

On World Press Freedom Day, We Demand the Release of 422 Citizen Journalists Detained in Syria, mostly by the Syrian Regime, and Now Also Threatened by COVID-19 Pandemic

707 Citizen Journalists Killed Since March 2011 to Date, 78% by Syrian Regime Forces



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Sunday, May 3, 2020

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. Citizen Journalists Play A Fundamental Role in Disseminating Information and Images:

May 3rd every year marks the annual 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 stipulated that a free, pluralistic and independent press is an essential element of every democratic society.

The Syrian regime has been well aware of the danger posed by press freedom to its tyrannical rule for decades, abolishing all independent newspapers, and allowing only three official newspapers (al Watan, Tishreen, al Baath) to be published; all three are simply Syrian regime mouthpieces, dedicated to promoting, defending and justifying the regime's actions. It is, therefore, no exaggeration but simply a statement of fact to say that there is no such thing as a free press under the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime's hostility towards the concept of journalism and media freedom increased after the outbreak of the popular uprising in March 2011, a point evident from Bashar al Assad's speech delivered during a meeting with a delegation from the Jobar neighborhood of Damascus on June 11, 2011, in which he said: **"I do not blame those who demonstrate, but rather blame those who photograph and transmit."** This expression of intolerance for any dissent was translated into operational reality for every individual reporting freely, fairly and independently on events in Syria and exposing the terrible realities of the violations committed by the Syrian regime and security forces against the Syrian people.



As the rate of violations rapidly grew and spread across various Syrian regions in parallel with the spread of the popular uprising demanding political change, the idea and importance of the “citizen journalist” emerged; this was necessitated by the Syrian regime completely blocking all independent media, allowing only the regime-affiliated Iranian, Russian and Lebanese media outlets, which are not independent media outlets but more mouthpieces for the regime to justify or deny its own violations and those of its allies. This complete blocking of media freedom has continued for nine years to date, with only rare conditional exceptions, which cannot be relied upon.

Syrian citizen journalists have risked their own lives to report on events in Syria, initially simply using mobile phones to photograph, film and document the facts; some went on to get better quality, more professional cameras and broadcast equipment to report events directly to the world using social media websites and platforms and satellite broadcasting outlets. Although some citizen journalists did make a number of errors in their media coverage, especially in the early days, such as exaggerating facts or reporting on events from second-hand accounts without first verifying their authenticity, the accumulation of experience means that such errors have decreased significantly, with the proliferation of media outlets and hundreds of citizen journalists contributing to an ability to quickly and accurately verify information through cross-checking with various sources and data.

The violations against citizen journalists have not been limited to the Syrian regime although it is the main perpetrator, but extend to all parties to the conflict, most especially when exposing the violations of the de facto authorities. Earlier this year, Reporters Without Borders ranked Syria for the second consecutive year as ranking in 174th place out of 180 countries globally in terms of press freedom according to the [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#); citizen journalists in Syria have been exposed to various types of violations, including killing, torture, enforced disappearance, injury, kidnapping, and threats. We can affirm without a doubt that without the news reports, video footage and photos provided by citizen journalists in areas under or outside the control of the Syrian regime, many violations would never have been documented.

II. Most Notable Violations Against Citizen Journalists According to the SNHR's Database

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has been concerned from the beginning of its work with documenting the violations committed against the media sector, including killing, detention, injury and persecution, whether by cataloguing these in daily news reports or by issuing [monthly reports](#) and [special reports](#) that document these violations committed by all perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria. According to SNHR's methodology, a cit-



izen journalist is classified as an individual who played an important role in reporting and publishing news, with the status of a citizen journalist being discontinued if and when such an individual takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, and being resumed if he or she withdraws completely from participation in military action.

The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the greatest responsibility for Syria's horrendous status globally concerning press freedom and media work, and for the grotesque misrepresentation of Syria and the Syrian people. The Syrian regime is by far the largest perpetrator of violations against citizen journalists compared to all other parties to the conflict; Russian forces are also associated with and supportive of the Syrian regime's violations. In the event that the violations practiced by the two parties are considered collectively, they exceed 85% of some types of violations, particularly bearing in mind that the Syrian regime has harnessed the capabilities of the Syrian state and its institutions, including the army and security, cash reserves, oil and other resources, to crush those demanding political change.

Even in areas that broke free of Syrian regime control, citizen journalists have not been safe, with the regime and Russian forces targeting them with aerial and artillery bombardment, killing or injuring many of them. One of the gravest examples of this attack strategy is the policy of 'double-tap' airstrikes, in which Syrian regime or Russian warplanes target one site, then wait until medical and rescue personnel have rushed to help the injured and citizen journalists have gathered to report the event to return and target the same site again, deliberately targeting these personnel and causing as many victims as possible.

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 for expressing expressed the slightest criticism or objection, with security services quickly detaining and imprisoning them for doing so. One such case is that of the citizen journalist, [Wesam al Tair](#). Finally, the Syrian regime has betrayed those in the areas with which it had entered into settlement processes, deliberately and systematically persecuting citizen journalists there and arresting most of them.



Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has also routinely persecuted citizen journalists in the areas under its control, killing and assassinating all those who it felt might pose a threat to its extremist ideology and policies. We have also documented the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's forces in retaliation for publishing material contrary to its policies or for participating in activism without obtaining permission. We also recorded the injury of dozens of citizen journalists by HTS' forces while they were working on media coverage of anti-HTS protests; this has recently led many citizen journalists to either abandon their journalistic activities or flee their areas.

The ISIS organization also practiced a variety of violations against citizen journalists, even forcing them on pain of death to use their expertise to convey ISIS's distorted ideology and to publish its vicious propaganda, 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 their repentance before being executed by a variety of horrendous methods.

Despite the announcement of the end of the ISIS in March 2019, all of the citizen journalists who had previously been arrested by the organization have remained forcibly disappeared and their fate has not been revealed to date.

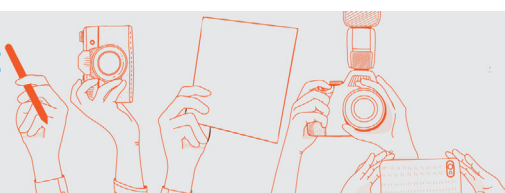
The areas under the control of the Armed Opposition have also not enjoyed positive models of press freedom, with citizen journalists routinely being subjected to a policy of harassment, extortion, intimidation, detention and torture.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have also largely suppressed press freedom, in particular any coverage that opposes or criticizes 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 SDF also require media to obtain licenses to operate in areas under their control.



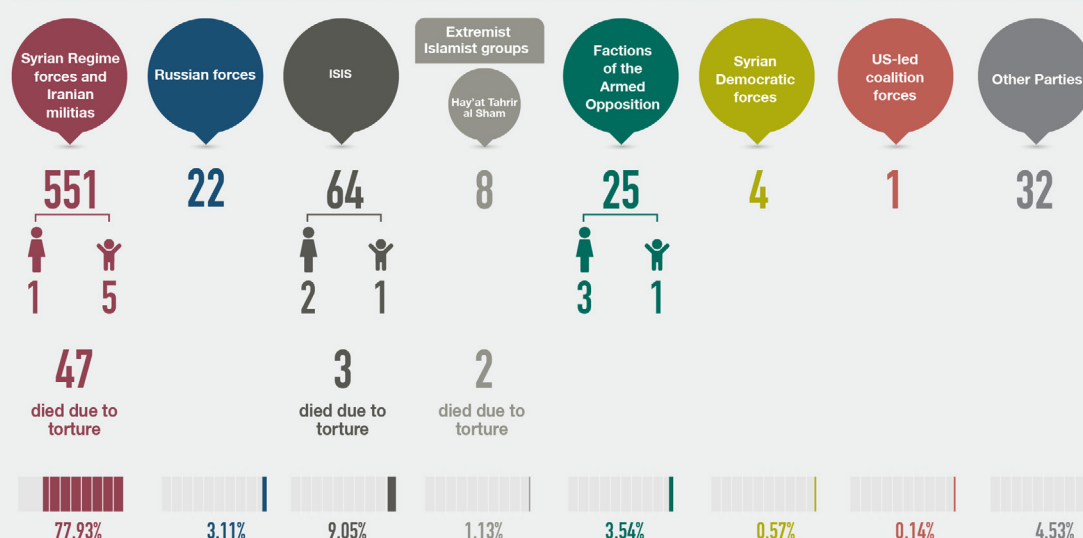
The most notable violations against the media sector in Syria

Between March 2011 and May 2020



Extrajudicial Killing

The death of **707** citizen journalists, including **7** children, **6** women, and **52** due to torture, at the hands of the main perpetrator parties:



Arbitrary Arrest and Enforced Disappearance

At least **422** citizen journalists, including **3** women still detained or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the main perpetrator parties:



May 3, 2020



Extrajudicial killings:

The SNHR documented the deaths of at least 707 citizen journalists at the hands of all main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria from March 2011 to May 2020, including seven children and six women (adult female), as well as nine foreign journalists, and 52 others killed due to torture, in addition to 1,563 others who were injured with various degrees. They were distributed by the main perpetrator party as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):** 551, including five children, five women, five foreign journalists, and 47 who died due to torture in detention centers.
- **Russian forces:** 22.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):** 64, including one child, two women, three foreign journalists, and three who died due to torture.
- **Extremist Islamist groups:**
 - Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition): Eight, including two who died due to torture.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 25, including one child and three women.
- **Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party):** Four.
- **US-led coalition forces:** One.
- **Other parties:** 32, including one foreign journalist killed at the hands of the Operation Peace Spring alliance forces (Turkish and Syrian National Army forces)

We outline the most notable incidents we documented in a year since our last annual report, between May 2019 and May 2020:

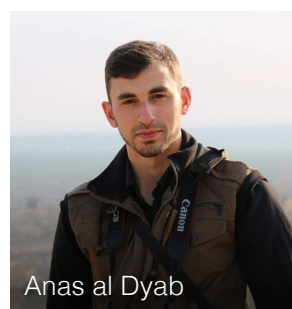
On Sunday, June 23, 2019, the citizen journalist known as [Omar al Dimashqi](#), whose real name we reserve for security reasons, died in a Turkish hospital of several shrapnel [wounds](#) to most parts of his body [caused by the blast from an explosive device](#) planted in a car belonging to al Rahmon Humanitarian Relief Society, which he worked for, in Sarmada city in Idlib governorate northern suburbs on Monday, June 17, 2019. We were unable to identify the party responsible for planting the device up to the publication of this report. The city was under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

Born in 1996, Omar, a photographer with al Rahmon Humanitarian Relief Society, originally came from Aqraba town in the south of Damascus Suburbs governorate. Omar, who held a Preparatory school certificate, was single.



The SNHR contacted the media activist, Hazem al Qalamouni¹, who told us what Omar's friend, who was with him, had told him about the incident and subsequent events: **“On Monday, June 17, while Omar was about to get in a car belonging to the association he worked for to drive to Atma Camps to distribute bread to the displaced, an explosive device planted in the car blew up, injuring him with several shrapnel wounds all over his body. He was immediately taken to the university hospital in the Turkish city of Antakya where he underwent several operations, in which his left foot was amputated and a number of fingers of his hands were removed. He was then transferred to Kaderli Hospital in the Turkish city of al Othmaniya where he died six days later due to the wounds sustained. “**

On Sunday, July 21, 2019, the citizen journalist [Anas Abdul Majid al Dyab](#) died of [wounds caused by multiple shrapnel injuries to most of his body](#) as [a result of bombardment](#) by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, when they fired missiles at al Gharbi al Shamali neighborhood in Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, while he was with the Civil Defense teams inspecting a site in the neighborhood previously bombed by the same warplanes.



Anas, a photographer for the Khan Sheikhoun Civil Defense Centre, from Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, was born in 1997. Anas, who was single and held a secondary school certificate, had been injured several times before; one of these injuries was sustained in the chemical attack carried out by the Syrian regime on al Shamali neighborhood in Khan Sheikhoun city on April 4, 2017.

The SNHR contacted citizen journalist Ayham al Bayyoush², a friend of Anas, who quoted to us what Anas's colleague, who was accompanying him when he was fatally injured, said: **“On Sunday, July 21, Russian warplanes launched several raids on al Gharbi al Shamali neighborhood of Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. While Anas was with his team at one of the sites that was bombed, inspecting the place and documenting what happened, a missile fell near him fired by the same warplanes. Shrapnel hit several places in Anas' body, and he was immediately taken to Bab al Hawa Hospital near the Syrian-Turkish borders, but unfortunately he died before he arrived at the hospital.”** Ayham added that two other Civil Defense members were also injured in the bombardment.

¹ Via his personal Facebook account on June 26, 2019

² Via his personal Facebook account on July 22, 2019



Samer Saleh al Salloum, an activist in the popular uprising, in charge of the printing and distribution of 'al Gherbal' political magazine and 'Zawrak' children's magazine, came from Kafranbel city in the southern suburbs of Idlib city. Samer, who was born in 1985, was a married father of four children, one of whom was an infant when Samer was arrested.

On Tuesday, December 26, 2017, gunmen affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested the citizen journalist Samer al Salloum and his friend Ahmad al Hannak in a raid on Samer's family home in Kafranbel city and took both men to al Uqab Prison in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. While Samer's friend, Ahmad, was released after one day of detention, Samer remained in detention, with HTS denying any knowledge of his fate, and refusing many times to allow his family to visit him; as a result, Samer was categorized as having been forcibly disappeared. This continued until August 10, 2019, when his family received information confirming that he had been executed by a gunshot nearly four months previously, in April 2019; however, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham did not inform his family about his death. We issued [a report](#) on the incident.

The SNHR highlighted his condition amongst a group of portraits created by SNHR showing 100 of the people forcibly disappeared in Syria; these portraits were exhibited at advocacy events held in several countries. Samer's portrait can be seen on [the link](#).

On Friday, October 11, 2019, the citizen journalist [Vedat Fateh Erdemci](#) died due to wounds sustained by shrapnel which penetrated most of his body during bombardment by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe belong to the Turkish forces involved in Operation Peace Spring (Turkish and Syrian National Army forces), which fired a number of missiles that landed near his home in Ras al Ein city in the northwestern suburbs of Hasaka governorate, which was under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces at the time of the incident.

Vedat, [a photographer and documentary filmmaker](#), from Urfa city, Turkey, was born in 1999.



The incident also resulted in the deaths of [Saed Sheikhmous Ahmad](#), a reporter for the Hawar News Agency 'ANHA', and [Muhammad Hussein Rasho](#), a correspondent for Cira TV

On Tuesday, February 4, 2020, at around 07:00, the citizen journalist Amjad Muhammad Anas Aktalati, was killed when fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a number of missiles targeting al Midan neighborhood in Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, which was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.



Amjad, a photographer at the General Media Center, was a married father of three from Ariha city. Born in 1992, he was a third-year student at the Faculty of Education - Department of Psychology - University of Damascus.

The SNHR contacted the media worker, Anas Tracy³, a friend of Amjad, who told us: **“When I heard about the news of Amjad’s death, I contacted one of the Civil Defense personnel who was at the site of Amjad’s death, who told me that the Russian warplanes launched several missile airstrikes targeting the al Midan neighborhood in Ariha city, one of which targeted the house of Fadi Rahal, a friend of Amjad, in whose house Amjad spent the night, which resulted in the death of Amjad and his friend Fadi.”** Anas added that the bodies of the two martyrs were not retrieved until the next day because of the intense shelling that day and the great destruction in the area.

Jihad Muhammad Jamal, from Aleppo city, was a citizen journalist in addition to his activism in the Syrian popular uprising. Nicknamed 'Milan', Jihad, born in 1972, was a qualified lawyer, having obtained his law degree from Aleppo University.

He was arrested for his activism by Syrian Regime forces for the fourth and final time on Wednesday, March 7, 2012, in the Ninar Café in the Bab Sharqi neighborhood of Damascus city, along with a number of other activists, and taken to the regime’s infamous Palestine Security Branch '235' in the city. During his interrogation at the Palestine Branch, Jihad was severely tortured and accused of treason, and was subsequently subjected to a trial in the Military Field Court in December 2012. After this, he was detained in Seydnaya Military Prison in Damascus Suburbs governorate, where his family managed to visit him for the last time at the beginning of 2016.

³ Via WhatsApp on February 18, 2020



On Monday, April 13, 2020, the SNHR obtained information indicating that he had died, with his family obtaining a document on Saturday, March 7, 2020, stating that he had died on Friday, November 2, 2016, according to the records of the Civil Registry Department. Since the regime has not handed over his body to anyone, he is still classified amongst those 'disappeared' by the Syrian regime.

SNHR spoke with activist Noura al Jizawi⁴, Jihad's colleague who worked with him, who said, **"Jihad worked on many societal, legal and political issues before the start of the revolution, such as campaigns for organ donation and against the law of honor crimes. With the start of the revolution, he participated strongly in organizing and coordinating protests and sit-ins in both Aleppo and Damascus. He also worked on producing a documentary film about the sit-in in al Sa'a Square (New Clock Tower Square) in Homs city."**

Noura was arrested 19 days after Jihad's arrest, learning during her own interrogation that he was being held in the Palestine Branch; the investigating officer told her the charges against Jihad in an effort to extract information from her and was tortured when she denied them.

SNHR also spoke with Human Rights defender Mansour al Omari⁵, another friend of Jihad who worked with him, says, **"Jihad was a media activist and he reported the news of the revolution in Syria to many channels, such as the BBC and others. I was helping him in editing the reports he was filming and sending them to news channels like Orient and others."**

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⁴ Via phone on April 20, 2020

⁵ Via phone on April 23, 2020



We note that [Jihad Jamal](#) was previously detained three times before his last arrest by Syrian Regime forces. The first time he was arrested was in the Milano Cafe in Aleppo city on May 5, 2011, after which he was released on June 4, 2011; the second was in Damascus city on August 4, 2011, after which he was released on October 2, 2011; and the third time was on October 14, 2011, after which he was released on December 29, 2011.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights on several occasions called on the Syrian regime to reveal Jamal's fate, and highlighted his condition amongst a group of portraits created by SNHR showing 100 of the people forcibly disappeared in Syria; these portraits were exhibited at advocacy events held in several countries, a number of which were outlined in [a report we previously issued](#). Jamal's portrait can be seen at [this link](#).

Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance:

The SNHR documented at least 1,169 cases of arrests and kidnappings of citizen journalists at the hands of the main perpetrator parties in Syria from March 2011 to May 2020, of whom at least 422, including three women and 17 foreign journalists, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in detention centers, distributed by perpetrator party as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 353, including two women and four foreign journalists.
- **ISIS:** 48, including two women and eight foreign journalists.
- **Extremist Islamist groups:**
 - Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: Three.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 12, including five foreign journalists.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Six.

We outline the most notable incidents we documented in the year since our last annual report, between May 2019 and May 2020:

On Monday, June 3, 2019, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested Muhammad Tawfiq al Saghir as he was passing through one of the SDF checkpoints, namely Hittin Checkpoint, near Hattin village, north of al Qameshli city in the northern suburbs of Hasaka governorate. On June 29, 2019, we received information confirming that he had been sentenced to two years imprisonment, being served in Alaya Prison in the suburbs of Hasaka, supposedly on a charge of arson of agricultural land.

[Muhammad Tawfiq](#), correspondent for the Syrian News channel in Hasaka city, is from Hasaka city.



On Wednesday, June 12, 2019, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested Khaled al Hasan in a raid on his house in al Qameshli city in the northern suburbs of Hasaka governorate. His fate remains unknown.

Khaled, a correspondent with the official Syrian News Agency, who comes from al Qameshli city in the northern suburbs of Hasaka governorate, is married with four children.



On Wednesday, July 24, 2019, gunmen affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested the citizen journalist Jum'a Ali Haj Hamdo in a raid on his house in Ebeen Sam'an village, before releasing him on Tuesday, July 30, 2019.

Jum'a, known as Jum'a al Ali, who is one of the founders of the 'Syria Mirror' website, and the director of the 'Stand' short film team, as well as being a correspondent for the Zaman al Wasl website and many other media agencies, is from Ebeen Sam'an village in the western suburbs of Aleppo governorate.



On Saturday, August 10, 2019, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested the two citizen journalists Iyas Hasan al Abbo and Salah al Din al Abd al Katea in the Greek House Restaurant, located near al Jisr al Qadim area south of Raqqa city, before releasing them on Monday, September 9, 2019.

Iyas, a media worker for Afaq Jadida organization (New Horizons), was born in 1992, and lives in Kesret Afnan village in the suburbs of Raqqa governorate.

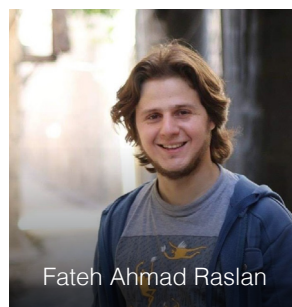
Salah al Din, the director of the media office and board member of the Future Makers Team, from al Nahda neighborhood in Raqqa city, was born in 1985.



On Friday, August 23, 2019, gunmen affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested the two citizen journalists Fateh Ahmad Raslan and Muhammad Jamal Daboul in Idlib city and took them to a Hay'at Tahrir al Sham detention center in the city.

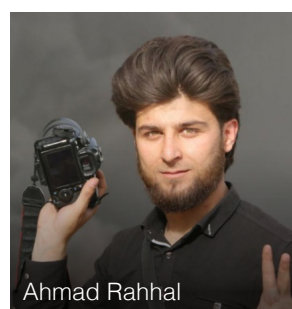
Fateh, born in 1994, is a reporter with the Step News Agency and a cameraman with al Ameen humanitarian support organization, from al Sha'ar neighborhood in Aleppo city. Fateh was released on Tuesday, October 8, 2019.

Muhammad, born in 1995, is a cameraman with the Step News Agency, from Idlib city. Muhammad was released on Thursday, August 29, 2019.



The SNHR spoke with a local activist close to activists Muhammad Daboul and Fateh Raslan⁶, whose name we withhold here for security reasons. The activist told us that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham gunmen arrested Muhammad and Fateh and confiscated their equipment, adding: **“HTS received information that Muhammad and Fateh received a money transfer from Step News Agency, whose work contradicts HTS policy, and which Fateh and Muhammad were working with secretly. We searched hard until we found that Muhammad and Fateh had been taken to the HTS political branch in Idlib city, and still our attempts to get them released fail.”**

On Wednesday, September 11, 2019, members affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested the citizen journalist Ahmad Rahhal in a raid on his house in Idlib city, and confiscated equipment on a charge of publishing posts criticizing HTS on his personal social media accounts (screenshot of the post [on this link](#)). He was subsequently released on Thursday, September 19, 2019.



Ahmad, a reporter with el Dorar al Shamia network and other media outlets, is from Mhambel town in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate.

⁶ Via his personal Facebook account on August 24, 2019



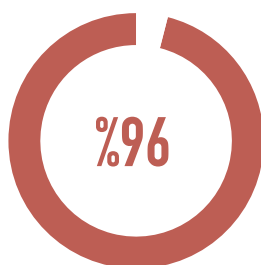
III. Mini Survey with 64 Citizen Journalists Reveals Part of the Burden on Citizen Journalists in the Syrian Conflict

The SNHR has established extensive relationships with a large number of citizen journalists, given the nature of our daily work that is organically linked to news of violations in various Syrian governorates, with citizen journalists often considered to be the primary reporter of the event, as well as regularly being eyewitnesses to what's happened and survivors of bombings at other times, or even all three things combined. The SNHR issues an annual report on press freedom in Syria, and this year we created a set of questions that we put to a number of citizen journalists, with a total of 64 citizen journalists from ten governorates, including five women, responding, providing the following revealing information:

The percentage of those using a pseudonym:



The percentage of those without an academic qualification from a college, university or journalism institute:



The percentage of those who worked as citizen journalists since the first months of the popular uprising:



The percentage of those who were arrested in connection with their work as citizen journalists:



The percentage of those who were subjected to persecution and restrictions by the governing authorities in the areas where they worked:

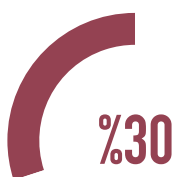


Mini Survey with
64
Citizen Journalists

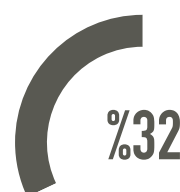
The percentage of those whose work as a citizen journalist is a source of partial or total income:



The percentage of those who fled outside Syria to protect their safety:



The percentage of those who deleted or destroyed their media materials for security reasons:



IV. The Syrian Regime Uses State Media as A Weapon of War, including Movies & TV Series

The Syrian regime has employed various state institutions in order to maintain power, among which are all state media, with some pro-Syrian regime media figures routinely inciting the audience to kill and broadcasting hate speech justifying murder, destruction, displacement and criminality, with the regime's crimes against humanity being depicted as a 'war on terrorism'. Even this was viewed as being insufficient for the Syrian regime which apparently felt that utilizing constant news bulletins, newspaper reports and all sorts of articles to promote its propaganda, and forcing detained citizen journalists or activists imprisoned for supporting political change to appear on TV and make 'confessions' coerced under threats or torture did not go far enough. The regime even created movies and TV series with the sole purpose of promoting its own fictionalized narrative of events or included storylines into existing series to do so, with some of the most prominent of these fictional vessels for regime propaganda being:

1. Al Habl al Sirri ('The Umbilical Cord'), a movie filmed in 2018 in the ruins of al Zabadani city, in which the writers, producer and director narrating the regime's version of events in which the regime had thwarted "terrorists" who it claimed had destroyed the city.
2. Qontak ('Short Circuit'), a TV series, had an episode in 2019 depicting Civil Defense personnel as fabricating and filming a non-existent chemical attack.
3. 'Minbar al Mawta' (Platform of Death), the third season of the series 'Al Welada Min al Khasira' (Birth from the Waist), which was shown in 2013, showed images of the children Hamza al Khatib and Alaa Fawaz, suggesting that they had been killed by terrorist groups opposed to the regime, (according to numerous sources, including the Syrian Network for Human Rights' extensively documented records, Hamza was killed under torture by regime forces in 2011, while Alaa was killed by regime artillery bombardment of al Sbeina town in Damascus Suburbs governorate in 2013.
4. The series 'An Interview with Mr. Adam', which was shown in April 2020, one of whose episodes showed a photo of the body of torture victim Rehab al Allawi, with the storyline describing her as an Egyptian citizen who was kidnapped and killed in Syria for the purpose of trafficking in her organs. In reality, she was a young Syrian girl who was arrested by the Syrian regime and killed under torture in prison, with the photo showing her body being one of the thousands of photos smuggled out of the country by the former regime photographer codenamed 'Caesar' following his defection.



Russian and Iranian media and the Lebanese Hezbollah group have also replicated the Syrian regime's accounts of events and repeated its statements, justifying or denying all of its crimes in the same terms used by the regime, including the crimes of using chemical weapons and barrel bombs, as well as denying the authenticity of the Caesar photos and denying numerous other regime violations. The regime reciprocated in kind by denying all the crimes committed by the Russian and Iranian forces and Hezbollah in Syria, failing to mention any of them as though they had not happened at all.

V. Concern Over the Fate of 353 Citizen Journalists Detained by the Syrian Regime, Amid a Strong Possibility of the Spread of the COVID-19

The SNHR expresses serious concern over the fate of 353 citizen journalists who are detained by the Syrian regime, especially in light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the fact that the Syrian detainees, including the citizen journalists, are detained in unimaginably dire conditions, with large numbers of detainees being packed into cells of various sizes, with an average cell area measuring 4 x 6 square meters containing approximately 50 detainees; this means that each detainee barely has an area of 70 cm² for sitting and sleeping, with detainees usually taking turns to attempt to sit or lie down to sleep when their numbers exceed the holding capacity of the cell, as they routinely do. These cells also lack ventilation and the most basic standards of sanitation and cleanliness, with the conditions being even more squalid in the solitary confinement cells located on the detention centers' lower floors which lack even light. Throughout the duration of their detention in the security branches, detainees are also prevented from going outside to get any exercise, or exposure to fresh air or sunlight.

In addition to these congested unsanitary conditions, detainees are able to shower or wash only very rarely throughout the period of their detention, which often lasts for many years, with all these factors contributing to and exacerbating the spread of the pandemic in case it outbreaks there.

As for the role of the Syrian media in light of the outbreak of the Coronavirus emerging around the world, the Syrian regime's media have played a wholly negative role. Here, we cite only three examples which serve as a sample of innumerable other cases:

1. On March 10, the Syrian regime's Minister of Health, Dr. Nizar Yazji, [stated](#) in a television interview with an official agency concerning the procedures followed by the ministry to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic: "Thank God, the Syrian Arab Army has cleared many of the germs on the soil of Syria, and I thank it for that". It should be emphasized that this chillingly dehumanizing reference to the regime's victims comes from the Minister of Health, not the head of a security branch, indicating the absurdity and recklessness of the regime authorities, as well as the regime's complete dependency on the military and security establishment.



2. On March 15, Dr. Hazar Raef, Director of Damascus Health Department, [spoke](#) on a TV program on the Syrian Satellite Channel about how state institutions are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming implausibly that several countries had contacted the department in order to benefit from the regime's national plan to combat the disease; this statement came three months after the pandemic outbreak worldwide.

VI. International Laws Governing the Rights of Citizen Journalists Are Meaningless in Syria

The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in [Article 19](#): 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

In many of its articles, International Humanitarian Law emphasized the need to protect journalists, as, for example, in Article 79 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Convention of 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, which states that journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians, and that they shall be protected as such provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians. According to the customary rules of international humanitarian law, it is stated in rule 34: 'Civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities.'

[Resolution](#) no 1738 of the Security Council in December 2006 condemned all forms of attacks on media professionals in armed conflicts.

On December 18, 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.

The Security Council passed [Resolution no. 2222](#) on May 27, 2015, in which it condemned all violations and abuses committed against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel in situations of armed conflict.

Despite the decline in the area of Syria witnessing combat operations during the past year, and many citizen journalists withdrawing from media work due to restrictions or emigration, Syria remains one of the deadliest countries for journalists globally, ranking first in the world in terms of the number of citizen journalists killed in 2019 according to [a report](#) issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists on December 17, 2019.



On July 15, 2019, Reporters Without Borders issued [a report](#) confirming the increasing pressure on the pro-Syrian regime media.

In 2020, Syria also ranked for the second year in a row as 174th out of 180 countries according to the [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#) published by Reporters Without Borders.

VII. Recommendations

UN Security Council:

- Issue a resolution demanding the immediate release of all citizen journalists, by all parties, in particular the Syrian regime, which is detaining the vast majority of them.
- 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 advances Syria from being a totalitarian state to a stable, democratic and civilized state that respects press freedom.

OHCHR:

- Condemn the targeting of citizen journalists in Syria, and highlight their sacrifices and suffering.
- Demand the disclosure of the fate of the detained and forcibly disappeared journalists in light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI):

- Launch a special investigation on the targeting of citizen journalists in particular, especially in light of their vital role in documenting events in Syria.

The Arab and International Media Institutions:

- Advocate on behalf of fellow citizen 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.



The Syrian regime and all the dominant powers:

- Immediately release all citizen journalists and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared ones.
- Allow them to work freely and stop the policy of threats and persecution.
- End the abuse of media to serve authoritarian and dictatorial agendas.

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