

Brief report

On World Press Freedom Day: Citizen Journalists in Syria Face Retirement or Displacement

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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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.

I. Introduction

On May 3rd every year, the world celebrates World Press Freedom Day, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 in accordance with the [recommendations](#) of the twenty-sixth session of the General Conference of UNESCO in 1991, which stipulate that a free, pluralistic and independent press is an essential element of every democratic society. On May 1, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, called on all parties to defend the rights of journalists, in a [video message](#) delivered to mark the occasion of World Press Freedom Day. In a separate [message](#) marking this occasion, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay called upon all UNESCO Member States as well as civil society and professional organizations to celebrate freedom of the press and the right to have access to information as essential pillars of any democratic society.

As the world celebrates this day, citizen journalists in Syria continue to suffer from the most severe and lethal forms of repression, persecution, detention and torture. In its latest report, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Syria as 174 out of 180 according to the [2019 World Press Freedom Index](#).

The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the greatest responsibility for Syria's horrendous status globally, and for the grotesque misrepresentation of Syria and the Syrian people. Since the beginning of the Assad family's rule, the regime's security services have completely dominated every facet of the press and other media, and prevented the establishment of any independent audio, visual or other media outlets, with state newspapers and channels being the sole domestic news media available, providing regime propaganda platforms for decades. Following the outbreak of the popular uprising for freedom in March 2011, the Syrian regime and its security services became even more lethally brutal and oppressive towards any independent press and media covering events in the country. This savage repression is driven by the regime's fear that independent media would expose the practices and crimes of the Syrian regime and thoroughly disprove the complete falsity of the claims published as 'news' by the official media outlets, which are wholly controlled by the security services.



Press Work in Syria Is Endless Challenges:

The Syrian regime has been aware of the danger posed to press freedom to its tyrannical rule for decades, never tolerating any press report or image exposing its brutal practices against the Syrian people. These brutal practices did not diminish after Bashar al Assad inherited power but increased. This brief report is insufficient to include dozens of examples of the Syrian regime's attempts to stifle and crush any independent media work in Syria. Amongst the tools deployed by the regime to legitimize its repression, terror and criminality has been the introduction of totalitarian articles of legislation severely restricting freedom of the press. These laws include the Media Act promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, which imposed further restraints limiting the already severely restricted media transparency and press freedom, and providing for prison sentences and fines for anyone who violates the provisions of this repressive law. Many of the provisions of this decree are characterized by broad terms that allow for different interpretations, making it difficult for journalists to accurately distinguish their rights and duties. Many journalists and media activists have been arrested, persecuted and tortured, while scores of Syrian journalists have been forced to flee Syria in search of safer and more secure and free places.

From the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011, the Syrian regime greatly increased its already harsh repression of press and media work, effectively muzzling the voices of the people and forbidding the broadcast of any report, video or photograph exposing the brutal practices of the security services. In addition, the regime also prohibited the broadcast or publication of the demands of the popular uprising and peaceful demonstrations and reports on the uprising's development and expansion. The growth of Syrian citizen journalism was a decisive factor in the preparation of press reports in cooperation and coordination with international journalists and media outlets. For this reason in particular, the Syrian regime, through a deliberate and clear strategy used in all Syrian governorates, targeted local journalists. The Syrian Network for Human Rights' (SNHR) team has documented multiple intensive, widespread and clear violations against the rights of journalists, who have been targeted by snipers and singled out for arrest, enforced disappearances and torture, with the regime also attempting to undermine the credibility of Syrian journalists by denying the veracity of their reports. In this context, we've recorded dozens of cases in which the Syrian regime has forced detained citizen journalists to appear on official state television making clearly coerced confessions denying all that they have filmed and published, and declaring their return to 'obedience' to the Syrian regime and repentance for what they did.



Even in areas that broke free of Syrian regime control, citizen journalist and media workers have not been safe, with the regime and its allies targeting them with aerial and artillery bombardments, killing or injuring many of them. One of the gravest examples of this attack strategy is the policy of 'double-tap' strikes targeting civilian populations, including primarily media workers who come to the bombing site to film the aftermath and prepare reports on the events that took place. According to what SNHR has been able to document on our database, at least 1,457 media workers have been injured in military attacks by the Syrian-Russian alliance, with their injuries ranging from mild and moderate injury to permanent disability.

It must be stressed that the Syrian regime allows no form of criticism at all, even from its most ardent loyalists, and will tolerate no kind of freedom of expression or press freedom; that is to say, the Syrian state is fully ruled and controlled by the totalitarian regime's security apparatus. The Syrian regime has even prosecuted loyal media workers who obediently presented its account of events and defended it devotedly for years; when they expressed the slightest criticism or objection, however, they were quickly arrested by the security services. One such case is that of the prominent regime media figurehead known as Wesam al Tair; although he was infamous for his absolute loyalty and his closeness to the ruling family, that did not prevent the security services from arresting him in Damascus city on Saturday, December 15, 2018. His fate remains unknown up to the time of this writing, and he's categorized as being among those forcibly disappeared by the regime.

Finally, the Syrian regime has betrayed the areas with which it had entered into settlement processes, deliberately and systematically persecuting citizen journalists there and arresting most of them.

Extremist Islamist groups, in particular ISIS terrorist organization, have also practiced a variety of violations against citizen journalists, even forcing them to use their expertise to convey ISIS's distorted ideology and to publish its vicious propaganda on pain of torture and death if they fail to comply, as well as pursuing, arresting and terrorizing media workers and citizen journalists. We at SNHR have experienced long periods of hardly receiving any news or information from areas that were under the control of ISIS, which indicates the scale of the targeting and horror that this brutal organization spread.

ISIS copied the Syrian regime's practices in many types of violations, such as filming and publishing various videos showing clearly coerced 'confessions' by citizen journalists admitting to supposed crimes against ISIS and expressing repentance before being executed by a variety of horrendous methods. One of the most notable of these gruesome publications by ISIS was what it called 'The Devil's Revelation', issued in June 2016, containing footage of the execution of four citizen journalists in Deir Ez-Zour governorate (Samer Mohammad al Abboud, Sami Jawdat al Rabah, Mahmoud Shaaban al Haj Khader, Mohammad Marwan al Eisa).



Another extremist Islamist group, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has also persecuted citizen journalists in the areas under its control, killing all those who it felt might pose a threat to its extremist ideology and policies, as it did with Raed al Faris and Hamoud Jneed. We have also documented the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's forces in retaliation for issuing publications contrary to its policies or for participating in activism without obtaining permission; this persecution has led many media activists, fearing for their lives, to either abandon their journalistic activities or flee their areas.

The areas under the control of the Armed Opposition have also not enjoyed positive models of press freedom, with citizen journalists routinely being subjected to a policy of harassment, extortion, intimidation, detention and torture.

Syrian Democratic Forces have also largely suppressed press freedom, in particular any approach that opposes their policies. We have documented a wide range of arrests, enforced disappearances and torture of citizen journalists who have criticized the Syrian Democratic Forces' policies and their administration of the areas under their control.

The persecution and assassinations that have dogged the work of independent media personnel in Syria have sent a clear message aimed at muzzling the people's voices and dragging Syria into an abyss of endless darkness.

Record of the Most Notable Violations Against Media Workers According to the SNHR's Database:

I. Extrajudicial killings:

The SNHR documented the deaths of at least 695 (local and foreign) journalists and media workers from March 2011 to May 2019. They were distributed by to the main perpetrator party as follows:

Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias): 546, including five children, one woman and five foreign journalists.

Russian forces: 20.

Extremist Islamist groups: 71, including one child, two women and three foreign journalists, divided between:

- ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'): 64, including one child, two women and three foreign journalists.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition): Seven.

Factions of the Armed Opposition: 25, including one child and three women.

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party): Four.

International Coalition forces: One.

Other parties: 28



II. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance:

The SNHR documented at least 1,136 cases of arrests and kidnappings of media workers at the hands of all key perpetrator parties in Syria from March 2011 to May 2019, of whom at least 421, including four women and 18 foreign journalists, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in detention centers, distributed by perpetrator party as follows:

Syrian Regime forces: 349, including two women and four foreign journalists.

Extremist Islamist groups: 51, including one woman and nine foreign journalists, divided between:

- ISIS: 48, including one woman and eight foreign journalists.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: Three, including one foreign journalist.

Factions of the Armed Opposition: 14, including one woman and five foreign journalists.

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces: Seven.

The Most Notable Violation Incidents Against Media Workers:

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, we outline the most notable violation incidents we documented between May 2018 and May 2019:

I. The most notable Extrajudicial killings:

[Niraz Saeed Manad](#), a married [photographer](#) born in 1991, who originally came from Olem village in Palestine, was living in al Yarmouk Camp south of Damascus city. Having attained a secondary school diploma, Niraz won several photography awards, most notably the UNRWA award for Best Journal Picture of the Year 2014 for his photograph entitled 'Three Kings', as well as several international awards for "Letters from Yarmouk".

On Monday, July 16, 2018, we received information confirming Niraz's death due to torture in a Syrian Regime forces' detention center. We note that Niraz was arrested on Friday, October 2, 2015, by Syrian Regime forces in Damascus city.



Niraz Manad

[Ahmad Mahmoud Aziza](#), born in 1998, was [a reporter](#) and [photographer](#) for [Aleppo News Media Network](#) and [Ayoon Syria Network](#), from Aleppo city. Ahmad, a bachelor, had an intermediate education certificate. On Friday, August 10, 2018, he died as result of multiple injuries inflicted by shrapnel as a result of an air raid by fixed-wing warplanes that we believe were Russian, which fired a missile that landed near him while he was tending to those wounded in a previous bombing by the same air force on Urm al Kubra village in the western suburbs of Aleppo governorate, which is under the control of Armed Opposition factions.



On Friday, November 23, 2018, at around 12:00 Damascus time/10:00 GMT, as people were performing the Friday Prayer, Raed Fares was in his car with his fellow activists Hamoud Jneed and Ali al Dandoush, driving from the URB in the town of Kafranbel in the southern suburbs of Idlib province towards the city's main market on their way to visit a relative of Raed's, They were followed by a car carrying gunmen who assassinated Raed and his colleague Hamoud when Raed stopped the car he was driving in front of the relative's home. We believe that it is most probably Hay'at Tahrir al Sham who carried out the assassination. SNHR issued [a detailed report](#) on the incident. Raed, born in 1972, was the founder and director of Radio Fresh and a prominent activist in the popular uprising for democracy. He came from Kafranbel city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and was married with three children.



Hamoud Jneed, a media activist from Kafranbel city in Idlib, worked for Radio Fresh. Born in 1980, he was a married father of four children, including a daughter with special needs. He had been actively involved in filming the demonstrations with Raed from the earliest days of the uprising for freedom, as well as documenting the Syrian regime's bombardment of the city with many photos and videos. He also produced a number of reports for Radio Fresh.



[Ali Mahmoud Othman](#), a member of the Baba Amr media office, from the Baba Amr neighborhood in the south-west of Homs city, was born in 1977. He was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, March 28, 2012, after being lured from his hiding place in Aleppo city. In May 2012, Ali made a clearly forced confession on a TV show entitled 'Khafaya Baba Amr' (Mysteries of Baba Amr) on the regime-run 'Syrian satellite' state TV channel. On Sunday, April 14, 2019, we learned that his family had been given a document at the local civil registry office stating that he had died on Monday, December 30, 2013; it is probable that he died due to torture in a Syrian Regime forces' detention center.



Ali, nicknamed 'al Jid' (the grandfather), was one of the most prominent activists in the Baba Amr neighborhood. He witnessed the targeted killing of the American journalist Marie Colvin when Syrian Regime forces stormed the Baba Amr neighborhood on February 22, 2012, and assisted the British journalist Paul Conroy and many other foreign journalists to escape from Homs city following this invasion. We have issued a [detailed report](#) on the incident and the registering of Ali's death in the civil registry secretariat.

II. The most notable arrest incidents:

Mohammad Fadel Janoudi, known as Mohammad al Shami, was born in 1995. A married father of two children, he is a reporter for the Qasioun Agency in the suburbs of Latakia governorate, from al Najeyya village in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate. On Monday, June 24, 2018, Mohammad was arrested by gunmen affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, for not having permission to photograph in the areas under their control, from his local area near Ein al Bayda camp, near the town of Bdama, in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was taken to a detention center in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was released on Wednesday, March 6, 2019.



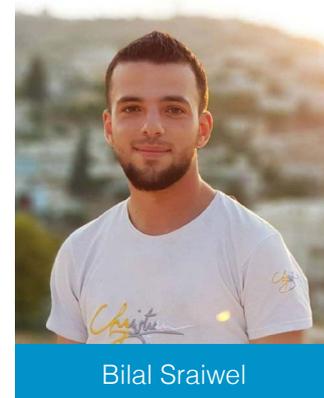
[Isam al Abbas](#), born on May 20, 1980, is an independent media activist who was working as a reporter for Hevi FM radio, from Hasaka city when he was last seen. Isam, who is married with two children (a boy and girl), was arrested on Friday, June 22, 2018, by gunmen affiliated with al Shamal brigade, which is affiliated with the Armed Opposition Factions, in al Jat village near al Haishariya village in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, while he was on his way to al Haishraiya village to photograph a report on the Turkish-American agreement in Manbej city. Al Haishariya is the contact line between the control areas of the Syrian Democratic Forces and those of the Armed Opposition factions. The gunmen took him to one of the detention centers belonging to the Sultan Murad brigade in Azaz city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate.



[Omar Kalo](#), born in 1977, is a media graduate from the University of Damascus, and a newscaster on the Kurdish Rudaw satellite channel. Omar, who is originally from the village of Arslan Tash, east of the city of Ein al Arab in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Saturday, August 25, 2018, by Syrian Regime forces at a checkpoint on the road linking between Aleppo and Manbej city in the northeastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. He was released on Thursday, October 4, 2018.

Bilal Sraiwel, a media worker for Swa'adna Alsouria Organization, a member of the Media Workers Association of East Ghouta, and a designer for the Syrian Independent Kurd League, from Douma city in the Eastern Ghouta in eastern Damascus Suburbs governorate, was born in 1993.

On Thursday, November 8, 2018, at around 20:00, gunmen affiliated to al Sultan Murad brigade, one of the factions of the Armed Opposition, arrested Bilal in Vilas street in the center of Afrin city on charges of filming without obtaining prior authorization. He was taken to an undisclosed location, before being released on Sunday, November 11, 2018, after being subjected to [severe torture](#).



[Durgham Hammadi](#), born in 1973, is an editor with the Fox Aleppo website and a civil activist working in the Aleppo Governorate Council, from the western suburbs of Aleppo governorate. Omar, who is a resident of al Atareb town west of Aleppo governorate after being displaced from Aleppo city, is married with seven children. On Wednesday, November 28, 2018, he was arrested by gunmen affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at a checkpoint while he was heading from al Atareb city to Bab al Hawa area to obtain an authorization permit to film in a camp near the borders. He was released on Friday, December 21, 2018.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council:

Contribute to combating the policy of impunity by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Make clear efforts to end the conflict in Syria through a political process that moves Syria from a totalitarian state to a stable democratic civilized state.



OHCHR:

Condemn the targeting of media workers in Syria, and highlight their sacrifices and suffering.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI):

Investigate the targeting of media workers in particular, given their vital role in recording events in Syria.

The Arab and International Media Institutions:

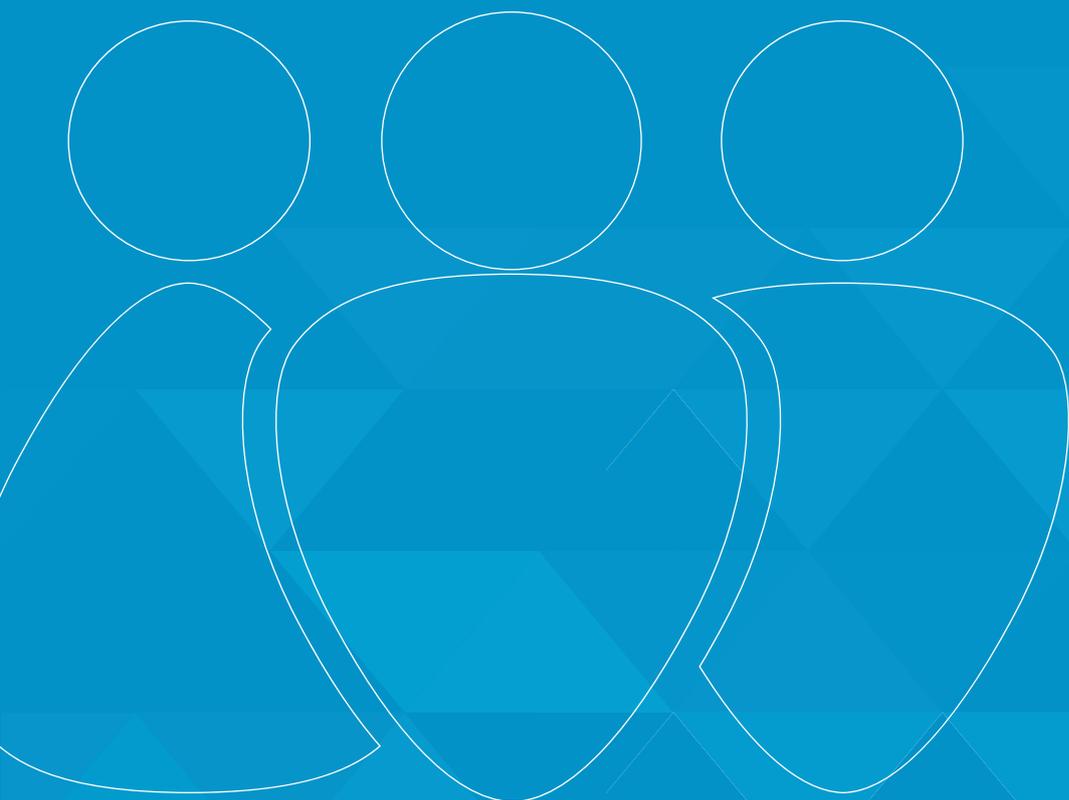
Advocate on behalf of fellow journalists in Syria through the publication of periodic reports highlighting their daily suffering and commemorating their sacrifices, as well as communicating with their families, and providing relief and reassurance to them.

Finally, all parties in the areas under their control must abide by the provisions of international humanitarian law with regard to the protection of civilians, especially media workers and their equipment.

Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to the media workers and their families whose information has enriched this report, and who are putting their lives at risk in order to uncover violations and to hold those involved accountable.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

