

# EXECUTIONS BY BURNING

## A PRACTICE BY SYRIAN GOVERNMENT FORCES

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Syrian Network For Human Rights

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان



## Introduction:

Syrian regime forces, pro-government forces and foreign militias have widely adopted the practice of execution by burning and the burning of bodies of murdered persons since the start of the events in Syria in 2011. This practice has endured throughout 2012 and the following years.

Burning individuals to death at the hands of the Syrian regime has received little or no media coverage. Syrian government officials deny carrying out such practices; however such crimes are being embraced and published on several pro-government websites. These crimes have not been recorded by regime forces, but rather by the victims' families and/or local human rights activists using modest recording tools and cameras. The content of these recordings have then been uploaded to several websites, and sent to the Syrian Network for Human Rights via email.

Based on witness accounts, testimonies of family members and video evidence, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, in collaboration with the Euro-Mid Observer for Human Rights, has been able to monitor and document these crimes and produce accurate results.

The execution by burning of the Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) on January 3rd 2015 has given a face to this horrendous crime which has been condemned widely internationally. Unfortunately, there has been no explicit attention to the stories of tens of Syrian citizens being burned alive and having their bodies burned by forces of the Syrian regime and pro-government militias.

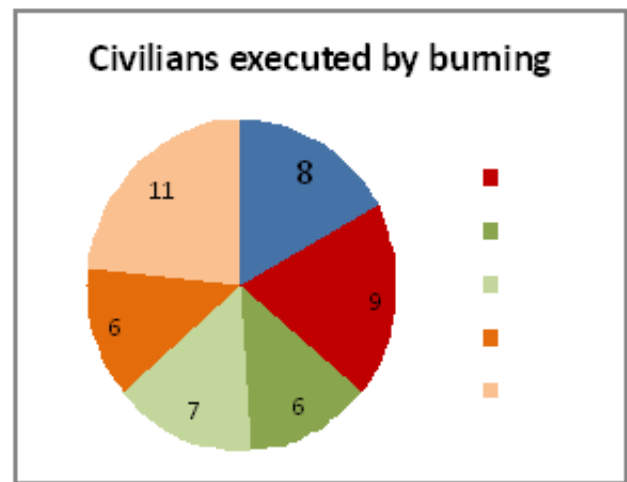
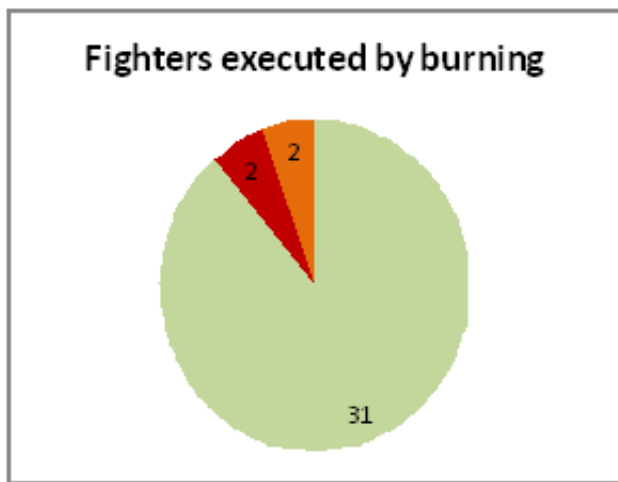
This report is intended to expose the burning of Syrians alive and the burning of bodies in order to hold the perpetrators accountable and put a halt to Syrian government forces and pro-government forces' impunity.

According to gathered data and witnesses a mix of regular government troops; members of the National Defense Force, a paramilitary group organized by the government from pro-government militias; and armed pro-government residents of neighboring villages and foreign militias have burned at least 81 people to death, including 46 civilians; 18 children, 7 women, and 35 of the armed opposition fighters, since the beginning of the events in Syria in March 2011 and until the publication date of this report. A detailed list of all these victims is available, which includes the place and date of the crime and personal data of the victims.

Figures show that burning people to death or burning the bodies of people killed by the government forces is a systematic policy adopted by the regime forces in various Syrian cities. Over the past four years, such acts have occurred during several sectarian massacres, mostly in Hama where 38 people were executed by burning including 7 civilians, one child and 31 of the armed opposition fighters.

**Executions by burning carried out by the Syrian regime forces  
and loyal militias by Syrian districts:**

1. **Hama:** 38 people; 7 civilians - including one child - and 31 of the armed opposition fighters.
2. **Aleppo:** 11 people; 9 civilians - 6 children and 3 women mostly from Safira in Aleppo countryside - and 2 armed opposition fighters.
3. **Deirez-Zor:** 8 people; 6 civilians and 2 fighters from the armed opposition.
4. **Rif Dimashq [Damascus countryside]:** 8 civilians; including 4 children and 1 woman.
5. **Homs:** 6 civilians, including 4 members of one family - including 1 pregnant woman.
6. **Tartus:** 5 civilians; 4 children and 1 woman.
7. **Latakia:** 4 civilians; 3 children and 1 woman.
8. **Dara'a:** 2 civilians.



### The main documented cases of executions by burning:

- On 28 January 2012 pro-government militias killed 4 people from the same family; including 3 children and 1 woman, by burning them alive inside their home in the Gold Market in Latakia.
- On 3 September 2012, government forces surrounded a house in al-Farrayeh neighborhood in Hama, which a number of armed opposition fighters had taken cover, and set the house on fire, killing 27 of them.
- On 19 September 2012, government forces moved into the Masha'a al-Arbi'n neighborhood in Hama after targeting it with tanks and heavy weapons. Subsequently, a number of young men from the same neighborhood were arrested, handcuffed and gathered in a house to be burned alive by setting the house on fire. Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the killing of 9 people by burning during this incident, including 5 civilians. Among the civilians killed was a child named Hamzi Kinan, whose four limbs were cut off and then thrown alive into the fire by regime forces. In addition to that, 4 of the armed opposition fighters were also executed by burning.<sup>1</sup>
- On 24 September 2012, government forces burned Fadi Khalaf alive in the Sabina area in the suburb of Damascus.

<sup>1</sup>. A video shared by activists on YouTube showed a number of bodies being burned in Masha'a al-Arbi'n neighborhood in Hama. Click <http://youtu.be/-rUml9aCWoA> and <http://youtu.be/NLvjy7brCzs> to see the videos.

- At the end of September 2012, pro-government militias executed 3 persons by throwing them alive into a furnace in Jura neighbourhood in Deir el-Zor. Witnesses interviewed by our team reported that pro-government militias arrested these 3 persons and threw them alive into a furnace. The remains of the three bodies were found several days later, with empty fuel cans nearby.
- On 21 July 2013, local militias and the so-called 'National Defense Army' raided the village of al-Bayda in Tartus, and headed straight to the house of Osama Fattouh, executed him on the spot and set his house on fire with his wife and children inside.

## **2. Burning of Dead Bodies**

Government forces have carried out wide operations in which bodies of executed or slaughtered victims were burned, apparently to take revenge, deter and terrorize local communities, or to deform and disfigure bodies and thus cover up the crimes. There were also cases of women being burned after being sexually assaulted.

We have managed to document at least 773 cases of people being killed and their bodies burned, including 146 women and 69 children (nearly 28% of victims), in addition to 22 people who died due to torture and their bodies were then burned. Data is available on these victims, including their names and details on the incidents.

Our team has documented that the burning of bodies was carried out either to individual and separate cases, or collectively to a number of people as a consequence to retaliation and sectarian justifications. Most of the cases were carried out in sectarian massacres committed by local or foreign militias in coordination and cooperation with government forces. Our teams have documented 44 cases related to sectarian purposes, which included the torture and abuse of victims and the mutilation of bodies in a sadistic and brutal manner, such as the writing of sectarian phrases, taking pictures and capturing videos containing sectarian text.



## **Some of the main documented cases of burning bodies following collective massacres:**

- Deir Ba'alaba massacre from 2 to 9 April 2012: Government forces backed by a local militia, raided Deir Ba'alaba and committed a massacre, which included breaking into homes, field executions of civilians, rape of women, mutilation and burning of most of the bodies and buried them in mass graves.<sup>2</sup>
- Apel massacre in Homson, 25 March 2013: Government forces withdrawing from Apel village after clashing with a number of armed opposition fighters arrested two families on the outskirts of the village, killed them and burned their bodies. Our teams have documented the killing of 14 civilians, including 6 women and 4 children, whose bodies showed burn marks.<sup>3</sup>
- Al Mazra'a massacre in Aleppo countryside on 21 June 2013: Government forces, backed by a pro-government militia, killed dozens of civilians, including women and children. Some of the bodies were dumped in the village well, while the others were burned.
- Nabek massacre from 20 November until 27 December 2013: Government forces, along with foreign pro-government militias, raided the city of Nabek and committed massacres against several hundreds of civilians. We have documented many cases of bodies being burned, there is a documentation of the execution of 14 people and their bodies burned behind a petrol station in the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

## **Some cases of bodies being burned after field executions:**

- On 11 February 2012, Kafa Hammadial-Hwas, was found dead and his body was burned near the Othman bin Affan Mosque in Deirez-Zor. Kafa, an English language school teacher, was kidnapped, killed and burned by government forces.

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2. The Syrian Network for Human Rights issued a report containing photos of the massacres.

The Report documented the deaths of 200 persons, including 21 children and 20 women.

3. A videos shared by activists on YouTube showed bodies being burned. Click <http://youtu.be/Qx1K3jsOUz8> to view the video.

4. Nabek massacre: photos of burned bodies in Damascus countryside. (

1. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B9dF5VO4iR18V25hcENuV2tLdTA/edit?pli=1>

2. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B9dF5VO4iR18ZnV5ODhJTWh4RjQ/edit?pli=1>

3. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B9dF5VO4iR18STNSeGINVIBeA/Vk/edit?pli=1>

4. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B9dF5VO4iR18WHZYdFdwSDg0VXM/edit>

- On 7 May 2012, government forces gunned down three members of Sheikh es-Souq family; including a child and a woman, in al-Qisour neighbourhood in Homs, and burned their bodies. Locals found their bodies with burn marks a few days after the execution.
- On 26 July 2012, government forces beheaded the head of al-Asali neighbourhood in Damascus and burned his body.

#### **4. The legal dimension of execution by burning and burning of dead bodies**

Executions by burning are greatly brutal and heinous and represent a ‘crime against humanity’ as defined in Article 7 (1) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, as being part of “inhumane acts intentionally causing great suffering or serious injury to the body”. Burning a person alive to death is considered a murder. Additionally, executions by burning that have a sectarian character represent a violation based on the ‘persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political reasons’.

Execution by burning is a ‘violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;’, a form of ‘committing outrages upon personal dignity,’ and ‘carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court’; all of which are considered ‘war crimes’ under Article 8 (2) (c) of Rome Statute.

Moreover, these crimes violate the right to life enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966.





## Conclusions and recommendations

1. It is clear that Syrian government forces and pro-government militias have carried out systematic and frequent executions by burning alive or burning the bodies of persons killed in various Syrian cities over the past four years, while also committing several massacres of sectarian nature.
2. The focus of the international community on the crimes committed by ISIS, while ignoring almost all similar crimes committed by Syrian government forces and pro-government local and foreign militias, is fueling ISIS with more fighters and resources as it is claiming to put an end to such grievances. This is demonstrated by the Security Council Resolution No. 2170 on 15 August 2014, which has failed to list extremist sectarian groups.
3. The Security Council must fight extremism and terrorism of all parties; work to fulfill its role in ending the ongoing conflict in Syria, which has become a great threat to international peace and security.
4. The UN Security Council should ensure accountability for these crimes by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).
5. The Security Council should also insist that Syria cooperates fully with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry by giving it unrestricted access to areas under its control where massacres have been committed







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