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The Brutal Attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS

154 Civilians Killed, including 15 children



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Tuesday, October 16, 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

Suwayda governorate is located in south Syria, about 128 km from the capital Damascus. With a monotheist Druze majority, the city's population was estimated at 370,000 people as of 2010. Since that the city was never targeted in heavy attacks, or aerial and artillery shelling, resulting in relative stability, about 100,000 Syrian citizens have fled to Suwayda governorate from nearby areas such as Damascus suburbs and Daraa.

As the scope of the Syrian regime's military operations against the areas who called for changing the one-family rule into a democratic governance have expanded and grown, the Syrian regime faced a need to recruit more and more Syrian citizens within its military forces, which drove hundreds of thousands of Syrian youths to flee the country out of fear of having to join Syrian regime forces and fight their fellow Syrians, while other refused to join altogether and stayed within the borders of Suwayda governorate as what came to be called popular committees took control of the governorate, where the Syrian regime had merely nominal rule in the governorate.

Founded in 2012, Rejal al Karama Movement (The Men of Dignity Movement) was an armed formation that was founded by one of the Durzi sect's prominent figure, Wahid al Bal'ous. This faction's purpose was to maintain the governorate from any military inference, be it from the Syrian regime or even any armed opposition factions. More and more people came to



bear arms in Suwayda governorate with time, where people's committee were formed and established control over the entirety of the governorate. These committees relied on individual donations from people from the Durzis in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan for arming themselves, as well as pro-Syrian regime parties such as the Baath party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, while some committees relied on Syrian regime's security branches, such as the Military Security branch, according to some Suwayda governorate residents.

The residents of Suwayda governorate were targeted in multiple attacks that took place on July 25, 2018. These attacks resulted in a large number of victims and injured. SNHR has tried to document these incidents and the international law violations that were committed during these attacks. We have spoken to a number of eyewitnesses, local media workers, and victims' families, as this report contains two accounts that we've collected by speaking directly to eyewitnesses and are not cited from any open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interviews to the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report with offering or giving them any incentives.

SNHR has tried to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering the violations. Also, guarantees were given to conceal the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.

SNHR has analyzed the videos and photos posted online. Also, some videos posted by activists show the destruction in the vegetables market and some cars, in addition to interviews with the abductees' families, while other videos showed alleged ISIS fighters executing two of the hostages.

This report encountered additional challenges in light of the fact that SNHR doesn't have an extensive communication base in Suwayda governorate, as the governorate hasn't seen many violations compared to other governorates. SNHR works on expanding and building its relations in light of the occurrence of violations. For this reason in particular, the investigations of this report took more time, which is why it is very important to thank the residents from Suwayda governorate and abroad for cooperating with the investigations. Lastly, it should be noted that this is the bare minimum, which we were able to document, in light of extraordinary difficulties and many residents' hesitation to cooperate in fear of retaliatory acts by ISIS or the Syrian regime against them if they do so.



In the course of the ongoing monitoring for incidents and developments by SNHR team through a wide network including tens of various sources that have been built over an accumulation of extensive relations since the start of our work. When we receive information, or hear some news about a violation via the internet or media outlets, we work on following-up on this news and try to verify and collect evidences and data. In some cases, the researcher is able to visit the incident location at the soonest. However, this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks, and given the frequency of daily incidents and in light of the human and material resources at hand. Therefore, the possibility to access evidences vary from one case to another, and, hence, the degree of its classification. Usually, what we do, at SNHR, in such cases is relying on accounts from survivors who experience the violation firsthand, where we try to access those directly, and, to a second degree, who saw or filmed the violation, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the internet and media outlets. Thirdly, we try to speak to medical personnel who treated the wounded, assessed the symptoms, and determined the cause of death. You can see our methodology by clicking on this [link](#).

II. Indications of Coordination and Harmony between the Syrian regime and ISIS in the Suwayda attacks

1. In early-May 2018, an agreement was struck between the Syrian regime and ISIS fighters in al Yarmouk Camp, southern Damascus. Per the agreement, 1,200 ISIS fighters departed from the camp to al Badiya al Sharqiya, eastern Suwayda governorate. The process of transporting the ISIS fighters were overseen by Syrian regime forces via Damascus-Suwayda road. Those 1,200 fighters settled in al Badiya al Sharqiya.
2. In June 2018, Syrian regime forces evacuated their points, where they were previously stationed, in eastern suburbs of Suwayada along the contacts lines with the 1,200 ISIS fighters who were transported earlier.
3. A few days before the attack, Syrian regime forces evacuated one of the most integral observation points – al Dayyatha point, which was under the control of National Defense Militias. According to corroborating accounts we were able to acquire, Syrian regime forces pulled back the weapons that they distributed among the popular committees, which were in control, in Suwayda governorate on July 22, 2018 – only three days before the attack. Some of the villages refused to surrender their weapons. Subsequently, however, we found out that the attacks only targeted the villages that surrendered their weapons.
4. Two of the witnesses talked about a power outage and land communication being cut off in the areas that were attacked simultaneously with the raids, which, certainly, made the task of sneaking into the villages easier on the attacking forces, while it made for a more difficult situation for the residents who couldn't call for help or instantly recognize the criminals.



These factors indicate that there has been a coordination and cooperation between the Syrian regime and ISIS, entailing a joint responsibility for the egregious violations that occurred in Suwayda. This wasn't the first time a coordination of this sort happened in such a glaring manner, as we have pointed out in [past reports](#) the extent to which the Syrian regime used ISIS to serve its ends, particularly in the battles of eastern suburbs of Hama and southeastern suburbs of Idlib where Syrian regime forces never targeted ISIS in the group's areas of control which were adjacent to Syrian regime forces' but rather paved the way for ISIS through their areas of control to reach the contact line with areas under the control of Hay'at Tahrir a Sham or factions from the armed opposition.

Ravina Shamdasani, a spokesperson for the UN Human Rights Office, has pointed out in a [press briefing](#) published on July 31, that **“The transfer of armed fighters with a history of gross human rights abuses and contempt towards international law can mean an increase in the likelihood of violent attacks against civilians like the ones carried out last week in As-Sweida. We urge the Syrian Government not to put civilians at serious risk through such relocations.”**

We believe that these attacks, which give away a scenario in which the Syrian regime used ISIS to attack the residents in Suwayda governorate, aim primarily to ask for the Syrian regime's protection, and therefore it gradually taking back control of the area, and apply pressure on the Druze sectarian group to give up tens of thousands of youths to fight with Syrian regime forces, as they are suffering from a shortage of manpower to secure the stable area in Daraa governorates after Russian, Syrian, and Iranian forces managed to seize control back in late-July 2018.

III. Details of the Attacks

Wednesday, July 25, 2018, between 05:00 and 07:00, Suwayda city saw a series of attacks, where a number of gunmen wearing explosive belts carried out suicidal bombings in a number of neighborhoods in Suwayda city. As we've recorded, the first attack took place in the [vegetables market in the center of the city](#), while the second one was by al Mashnaqa Circle, and the third attack by al Najma Circle to the west of axial road, whereas a fourth attack took place in al Maslakh neighborhood. There was also a planned similar attack at the National Hospital but it was thwarted as the individual wearing an explosive belt was captured.

No less than 24 civilians were killed in those attacks, including two women, while at least 50 others were wounded.

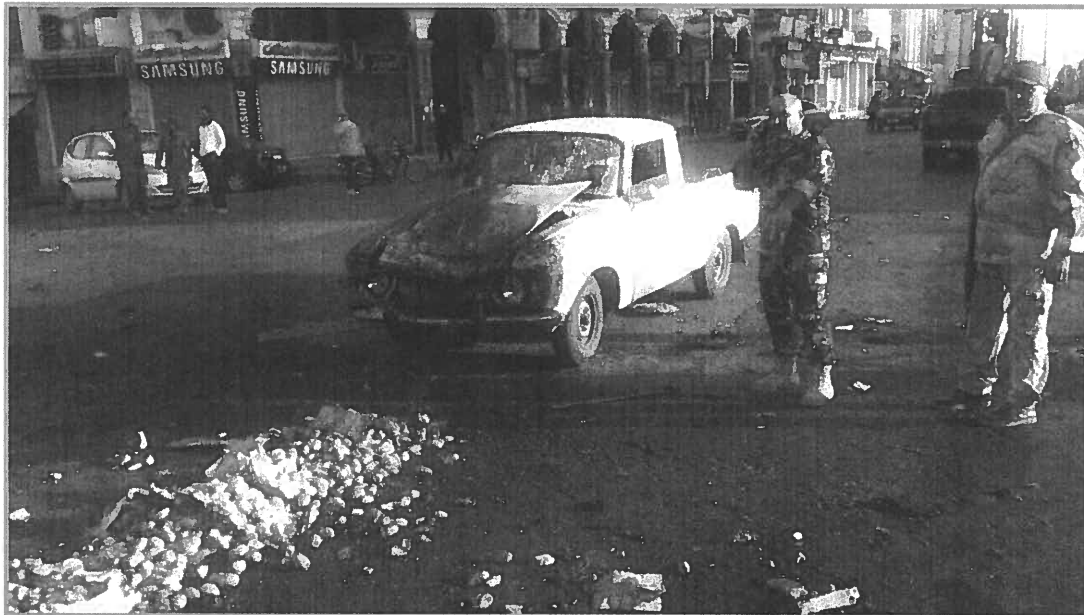


Bombing sites in Suwayda city, Wednesday, July 25, 2018



The explosive belt tactic is an M.O. for extremist Islamic groups, specifically ISIS as seen in many attacks that were carried out by the group to terrorize residents and pressure them. ISIS, through its media channels, has claimed responsibility for the Suwayda city attacks, saying that their fighters were able to kill 100 individuals in those attacks. In such attacks, complex investigation methods are needed to identify the actual perpetrator. SNHR hasn't been able to visit those sites.





The bombing location in the vegetables market in the center of Suwayda city – July 25, 2018

In parallel with those attacks, gunmen raided eight villages in the eastern and northeastern suburbs of the governorate – al Shbeki, al Mtouna, al Swaimra, al Shreihi, Gheidat Hamayel, Douma, Tarba, and Rami, where they raided houses and executed people by shooting or slaughtering them using knives. We have recorded the killing of 130 civilians, including 15 children and 17 women (adult female). In addition, we've recorded that around 29 civilians, including 18 children and 10 women, were abducted from al Shbeki village.



ISIS hasn't claimed responsibility for the raids of the villages and the subsequent executions and abductions of residents who were taken as hostages as they have done with the bombings in the city. However, the investigations we've conducted and the accounts we've acquired suggest that ISIS fighters were indeed involved in perpetrating those crimes. Some of the residents told us that these operations were carried out in coordination with some men and women from the Bedu of Suwayda who assisted ISIS fighters in raiding those villages.

Shojoun Amer is a young woman from al Mtouna village, Suwayda suburbs, which is was one of the villages that were attacked, Shojoun told SNHR that they experienced two power outages occurred before the raids, which was something unusual, as she added that she heard heavy gunshots around 04:30, **"We were in shock. We had no idea what was happening around us. The sound of bullets was everywhere, and then I heard people screaming and weeping. My uncle, with a gun in his hand, left the house where I was and hid in the backyard garden. He said that he was able to pinpoint the direction from which the attack was launched. He told us that the raid came from the north side, from the direction of al Lajat area. Only one house separates our house from that area. That house was resided by one woman and her two daughters, and I learned that they were also killed in the attack."** Shojoun told us that she saw two gunmen near her house, where her uncle managed to kill one of them, **"He was trying to raid our house, so my uncle shot him and killed him on the spot. But the gunmen mobilized quickly and opened fire uncontrollably, in addition to dropping a number of bombs, seven of which landed in front of our house. We heard the sound of their explosion. It was horrifying and I can't describe it. They attacked our house, our neighbors', and my cousin's. Our neighbor was killed with two bullets to the chest. My cousin and my late cousin's wife were also killed."** Shojoun said that only the village's men were able to fend off the attack, as they used all the light weapons they own to defend the houses, such as guns and knives, **"No one intervened to protect us, not even the Syrian security or the army. It was like they were in deep sleep. The attacks occurred simultaneously, which is why no one from the nearby villages was able to come and help us. The attack lasted for an hour. A number of terrorists were killed and many of them retreated to al Lajat area. The terrorists attacked the houses they were sure they had no weapons or men."**

Shojoun confirmed to us that she saw two of the gunmen being killed next to her house, **"I saw the body of one of them. He was wearing military camouflage. It seems that ISIS fighters managed to pull his weapon before retreating because I only saw two grenades in his bag and a first-aid kit. Syrian security forces only pulled the bodies of the ISIS fighters who were killed in Douma village, eastern Suwayda, while the bodies of the ones who were killed in our villages were tossed in al Lajat area."**



Shojoun told us that the timing of the attack was deliberate, as the power outage occurred before the attack, making the task of sneaking into the village easier. She added that the attack took place just three days after some of the villages agreed to surrender their weapons at the request of the sheikh Nazih Jarbou', a leader of a faction affiliated with the Military Security, who disarmed the residents of the villages in northern Suwayda, such as al Swaimra and al Mtouna, while the villages that refused to surrender their weapons remained unscathed, **"Everything was in place and prepared ahead of their arrival. Villages devoid of weapons and the Syrian army withdrew from its bases about a month ago. The attacks weren't limited to the eastern and northern villages, as they easily managed to reach the city. They detonated their belts in the city's neighborhoods. How could they pass through the checkpoints this easily? The support and facilitation provided by the regime or the Bedouin tribes was evident. They are all responsible for the tragedy of Suwayda."**

SNHR spoke to Mr. Theeb¹, a young man from al Shbeki village that saw killings and abductions. Theeb lost his father, brothers, and cousins in the attack. He was in Suwayda city and headed for the village at dawn after he learned of the raids. Fearing that the snipers, who were shooting at anything that moves, might spot him, he snuck to the village through the surrounding farms. He told us, **"On my way to our home, I saw the bodies of my cousins and neighbors. On the side of the road there was a car on fire with bodies inside. I arrived at our house and didn't find anybody. The doors were open and the house was completely empty. My neighbor's son told me that ISIS fighters got into the house and abducted my mother and my sister-in-law, and that the rest of my family members were taken to al Badwi house. I went there and saw the tragedy. They killed my father, my two brothers, my cousin, and my neighbor. They shot them all in the head."** Theeb confirmed to us that both his mother and sister-in-law were among the hostages who were taken by ISIS, but they managed to escape, **"They raided my house and took all my family. They killed my father and my two brothers in front of my mother, and then took the women to east of the village through bumpy routes. My mother told me that she was able to recognize that they descend from different nationalities. Some were Syrians, some were Afghanis, and some were Palestinians."**

Theeb accused the Syrian regime of supporting ISIS in their attacks on Suwayda and providing facilitations, **"They cut off the power and land communication in conjunction with the attack. This made the sneaking into the village easier and us communicating with each other more difficult. I called the electricity company and they told me that ISIS shot the electric wires even though that didn't happen. The power outage was**

¹ Via WhatsApp on October 2, 2018

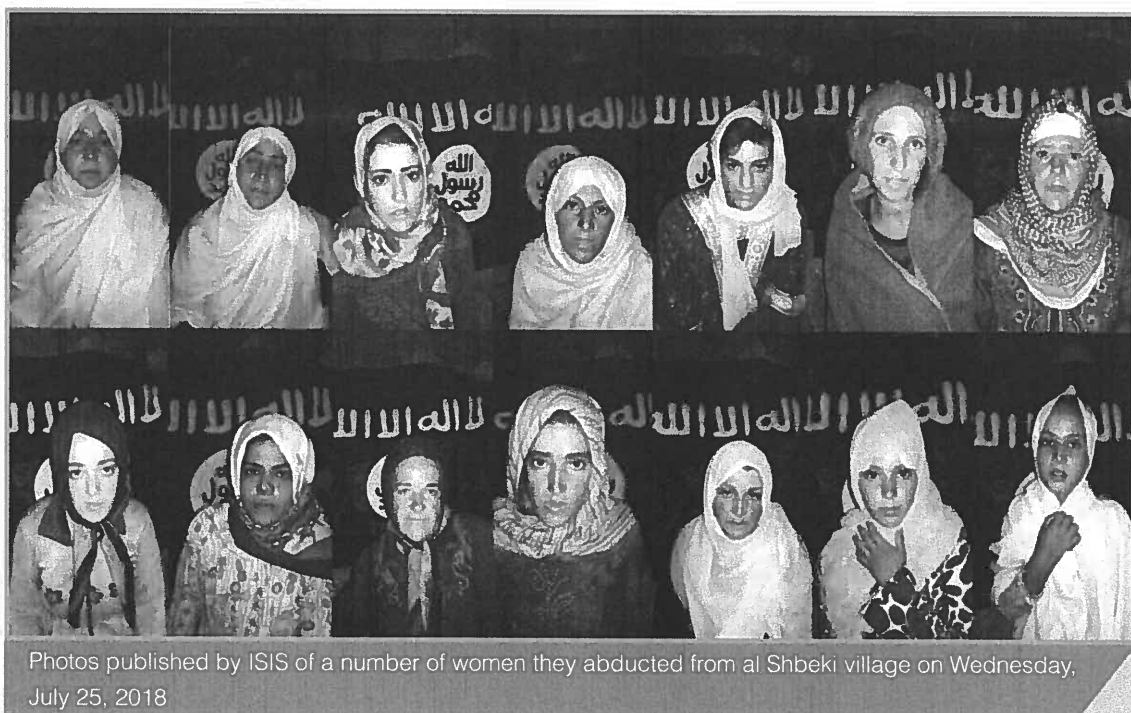


before the attack and the shooting. The attack started hours later, around 09:00. A Syrian regime warplane bombed some points in eastern al Shbeki village. At first, the bombing targeted points near where the ISIS fighters were gathering. The other strikes were far from their points, as if the bombing was to cover their retreat from the village.”

Theeb told us that some of his village's young men found a video in a camera that was with one of ISIS fighters who were killed the village. The fighter was recording the raid and the abducting of the hostages, but Syrian security forces confiscated the camera and arrested the guy who found it. The residents of the village haven't learned anything about his fate ever since.

IV.No less than 26 Individuals Abducted Who are Still Being Held as Hostages including Women and Children

We believe that the gunmen who raided the villages and carried out the killings and the abductions are affiliates of the terrorist group ISIS. The abductors' requests are also in line with releasing ISIS affiliates. We have noticed that every time the negotiations between the Suwayda residents and the abductors stumble, ISIS release videos of a hostage being executed as a way to apply pressure on the residents and other negotiating parties that have entered the negotiations. The abductors executed the young man Mohannad Abu Ammar on August 2 and the young woman Tharwat Abu Ammar on October 2 which was shown in video recordings we believe were made by ISIS.

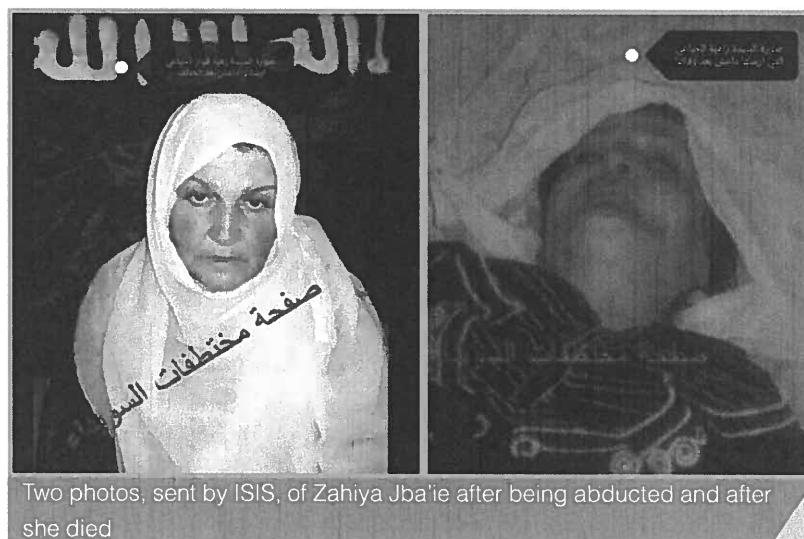


Photos published by ISIS of a number of women they abducted from al Shbeki village on Wednesday, July 25, 2018



Unlike ISIS in similar cases in the past, the group's media channels haven't published videos showing those hostages being executed. Additionally, the videos themselves lacked the dramatic flair usually found in their productions. We have also come upon some technical differences. For instance, the Georgian calendar was used instead of the Hijri calendar, which the group adopts in their videos. Lastly, the abductors speak in poor Arabic. It is possible that this was because of the exhaustion that has gotten ahold of ISIS, as well as the poor resources and capabilities, or there might be other possibilities.

On August 9, we found out that one of the women who were abducted, Zahiya Jba'ie, died due to worsening health conditions as it was announced. Additionally, [Abir Mesh'al Shaghlin](#) lost her unborn son because of a premature birth that was the result of poor health care.



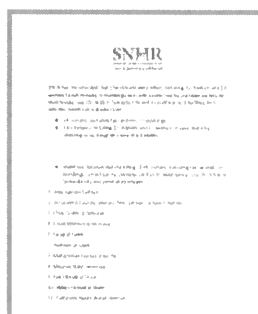
Moreover, we recorded on the day of the attacks that pro-Syrian regime militias executed a number of individuals who were allegedly affiliates of ISIS that were captured after their involvement in the attack. The same militias did the same thing on August 7, when [they published a video](#) showing an alleged ISIS affiliate being executed, where his dead body was also disfigured. Such acts, which are most likely deliberate and planned by the Syrian regime, puts the safety of the abductees at risk.

In early-August, 2018, a leader of Rejal al Karama Movement detained around 60 individuals, including 25 women, that he claimed that they are relatives of ISIS affiliates that were involved in the Suwayda attacks. They were subsequently released on September 30, thanks to a Russian mediation.



V. Appendixes and Attachments

Victims' names



Video showing hostages who were abducted from al Shbeki village on Wednesday, July 25, 2018

Video showing the female hostage Fadiya Abu Ammar who were abducted from al Shbeki village on Wednesday, July 25, 2018

Video showing the female hostage Su'ad Abu Ammar saying that ISIS is holding her and asking the Syrian regime to agree to the conditions specified in the negotiations, so all the hostages are released

Photo of the female hostage Su'ad with her children

Photos showing children who were abducted by ISIS from al Shbeki village on Wednesday, July 25, 2018

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions

- The use of explosive arms to target populated residential areas reflect a criminal mentality and a deliberate intention to kill as many victims as possible. This explicitly violates the international human rights law, and constitutes a blatant violation of Articles 27, 31, and 32 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.
- The international humanitarian law prohibits taking hostages (Article 34 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, Article 75-2-c of Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions, and Article 4-2-c of Additional Protocol (II) to the Geneva Conventions). Taking hostages constitutes a war crime.
- The Syrian regime's practices have paved the way for ISIS to carry out their attacks. As such, the Syrian regime bears a significant responsibility in those incidents.



Recommendations

International community

- There is no putting an end to extremist groups as long as there are regimes who are manipulating, harnessing, and using these groups to terrorize the Syrian people and forcing it to a choice of the lesser of two evils. There is no alternative to working on establishing a path of political transition founded on removing and holding the criminals accountable.
- Aid the victims of the terrorist attacks that were carried out by ISIS and provide educational and material support for the local communities to shield them from the risk of being intellectually conditioned and then actually recruited.

Security Council

- All possible measures should be taken to uphold the Resolutions adopted by the Security Council – most notably Resolution 2139, and find a way to stop the huge violations that are being perpetrated by the Syrian authorities and their militias who have been coordinating with ISIS in many areas as it was shown in this report and other past reports.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who were involved should be held accountable.
- Add the militias that are fighting with the Syrian government and have perpetrated wide massacres, such as Iranian militias, the Lebanese group Hezbollah, other Shiite factions, National Defense Army, and Shabihas on the list of terrorist groups, and target and fight these groups same as extremist Islamic groups.

OHCHR

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other UN organs about this massacre and the massacres that preceded seeing that it is a glaring point in a string of daily massacres of lesser scope. Also, the OHCHR should work on upholding the recommendations of this report.

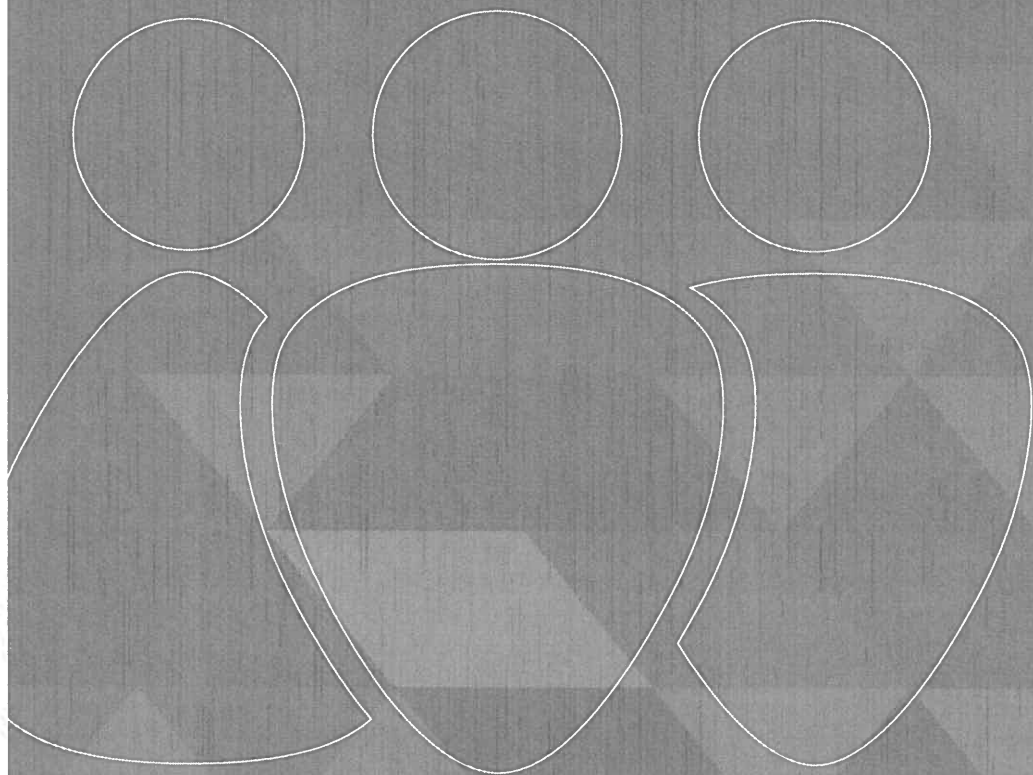
Commission of Inquiry (Col)

- Launch investigations into the killing incidents that occurred in Suwayda governorate and other areas. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more data and evidences.

Acknowledgment

We would like to profoundly thank the survivors and local activists who contributed effectively to this report, as some of them have put their lives at risk just to reveal the truth and hold those who were involved accountable.





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