

Brief Report

Security Forces in Suwayda Are Responsible for the Abduction and Enforced Disappearance of Political Activist Mohannad Shehab al Din

The Syrian Regime Continues Its Policy of Enforced Disappearance, Terrorism and Torture

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Monday, June 24, 2019

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. The Syrian Regime Has Arrested Approximately 1,478 Individuals Since the Beginning of 2019, 764 of Whom Have Been Forcibly Disappeared

In conjunction with the heavy shelling of areas outside the Syrian regime's control in north-west Syria by Russian and Syrian warplanes, which have deliberately targeted populated areas, medical facilities and schools, and have never complied with international humanitarian law in the ongoing battles with the Syrian opposition factions, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented that Syrian-Russian alliance forces killed at least 487 civilians, including 118 children and 92 women (adult female). In addition to these casualties, at least 1,495 civilians have been injured since the beginning of this campaign of military escalation against the fourth de-escalation between April 26, and June 23, 2019. At the same time, Syrian security forces continue to commit the most serious daily violations and acts of persecution in areas under the control of Syrian Regime forces, which are aimed at terrorizing civilians and suppressing any attempt by any civilian movement to resume demands for a change of the ruling family that has committed and continues to commit thousands of crimes against humanity and war crimes ever since March 2011.

Since the beginning of 2019 up to the publication of this report, the SNHR's Detainees Department has documented the arrest of 1,478 Syrian citizens, including 71 children and 90 women (adult female), by Syrian Regime forces. After interrogation and torture, 325 of these individuals were released, while 1,153 are still detained by the Syrian regime, with 764 of this latter number now classified as forcibly disappeared since their fate is no longer known to us, with the Syrian regime denying any knowledge of them.



According to the SNHR's database of detainees during the last six months, most of the arrests occurred in the governorates of Damascus, Damascus Suburbs and Aleppo, with extensive arrests in the areas that were forced to accept settlements with the Syrian regime such as the Eastern Ghouta, the northern suburbs of Homs, and southern Syria. Among the arrested were IDPs who returned to these areas after being displaced from them. We also recorded a large number of arrest cases at border crossing points of Syrian refugees who decided to return to Syria. We've been working for several months on a special report about the detention of displaced persons and refugees who have decided to return to their areas, which will be issued in the next few days.

The SNHR's Detainees Department has documented many incidents of arrests of women with their children. Syrian regime security forces also failed to take into account the frailty of the elderly, with security forces arresting all those who have kinship with members of the Armed Opposition factions or involvement in the popular uprising demanding an end to the ruling Assad family.

Finally, we note that the security forces loyal to the Syrian regime are severely pursuing all Syrians of military recruitment age for conscription to send them to the frontlines of fighting against Syrian Armed Opposition factions in north-west Syria, and we have recorded a large number of these cases targeting people in northern Homs in particular.

From the first moment of any detainee's arrest, security forces prevent him or her from contacting their family, appointing a lawyer and even from knowing the reasons behind their detention. Most arrests occur without any legal warrant, with detainees routinely remaining imprisoned for months or years without trial or any charges, while security branches often rely solely on security reports issued by their own personnel rather than on any other evidence or judiciary.

Since the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011, we have noticed that Syrian Regime forces have adopted an arrest tactic which is in reality abduction of civilians without warning from their homes, workplaces and other locations. During these arrests, the security forces do not announce which security branch they are affiliated with, or provide any information regarding where they are taking their victims, thereby spreading the greatest amount of terror and panic.



II. Syrian Security Forces Are Responsible for the Arrest and Enforced Disappearance of the Syrian Activist Mohannad Shehab al Din

While Syrian Regime forces now have almost complete control over Suwayda governorate, a number of independent local armed groups have emerged affiliated with some prominent Suwayda sheikhs and dignitaries. These forces' mission is concentrated, according to their founders, in attempting to prevent Syrian Regime forces from plundering and exploiting some areas, protecting their peoples from arrest and enforced disappearance, and from being forcibly conscripted into the ranks of the Syrian army.

Since the beginning of 2018, kidnappings have escalated in Suwayda governorate, with the SNHR so far documenting some 208 abductions of citizens in the governorate since then. Our initial investigations revealed that Syrian regime security forces were involved in most of these abductions. A large number of residents informed us that the Syrian regime aims to undermine stability in the region in an attempt to expand its strength and regain full control over the governorate. Our Victim Documentation Department also recorded multiple cases of homicide, with local people informing us that these were carried out under the same pretext.

Mohannad Shehab al Din

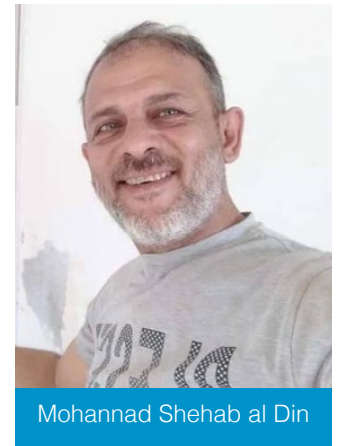
Born in 1973, Mohannad, a peaceful political activist from Suwayda city, is a married father of four who works as a carpenter and cabinet maker in Suwayda city. He was kidnapped by gunmen who we believe belong to the Syrian regime's military security forces on June 16, 2019, at his place of work in the west of Suwayda city. As we mentioned above, Syrian regime forces provide no information about where their victims are being taken, about the party that arrests them or the charges against them.

SNHR spoke with a number of people close to Mohannad, who preferred not to reveal their true identities due to living in areas under the control of the Syrian regime; they told us that members of the local military security branch had come to Mohannad's workplace to gather information about him two days before his abduction. They also told us that on the day of his abduction, armed men carried out a raid on his workplace, taking him away in a white H1 van-type vehicle. It's common knowledge among the people of Suwayda city that this is the type of vehicle used by personnel from regime's Military Security division.

SNHR learnt from Mohannad's relatives that, in response to their enquiries, all the security branches in the city have denied any knowledge of Mohannad's arrest or his whereabouts. Political activist Mohannad Shehab al Din was involved in



most of the peaceful protests and sit-ins in Suwayda city, which took place due to the spread of kidnappings in the city, and accused the regime's security branches of being behind them. Some of the protests were held in solidarity with citizens in other areas of Syria that suffered heavy bombardment by Syrian Regime forces, as well as condemning the terrorist ISIS organization and denouncing the attacks ISIS carried out in the suburbs of Suwayda governorate. Mohannad is known for his patriotism and his support for peaceful political movements and human rights.



III. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Syrian regime has violated many principles of international human rights law through the abduction of Syrian citizens without trial, the policy of enforced disappearance and torture. The Syrian regime has systematically and extensively practiced these violations since 2011. In accordance with Article 7 of the Rome Statute, torture, enforced disappearance and severe deprivation of physical liberty constitute crimes against humanity if they are knowingly and widely practiced.
- The arrest of activist Mohannad Shehab al Din is one of hundreds of thousands of cases in which the Syrian regime violates the Syrian Constitution itself. Since 2011, the Syrian regime has continued to detain at least 1.2 million Syrian citizens who have been subjected to detention without being issued with any arrest warrant or being charged, in addition to being forbidden from hiring a lawyer and from receiving family visits. Meanwhile, nearly 128,000 Syrian citizens are still being detained by the Syrian regime, almost 82,000 of whom have been forcibly disappeared. Their families are not informed of their whereabouts, while if their families make enquiries about their loved ones, the security branches and authorities deny any knowledge of their whereabouts, and those enquiring may be at risk of arrest for doing so.
- Syrian Regime forces have used the strategy of enforced disappearance to target anyone involved in the popular uprising against the Assad family's hereditary dictatorship. Analysis of the available data shows the spread of this phenomenon in many areas, which indicates that it is a consistent and calculated policy and methodology, which amounts to a crime against humanity.



- The ruling authority under President Bashar al Assad has also violated several provisions of the current Syrian Constitution, which criminalize arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearance, which are flagrant violations of both international law and domestic law.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council and the United Nations:

- Impose sanctions on the Syrian regime, starting with arms embargoes and diplomatic boycotts, and escalating to military sanctions in the event of continuing committing grave violations, which are still ongoing.
- Protect civilians detained by the Syrian regime from lethal torture, and rescue those who remain alive.
- The General Assembly of the United Nations must take the lead in the Syrian situation and resort to invoking the principle of “Uniting for Peace”, given the total paralysis in the Security Council due to the Russian-Chinese veto.
- Russia must stop blocking any referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- All UN relief agencies must search for families that have lost one or more of their breadwinner or children due to torture, ensure that aid is delivered to their beneficiaries continuously, and initiate rehabilitation.
- Resort to Chapter VII of the UN Charter to protect detainees from death in detention centers and put an end to the epidemic of enforced disappearance prevalent in Syria as this threatens the security and stability of society.
- The Security Council must continue to implement and compel the Syrian regime and other parties to abide by the resolutions it has issued, most notably Resolution number 2042 and Resolution number 2139, and demonstrate their compliance with these theoretical decisions through their actions.
- Immediate punishment of all individuals involved in the regime’s torture apparatus.
- Pressure the Syrian regime effectively to allow all detainees to communicate with their relatives and lawyers and to ensure binding guarantees to prevent the recurrence of lethal torture in detention centers.

The international community:

- States parties to the Convention against Torture must take the necessary measures to establish their jurisdiction over perpetrators of torture crimes and make all necessary material and security efforts to that end.



- Impose further sanctions and boycotts on the Syrian regime and its supporting countries, and classify anyone who supports the Syrian regime as an accomplice involved in atrocities.
- Take serious punitive measures against the Syrian regime to deter it from continuing to disappear and kill Syrian citizens by torture.
- Provide more funds, support and grants to local organizations concerned with the care and rehabilitation of torture victims and their families.
- Provide support to individual activists and local organizations that document violations without imposing tutelage or political guidance.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Launch investigations into the case included in this report and other cases we have documented previously. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more evidence and data.

The Syrian regime:

- Immediately stop the use of all torture and end the involvement of the Syrian state in the torture and terrorizing of society.
- Immediately allow access to detention centers by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, the International Committee of the Red Cross and all relevant human rights organizations.
- Take legal and historical responsibility for this comprehensive national disaster.
- Ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all arbitrarily arrested detainees, particularly children and women, and reveal the fate of tens of thousands of forcibly disappeared persons.
- Stop violating several articles of the Syrian Constitution.

Human Rights Council

- Follow up on the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, highlight this issue in all annual meetings, and allocate a special session to discussion of this terrible threat.

High Commissioner for Human Rights:

- Prepare a special and detailed report highlighting the disaster of detention and forced disappearance with all its psychological, social and economic dimensions, and support local human rights organizations.



The Special Group on Enforced Disappearances:

- Increase the number of persons working on the issue of enforced disappearances in the Office of the Special Group on Enforced Disappearances in Syria due to the intensity and magnitude of cases of enforced disappearances.

Acknowledgment and solidarity

We wish to express our steadfast and wholehearted solidarity with the victims and their families, and to insist that there must be a continuous human rights and social struggle until the fate of the detainees is disclosed and they are released, and to offer our sincere thanks and appreciation to all the individuals and local activists without whose efforts this report would not be possible.





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