Four Media Activists Killed, Two Injured, and Eight Arrested and Abducted, toll of August 2017

ISIS Trumps all other Parties in Killing Media Activists

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. Introduction

Media activism in Syria is continuously deteriorating in light of the lack of attention by many international media organizations to what is happening in Syria and the notable decline in media coverage over the last year compared with previous years.

SNHR publishes a monthly report documenting the violations against media activists who play a prominent role in the civil movement and the armed conflict.

It should be noted that a journalist is a civilian according to the international humanitarian law regardless of his nationality. Any attack deliberately directed against a journalist is considered a war crime. However, when a media activist gets close to action-heavy zones, he is responsible for his own actions where targeting him in such case would be seen as collateral damage. Also, he would lose the right to protection if he was involved in military operations. We believe that media activists must be respected whether they have identification papers as media workers or don't considering the many difficulties they encounter to acquire these papers.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

"Media activism is especially important because it often sheds light on a string of various crimes that are taking place on a daily basis. Therefore, we record the violations perpetrated by conflicting parties in our monthly reports on violations against media activists."

The fourth round of negotiations was held in Astana city, Kazakhstan's capital, on 3 and 4 of May 2017. Russian, Turkish, and Iranian representatives attended as the sponsoring states of Ankara Ceasefire Agreement. The three states agreed on establishing four de-escalation zones, wherein the agreement is to commence on May 6, 2017. The agreement outlined four major de-escalation areas – Idlib governorate and the surrounding areas (parts of Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia governorates), northern Homs governorate, Eastern Ghouta, and parts of Daraa and al Quneitra governorates in the southern parts of Syria. It was provided that an expert committee would accurately assign the borders of said zones at a later date. The agreement provided for a cessation of combat operations, passage of humanitarian aids, and for IDPs to go back to their areas. Following an extensive round of talks between Russia, USA, and Jordan that commenced in May 2017 in Amman, Jordan's capital, the American and Russian presidents announced, on the sidelines of the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg, that a ceasefire agreement has been reached in southwestern Syria – Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda governorates. The agreement went into force at 12:00 on Sunday July 9, 2017, and provided for the passage of humanitarian aids in addition to a ceasefire between the conflicting parties (Syrian regime forces and their allies on one side, and armed opposition factions on the other side). Also, the agreement specifies that maintaining security in this region is the Russian forces' responsibility in coordination with the Americans and Jordanians. Since the agreement went into effect, the included areas saw a noticeable and relatively good drop in the rates of killing in comparison with the previous months since March 2011.

In addition, there have been a number of other local agreements, such as Eastern Ghouta agreement between armed opposition factions, on one side, and officials from the Russian side, while a similar agreement was struck with the opposition in northern suburbs of Homs. However, the texts of these agreements haven't been made public on Russian government's websites, and the same for armed opposition factions who didn't publicize these agreements, except for Failaq al Rahman who published the text of the agreement on their official website. At the end of the agreement, according to the copy on Failaq al Rahman's website, a signature by a Russian sponsor was shown but without an explicit name, which is a great flaw, as apparently all of this helps the sponsoring Russian side to easily dissolve themselves from these agreements with no subsequent political or legal obligations and repercussions.

On Saturday, July 22, 2017, Russian Ministry of Defense announced that a de-escalation agreement has been signed in Eastern Ghouta following a round of talks between Russian military officials, on one side, and Jaish al Islam faction, on the other side, in Egypt's capital Cairo. The agreement was to come into effect at 12:00 of the same day. On Wednesday, August 16, 2017, a Failaq al Rahman representative and a Russian representative have signed an agreement in Geneva city that established Failaq al Rahman's inclusion in the de-escalation zone in Eastern Ghouta. The agreement was to come into effect at 21:00 of Friday, August 18, 2017.

On Monday, July 31, 2017, another de-escalation agreement was signed in Egypt's capital Cairo for northern Homs suburbs and southern Hama suburbs following a round of talks between armed opposition factions in the area and the Syrian regime represented by the Russian government as a sponsoring party, as the agreement was to commence at 12:00 on Thursday, August 3, 2017.

Most notably, the two most recent agreements provided for a full cessation of hostilities between the conflicting parties in the relevant areas -with the exclusion of the areas in which ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham are present- and for humanitarian aids to enter these areas and for detainees to be released as per the demands of each party as to which detainees are to be released.

Nonetheless, breaches didn't stop, mainly by the Syrian regime, who is seemingly the party that would be most affected should the ceasefire go on, and in particular extrajudicial killing crimes and, more horrendously, deaths due to torture. This strongly asserts that there is a ceasefire of some sort on the table, but the crimes that the international community -especially the sponsoring states- won't see are still going on as nothing had changed.

SNHR recorded a significant drop in the rates of media activists' deaths for the third month in a row following the de-escalation agreement's commencement on May 6, 2017. Also, in August, we recorded a first-time incident where international coalition forces killed one media activist since their military campaign began in Syria on September 23, 2014. On the other hand, we recorded a notable rise in the numbers of media activists' arrests by extremist Islamic groups compared to early-2017. These groups were responsible for 50% of documented cases this month, topping all other parties.

SNHR emphasizes that serious and quick steps must be taken to save media activism in Syria, and renews its condemnation of all violations against the freedom of media activism regardless of the perpetrators. The freedom of media must be respected and the workers in the media field must be protected and particularly considered. All individuals involved in violations against journalists and media activists must be held accountable. The international community, represented by the Security Council, must act upon its responsibilities in order to protect civilians and media activists in Syria.

Methodology

According to SNHR's methodology, a civilian journalist is anyone who plays a notable role in reporting and publishing news. He is not necessarily impartial as a journalist should be.

In case a civilian journalist carried a weapon and was directly engaged in offensive military operations, he is no longer deemed a citizen journalist whereas it is possible that he would be referred to as a civilian journalist again provided he retires completely from military action.

The report might include incidents that we believe do not constitute violations of the international humanitarian law. We include it, however, to record it among the incidents that resulted in casualties even though it was within the boundaries that the international humanitarian law allows for.

SNHR incorporates a high-level documentation standard that draws upon direct accounts from survivors, victims' families, and local media activists, as this report includes five accounts. We have explained the purpose of these interviews for the witnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR has tried as much as possible to spare them the agony of remembering the violations. We also gave guarantees to conceal the identities of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias. Additionally, we have analyzed and verified the pictures and videos and some of the medical records we received. We have copies of all the pictures and videos this report contains in a secret online database, as well as backup copies on hard drives. Nonetheless, we can't claim to having documented all cases, in light of the ban and pursuit by Syrian regime forces and some of the other armed groups.

Please see the methodology adopted by SNHR in documenting victims.
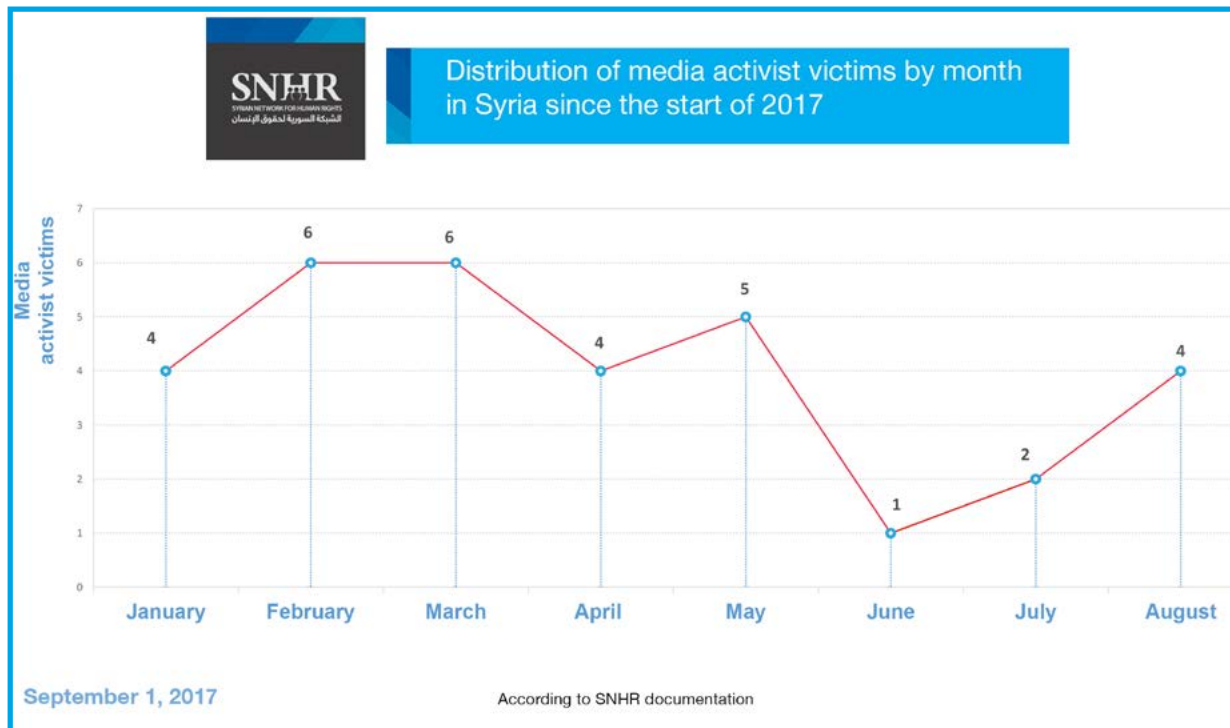In light of the security and logistic difficulties to access all the areas where violations take place, it is worth noting that these statistics and incidents are only the bare minimum of the actual magnitude of crimes and violations that happened.

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II. Executive Summary

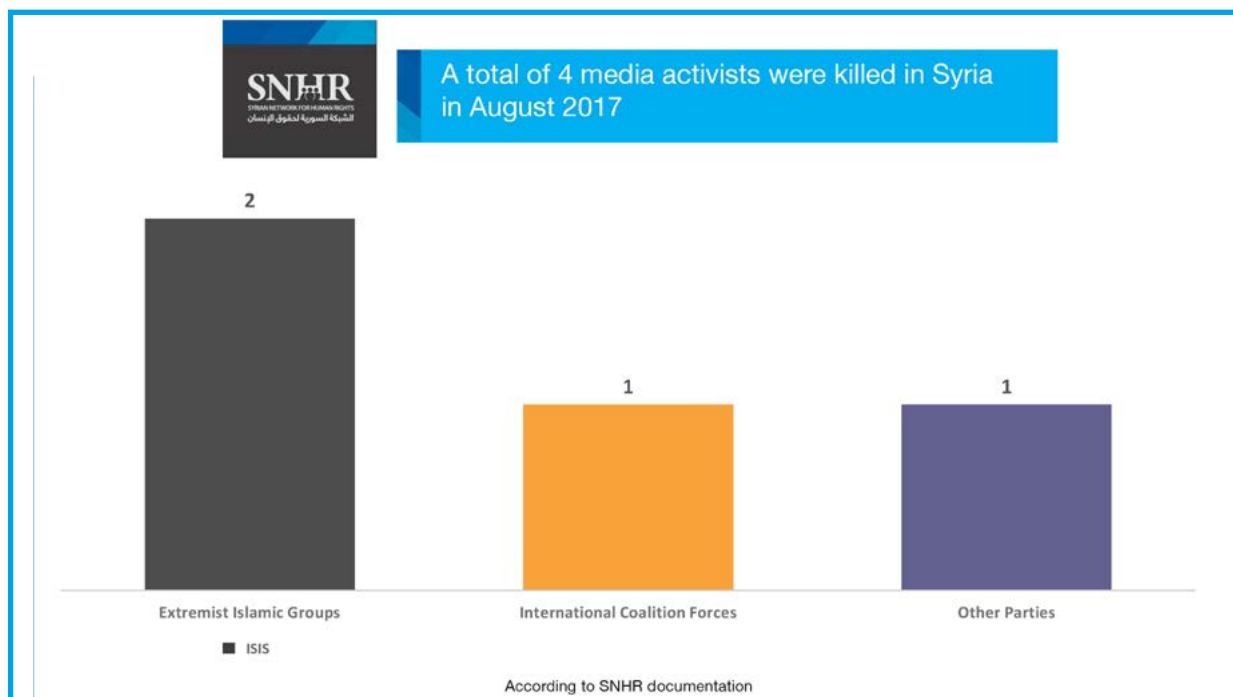### A. Most notable violations against media activist in 2017

SNHR has recorded the killing of 28 media activists from the start of 2017 until August of the same year

B. most notable violations against media activists in August 2017

Violations against media activists during the month of August 2017 are distributed as follows:
- Acts of killing: SNHR documented the killing of four media activists at the hands of the parties to the conflict, as follows

- Extremist Islamic groups

o ISIS (self-proclaimed the Islamic State): two media activists; one of whom was a child.

- International coalition forces: one media activist

- Other parties: one media activist

- Injuries: we recorded that two media activists were injured at the hands of ISIS

- Arrest, abduction, and release: we recorded eight cases of arrest, where four of the eight media activists were released:

- Extremist Islamic groups:

ISIS: one case of arrest

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance consisting of a number of extremist Islamic groups and a number of armed opposition factions): we recorded three cases of arrest, where two of the three arrested media activists have been released.

- Armed opposition factions: we recorded two cases of arrest.

- Self-Management forces (primarily consisting of the Democratic Union Party – a branch for the Kurdistan Workers' Party): we recorded one case of arrest, where the arrested media activist was released.

- Other parties: we recorded one abduction case where the abductee was able to escape.

III. Details
A. Violations by Extremist Islamic groups
- ISIS (self-proclaimed the Islamic State)
- Acts of killing
Ali Yousef al Radi

Sunday, August 20, 2017, armed fighters from ISIS arrested him from an internet café in al Mayadin city, eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour over accusations of conducting illegal media activities. ISIS executed Ali on Monday, August 21, 2017, by shooting him to death in al Mayadin city.

Ali, media activist, administrator of al Mayadin Page on Facebook, from al Ummal neighborhood, Deir Ez-Zour city, 17-year-old.

Ali al Radi

Abdul Ghaffar Qasim al Badawi

Monday, August 28, 2017, Abdul Ghaffar died of wounds caused by shrapnel that inflicted wounds all over his body parts after a thermal rocket fired by ISIS landed near him, as he was covering the clashes between armed opposition factions and ISIS on the battlefront of al Sheikh Saad in western suburbs of Daraa governorate, as part of "Fateh al Fotouh" battle.

Abdul Ghaffar, a reporter for Shahid Media Institution, from Tasil town, western suburbs of Daraa governorate, born in 1977, has a high school diploma, married and a father of six.

Abdul Ghaffar al Badawi

SNHR contacted the media activist Maher Suliman, a friend of Abdul Ghaffar's, via WhatsApp. Maher told us:

> "While Abdul Ghaffar was covering the ongoing battles between armed opposition factions and ISIS on the battlefront of al Sheikh Saad, western suburbs of Daraa governorate, ISIS targeted the location where he was with a directed thermal rocket that landed near him. Shrapnel infected most of his body, as the most fatal injury was in his head, and he died immediately. Also, two of the rebels who were standing near him were killed as well, while four others were wounded to varying degrees."

- Injuries

Alaa Abdul Salam Mulla Sa'doun

Thursday, August 3, 2017, Alaa sustained wounds from shrapnel that infected most of his body after ISIS blew a vehicle bomb near one of the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) centers on the northern outskirts of al Mashlab neighborhood, east of Raqqa city. It is worth noting that Alaa was filming from inside the center when the bombing took place.

Alaa, a reporter for Smart News Agency, from Ain al Arab city, northeastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, born in April 1995, has a high school diploma, single.

Alaa Sa'doun

SNHR contacted Alaa, via Facebook, to ask him about his injury:

"On Thursday, August 3, I was with SDF fighters covering their battles with ISIS in Raqqa city. After we finished filming, my colleague Redwan Othman and I accompanied a SDF group to one of their centers in al Mashlab neighborhood. While I was filming Raqqa city from one of the center balconies, we noticed a car advancing quickly towards the center, and it blew near him. I was in shock, and I woke to find out that me, Redwan, and 13 other fighters were wounded. I was rushed to a medical point in al Raqqa Samra village in the northern suburbs of Raqqa governorate, where I received first-aid. Then, I was transferred to Koubani Hospital in Aleppo suburbs, where I stayed for nearly four days. The shrapnel caused various wounds mostly in my right foot, chest, hand, and face."

Redwan Rashid Othman

Thursday, August 3, 2017, Redwan sustained wounds from shrapnel that infected most of his body after ISIS blew a vehicle bomb near one of the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) centers on the northern outskirts of al Mashlab neighborhood, east of Raqqa city It is worth noting that Redwan was filming from inside the center when the bombing took place.

Redwan, known as Redwan Bizar, a reporter for Kurdistan 24 TV channel, from Tal Abyad city, northern suburbs of Raqqa governorate, born in 1985, a third-year university student at the faculty of media in University of Damascus, married.

Redwan Othman

We weren't able to contact Redwan, but the media activist Alaa Mulla Sa'doun, who was with him at the time of his injury, confirmed that a number of shrapnel infected different parts of his body.

- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance consisting of a number of extremist Islamic groups and a number of armed opposition factions)

- Arrest and release

Ahmad Abdin

Tuesday, August 8, 2017, fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested him at a checkpoint in Ma'arat al Nu'man city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate over posts he wrote criticizing Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. He was taken to one of their detention centers in Idlib city, and was released on Saturday, August 12, 2017.

Ahmad, a media activist who works with Jaish Idlib al Hur, from Ma'aret al Nu'man, born in 1996.

Ahmad Abdin

Ahmad Basim al Hannini

Thursday, August 17, 2017, Ahmad was arrested by fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Kafr Nobbol city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, who took him to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

Ahmad, a reporter for the Syrian Journalistic Center, and a footballer for Kafr Nobbol Sports Club, from Kofr Nobbol city.

Ahmad al Hannini

Ali Khaled al Mer'ie

Sunday, August 20. 2017, Ala was arrested by fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at a checkpoint on the road between Hzarin village and Darkoush city in suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was taken to an undisclosed location, and was released on Wednesday, August 30, 2017.

Ali, works as a media officer at "Syria Relief" organization, from Hzarin village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, born in 1992.

Ali al Mer'ie

B. Violations by armed opposition factions

- Arrest

Hamad al Ahmad

Friday, August 11, 2017, Hamad was arrested by members of the Security Institution that is affiliated to Euphrates Shield operation room, which is composed of a number of armed Syrian opposition factions, in Jarabuls city, eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family. Hamad, an independent media activist, from Jarabuls.

Munib Abu Tayyem

Tuesday, August 22, 2017, Munib was arrested by fighters from Jaish al Islam, an armed opposition faction, who raided his place of residence in Douma city, Damascus suburbs governorate and confiscated his media equipment, and took him to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

Munib, a reporter for Damascus Media Center, from Douma city, 19-year-old

Munib Aby Tayyem

C. Self-Management forces (primarily consisting of the Democratic Union Party – a branch for the Kurdistan Workers' Party)

- Arrest and release

Yahya Sbeih

Tuesday, August 15, 2017, he was arrested by Self-Management forces (primarily consisting of the Democratic Union Party – a branch for the Kurdistan Workers' Party) at a checkpoint in Ifreen city, northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. They took him to one of their detention centers in Ifreen city. He was released on Sunday, August 27. 2017.

Yahya, director of broadcast at Watan FM Radio, from Ma'arat al Nu'man city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, born in 1997.

Yahya Sbeih

Yahya spoke to SNHR via Facebook: "As I passed the first checkpoint for the Kurdish forces in Ifreen city, they stopped me and they asked if I was a journalist, and I denied and said that I am a civilian student, but I got the sense that they recognized me, so I admitted that I am a media activist, and then I was taken to one of their detention centers in Ifreen city, where the interrogation started. I found out that they detained me because I work with Watan FM which has opposing views to their policies. They didn't beat me or insult me, because I had ties to people who work at human rights organization as well as the U.N. They only detained me for 13 days, and then I was released."

D. International coalition forces
<u>- Acts of killing</u>
Ahmad Sheikh Shouk
Thursday, August 10, 2017, Ahmad was killed in a bombing by fixed-wing international coalition forces warplanes that bombed the ISIS-held Raqqa city with missiles.

Ahmad, known as Abu Amer al Babi, a media activist who works with Amaq Agency, from al Bab city, suburbs of Aleppo governorate, 25-year-old. He worked previously with the media office of Harakat Fajr al Islam and then Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement, both are armed opposition factions, before he shifted to ISIS's media office in late-2013.

Ahmad Sheikh Shouk

E. Other parties
<u>- Acts of killing</u>
Osama Naser al Zou'bi
Sunday, August 20, 2017, Osama was killed in an IED bombing that was implanted on al Karak al Sharqi-Rakham road, eastern suburbs of Daraa governorate. The IED blew near the car he was in, as he was heading for Daraa city to make a report on the civilians' humanitarian conditions. As of this writing, we haven't been able to determine the group behind the bombing. The area is under the control of armed opposition factions.

Osama al Zou'bi

Osama, [head of the Syrian Media Commission office](#) in eastern suburbs of Daraa governorate, from al Mleiha al Sharqiya town, eastern suburbs of Daraa governorate, born in 1987, has a degree in economics, married and a father of two.

SNHR contacted the media activist Bassel al Karaki, via Facebook, who told us about his friend Osama's murder:

> "On that day, Osama was heading along with his brother Khaled, who works with Osama, and his nephew Ya'rub for Daraa, where they were going to make a report about the conditions in the city. When their car passed near a mine, it exploded and the shrapnel killed Osama as well as the people who were with him immediately. Also, the car was heavily damaged."

- Abduction

Samer al Hourani

Tuesday, July 18, 2017, he was abducted by unknowns who lured him near al Raa'ie village, northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The abduction was in the hopes of getting a ransom. On Monday, August 7, 2017, he managed to escape with the help of someone.

Samer (his real name is concealed for security concerns) is a media activist and a drama writer, he graduated from the faculty of media at University of Damascus, from al Karak al Sharqi village, suburbs of Daraa governorate, he was born in 1985. He previously worked with Orient TV Channel and Alaan TV Channel.

Samer al Hourani

We contacted Samer, via Facebook, who told us about the abduction:

> "I was coordinating with my colleague Ibrahim Yassouf for a documentary they working on in northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, and another in Idlib suburbs. In order to facilitate work, I contacted a Syrian in Turkey that I was hoping he can facilitate my entrance into Syria via Kellis area in suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The guy agreed to help once I told him about what I wanted to do there, and told me that I will find guys he knows there to help me move. Indeed, I got to the specified area on the specified date, July 18, and met one of the guys who got me to al Raa'ie area, where we waited for a third guy before moving. Three guys came, and told me that I have to get a filming permission from Jarabuls's security. I didn't show any opposition and I went with them to an area in Jarabuls suburbs,

where they left me in a school and told me that I will be staying with them. A while later, they came back and blindfolded me and took pictures of me and sent them to my family. They took my phone, my passport, and some cash I had on me. I realized by then that I was set-up. I kept asking them about the reason I am here, and no one would give me a definite answer."

"I tried my best to contact my family to tell them that I am okay but to no avail. One of the abductors sympathized with me and he would always say: "Your family knows" I tried to convince him to let me use my Facebook, but he wouldn't let me and just let me take a look at my profile from his account. I found out that a lot of pages had posted about my abduction, and I was shocked to know that they were negotiating my family on a ransom. I managed to escape with the help of someone, and I never spoke about what happened to me until after I got to Turkey."

IV. Recommendations

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Condemn the targeting of media activists in Syria and sheds light on their sacrifice and suffering.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

Conduct investigations that focuses on the targeting of media activists given their vital role in recording incidents in Syria.

The Security Council

Work on fighting the policy of impunity by referring the cases in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

The sponsoring Russian side

• The Syrian regime has to be stopped from dooming the de-escalation agreements. Otherwise, it will only be seen as an exchange of roles between the Russian regime, on one side, and the Syrian/Russian alliance on the other side.

• Start making progress in the detainees issue by revealing the fates of 76,000 forcibly-disappeared persons at the hands of the Syrian regime.

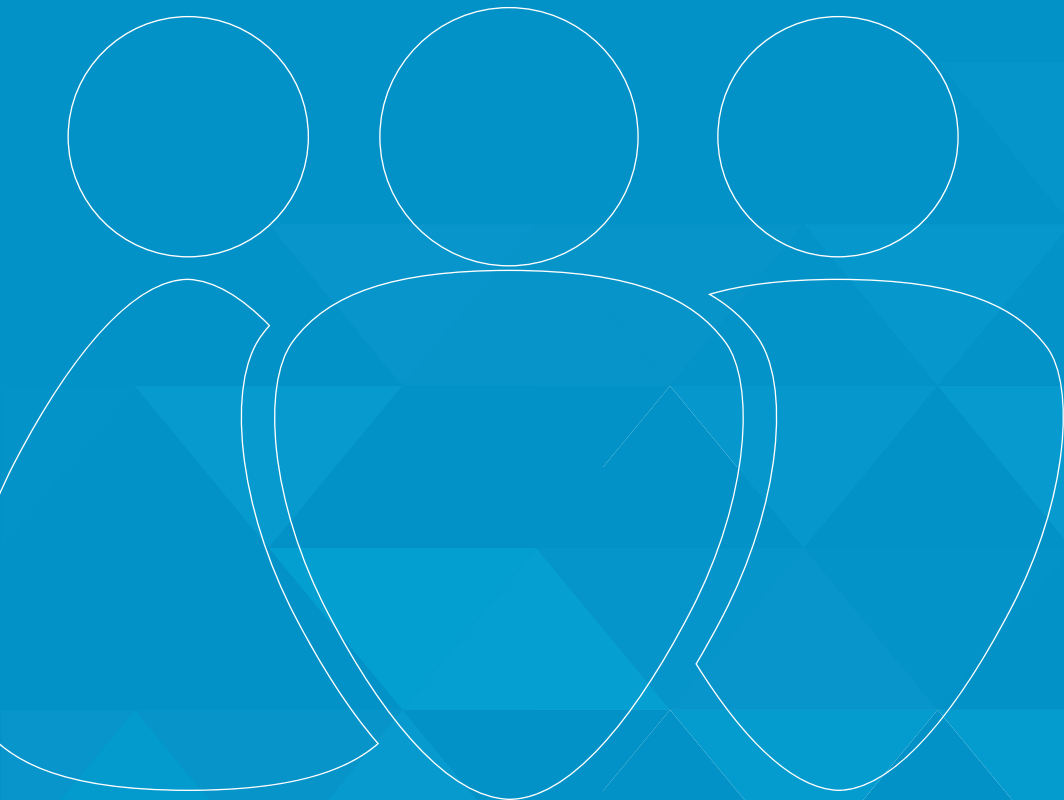**International and Arabic media institutions**

Advocate their colleagues in the field of media by publishing periodic reports that shed light on their daily suffering and memorialize their sacrifice. Also, they must contact their families to console them.

Finally, all parties have to respect the international humanitarian law with respect to the protection of civilians and especially media activists and their equipment.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

Out most heartfelt condolences go out for the victims' families and our thank for the families and friends of media activists who contributed effectively to this report.

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