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The Syrian Regime Threatens, Arrests and Tortures the Families of Dissident Political and Military Activists, Using Mafia-Like Methods

Forcing the Father of Activist and Doctor, Amani Ballour, to Appear on Official State Media and to Promote the Security Services' Falsified Version of Events

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

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الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. Nearly 364 Cases of Detainees or Activists' Relatives Being Forced to Appear on Government Media TV and Speak According to the Security Services' Dictates:

The Syrian regime has not only carried out arbitrary arrests and brutal torture against political dissidents detained in connection with the popular uprising, but has also forced many, through torture and coercion, to appear on state-run or pro-regime media TV programs, and make statements and coerced confessions promoting the regime security services' falsified accounts of events, including denying the Syrian regime's responsibility for bombardment, arrests or killings it has carried out and blaming terrorists for these crimes.

In many cases, the Syrian regime uses the families of detainees or political activists now outside Syria who still live in areas under its control, forcing them to appear on state media disavowing their children and accusing them of working for the West, of supporting terrorism, and of other false, pre-prepared charges which are always repeated by the Syrian regime and other affiliates. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has documented at least 364 such appearances by detainees held by the Syrian regime, or family members of political activists who were forced to issue these grotesque 'confessions' broadcast by government or pro-regime media outlets, including media outlets affiliated with Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. We have also documented that approximately 300 of the individuals filmed making these 'confessions' were subsequently forcibly disappeared, with some being confirmed as having died due to torture, most notably [the prominent political activist Ali Othman](#), [Sara Khaled Al-Alaou](#), and most recently, the father of Dr. Amani Ballour.

II. Forcing the Father of a Prominent Syrian Doctor to Slander Her Because of Her Principled Position in Opposing the Syrian Regime's Violations against the Syrian People:

The Syrian regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, is making massive efforts and spending vast sums of money on propaganda in its attempt to evade responsibility for its crimes, blurring and distorting the truth completely. The regime and its loyalists have established many websites and organizations to promote this historical revisionism and false narrative of events, as well as producing serials and documentaries that serve to present a falsified historical record and to cast doubt on the authenticity of records documenting its crimes. Although the Syrian regime is fully aware of the difficulty of achieving this objective, it seeks through its efforts to promote uncertainty and to obscure the reality, turning the truth into a subject open to many possible interpretations in front of local and international public opinion, and taking advantage of the fact that most people don't closely follow the reports of the UN investigation committees and international and local human rights organizations, which have consistently presented plentiful evidence to substantiate the facts of the regime's crimes against humanity and war crimes in a clear and direct manner.

In the service of the Syrian regime's falsification of events, Syria's Al-Ikhbariya TV¹ aired a documentary film on April 20, 2021, entitled "[From the Tunnel to the Light](#)", whose primary aim was to reiterate the regime's claim that it had not used chemical weapons on the Eastern Ghouta area of Damascus Suburbs governorate; in the film, the regime's security services presented a number of former field hospital workers in the Eastern Ghouta who remained there after the Syrian regime took control of the area, with the security services ordering them to play these roles in exchange for not forcibly displacing or arresting and torturing them.

¹ Al-Ikhbariya TV, one of the Syrian regime's official media channels, which is considered the Syrian regime's main news platform, was established in 2010.

Another objective of this film was to distort and malign public perceptions of Doctor Amani Ballour and Doctor Salim Namour, both of whom worked to treat those wounded or injured in Syrian regime bombardment with chemical weapons and conventional weapons for many years. In service of this despicable goal, the Syrian regime summoned the father of Doctor Amani Ballour, who wasn't displaced and had remained in the Eastern Ghouta, forcing him to appear in this program and express support for the Syrian regime's falsified version of events, denying the regime's chemical attacks and claiming that they were staged and fabricated by terrorists.

It seems that the Syrian regime has deliberately grievously slandered and distorted the image of Doctor Amani Ballour, due to the heroic role she played during the time she worked at al Kahf Hospital (the Cave), and following her forcible displacement from the Eastern Ghouta, after the Syrian regime took control of the area following [its chemical attack on Douma city on April 7, 2018](#).

The most prominent achievements of the activist doctor, Amani Muhammad Ballour, which led to the Syrian regime targeting her and her family, are:

One: A Syrian doctor who graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Damascus at the end of 2012, Dr. Ballour worked as a doctor in an underground field hospital called 'al Kahf Hospital', continuing these duties until 2016, when she became the hospital's director, a position she retained up until the Syrian regime bombarded Douma city with chemical weapons on April 7, 2018, which prompted the people there to surrender, after which they were forcibly displaced.

Two: She starred in the famous documentary film '[The Cave](#)', released in 2019, which shows the traumatic scenes Dr. Amani experienced with a number of her colleagues during their work in the underground field hospital. The film, which was nominated for an Oscar in 2020, won several international awards.



Three: On January 15, 2020, Dr. Amani received the 'Raoul Wallenberg Prize' for extraordinary humanitarian achievements from [the Council of Europe](#), for her personal courage, bravery and commitment in saving the lives of hundreds of injured people in Eastern Ghouta.



Four: On March 29, 2021, at the invitation of the US Department of State, Dr. Ballour participated in [a Security Council special session on the humanitarian situation in Syria](#), during which she talked about some of her experiences as a doctor and director of an underground hospital that was concerned with receiving and treating those injured in attacks by the Syrian regime and its allies. She also talked about the Syrian regime's targeting of other medical facilities and about her experience during the siege imposed on the Eastern Ghouta between 2012 and 2018, and testified about the Syrian regime's chemical attack on the two Ghoutas of Damascus on August 21, 2013.



III. Nearly 20,000 Syrian Citizens Are Still Detained or Forcibly Disappeared Over Their Kinship with Political Opponents:

The Syrian regime has used various methods to punish its political opponents, with the targeting of family members, friends and relatives being among of the most brutal methods employed, indicating that Syria is not only facing a dictatorial political regime, but that such offensive, mafiosi tactics acts are a standard part of the regime's strategy toolkit. We have noticed that the Syrian regime has expanded its arrests and disappearances of the families or friends of its political opponents, even if those detained are uninvolved in any political or relief activity; this is an irrelevance for the regime, for whom the main objectives are to take revenge on political opponents, and to generate hatred among members of the same family. In [a previous report](#), we outlined arrests and enforced disappearances in which the Syrian regime targeted individuals due to their kinship with participants in the political uprising against the Syrian regime. In some cases, we recorded that the political opponent succumbed to pressure and surrendered to the regime forces, in exchange for the release of his/her father, mother, or brothers; despite this desperate effort to save their loved ones' lives, the Syrian regime did not release any of the relatives or detainees, with this callous disregard outperforming even the mafiosi.

The SNHR's database shows that at least 20,847 of the individuals arrested by the Syrian regime since March 2011, including 13 children and 27 women, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers over their kinship with activists in the popular uprising or opponents to the Syrian regime, as of May 21, 2021. These constitute approximately 16% of the total documented number of those detained or forcibly disappeared by Syrian regime forces. Among those detained in this category are at least 137 individuals over the age of 70, with at least 7,929 other individuals, who were arrested over their kinship with individuals wanted by the Syrian regime, including 147 children and 180 women, being later released.

One of the most prominent cases of the Syrian regime's targeting of its opponents, which it has now become possible to reveal following the conclusion of an exchange deal was the regime's arrest of the wife of the defector Colonel Bassam al Sanbaki, Ms. Nisreen Muhi al Din Wanli, and their young sons, Muhammad and Shivan, who are from Rukn al Din neighborhood in Damascus city, in August 2013. The mother and two sons were subjected to many methods of torture, before being released on Wednesday, May 12, 2021, as part of a prisoner exchange deal with Syrian National Army forces, under the supervision of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, with the Syrian National Army forces handed over five Syrian regime forces members and a dead body to the regime forces, in exchange for the release of the defector officer's wife and sons.



Photo shows Ms. Nisreen Muhi al Din Wanli, her husband, Colonel Bassam al Sanbaki, and their two sons, Muhammad and Shivan, after their release

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The Syrian regime has repeatedly forced the relatives of political activists in the areas under its control to appear on pro-regime media, and to make coerced 'confessions' scripted by the security services, which include condemning and disavowing their family members.
- The Syrian regime, which completely controls all state media outlets, uses these to deny its own crimes, which it attributes to 'terrorists'.
- The Syrian regime has followed mafia-style methods of threatening and intimidating political opponents through the arrest, rape and murder of their family members, with women and children not being spared this ordeal.
- The Syrian regime knows that no sane person can believe its version of events compared to verified and fully substantiated evidence presented in numerous reports by local and international bodies, including the UN, whose data is proven and documented to the highest standards, but it seeks to create a state of confusion, ambiguity, controversy and skepticism.

- The Syrian regime has followed the tactic of arresting, torturing and disappearing the families of persons active in the popular uprising in a widespread and deliberate manner, in order to both deter and punish these individuals for their opposition to the regime, and to terrorize other citizens, silencing any expression of dissent or similar actions for fear of what might befall their family members.
- Nearly 20,000 Syrian citizens are still detained or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime in connection with their kinship or other relationship with political or military dissidents, with the disappearance of this huge number of Syrian citizens constituting crimes against humanity. We also have evidence confirming that detainees have been subjected to brutal methods of torture, with systematic torture practiced by the Syrian regime also constituting crimes against humanity, under Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Recommendations:

The UN Security Council:

- Condemn the Syrian regime's adoption of mafia methods against Syrian citizens, and clearly condemn the way in which Amani Ballour's father was forced to participate in a pro-Syrian regime film, especially in the wake of her testimony before the UN Security Council.
- The UN Security Council should monitor the implementation of Resolution 2042, adopted on April 14, 2012, Resolution 2043, adopted on April 21, 2012, and Resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014, which demand the immediate cessation of enforced disappearances.
- Demand the immediate release of nearly 21,000 Syrian citizens who have been detained or forcibly disappeared due to the participation of their relatives in the popular uprising against the Syrian regime.
- Accelerate the implementation of the process of political transition towards a democratic government in Syria that respects human rights, since every delay means more brutality and greater encroachment by the Syrian regime and its security services over Syrian citizens' most basic rights.

The Russian regime:

- Despite Dr. Amani Ballour's participation at the UN Security Council in the presence of Russia's delegate, the Syrian regime has humiliated and threatened her family; Russia must assume responsibility for deterring the Syrian regime from such shameful mafia practices.
- Must demand that its ally, the Syrian regime, release the 21,000 Syrian citizens, and stop threatening and persecuting activists' families.
- Stop supporting the factional system in Syria, in view of its lack of any credibility in the eyes of the Syrian people and the international community, and its steady progression towards further decline and absolute contempt for human rights in a way unimaginable in the modern world.

The Syrian regime:

- Stop exploiting dissidents' families and using family members as part of the media propaganda promoted by the regime.
- Stop using state institutions, including state media, in efforts to exonerate the Syrian regime of the atrocious violations it has committed.

- Acknowledging the reality of the crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated by the regime is the essential first step towards healing the rift in the Syrian society, along with ending its attempts to rewrite history and falsify the historical record of events; no sane person can believe the narrative fabricated by the brutal security services.
- Reveal the fate of nearly 102,000 forcibly disappeared persons, immediately release tens of thousands of arbitrarily detained prisoners and other detainees whose sentences have ended, and publish a register that includes detainees' data, along with the reasons for detention, their locations, and the sentences issued.

Solidarity

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) stands in solidarity with the activist and doctor, Amani Ballour, and with all political and military activists whose families the Syrian regime seeks to threaten, and confirms that this report is issued as part of our ongoing efforts to protect and preserve fundamental rights, to uphold the true history of events and to expose the criminal practices of the Syrian regime.



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