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Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Exploits the De-Escalation Agreement and Escalates Their Violations

Five Civilians Killed, including Two Children, and no less than 184 Individuals Arrested



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Sunday, October 21, 2018

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



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I. Introduction and Methodology

In January 2017, the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham group was announced. The group included Fateh al Sham (formerly al Nusra Front) and a number of factions from the armed opposition, as well as Ansar al Din, who is one of the extremist Islamic groups. The group has been responsible for serious violations throughout 2017, where they carried out several attacks in areas in southern and western suburbs of Idlib, as well as the border areas with Turkey. The group continued their policies and methodology, enforcing whatever rulings they see fit through violence and coercion, as they actively sought to expand their areas of control at the expense of the moderate factions' territories. We have published, in this regard, a wide range of news and released [two extensive reports](#) in which we've documented the most notable violations perpetrated by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Idlib governorate.

Since the start of September 2018, we recorded a significant escalation of the rate at which Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has been perpetrated their violations in north Syria, where the group has raided a number of villages and arrested dozens of individuals, including local activists, relief workers and mosque preachers (Khatib). It seems to us that this escalation by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham was in anticipation of the Turkish-Russian agreement, where they hoped to gain as much as they can on the ground. In light of the agreement which came into force on September 17, the residents living in the areas that broke away from the Syrian regime's control breathed a sigh of relief as rates of bombardment and killing dropped, enabling them to secure some basic needs, particularly those that require transportation between cities and villages. The forcibly displaced, namely the segment that was affected the most



in those areas, were the ones who needed this kind of transportation the most. About 38% of the population of the areas that broke out of the Syrian regime's control in north Syria are IDPs. However, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's violations resulted in destabilizing the state of security and stability which the society was in desperate need of, and caused panic in a number of villages and areas.

As the indiscriminate aerial bombardment stopped in light of the most recent Turkish-Russian agreement, Friday's demonstrations came back and some banners were notably seen in those demonstrations, where some local groups and activists were pursued by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates because of those banners and their discourse condemning the group's practices.

This report sheds light on Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's violations between the start of September and mid-October 2018. The report draws upon SNHR team's continued monitoring of news and developments during, before, and after the time period covered by the report, as well as an extensive wide network of relations with dozens of various sources that have been built over the course of our work. In addition, our team was present in some areas and contacted the residents and eyewitnesses, as this report will include two accounts, real names are omitted for security reasons, and we have the contact information of those eyewitnesses.

SNHR has analyzed the videos and photos posted online, or the ones sent by local activists to SNHR via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some videos posted by activists show Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates opening fire on protestors in Kafr Halab village.

This report only represents the bare minimum, which we were able to document, of the magnitude and severity of the violation. It also doesn't cover the social, economic, psychological, and demographic ramifications.

II. Five Civilian Killed in Attacks by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates

SNHR has recorded that five civilians were killed, including two female children, in attacks carried out by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham between the start of September and October 15, 2018. The group raided three villages – two in western suburbs of Aleppo, while the third, Ein Larouz, is located in southern suburbs of Idlib. The group used heavy weapons, mortar shells, and opened fire randomly on civilians in those attacks.





Kafr Halab village, western suburbs of Aleppo governorate

Friday, October 5, 2018, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates raided Kafr Halab village, western suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The village was under the control of Syrian Liberation Front, an armed opposition faction, at the time of the attack. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham alleged that the raid was to arrest Syrian regime affiliates even though the group's gunmen surrounded the village before raiding it, and carried out a raid and arrest campaign that targeted a number of affiliates of the Syrian Liberation Front, before heading for one of the latter's commanders, Raed al Abdo. A number of residents informed us that his house was attacked, as one of his relatives was shot at, which led to clashes between Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and the Syrian Liberation Front, during which Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen used heavy machine guns, which resulted in the killing of two female children from Raed al Abdo's family (Amal and [Ela Assaf](#)) inside their home.

A few hours after the attack, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham opened fire at a demonstration condemning the group's actions. We recorded that one civilian (Moutaz Assaf) was killed as a result of the shooting, while no less than five others were injured, including women.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham managed to establish control over the village in the aftermath of the attack, where the Syrian Liberation Front affiliates retreated to the nearby villages in western suburbs of Aleppo.



[A video](#) showing Hay'at Tahrir al Sham opening fire at protesters in Kafr Halab village – October 5, 2018

SNHR contacted Raed al Abdou¹, a Syrian Liberation Front leader. Raed told us that an armed group raided his house and asked to search it, before they started shooting fire when his wife refused to let them in. He added that they also assaulted his relatives who live in the adjacent house, **“They shot and injured my uncle and tried to rip off the house doors. I came out with my weapon to engage with them, but they opened heavy fire at us and the nearby houses, killing two children. This seemingly wasn’t enough for them. A few hours later, they targeted a demonstration condemning them raiding the village and opened direct fire on the protestors and killed one civilian. They are trying to take over our villages and kick us out.”**

Mezanar village, western suburbs of Aleppo

Saturday, October 6, 2018, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham raided Mezanar village, after taking over Kafr Halab village, and opened random fire. A number of residents told us that clashes ensued between Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and affiliates of the Syrian Liberation Front during which Abdullah al Rammah, a Syrian Liberation Front commander, was killed, while three civilians were injured, including one child, as Hay'at Tahrir al Sham opened random fire at the civilians' houses.

Ein Larouz village, southern suburbs of Idlib

Monday, October 15, 2018, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates raided Ein Larouz village, Jabal al Zawiya, southern suburbs of Idlib, and opened random fire on the houses, killing an elderly man inside his house named Mustafa Qentar.

According to the village's residents, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham raided the village to arrest a number of gunmen who, according to Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates, were responsible for abducting civilians. Clashes ensued, however, between Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates and those gunmen where they were able to escape. In the wake of the raid, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates carried out a raid and arrest campaign where approximately 12 civilians were arrested and taken to an undisclosed location, as their fate remains unknown.

¹ Via WhatsApp on October 6, 2018



SNHR contacted Afif², a resident from Ein Larouz village. Afif told us that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham affiliates raided the village under the pretext of arresting a group of gunmen who abducted residents from the village, **“Large groups of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham fighters entered the village. There have been also claims that other factions were discreetly involved in the raid. They raided the village from multiple directions as they were shooting heavily in the air. This led to big clashes in the village with the families of the wanted individuals. In less than an hour, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham was able to enclose the area, and started raiding houses, arresting anyone whom they suspected was carrying a weapon or showed any resistance. Mustafa Faris Qentar, a 70-year-old elderly man, was hit by one of the random bullets fired by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, and he died immediately.”**

II. Five Civilians Killed in Attacks by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates

SNHR has recorded no less than 184 incidents of arbitrary arrest and abduction carried out by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham forces between the start of September and mid-October 2018. Most of the incidents were concentrated in the villages and towns of Jabal al Zawiya, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and Sarmada, al Dana, and Atma areas, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate.

The arrest campaigns involved prominent figures and sheikhs who refused to praise Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in their sermons, as well as local activists who criticized some of the group's practices on social media. The arrests also involved demonstration organizers who raised banners in protest of the group's policies.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham denies carrying out any abductions or disappearing any individuals for a ransom. However, SNHR team can confirm this through talking to a large number of individuals who were released in the last two years, as they told us they were being held at Hay'at Tahrir al Sham prisons. We have documented that in [a number of previous statements](#).

Marwan al Hamid, from Kafrouma village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen on Sunday, September 2, 2018, in Kafranbel city, southern suburbs of Idlib. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



² Via Facebook



Malek al Abdullah, the imam and preacher (Khatib) of al Farouq Mosque in Atma village, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen on Sunday, September 16, 2018, from Atma village. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.

Yasser Abdul Rahman al Salim, a lawyer, from al Demas town, western Damascus suburbs governorate, born in 1970. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen from his place of residence in Kafranbel city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



Anas Hasoud, co-founder and secretary of Idlib University, has a degree in sharia, from Ma'aret Harma village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen on Tuesday, September 25, 2018, who raided the university headquarter, where he was. His fate remains unknown SNHR, as well as to his family.



Mohammad Ahmad Khashan, Islamic singer and director of an Islamic singing group, from Ma'aret al Nu'man city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen on Friday, October 5, 2018, from Khan Sheikhoun city. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



Saddam al Mohammad, director of Ataa Association for Relief and Development, from al Twyna village, Sahl al Ghab, north-western suburbs of Hama governorate. He was arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen on Friday, October 12, 2018, from Atma village, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.

We recorded that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has taken over Ataa Association's housing project for the displaced in Atma village in August 2018 through the Displaced Directorate which is supported by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham.



IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham is in control of wide areas where they enforce their rule over the residents. The group has a political entity and abides by a hierarchical structure to a large extent. As such, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham is bound by the international human rights law. However, the group has committed wide violations through arrests and enforced-disappearances. In addition, the group has violated the international humanitarian law through indiscriminate shooting which resulted in the killing of many civilians.

Recommendations

International community and influential states

- Support, financially and logistically, the active local councils who are undergoing a conflict with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, whether publicly or discreetly, as the group is trying to dominate or dismantle these councils.
- Support the vital civil society groups in north Syria who stand as a line of defense against extremist groups by raising awareness and providing services.
- Add the Iranian, Iraqi, and other extremist Shiite groups that are openly supported by Iran, as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and all are cross-borders organizations, to the lists of designated terrorist organizations and target and obstruct them in line with extremist Islamic groups.
- Extremist groups thrive on wars and conflicts. Accordingly, the process of political transition to democracy should be accelerated. Also, assist the new Syrian state with restoring security and stability.
- Support the formation of a local police apparatus that is strong and coherent to defend the residents against abductions and assaults, which should pave the way to relative stability and security.



OHCHR

- Monitor Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's violations and its reflections on the lives of the civilians in Idlib, and submit effective recommendations to the international community in this regard. Commission of Inquiry (Col)
- Start investigating the incidents in this report and try to include them in their next report.

Armed opposition factions

- All of the factions that had joined Hay'at Tahrir al Sham should urgently detach themselves from this formation, expose the group's practices, and organize awareness campaigns on the ideals of extremist groups and how they infiltrate societies and recruit youths in parallel with workshops highlighting the importance of respecting and defending basic human rights.

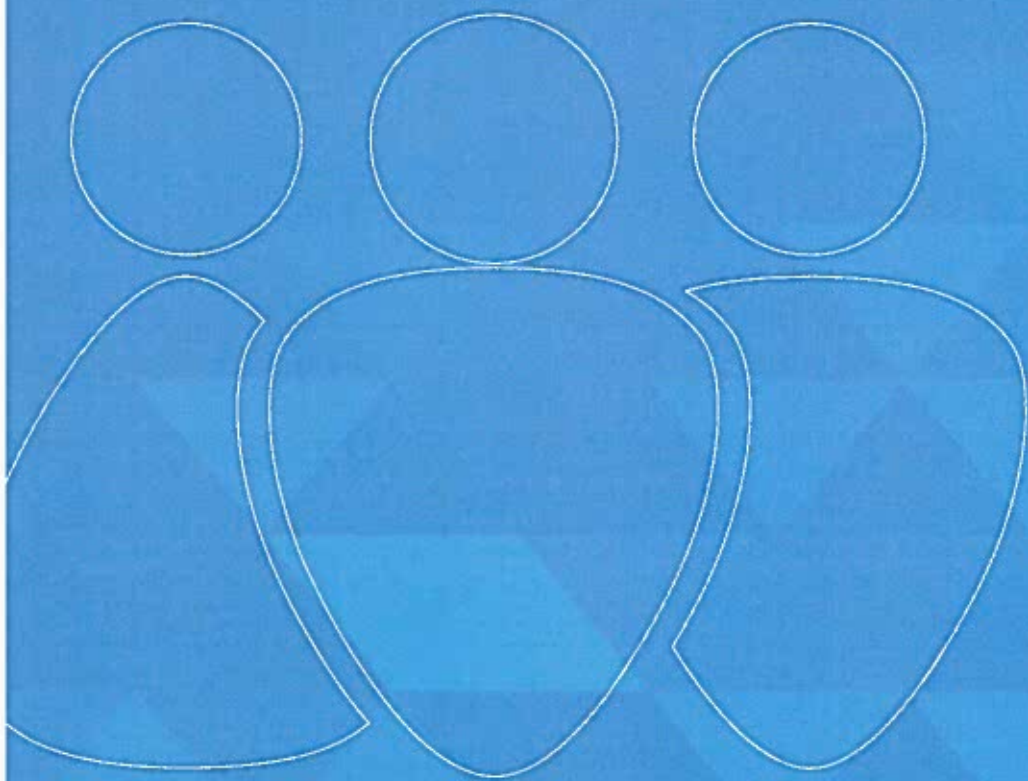
Hay'at Tahrir al Sham

- Immediately cease agitating a state of chaos, infighting, and social resentment.
- Respect basic human rights in their areas of control.
- Immediate release of all arbitrarily arrested detainees
- Ceremonially announcing defection from Al-Qaeda is not enough, as this should be translated into actions in reality.

Acknowledgments

Our most heartfelt gratitude to the survivors and local activists who significantly contributed to this report, as some of them have put their lives at risk to reveal the truth and hold those who were involved accountable.





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