



The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations against Media Workers in Syria on World Press Freedom Day

709 Journalists and Media Workers Have Been Killed Since March 2011, Including
52 Due to Torture

Monday 3 May 2021

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.

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. The Pivotal Role of Journalists and Media Workers Has Made Them Vulnerable to Multiple Types of Violations:

May 3rd this year marks the 28th anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly's declaration that this date would mark the annual World Press Freedom Day¹, in accordance with the [recommendations](#) of the twenty-sixth session of the General Conference of UNESCO in 1991, which stipulated that "Free, independent and pluralistic media is a core element of any functioning democracy"

On December 18, 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [a resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. On May 27, 2015, the Security Council adopted [Resolution No. 2222](#), in which it condemned all violations and abuses committed against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel in situations of armed conflict, in addition to issuing numerous texts on freedom of opinion and expression in international human rights law.

Despite all the texts and resolutions, the reality in Syria is still very far from attaining even the most basic human rights and legal standards, with the nation governed by one party, and the worst of the one-party rule is that since 1971 this party has nominated solely and exclusively a member of the al Assad family to head the state, with the one party and one president dominating every aspect of public and private media and journalism work, with the regime further increasing its already brutal repression to become even more repressive since the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011, particularly targeting media workers and photographers, as well as expelling and banning all independent media.

Many Syrian activists have taken it upon themselves to try to compensate for the regime's banning of Arab and international media, to report news and the reality of events taking place in Syria; at the beginning, they often found themselves facing daunting missions far greater than their specific experience, but this journalistic experience has developed vastly over the past ten years, and succeeded in producing documentary and artistic works that won international awards such as: 'For Sama'², 'The Cave'³, 'Last Men in Aleppo'⁴ and many others.

These journalists' and photojournalists' camera lenses and news reports have also contributed massively to the process of monitoring, recording and documenting human rights violations, and we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have established an extensive network of contacts with a large number of journalists and citizen journalists, due to the nature of our daily work that is organically linked with news of violations in various Syrian governorates, with journalists and citizen journalists often considered to be either the first to catalogue the event, being eyewitnesses to what happened in some cases, and survivors of bombing at other times, or often falling into two or all three of these categories simultaneously.

¹ Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993

² This film was produced by [Waad al Khatib](#) in 2019, [recounting](#) what she lived through during the Syrian regime's aggression on Aleppo and detailing what the hospital she was in with her husband, a doctor there, was exposed to. It was nominated for several international awards, including the Academy Award and won several awards, most notably the Best Documentary Award at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival

³ This film narrates the immense difficulties faced by Dr. Amani Ballour during her work at al Kahf Hospital (the Cave) in Eastern Ghouta, in light of the siege imposed on the area and the violent bombing that it was exposed to by Syrian-Russian alliance forces before its people were forcibly displaced in 2018. [The film](#), directed by Firas Fayyad and produced by National Geographic and the Doha Film Institute, was circulated in 2019 was nominated for an Academy Award.

⁴ [A documentary film](#) that was shown in 2017, produced by PBS, written and directed by Firas Fayyad, which recounts the experience of Khaled, a member of the Civil Defense, and his comrades in light of the violent bombing and siege imposed by the Syrian-Russian alliance on the eastern neighborhoods in Aleppo city. The film, nominated for several awards, including the Oscar, won several awards, including the Emmy Award for Best Documentary Film Addressing Urgent Issues.

Based on these pivotal roles, the journalists and citizen journalists have been subjected to numerous violations, with this report's primary objective being to document at least a part of these violations.

Report's Methodology:

A citizen journalist is defined, according to the [SNHR's methodology](#), as the individual who has played an important role in the reporting and dissemination of news; when anyone classified as belonging within this category takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, however, they are no longer categorized as media workers, although this categorization can be restored once they abstain completely from any involvement in military action.

Since the very beginning of its work, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has been concerned with documenting violations committed against workers in the media sector, including killing, arrest, injury and persecution, whether through cataloguing these in daily news reports or via issuing [monthly reports](#) and [special reports](#) that document these violations. On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day specifically, we are keen to publish a special report highlighting the violations committed by all the perpetrator parties involved in the conflict in Syria.

This report outlines the record of the most notable violations against journalists and media workers in Syria from March 2011 to May 2021, and highlights the most notable violations SNHR documented in the past year (from May 2020 to May 2021), as well as including the most notable violations that occurred during the same period.

Through use of SNHR's extensive database, we can catalogue the victims who were killed and the cases of arrest according to the governorate where the incidents occurred, and also by the governorate from which the victims originally came. This report catalogues the death toll of victims and arrests/enforced disappearances according to the governorate in which the incidents occurred, rather than by the governorate they originally came from. This method is used to identify the extent of the human losses and violence inflicted on media workers in each of the Syrian governorates.

Through field researchers working for us, we have obtained direct testimonies from survivors, eyewitnesses, and victims' relatives, none of which are cited from any open sources, with this report providing five of these testimonies. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the interviewees, who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without us offering or providing them with any incentives, as well as providing assurances to them that we will conceal the identity of any witness who prefers to use an alias. All these procedures are carried out under the terms of SNHR's internal protocols, which we have worked for years to perfect, and which we strive constantly to develop through our experience in order to consistently maintain the highest standards of care and reliability.

SNHR also analyzed videos and photographs that were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. Furthermore, we retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in this report in a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by Syrian regime forces and some other armed groups.

The information contained in this report only represents the bare minimum of incidents which we have been able to document, and of the severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

II. Continuous Violations against Citizen Journalists and Media Sector for the Tenth Consecutive Year:

The practices of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces against the media sector workers did not differ from the previous years, although there were fewer such incidents, due to several reasons, the most prominent of which are: The ceasefire agreement that resulted from the meeting of the Turkish and Russian Presidents, and entered into force at 00:00 on March 6, 2020, and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with its major role in weakening the capabilities of the Syrian regime's army and the affiliated Iranian militias; despite this, since [our previous annual report](#) in May 2020 up until May 2021, we have documented numerous atrocious violations against the media sector workers, such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, torture, enforced disappearance, targeting headquarters and others.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime continues to generally prohibit all independent media, and exerts absolute control over state media, with no independent local media outlets in the areas it controls; the regime restricts freedom of opinion and expression for media workers and citizens based on laws (decrees, or through the People's Assembly, which is subject to absolute regime control) that expressly oppose international human rights law and wholly restrict freedom of opinion and expression. We have documented dozens of arrests on charges of "weakening the nation's psyche" over citizens' criticism of living conditions and condemnation of rampant corruption among officials, with this charge being such a broad, vague and ill-defined term that the security services can use it to arrest and intimidate anyone they wish, as happened with the media worker, Halah al Jarf, an employee of the regime-affiliated Public Authority for Radio and Television, who [was arrested](#) as she was passing through a regime checkpoint in Damascus city on January 23, 2021, and is still under arrest up until the moment of preparing this report.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has also worked to restrict the work of citizen journalists, by requiring them to obtain a press card to carry out their work with those wishing to obtain this card required to submit a request to the Media Relations Office of the Salvation Government, including detailed information about whoever submitted the request and his/her work; upon receiving this card, after a waiting period of up to two months, the citizen journalist pledges to abide by a number of stipulations, including refraining from filming via drones in areas under HTS control without first receiving clearance, and providing an explanation of the nature of the media material he/she is working on and the party to which it will be provided for each report.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army forces have also, in some cases, harassed and intimidated [media workers](#), and failed to provide a safe environment for practicing media work in areas under their control, for example: Syria TV reporter, Bahaa al Halabi, was subjected to an assassination attempt on January 6, 2021, with the party that targeted him having not been yet discovered.

Syrian Democratic Forces have also restricted the movement of media workers on a number of occasions, with some of these media workers regularly persecuted, arrested, and harassed, prompting them to flee from the areas under SDF control. Syrian Democratic Forces also requires that all media workers must obtain a license to engage in media activity, with applicants possibly subjected to questioning and arrest. Some media workers also told us of intentional delays in the issuing of these licenses, and it seems that this depends on the applicant's identity and the extent of his or her compatibility with the ideology of Syrian Democratic Forces.

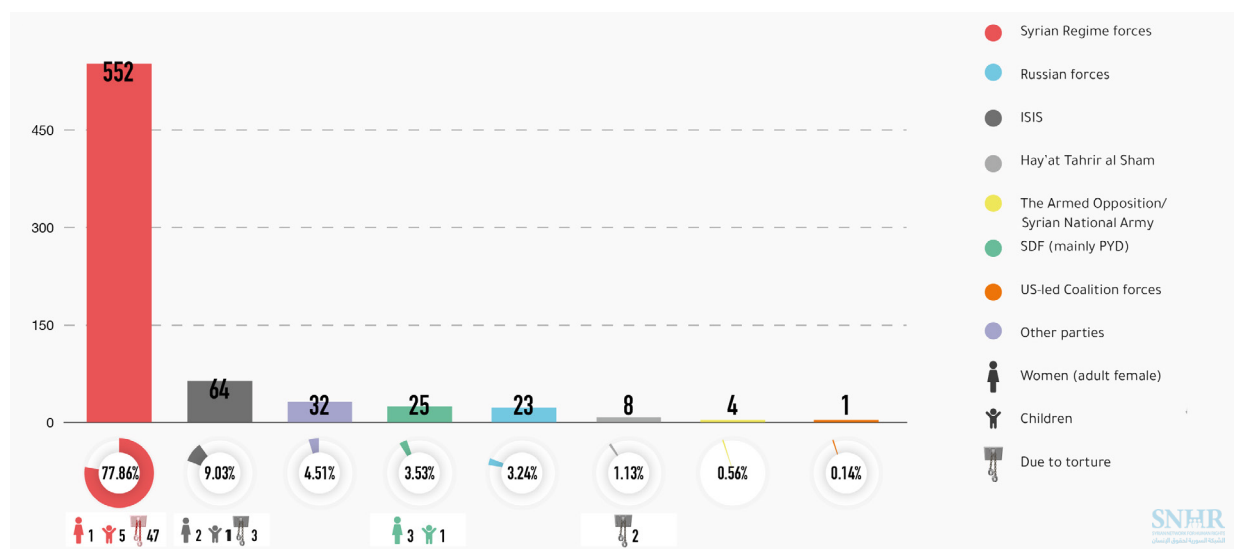
ISIS: Dozens of citizen journalists who were arrested and subsequently forcibly disappeared by ISIS are still unaccounted for. Syrian Democratic Forces, which have now taken control of most of the areas that were previously under ISIS' control, bear the responsibility for revealing the fate of these victims and should ensure serious care is taken in resolving this sensitive issue.

The following is the record of the most notable violations that journalists and media workers have faced, according to the SNHR's database, from March 2011 to May 2021, and the record of these violations from our last annual report in May 2020 up until May 2021:

First: Since March 2011:

A. Extrajudicial killings⁵ :

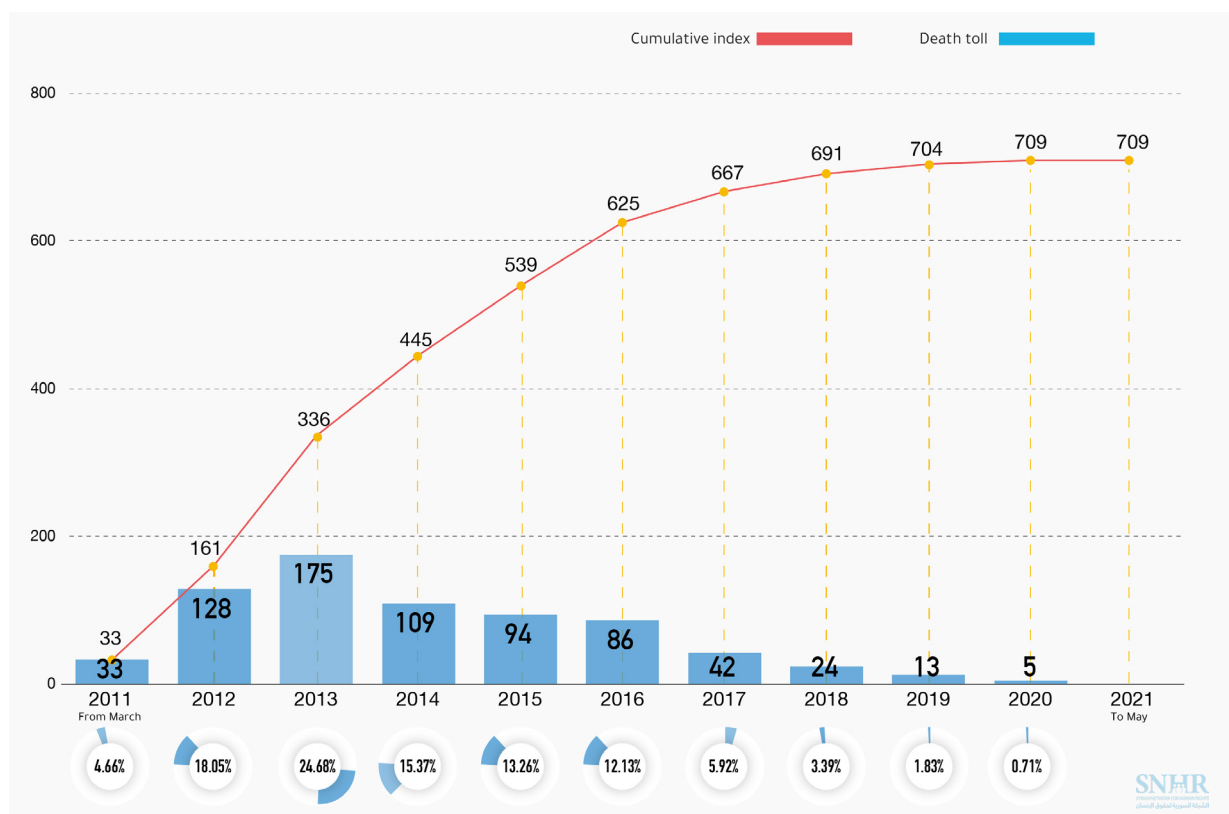
The SNHR has documented the deaths of 709 journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2021, including seven children and six women (adult female), as well as nine foreign journalists, and 52 others who died as a result of torture, in addition to 1,563 others who were injured to varying degrees. These were distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:



⁵ [Infographic of the death toll of journalists and media workers in Syria from March 2011 to May 2021](#)

- **Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias)⁶** : 552, including five children, one woman, five foreign journalists, and 47 who died due to torture in detention centers.
- **Russian forces:** 23.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State')**: 64, including one child, two women, three foreign journalists, and three who died due to torture.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham⁷** : Eight, including two who died due to torture.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:** 25, including one child and three women.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Four.
- **US-led Coalition forces:** One.
- **Other parties:** 32, including one foreign journalist.

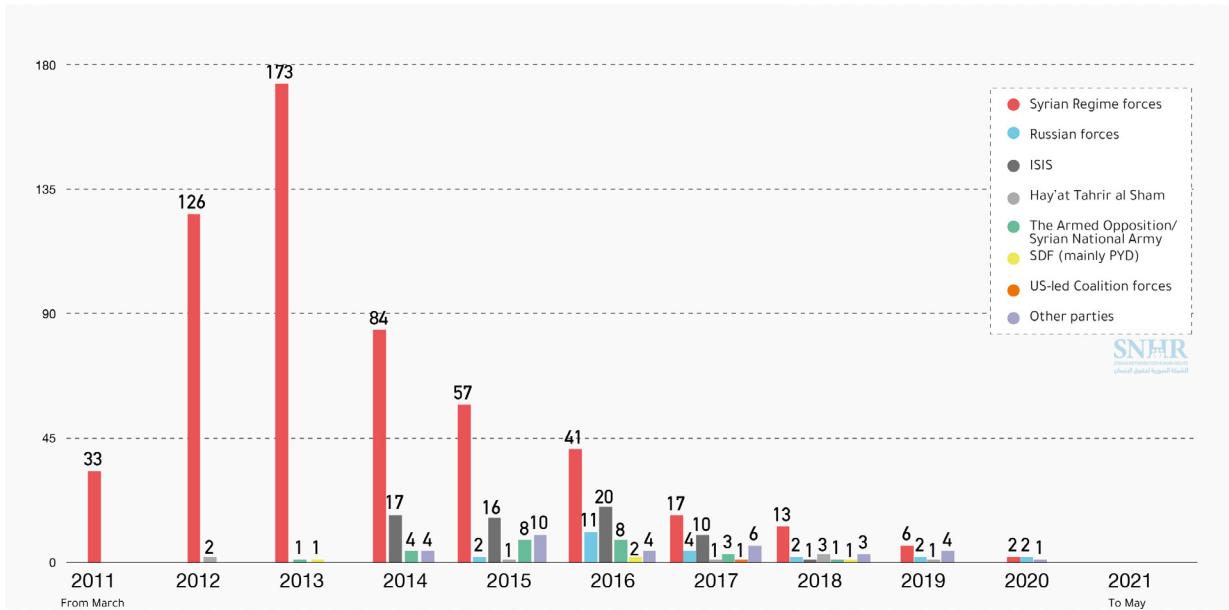
The death toll of journalists and media workers was distributed by years as follows:



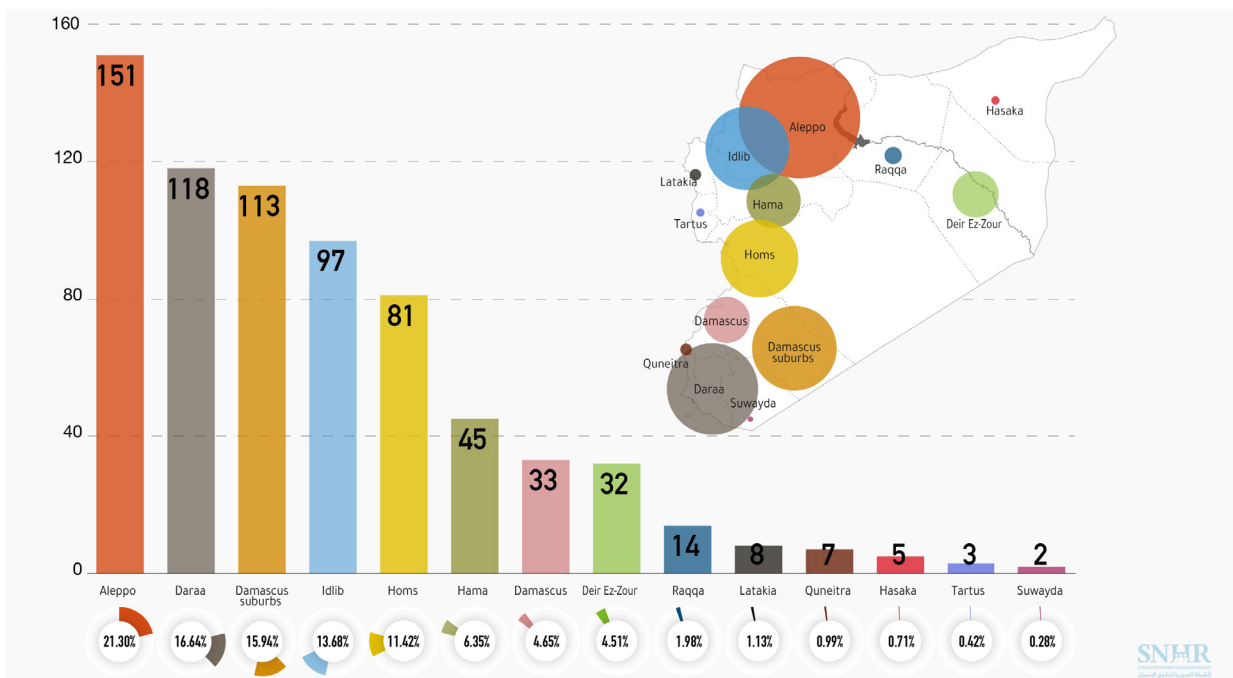
⁶ We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government's role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show; the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria. Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government' in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

⁷ The United Nations has designated it as a terrorist organization

The death toll of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces was distributed by years as follows:



The death toll of journalists and media workers was distributed across all Syria's governorates:



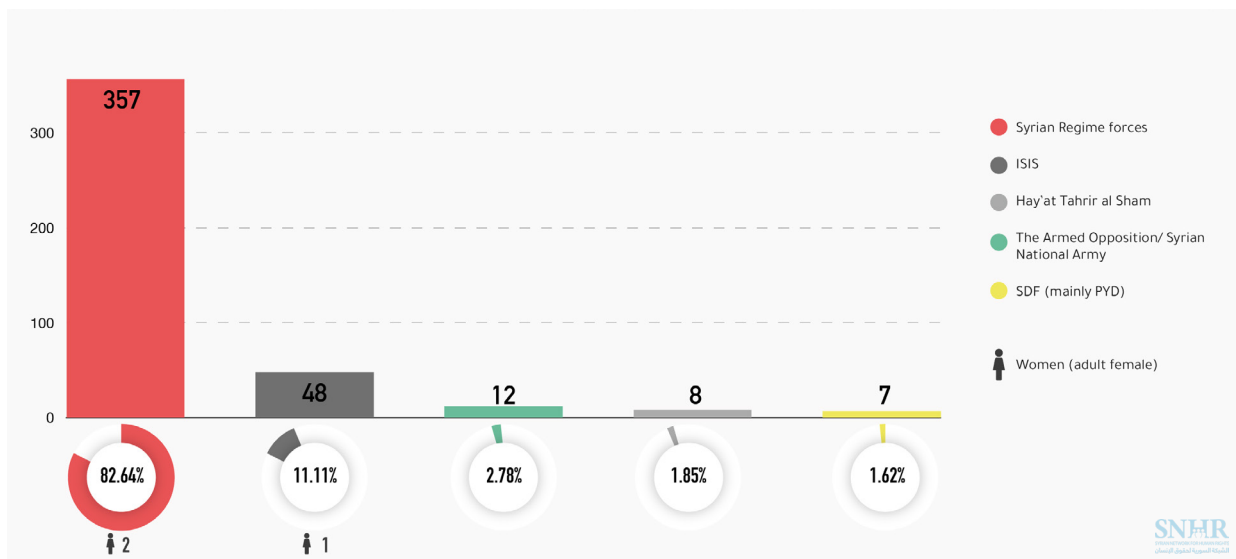
The above statistics show that the Syrian regime and its Russian ally are responsible for approximately 82% of the death toll of journalists and media workers, and the Syrian regime is responsible for approximately 91% of the death toll due to torture.

It also shows that 2013 was the bloodiest year for journalists and media workers (during which approximately 25% of the journalists and media workers documented as having died were killed), followed by 2012 (19%), and 2014 (16%).

Aleppo governorate saw the largest death toll among journalists and media workers, approximately 22%, followed by Daraa governorate with 17%, then Damascus Suburbs with 16%.

B. Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances⁸:

The SNHR documented at least 1,211 cases of arrests and kidnappings of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2021, of whom at least 432, including three women and 17 foreign journalists, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in detention centers, distributed by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces as follows:

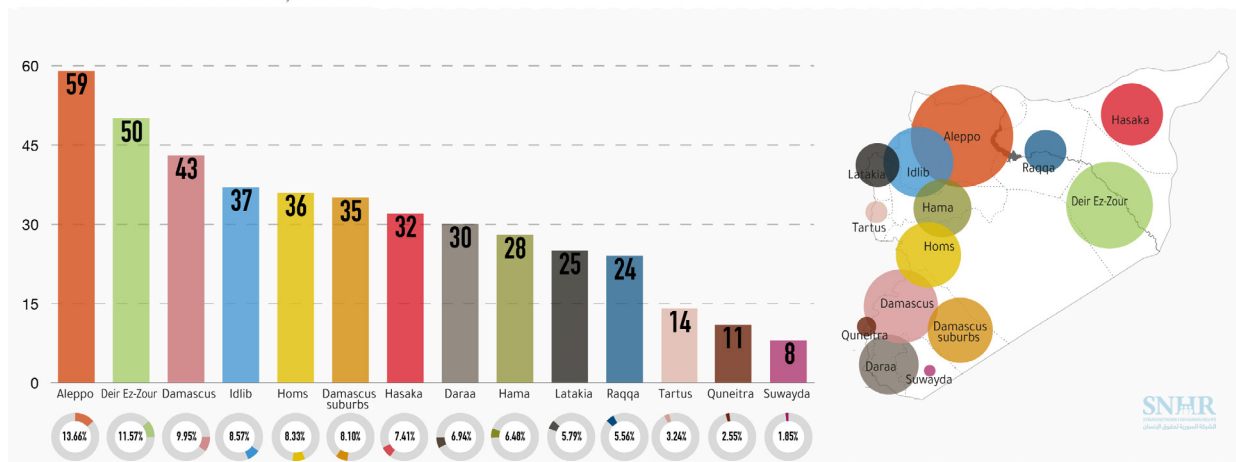


- **Syrian regime forces:** 357, including two women and four foreign journalists.
- **ISIS:** 48, including one woman and eight foreign journalists.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** Eight.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:** 12, including five foreign journalists.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Seven.

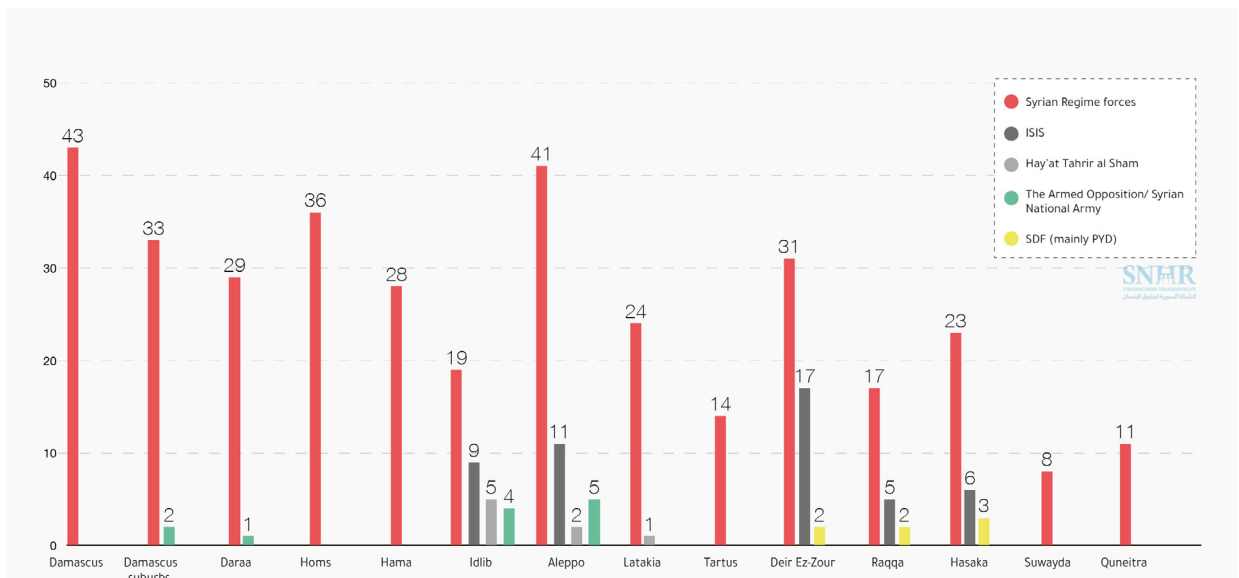
The Syrian Network for Human Rights expresses serious concern about the fate of the journalists and media workers arrested by the Syrian regime, especially in light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that the Syrian detainees, including journalists and media workers, are being held in extremely poor and inhuman conditions of detention, 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. Detainees are also 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 if it should emerge there.

⁸ [Infographic of the record of detainees and forcibly disappeared journalists and media workers in Syria from March 2011 to May 2021](#)

The record of journalists and media workers who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared was distributed across the governorates as follows:



The record of journalists and media workers who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces was distributed across the governorates as follows:



The above statistics show that the Syrian regime is responsible for approximately 83% of the cases of journalists and media workers who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared.

According to the data documented by SNHR, the largest proportion of journalists and media workers who are still detained or forcibly disappeared were originally arrested in Aleppo governorate (approximately 14% of the total record), followed by Deir Ez-Zour governorate (approximately 12%), then Damascus (approximately 10%).

Second: From May 2020 to May 2021:

A. Extrajudicial killings:

The SNHR has documented the deaths of two citizen journalists since May 2020, one of whom was killed at the hands of Russian forces, and the other at the hands of other parties.

B. Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances:

The SNHR has documented at least 42 cases of arrests and kidnappings of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between May 2020 and May 2021, distributed by perpetrator party as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 11, including three women.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** 17, including one woman.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:** Six.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Eight.

Prominent incidents in which the perpetrator parties and controlling forces have been documented committing violation between May 2020 and May 2021:

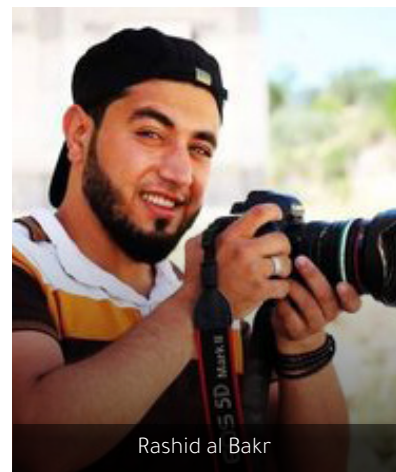
A. Extrajudicial killings:

1. Russian forces:

On Monday, October 26, 2020, media activist Rashid al Bakr died when fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a number of missiles at al Dweila airbase near Kafr Takhareem city in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, while he was reporting on military training underway inside a military camp belonging to the Failaq al Sham brigade faction affiliated with the National Front for Liberation. The city was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition 'the National Front for Liberation' and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

Rashid, born in 1996, worked as a military correspondent for the Failaq al Sham brigade faction, as well as being a photographer for Syria 1 News Agency and al Moharar Media Network. Originally from Kafr Takhareem city, he held a high school certificate, and was unmarried.

SNHR spoke with Rashid's colleague and fellow media activist Muhammad Walid Jabs⁹, who told us that a fixed-wing warplane which belonged to the Russian Air Force, according to the observatories' announcement, launched an air raid using four missiles on al Dweila airbase in al Dweila area, near Kafr Takhareem city in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate while Rashid was reporting on military training at a military camp belonging to the Failaq al Sham brigade faction inside the airbase.



Rashid al Bakr

9 Via WhatsApp on October 29, 2020

Muhammad said, “At the beginning, we received news that Rashid was injured, so I went with his brother to look for him in the medical centers. At first, we could not find him until we reached the Martyr Wasim Husseino Surgical Hospital in the center of Kafr Takhareem city, where we saw the bodies of dozens of dead fighters; Rashid’s brother was able to recognize him from the pieces of his torn clothes and some marks on his body; Rasheed’s body was torn to pieces.”

The killing of journalist Hussein Khattab due to a lack of security, and controlling forces’ failure to arrest the criminals:

Media activist Hussein Ibrahim al Khattab was killed on Saturday, December 12, 2020, [after being shot](#) in [the chest](#), heart and head by unidentified gunmen, whilst he was filming a report on the COVID-19 pandemic near the northern cemetery in al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The city is under the control of the Syrian National Army.

[Hussein](#), also known as ‘Kara al Safrani, was born in 1983; a married father-of-four from al Sfeira city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, he was a third-year college student at the Mass Communication college, as well as working with the TRT Arabi channel.



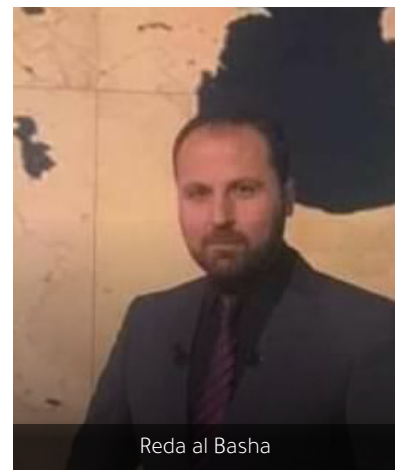
Hussein al Khattab

The SNHR spoke with media activist Abu Shadi al Safrani¹⁰, a friend of Hussein, who heard the details of the incident from residents of the neighborhood who had witnessed it. Abu Shadi recalled, “While Hussein was preparing a report on the coronavirus pandemic near the northern cemetery in al Bab city, he was shot directly with a military pistol by two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle; he was hit by several bullets in the chest, heart and head. He was immediately taken by the people of the area to al Bab Hospital, but he died before reaching it.” Abu Shadi added, “This was not the first time that Hussein had been subjected to an assassination attempt. The first was on September 23, 2020, when unknown gunmen shot him while he was driving his car near the Tarhin area near al Bab city, but he was not injured on that day.”

B. Arbitrary arrest/enforced disappearance:

1. Syrian regime forces:

On Saturday, August 15, 2020, Reda al Basha was arrested by Syrian regime forces, in a raid on his home in Aleppo city, over criticism posted on his Facebook account of the living conditions in Aleppo city, and was taken to the Criminal Security Branch in Aleppo city. We documented that he was released on August 18, 2020; we note that on Wednesday, March 15, 2017, a decision was issued by the Ministry of Information of the regime’s government canceling the renewal of Reda al Basha’s accreditation as a journalist in Syria, due to his ‘violation of the media law.’



Reda al Basha

¹⁰ Via his personal account on Facebook on December 19, 2020

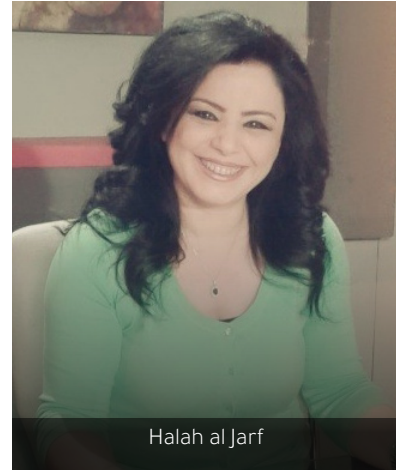
Reda is a 37-year-old correspondent for al Mayadeen TV, from Nubbul town in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate.

On Saturday, January 23, 2021, Syrian regime forces arrested Halah al Jarf as she was passing through a regime checkpoint in Damascus city over criticism posted on her Facebook account of the living conditions endured by the Syrian public in areas under the Syrian regime's control, and took her to the Criminal Security Branch in the city, before taking her to Adra Central Prison in Damascus Suburbs governorate. Halah was charged with a generalized accusation of "weakening the nation's psyche" and a series of other charges related to the regime's cybercrime law. She remains in detention up until the time of preparing this report. We issued [a statement](#) on the incident.

Al Jarf, who's originally from Salamiya city in eastern Hama governorate but now lives in Damascus city, is an employee of the Public Authority for Radio and Television, which is affiliated with the Syrian regime's government.

On Sunday, March 7, 2021, Syrian regime forces arrested Kenan Waqqaf, after summoning him to the Criminal Security Branch in Damascus city over criticism posted on his Facebook account of the poor living conditions and corruption in areas under the Syrian regime's control, and took him to Adra Central Prison in Damascus Suburbs governorate. He remains in detention in Adra Central Prison up until the time of preparing this report.

Waqqaf, who is a reporter for al Wehda newspaper in Latakia city, is originally from Tartus city.



Halah al Jarf



Kenan Waqqaf

2. Hat'at Tahrir al Sham:

On Saturday, September 19, 2020, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel arrested Nour al Shallou as she was leaving Sarmada Court in Sarmada city in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. We documented that she was released on Monday, December 4, 2021.

Al Shallou, who was born in 1992, is a media activist and humanitarian worker from al Atareb town in the western suburbs of Aleppo governorate.



Nour al Shallou

We spoke with Mr. Hussein al Shallou¹¹, Nour's uncle, who told us that Nour - whose husband Abdul Latif Abdul Rahman al Fajj, was killed during the Syrian regime's incursion into al Atareb city in 2012 - had been engaged in a dispute with her husband's family over the custody of their three children, adding that the lawyer representing her husband's family had previously accused her of immorality-related charges, and had threatened her during earlier court hearings. Recalling the events surrounding her arrest, Hussein said: **"Nour drove her car to the Sarmada court to attend a court session related to the custody of her children. On that day, Nour filed a lawsuit against the opponent's lawyer regarding his attacks on her and his immorality-related accusations against her, with the aim of winning the custody case. During the session, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham security personnel entered [the court] to arrest Nour under the instructions of the opponents' lawyer, but the Chief Prosecutor - Abu al Farouq - prevented them from arresting or detaining her. The security personnel waited for the session to end, and arrested Nour immediately after her exit from the court, and her fate remained unknown to her family, although the family contacted the Salvation Government's Minister of Justice several times to request permission to see Nour or find out any information about her fate."** Mr. Hussein told us that about two months after Nour was arrested and forcibly disappeared, the family learned that she has been charged with treason and other criminal charges, but Hay'at Tahrir al Sham had not provided any opportunity for family members to inquire about her or appoint a lawyer for her.

On Thursday, November 19, 2020, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham issued an [official document](#) citing its justification for the arrest of the activist Nour al Shallou.

On Sunday, October 4, 2020, the Salvation Government, which is affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, arrested Saleh Haj Yousef, after summoning him to the Public Prosecution building in Idlib city in connection with his criticism of an employee of the Salvation Government's Civil Registry in a post on his [personal 'Facebook' account](#). We documented that he was released the next day.

Saleh Haj Yousef, who is a media activist and cameraman for the Orient News Channel, is from Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate.

The SNHR contacted the activist Saleh Haj Yousef¹², who told us that he had received a message via WhatsApp from a person with the Salvation Government's logo on his profile, instructing him to visit the Public Prosecutor's office in Idlib in connection with a lawsuit filed against him. He added: **"When I went with my colleague Anas Tracey, I was presented to the Deputy Public Prosecutor, who asked me to clarify the background of the post in which I criticized an employee of the Salvation Government, which we reviewed for extracting a family document for my brother and his wife, but the employee did not accept the identity card and passport and the marriage contract of my brother's wife and requested her guardian exclusively, and asked impossible questions, so we refused to complete the transaction and criticized him in my post."**

¹¹ Via phone on November 18, 2020

¹² Via his personal account on Facebook on October 6, 2020

He added, “After that, they brought me to the Public Prosecutor’s office, who showed me my post as well as a photo of one of my comments, and he asked me if I was the one who published it, and I said ‘Yes’; then he confirmed the same statement and said, “So you acknowledge that you published it!”, and I confirmed. Then, he told me, ‘You confessed! So don’t say we wronged you.’ Then I asked him to ask me why I wrote it, but he shouted at me and threatened to beat me. Finally, he asked me if I would apologize, and I answered him in the affirmative. He wrote on a piece of paper on which he was writing while interrogating me: ‘Apologize and ask for mercy’, and he asked me to put my fingerprint on it.” Saleh told us that he was then taken to a cell in which he was held until the next day, when he was released, together with his colleague Anas Tracey.

We also spoke with Anas Tracey¹³ to find out the reason for his arrest, and he told us that on the morning of October 5, he had gone to the Public Prosecutor’s building (formerly the building of the Faculty of Law) near the industrial zone in Idlib city to follow up on the case of his colleague, Saleh. Upon seeing the Public Prosecutor, the official ordered his arrest despite his disapproval of Saleh’s publishing the post. He added: “I was then placed in the custody suite, before being taken to ‘Building 107’ in Idlib city, where I met Saleh in the collective custody suite, and then I was taken to a solitary confinement cell where I remained for about an hour-and-a-half before I was released.”

We note that Anas is a media activist and former correspondent for Orient TV, from Ariha city in the south of Idlib governorate.



Anas Tracey



Saleh Haj Yousef

On Thursday, April 15, 2021, Hay’at Tahrir al Sham personnel arrested Amer al Asi, after summoning him to an HTS police station in Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and took him to an undisclosed location.

Al Asi is a media activist, from Sarja village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate.



Amer al Asi

¹³ Via his personal account on Facebook on October 6, 2020

3. The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:

On Monday, May 18, 2020, Syrian National Army forces arrested Hammoud Fawaz Muhammad Khair, in a raid on his place of residence in Jendieres town, which is administratively a part of Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, over his criticism of a photo of Syrian National Army personnel with Turkish flags on their uniforms, posted on his [personal Facebook account](#). We documented that he was released on May 21, 2020

In August, 2020, [he was sentenced to three months in prison](#) or a [fine of 400 Turkish liras](#)

Mahmoud Fawaz, known as Mahmoud al Dimashqi, is a media activist and director of the Dawaa Foundation for Social Affairs, from al Sabeina town, south of Damascus Suburbs governorate, born in 1971.



Hammoud Fawaz Muhammad Khair

On Thursday, January 21, 2021, personnel affiliated with Syrian National Army forces arrested Hayyan Habbabeh in Izaz city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. We documented that he was released on January 30, 2021.

Habbabeh, a media activist from al Nqeir village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate who works in the healthcare center run by the Violet organization in Izaz city, lives in Izaz city.

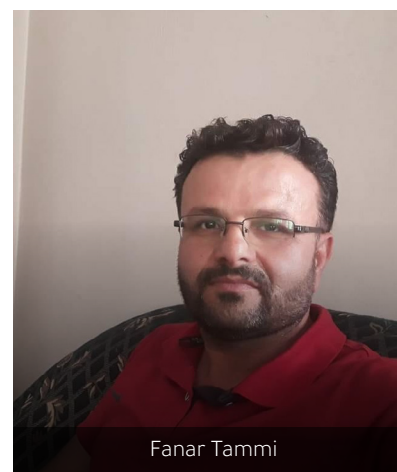


Hayyan Habbabeh

4. Syrian Democratic Forces:

On Saturday, January 23, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested Fanar Mahmoud Tammi in al Qameshli city, over his criticism of the SDF's practices via his Facebook account, and took him to an undisclosed location. On Monday, January 25, 2021, the General Command of the SDF's Internal Security Forces serving the SDF-controlled al Jazeera Region issued a statement denying Fanar Tammi's arrest, although local activists confirmed to us that Fanar Tammi had been referred to the SDF's 'People's Court' on charges related to treason. We documented that he was released on Thursday, February 11, 2021.

Tammi, a media activist and member of the Kurdistan Yekiti Party in Syria, is from al Qameshli city in the northeastern suburbs of Hasaka governorate.



Fanar Tammi

On Thursday, February 4, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested Ali Saleh al Wakaa in Hajin city's Hospital in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, during a visit by a delegation of the US-led Coalition to inspect the rehabilitation operations in the hospital, and took him to an undisclosed location.

Al Wakaa is a media activist from Abu Hamam city, which is administratively a part of al Sh'aitat area in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate.



Ali al Wakaa

On Sunday, March 25, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested Abbas Hasan al Shraida al Marsoumi, in a raid on his home in al Baghouz town in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, over his criticism of the living and service conditions in his town on his personal Facebook account. We documented that he was released on Friday, April 2, 2021.

Al Marsoumi, born in 1990, is a media activist from the town of al Baghouz town in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate.



Abbas al Shraida al al Marsoumi

III. Harnessing State Media to Promote the 'Election' of Bashar al Assad, and the Absence of Any Media Criticism Throughout the Twenty Years of His Presidency:

In the absence of any independent media and the regime security services' control of all state media, the Syrian regime is holding sham presidential elections in which Bashar al Assad is running for president; despite his being the figure who led the state throughout the past two decades until it reached its current devastated condition in all human rights, legal, political and economic fields, we have not documented even a single criticism of Bashar al Assad by the media, or even by the supposed opposition candidates, for his actions in the past seven years that have involved the forced displacement of millions of Syrians, the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, and the deaths of 47,967 Syrian citizens since the previous elections in 2014, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights database. We have issued [a detailed report](#) on the illegitimacy of the upcoming elections and the reasons behind this.

IV. The Syrian Regime Introduces Laws That Violate the Most Basic Principles of Human Rights and Aim to Suppress Freedom of Opinion and Expression:

Article 12 of the [Media Law](#) includes five provisions for material banned from publication, including “any publication of content that affects national unity and national security, harms the holy religions and beliefs, or incites sectarian or confessional strife.” The fifth provision also bans anything that “harms state symbols”. All these are infinitely vague terms, and almost everything can be banned using them.

This “law” also grants the right to regulate the media sector to the National Council of Information, which according to Article 20 consists of “nine members, including the president and deputy of the Council, who hold Syrian Arab nationality, who are named by a decree issued by the president of the Syrian regime for a period of three years, renewable for one additional time.” Under this legislation, the Syrian regime establishes autocratic domination over all state institutions and abolishes the independence and impartiality of the media that it is supposed to enjoy.

Article 285 of the Penal Code, amended by [Legislative Decree No. 1](#) of January 2011 stipulates that “Anyone in Syria who, in wartime or at a time when war is expected to break out, engages in propaganda aimed at weakening national sentiment or at arousing ethnic or sectarian tension is to be punished by temporary detention.”. Meanwhile, Article 286 states “Anyone is to deserve the same punishment who communicates news items which he knows to be untrue or exaggerated and which tend to dishearten the psychology of the nation.” This is bolstered by Article 287, which states: “Every Syrian abroad spreading news which he knows to be untrue or exaggerated and that undermines the prestige of the State, he is to be punished by at least six months’ imprisonment and by a fine of between one hundred and five hundred Syrian Liras.”

These are all vague terms which provide no accurate description of terms such as “weakening national sentiment” or “the prestige of the State,” enabling the Syrian regime to apply them up to whoever it wishes to punish; through use of such vague and undefined terms, the regime has condemned dozens of political opponents.

The Syrian regime not only crushes freedom of speech via traditional media, but Bashar al Assad has also issued a decree with the aim of restricting and proscribing it via the Internet. On May 7, 2012, the regime issued [Legislative Decree No. 17](#) related to the application of the provisions of the Social Media Law and Anti-Cybercrime legislation; according to Article 28 of this legislation, the previous minimum penalty prescribed in Criminal laws is doubled in the event of any individual using a network, a computer device, or an information system, with this article stipulating in Paragraph (c) for several forms of crimes punishable by law, including “promoting terrorism by means of information”. It is well known that the Syrian regime automatically labels all those who oppose it and anyone who publishes information revealing its practices and violations as “terrorist”.

V. Syria Is among the Worst Countries Worldwide in the Media Sector and Freedom of Opinion and Expression:

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and Freedom House, Syria consistently ranks either lowest or among the worst globally in their various indicators and recent reports on press freedom:

The Committee to Protect Journalists' 2020 Global Impunity [Index](#), released on October 28, 2020, showed that Syria is the second worst country in the world in terms of journalists being targeted for murder without the perpetrators being held accountable, with only Somalia ranking above Syria.

Syria received a rating of 17 out of 100¹⁴ in terms of freedom on the Internet in 2020 in [the annual report](#) issued by Freedom House, which assesses the level of freedom of Internet access in 65 countries, with Syria ranking third worst in the world in terms of countries lacking freedom, behind only China and Iran; the report stresses that "Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world's most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in the civil war."

[The report](#), issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists on January 21, 2021, ranked Syria as the deadliest country for journalists among many countries in the Middle East and North Africa region where the "Arab Spring revolutions" erupted ten years ago, far ahead of all other countries.

Syria is ranked 173rd (out of 180 countries), that is, it is the seventh worst country in the world according to the [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#) issued by Reporters Without Borders on April 19, 2021.

[The annual report of Freedom in the World Report 2021](#), published by Freedom House, ranks Syria as the worst country in the world in terms of lack of freedom.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the events documented on the Syrian Network for Human Rights' database throughout this period, part of which we have mentioned in this report, all the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces have violated many of the rules and laws of international human rights law in the areas they control, especially those related to freedom of opinion and expression, such as Article 19¹⁵ of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19(2)¹⁶ of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

These parties have also violated many rules and articles of international humanitarian law, foremost among which is Rule 34¹⁷ of customary law, which requires that 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.

¹⁴ Evaluation is based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

¹⁵ OHCHR, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19, https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr_translations/eng.pdf

¹⁶ OHCHR, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19 (2), <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/professionalinterest/ccpr.pdf>

¹⁷ ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, rule 34, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule34

Recommendations:

All the Parties to the Conflict/ Controlling Forces:

- Immediately release journalists and media workers who have been arbitrarily detained, and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared.
- Allow access to all media outlets and cease to proscribe the work of journalists according to the extent of their loyalty to the controlling party.
- Repeal all 'security laws' which absolutely suppress and deny freedom of opinion and expression, especially those issued by the Syrian regime.
- Not use media as organs to serve the controlling forces and to justify their violations or falsify the truth.

UN Security Council:

- Issue a resolution demanding the immediate release of all journalists and media workers, by all parties, in particular the Syrian regime, which is detaining the vast majority of them.
- 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 journalists and media workers in Syria, and highlight their sacrifices and suffering.
- Demand the disclosure of the fate of the detained and forcibly disappeared journalists and media workers in light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI):

- Launch a special investigation on the targeting of journalists and media workers 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 journalists and media workers 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.

Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to all journalists and media workers whose contribution has effectively enriched this report, who put their own lives at risk in order to report the truth to their entire Syrian community.



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