

# Hurras al Din Group Is Responsible for Kidnapping and Forcibly Disappearing Six Activists Working for Relief Organizations in Idlib

Detainees, Activists, and Prisoners of Conscience Should Be Released as a Precaution for Fear of Being Infected with the Coronavirus

# SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Thursday, March 19, 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. Hurras al Din ('Guardians of Religion') Group Controls Four Secret Detention Centers Containing Approximately 113 Detainees

February 27, 2018 saw the announcement of the establishment of a group calling itself 'Hurras al Din (Guardians of Religion)', with two main factors contributing to the birth of this group:

The first was the announcement by the leader of al Nusra Front, Abu Mohammad al Jolani, in July 2016, of his group's disengagement from al Qaeda, which caused a large number of defections from al Nusra Front. Among the defectors was the military leader of al Nusra Front, Samir Hijazi, 'Abu Humam al Shami', and its general sharia official, Sami al Aridi. The second factor was that al Nusra Front went on in January 2017 to form an alliance with a number of factions which became Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, an event which also caused more defections from the Nusra Front.

The Hurras al Din group considers itself one of the branches of al Qaeda and gives its allegiance to the terror group's leader Ayman al Zawahiri. Among the figures who founded the group are Samir Hijazi (known as Abu Humam al Shami, or Faruq al Suri, who is now the leader of the group. Hijazi was one of the founders of al Nusra Front in early 2012 after his return to Syria); Sami al Aridi (known as Abu Mahmoud al Sham); Bilal Khreisat (known as Abu Khadija al Urduni) Faraj Ahmad al Nana'a, and Abu Abdul Karim al Masri. The jihadists, who come from various nations worldwide, mainly from Jordan and Tunisia, control the group, with several subgroups and battalions joining the group following the announcement of its establishment, including, Jaish al Malahim, Jaish al Sahil, Jaish al Badiya, Saraya Kabul, Saraya al Ghouta, Katibat Abu Bakr al Siddiq, Katibat Abu Ubayda bin al Jarrah, Saraya



al Ghuraba, Katibat al Battar, Saraya al Sahil, Saraya Abdul Rahman bin Awf, Kataib Jund al Sham, Kataib Fursan al Iman, Quwat al Nukhba, Majmuah Abdullah Azzam, Katibat Usud al Tawhid and others. The Hurras al Din group is not considered a group that possesses any independent military capacity and strength; therefore, it often resorts to alliances with other extremist groups, including Jamaat Ansar al Tawhid, Jabhat Ansar al Din and others, when carrying out military attacks on areas outside its control. The Hurras al Din group also lacks any real central leadership, with each of its subordinate groups managing its own affairs and planning and carrying out kidnappings or killings, according to whatever each group perceives as useful at a given moment in achieving its objectives.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights' (SNHR) team spoke with a number of former detainees who were released by the Hurras al Din group after being detained in its detention centers; these interviews helped to confirm that the terror group controls four undeclared detention centers, in which it conducts investigations and trials of detainees, based solely on the orders of the group's security and sharia officials; in general, the Hurras al Din group does not claim responsibility for kidnappings or detentions in order to avoid unnecessary antagonism with local communities. We were able to confirm the group's responsibility for a number of kidnappings through the intermediaries who track down abducted individuals and/or mediate with the group on behalf of victims' family members in the negotiation process.

## **II. Eight Cases of Kidnapping and Enforced Disappearance of Eight Local Activists Have Been Documented, Some of Whom Work for Relief Organizations**

Since the beginning of 2020, the SNHR team has documented at least eight kidnappings targeting local activists working mainly in humanitarian organizations and charities in Idlib governorate; six of these individuals were detained by Hurras al Din group, as part of its policy of repression, restriction, and terrorizing of civil society organizations operating in Idlib governorate, and to take advantage of the current chaotic conditions in the northwest areas of Syria to carry out security operations.

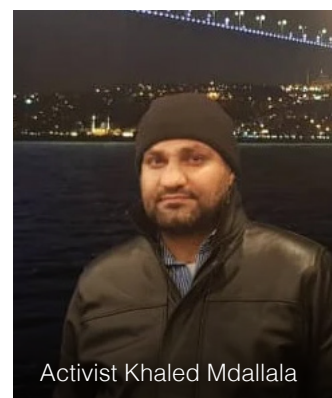
We communicated with the detainees' families, most of whom told us that the Hurras al Din group had been monitoring and shadowing the movements of their relatives for days before carrying out the kidnappings, as well as collecting information about their victims from the people around them; the victims' and family members' accounts had multiple points of similarity, enhancing their credibility greatly.

In this report, we outline three accounts that the narrators agreed to publish, and have archived the other testimonies - which the families chose to withhold for fear of the detainees being exposed to greater risk and more torture - on the SNHR database, and have informed the families of our goal in documenting these accounts and received their consent to use these.



On February 24, 2020, about ten masked individuals kidnapped the activist Khaled Mdallala after he left his home in al Dana city in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. Prior to the abduction, the individuals had surrounded the building where his home is located and cut off one of the roads leading to it. On kidnapping Khaled, they took him towards an undisclosed location; after his family launched a search for him and investigated the Hurras al Din group's activities, the group admitted kidnapping him, claiming that he was under investigation, and rejected all mediation attempts by local dignitaries and mediators to explain the reason for his kidnapping and to release him.

Khaled Mdallala, known as Abu al Walid al Hamawi, born in 1987, is from Bab al Qebli neighborhood in Hama city, where he's considered one of the city's most prominent activists in the Syrian revolution. He was among the members of the coordination group for the Bab al Qebli neighborhood, as well as being one of the founders of the former Hama Revolutionaries Union, established in 2012. Due to being persecuted by the Syrian regime's security forces in connection with his participation in the popular uprising, he moved to Idlib governorate, where he worked as the director of the North Office in the Sham al Khair Association in the Syrian north. He is married and has three children.



Activist Khaled Mdallala

The SNHR spoke to a relative of Khaled's, Kamal al Ahmad <sup>1</sup>, who he told us: **“We did not realize that Khaled had been kidnapped until 12 hours after he went missing; after we carried out investigations for several days following his disappearance, we were sure that he'd been kidnapped by the Hurras al Din group. We confirmed this after we put pressure on the Salvation Government and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and asked them to investigate the kidnapping incident, so they [Hurras al Din] told them [HTS] that he was accused of dealing with the US-led coalition and they wanted to investigate him. Everyone who knows Khaled knows the impossibility of this charge, but we believe that there are people plotting against him to get him.”**

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<sup>1</sup> We contacted him via phone on March 12, 2020



Bilal al Mohammad, a civil engineer, born in 1983, is from Harbnoush town. He lives in Tal'ada in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, where he works as a project official with a local charity. On February 11, 2020, he was kidnapped by gunmen who are likely to be affiliated with the Hurras al Din group while he was riding his motorbike along al Dana-Sarmada agricultural road. His fate remains unknown.

Mr. Mohammad <sup>2</sup>, the victim's brother, Bilal, told us: **“Ten days before my brother was kidnapped, he was subjected to a failed kidnapping attempt and received threats from Hurras al Din on the pretext that he'd been travelling to the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch areas and meeting with people wanted by the group. After his kidnapping, we contacted a number of people from our village who know and have relations with the group; they told us that my brother had a major problem with the group and asked us to stop asking about him, and they refused to tell us the charges against him. I believe that there are no real charges other than the group's dissatisfaction with my brother because of his having friends whom the group is unhappy about, and the presence of people who work as informants and transmit reports of people's movements to the group.”** Mohammad also told us that his brother suffers from health problems related to his digestive system and intestines, as a result of an injury he sustained in aerial bombardment of Harbnoush village in 2017.

Mohammad Rashid al Abdullah, a photographer and owner of a store selling electronic devices, is from Kafr Daryan village in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. On February 7, 2020, individuals who we believe belong to Hurras al Din group kidnapped him from his store and took him to an undisclosed location.

We spoke to Mohammad's uncle, Abdul Salam <sup>3</sup>, who told us: **“According to what one of the neighbors who witnessed the kidnapping told me, two cars came at around ten in the morning, which is the time that Mohammad opens his shop; four individuals got out of the cars, two of whom dragged Mohammad and put him into one car, while two others searched the store and collected several mobile devices and took them, and also seized a laptop computer. When I learned about the news, I went to the police station in Sarmada town, to the security department of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, and to the HTS checkpoint and told them that two cars with gunmen and a kidnapped man in them passed by before you, but they denied it and rejected any knowledge of it and said that they would investigate the matter.”** Abdul Salam told us that he knew that Mohammad was held by Hurras al Din through a person who he commissioned to ask them, but added that he was unable to obtain any further information from them.

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<sup>2</sup> We contacted him via phone on March 3, 2020

<sup>3</sup> We contacted him via phone on February 24, 2020



### III. The Responsibility of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham

The control of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, which is classified as a terrorist entity on official lists, over large areas of Idlib governorate, has caused a significant decline in the support of countries and international organizations to local organizations working in the relief field, with hundreds of their employees being affected; this has also added to the burden on their families; HTS exploits the presence of an extremist faction such as Hurras al Din to present itself as a local faction, but HTS has played no significant role in local affairs or assisted the local community in any way as it attempts to claim. A number of detainees' families have told us that they contacted the HTS security apparatus and provided data about the kidnappers, emphasizing that some of the kidnappings took place in areas where HTS maintains checkpoints and military roadblocks, and we believe that the kidnappers' cars had passed through these; despite this, HTS has taken no action over these incidents to date.

### IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

- Abductions, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on local communities' freedoms carried out by extremist Islamist groups, including Hurras al Din group (the Guardians of Religion) have resulted in many more activists and their families being displaced and fleeing to other areas outside the groups' control for fear of arrest and an unknown fate.
- Hurras al Din group has committed widespread violations of international human rights law against the people in the areas under its control through kidnappings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and unfair rulings issued by courts that in no way comply with the basic rules of fair trials.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### **The international community and the Security Council:**

- Extremist groups live on wars and conflicts. Therefore, the political transition towards democracy in Syria must be accelerated to expedite the process of ending these.
- The failure of the international community and the Security Council to deter the Syrian regime from committing crimes against humanity, which allow it to act with total impunity, is a historic and gross injustice that enables extremist groups to find support and to gain traction for their extremist doctrine in recruiting members of Syrian society.
- Allocate resources and create plans to try to attract and dissuade those who joined extremist groups through financial inducements, appeals to morality and reasoning, and raising awareness.



### **Hurras al Din group**

- Disclose the fate of the forcibly disappeared and abductees, end persecution and compensate the victims' families.

### **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:**

- Make serious security efforts to release the abductees.

### **Thanks and solidarity**

We would like to extend our solidarity to the victims and their families and to express our gratitude and appreciation to the local people and activists, without whose efforts this report could not have been written.





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