

Statement

We Condemn the Cancellation of the Paralympic Games in Idlib City Following an Antagonistic Campaign Against the Violet Organization

The HTS' Salvation Government's Decision to Ban Any Event Not Approved by its General Directorate of Political Affairs Only Perpetuates Its Restrictive Policies Against Humanitarian Groups



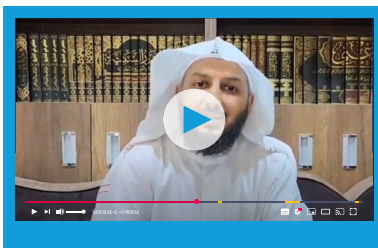
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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

The Hague – The Syrian Network for Human Rights:

On August 26, the Violet Organization¹ opened a Paralympic Games event,² with the participation of 333 athletes with disabilities at Idlib city’s municipal stadium. The event was supposed to be held in tandem with the Paris Paralympic Games, which began the same day and is set to conclude on September 12. Plans for the event’s three-stage program had already been completed and approved, with contracts signed between the Violet Organization and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS) Salvation Government in Idlib city. As such, preparations for the event had been underway for the past few months, with the games intended to give a prominent platform and far greater attention to members of one of society’s most vulnerable and marginalized group, namely people with special needs and disabilities, which are especially essential with many in Syria having suffered injuries leading to various disabilities as a result of aerial bombardment in recent years, primarily by the Syrian regime and its allies, while others sustained life-changing injuries that left them physically disabled in the earthquakes of February 6, 2023.

The first ceremony of the games was held on August 26, with the lighting of the Olympic Torch, again based on previously agreed arrangements with the Salvation Government, with the route for the torch’s passage to the Municipal Stadium having been explained and approved, along with filming locations, participating figures, and other relevant details, including the opening ceremony, the torch’s entrance to the stadium, and the lighting of the Paralympic cauldron in the stadium. At one point in the opening ceremony, the torch-bearer bowed down to the audience to greet them, with the cauldron behind him, with this gesture in particular causing uproar the next day, mainly from pro-HTS Islamic scholars, as well as other figures who denounced the opening ceremony as supposedly contravening Islamic Sharia and of being an imitation of the West and infidels, especially condemning the torch-lighting ceremony, which, they claimed, symbolizes “pagan beliefs”. Some went as far as calling for the reintroduction of HTS’ restrictive al-Hesba Apparatus in Idlib. (It should be noted that other Islamic scholars have deemed the Paralympics and the associated ceremonies to be a wholly acceptable event and customs that do not conflict in any way with Islamic Sharia).



↑ Sheikh Muslim al-Alyani on the Paralympic Games in Idlib



← Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi on the Paralympic Games in Idlib

1. Violet Organization is a humanitarian and development civil society organization that operates in northwestern Syria.
 2. Paralympic Games, or simply the Paralympics, is a series of sporting competitions with a system similar to the Olympics that features competitors with various and different disabilities.

On August 28, 2024, the Salvation Government’s Bureau for Coordinating Humanitarian Work summoned the Violet Organization’s public relations officer to demand that the humanitarian group issue a statement apologizing for the torch-bearer’s gesture of greeting to the crowd at the opening ceremony. The group rejected this, pointing out that all the Games’ ceremonies and events took place in accordance with the agreement signed between it and the Salvation Government. The Violet Organization was shocked at the subsequent statement issued by the Salvation Government cancelling the Games, and proclaiming that the event would be prevented from proceeding since it goes against local culture, norms, and traditions. Tareq al-Ali, the Public Relations Head at the Salvation Government’s Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, said in the statement that the Violet Organization had submitted a proposal for an event featuring sporting activities for the disabled, which was granted approval on the basis that it was solely a sporting event. However, he added, when the event got underway the organization held a ceremonial festival that falls outside the confines of its competence and requires special procedures, and a referral to the competent parties in the Directorate of Political Affairs, which he said was the cause of the ‘violations’ in the aforementioned ceremony, which **“goes against our culture, customs, and traditions.”**



Statement issued by the Public Relations Head at the Salvation Government’s Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs on the Paralympic Games in Idlib, which was reported by pro-HTS media outlets



Sadly, the incitement against the event drove the Violet Organization to cancel it in fear that the provocative rhetoric might lead to assaults on its staff, with the group now considering the possibility of suspending all its activities in the areas controlled by the Salvation Government. On August 29, 2024, the Syrian Salvation Government issued a decision that reads, **“In consideration of the public interest, guided by Prime Minister’s Office’s keen concern for organizing events and avoiding any violations, no event shall be held without the approval of the Events Bureau at the General Directorate of the Political Affairs.”**



The Salvation Government’s decision banning any event held without obtaining prior approval from the Events Bureau at the General Directorate of the Political Affairs



The antagonistic campaigns led by the ultra-extremist blocs within HTS and the way in which the Salvation Government has responded to these calls have created an atmosphere of fear and panic among humanitarian workers and civil society organizations in areas under HTS' control, especially given the repeated occurrences of such assaults; these also include, for instance, a shooting at al-Hamra Mall in al-Dana city a few months ago resulting from a similar antagonistic campaigns against the mall's opening ceremony due to its being attended by non-segregated males and females. This decision also reflects the Salvation Government's typically restrictive policies against humanitarian work as a whole through creating a hostile climate of obstructive bureaucratic procedures and straightforwardly interfering in and hampering these organizations' projects and work with abrupt, hastily issued decisions in reaction to particular incidents, including this most recent decision which bans all events that have not first obtained prior approval from the Events Bureau.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) condemns the cancellation of the Paralympic Games which began so promisingly in Idlib city on August 26, 2024. We also condemn the antagonistic campaign by opponents, which aims to send a threatening message, not only to Violet Organization, but to all other humanitarian organizations operating in Salvation Government territories. We call on the Salvation Government, as the de facto ruling authority there, to respect the work of organizations that are trying to serve the public in areas under its control, and to protect their personnel. The Salvation Government must also respect international human rights law, hold extremists accountable, and dismiss any such figures in positions of governance from their posts. We also stress that the Salvation Government must issue an apology to the Violet Organization, and assure them that such threats will not happen again in the future.



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