injured a woman in the head.¹⁰ We recorded his release after several hours.



Muhammad al Ismail

¹⁰ [SNHR](#), A displaced woman was wounded by a gunshot from Hay'at Tharir al Sham north of Idlib governorate on February 10, 2022.

3. Syrian Democratic Forces:

On Thursday, June 3, 2021, gunmen affiliated with Syrian Democratic Forces kidnapped Husam Alkass after beating him in al Souq area in al Malekiya city in the northern suburbs of Hasaka governorate center, over his criticism of the SDF's forced conscription policy on his Facebook account, before releasing him the next day. Husam Alkass, a member of the media office of the Assyrian Democratic Organization affiliated with the Peace and Freedom Front, is from al Malekiya city.



Husam Alkass

Thamer Muhammad al Shehadah, a media activist from al Sh'afa town in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, who works for the People's Municipal Council affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces in al Sh'afa town, was arrested along with his brother, Jarrah, by gunmen affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces on Friday, August 13, 2021, during a raid on their home in the town, with both being taken to an SDF detention centers in the town. SNHR documented that Jarrah was released a few hours after their arrest while Thamer was released on Sunday, August 22, 2021.



Thamer Muhammad al Shehadah

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

- All the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces have violated many of the rules and laws of international human rights law in the areas they control, especially those related to freedom of opinion and expression, such as Article 19¹¹ of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19(2)¹² of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- These parties have also violated many rules and articles of international humanitarian law, foremost among which is Rule 34¹³ of customary law, which requires that civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities.

¹¹ OHCHR, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19, https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr_translations/eng.pdf

¹² OHCHR, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19 (2), <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/professionalinterest/ccpr.pdf>

¹³ ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, rule 34, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule34

Recommendations:

All the Parties to the Conflict/Controlling Forces:

- Immediately release journalists and media workers who have been arbitrarily detained, and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared.
- Allow access to all media outlets and cease to proscribe the work of journalists according to the extent of their loyalty to the controlling party.
- Repeal all 'security laws' which absolutely suppress and deny freedom of opinion and expression, especially those issued by the Syrian regime.
- Not use media as organs to serve the controlling forces and to justify their violations or falsify the truth.
- Stop direct or indirect harassment and threats to press institutions and their employees.

UN Security Council and International Community:

- Make clear efforts to end the conflict in Syria through a political process that advances Syria from being a totalitarian state to a stable, democratic and civilized state that respects press freedom.
- Denounce the violations practiced by the parties to the conflict against journalists, and support press institutions operating on Syrian territory in order to continue their work in reporting facts and events.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):

- Condemn the targeting of journalists and media workers in Syria, and highlight their sacrifices and suffering.
- Demand the disclosure of the fate of the detained and forcibly disappeared journalists and media workers.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI):

- Launch special investigations on the targeting of journalists and media workers in particular, especially in light of their vital role in documenting events in Syria.

The Arab and International Media Institutions:

- Advocate on behalf of fellow journalists and media workers in Syria through the publication of periodic reports highlighting their daily suffering and commemorating their sacrifices, as well as communicating with their families, and providing relief and reassurance to them.

Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to all journalists and media workers whose contribution has effectively enriched this report, who put their own lives at grave risk in order to report the truth to the entire Syrian community and the world.



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