"Abduction as Mechanism to Disintegrate the Community Fabric"

A Special Report Highlighting Abduction and Counter-Abduction between Daraa Province and As-Sweida Province, and their Impact on Social Cohesion between Both Provinces

Contents

Preface

Kidnapping civilians is one of the most dangerous violations spread in the Syrian southern provinces. It has impact on the social interactions among locals of those provinces, particularly in the predominantly Arab Sunni province of Daraa and the mainly Druze province of as-Suwayda, following the increase of abduction and counter-abduction among armed groups in both provinces during the recent months in particular and during the years of the Syrian conflict in general. Many abductees experienced torture and murder and their families experienced terrible financial blackmail. According to the families and the persons interviewed for this report, abduction can be described as an organized and a public phenomena that affected negatively on the local peace among components of both provinces.
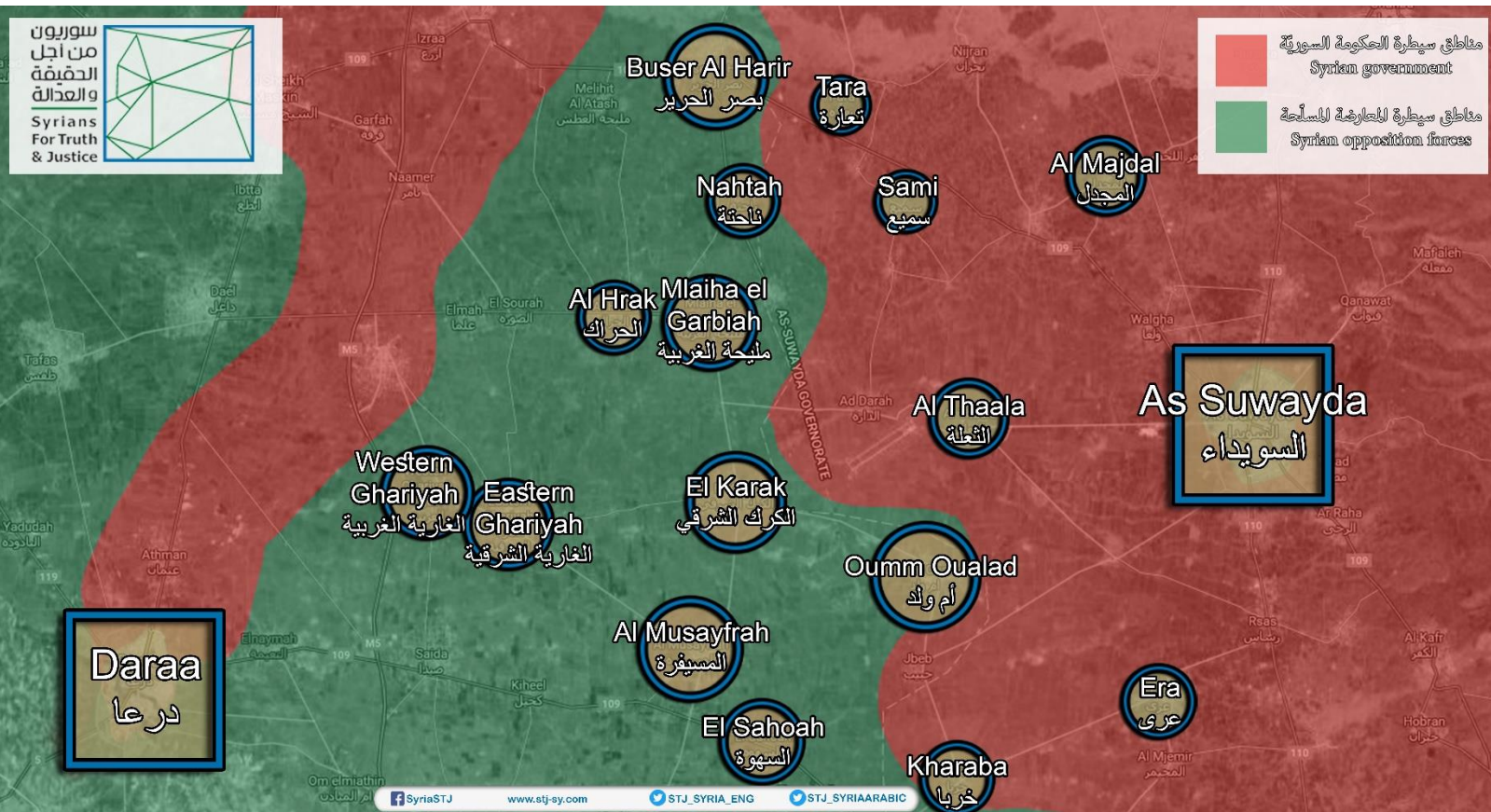
Based on many testimonies collected by Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, the abduction phenomena is supervised by the security system and its affiliated militias in Syrian government - held areas as well as supervised by organized armed groups in armed opposition-held areas.

Since the beginning of January 2017, insecurity increased in as-Suwayda, notably in the areas that border Daraa province[1] , as kidnapping and theft became a sustenance for most members of the armed groups in both provinces. Dozens of abductions were recorded in the western countryside of as-Suwayda, notably in al-Thaala, Era, al-Qurrayya and Sami' villages, although there are several security checkpoints of the National Defense, affiliated to the Syrian regular forces, which are near Daraa countryside held by Syrian armed opposition. In turn, several counter-abductions recorded that were carried out by families of the abductees against some locals of Daraa who are displaced in as-Suwayda, STJ reporter stated.

The number of the abductees between both provinces in just January 2017 reached 150 abductees, most of them were released after paying financial ransoms, whereas kidnappings decreased during the months followed January 2017 and increased again to be at least 65 abductees in August. From January to August, 300 kidnappings occurred, STJ reporters and other well-informed sources stated.

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[1]Borderline areas between both provinces are Era, Labeen, ad-Dour, Dama, al-Qurrayya, Sami', Thabeen, Barad, al-Thaala, al-Ariqah, al-Ghariyah, T'ara, and Harran.

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

	مناطق سيطرة الحكومة السورية Syrian government
	مناطق سيطرة المعارضة المسلّحة Syrian opposition forces

Buser Al Harir بصر الحرير

Tara تعارة

Al Majdal المجدل

Nahtah ناحتة

Sami سميع

Al Hrak الحراك

Mlaiha el Garbiah مليحة الغربية

Al Thaala الثعلة

As Suwayda السويداء

Western Ghariyah الغارية الغربية

Eastern Ghariyah الغارية الشرقية

El Karak الكرك الشرقي

Oumm Oualad أم ولد

Al Musayfrah المسيفرة

Daraa درعا

El Sahoah السهوة

Era عرى

Kharaba خربا

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A satellite image shows the villages adjacent between Daraa and as-Suwayda where kidnappings increased lately.

Methodology

The report in its methodology is based on many accounts and separate testimonies some of which belongs to former "abductees" from Daraa and as-Suwayda whom were abducted in different periods, whereas other testimonies belong to activists who witnessed kidnappings from both provinces. The report is also based on testimonies of personnel of the judiciary field in both provinces in order to consider the role of jurisdiction to end the kidnapping phenomena. Finally, we, STJ, had to listen to the testimonies of researchers and experts who specifically worked previously in documenting kidnappings between Daraa and as-Suwayda.

Totally, the research based-team interviewed up to 25 persons.

Challenges and Difficulties

The fear to testify by 'former abductees" and by families of the former and current abductees was the main challenge that the research based-team encountered. The fear led many witnesses not to disclose their identity. For six months, STJ has attempted to obtain more testimonies of "former abductees" but to persuade some of them to testify was one of the most difficulties, notably that some are still living inside the opposition-held Daraa or living in the Syrian government-held as-Suwayda province.

Legal Framework

In 2014 the UN Security Council with Resolution 2139(2014) "strongly condemn[ed] the arbitrary detention […] of civilians in Syria, as well as the kidnappings, abductions and forced disappearances, and demand[ed] the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons […]".

Under international law, kidnappings and abductions may fall within the scope of the prohibition of hostage taking and the prohibition of enforced disappearance. More generally, they constitute at a minimum an arbitrary deprivation of liberty and as such are in breach of the right to liberty and security of the person.

Therefore, in order to determine the international legal framework governing kidnappings and abductions this documents examines the rules applicable to hostage taking (Section I) and enforced disappearance (Section II). The rules applicable to arbitrary deprivation of liberty are examined in both sections as the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty is a constitutive element of both the prohibition of hostage taking and the prohibition of enforced disappearance.

I - Hostage taking

Hostage taking is defined in Article 1 of the International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages as follows:

"Any person who seizes or detains and threatens to kill, to injure or to continue to detain another person (hereinafter referred to as the "hostage") in order to compel a third party, namely, a State, an international intergovernmental organization, a natural or juridical person, or a group of persons, to do or abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for the release of the hostage."

The Elements of Crimes of the International Criminal Court uses the same definition as the Hostage Convention, but adds that the required behaviour of the third party could be a condition not only for the release of the hostage but also for the safety of the hostage.[2]

The commentary to the Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions defines hostages as "persons who are in the power of a party to the conflict or its agent, willingly or unwillingly, and who answer with their freedom, their physical integrity or their life for the execution of orders given by those in whose hands they have fallen, or for any hostile acts committed against them".

What characterises hostage taking and distinguishes it from other forms of deprivation of liberty, is the specific intent to compel a third party to do or abstain from doing any act.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

IHL is the body of law that applies during armed conflicts. In the context of a non-international armed conflicts, such as the one in Syria, common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 4(2)(c) of Additional Protocol II prohibit the taking of hostages when it targets persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed ' hors de combat' by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause. The prohibition to take hostages in a non-international armed conflict is a rule of customary international humanitarian law and is applicable to *all the parties* to the conflict, including non-state armed groups.[3]

International Human Rights Law (IHRL)

IHRL applies in times of peace and, with certain limitations, also during armed conflicts. Hostage taking is not expressly prohibited by any international human rights law treaty. However, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the prohibition to take hostages not only constitutes a rule of customary international law, but it is also a rule that does not admit derogation as affirmed by the UN Human Rights Committee.[4] Moreover, the act of hostage taking falls within the scope of the more general prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty affirmed by Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[5]

Any instance of deprivation of liberty is considered to be arbitrary not only when it is against the law, but also when it "includes elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability and due process of law", as well as when it lacks "elements of reasonableness, necessity and proportionality".[6] State responsibility may arise if the state acts in breach of the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, but also if the state does not take appropriate measures to

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[2] ICC, Elements of Crimes, 33.

[3] ICRC Customary IHL, rule 96.

[4] See UN HRC, General Comment 29, para 13. See also the preamble to the Hostages Convention in which hostage taking is described as "an offence of grave concern to the international community".

[5] Syria is a party to the Covenant.

[6] UN HRC, General Comment 35, para 12.

prevent, punish or investigate arbitrary deprivations of liberty committed by individuals or entities other than the state.[7]

Applicability of IHRL obligations to non-state actors

In circumstances in which an armed group exerts stable control over a certain territory the state is usually unable to impose its will. A number of commentators support the notion that human rights obligations bind also *non-state actors* such as armed groups, especially when such groups exercise significant control over territory and population and have an identifiable political structure.[8] It follows that under international law even outside an armed conflict the prohibitions of hostage taking and of arbitrary deprivation of liberty apply also to non-state armed groups that satisfy the aforementioned conditions.

International Criminal Law (ICL)

Pursuant to Article 8(2)(c)(iii) of the Rome Statute, the act of taking hostages amounts to a war crime in a non-international armed conflict when committed against persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat.

Beyond the Rome Statute, hostage taking is regulated by the International Convention against the Taking of Hostages and is indirectly prohibited by a number of international conventions applicable to the context of aircraft safety and harm to internationally protected people.[9] The Hostages Convention in its preamble acknowledges the existence of the prohibition to take hostages, and imposes a number of obligations to each state party including the obligation to criminalise the offence,[10] the obligation to take all practicable measures to prevent the offence,[11] the obligation to prosecute or extradite those responsible[12] and the obligation to exercise universal jurisdiction over the offence[13].

Syria is not a party to the Hostages Convention, therefore in principle the obligations listed in the Hostages Convention are not binding on Syria and do not apply in the relations with Syria. Nevertheless, in a non-international armed conflict, hostage taking constitutes a war crime. It

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[7] UN HRC, General Comment no 31. See also Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, principle II.

[8] See A. Clapham, P. Alston, D. Murray. Murray lists the two following conditions: "the armed group must exist independently and must be sufficiently organised that it can impose its will on its members".

[9] Hague Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft, 1970; Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation, 1971; Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents, 1973. Syria is a party to all three Conventions.

[10] Hostages Convention, Article 2.

[11] Ibid, Article 4

[12] Ibid, Article 8.

[13] Ibid, Article 5.

follows that under international law each state is entitled to exercise universal jurisdiction in relation to each individual (including Syrians) responsible for the war crime of hostage taking.

Payment of ransom

The payment of a ransom to free an individual held hostage by a terrorist group may be incompatible with certain international obligations binding on states.

The Convention on the Financing of Terrorism of 1999 prohibits any person to provide or collect funds by any means, with the intention that they should be used or in the knowledge that they are to be used, in full or in part, in order to carry out a terrorist act as defined in Article 2(1)(a)(b) of the Convention. The Convention is only applicable to offences involving a foreign component, meaning that it cannot be applied to purely domestic situations (both the act of financing and the terrorist act must be purely domestic for the Convention not to apply).[14] Syria is a party to the Convention.

The UN Security Council building on the 1999 Convention on the Financing of Terrorism adopted Resolution 1373(2001), which imposed on every state an obligation to (1) prevent and suppress the financing of terrorist acts and refrain from providing any form of support, active or passive, to entities or persons involved in terrorist acts and an obligation to (2) "prohibit their nationals or any persons and entities within their territories from making any funds, financial assets or economic resources or financial or other related services available", for the benefit of persons who commit terrorist acts.[15] In addition, the UN Security Council with a number of resolutions, most notably Resolution 1267(1999) and Resolution 1989(2011), imposed the same set of obligations in relation to the financing of listed organisations affiliated with Al Qaida.

The recent UNSC Resolution 2133(2014) clears any doubt as to the applicability to ransom payments of the measures to fight the financing of terrorism. The Resolution "notes that ransom payments to terrorist groups are one of the sources of income which supports their [activities]"[16] and "calls upon all Member States to prevent terrorists from benefiting directly or indirectly from ransom payments or from political concessions"[17].

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[14] Terrorist Financing Convention, Article 3.
[15] UN SC Resolution 1373(2001).
[16] UN SC Resolution 2133(2014), operative paragraph 7.
[17] Ibid, operative paragraph 3.

II - Enforced disappearance

Enforced disappearance is defined in Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance as follows:

"The arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."

Article 7(2)(i) of the Rome Statute replicates almost verbatim the definition of the Convention on Enforced Disappearance.

IHL

Although the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols do not expressly refer to the term enforced disappearance, in a non-international armed conflict such conduct is prohibited under customary international humanitarian law as it violates or threaten to violate a number of rules of customary international humanitarian law.[18] The relevant rules are the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty,[19] the prohibition of torture and other cruel or inhuman treatment,[20] and the prohibition of murder.[21]

The prohibition of enforced disappearance is binding on *all parties* to the armed conflict therefore including both state armed forces and on non-state armed groups. In addition, all parties to the conflict must take certain steps to prevent enforced disappearance including through the obligation to register all persons deprived of their liberty[22] and the obligation to take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and to provide their family members with information they have on their fate.[23]

IHRL

The Convention on Enforced Disappearance establishes in Article 1 the right of every person not to be subjected to enforced disappearance. In addition, it imposes on each state party a number of obligations including the obligation to "take appropriate measures to investigate" acts of enforced disappearance committed by any person and to "bring those responsible to justice",[24] the obligation to criminalise the act of enforced disappearance[25] and to make the offence

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[18] ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 98.

[19] Ibid, Rule 99.

[20] Ibid, Rule 90.

[21] Ibid, Rule 89.

[22] Ibid, Rule 123.

[23] Ibid, Rule 117.

[24] Convention on Enforced Disappearance, Article 2.

[25] Ibid, Article 4.

punishable by appropriate penalties[26], and the obligation to prosecute or extradite those responsible.[27] The Convention also imposes an obligation on each state to exercise universal jurisdiction over the offence of enforced disappearance.[28]

Syria is not a party to the Convention, nevertheless the prohibition of enforced disappearance is applicable also in the territory within its jurisdiction as it arguably constitutes a norm of customary international law.[29] In addition, as acknowledged by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) in its landmark decision *Velasquez Rodriguez*, the offence of enforced disappearance constitutes a "multiple and continuous violation" of several human rights. It follows that acts of enforced disappearance engage the responsibility of Syria (on the responsibility of non-state actors see below) as they constitute violations of a number of treaty obligations to which Syria is bound.

International courts and tribunals considered acts of enforced disappearance to be in violation of the following rights:

- Right to liberty and security of person[30] (Article 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR));

- Right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 7 ICCPR);

Enforced disappearance was found in breach of the aforementioned right even in absence of evidence that the disappeared person was ill treated in light of a presumption that a victim of enforced disappearance is subject to inhuman or degrading treatment,[31] or in light of the fact that prolonged isolation and deprivation of communication are in themselves cruel and inhuman treatment.[32] In addition, enforced disappearance was found to cause such severe mental distress as to breach the family members' right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.[33]

- Right to life (Article 6 ICCPR).

Enforced disappearance was found in violation of the right to life in light of a presumption of death of victims of enforced disappearance.[34] The presumption of death is not automatic and

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[26] Ibid, Article 7.

[27] Ibid, Article 11.

[28] Ibid, Article 9(2).

[29] UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment no 29, para 13.

[30] ECtHR, *Kurt v Turkey*; IACtHR, *Velasquez Rodriguez v Honduras*.

[31] UN HRC, *Mojica v. Dominican Republic*.

[32] IACtHR, *Velasquez Rodriguez v Honduras*; UN HRC, *Aouabdia v Algeria*.

[33] ECtHR, *Varnava v Turkey*; ECtHR, *Aslakhanova and others v Russia*.

[34] IACtHR, *Bamaca Velasquez v Guatemala*; ECtHR *Aslakhanova and others v Russia*.

such conclusion was only reached on examination of the circumstances of the case, in which the lapse of time since the person was seen alive or heard from is a relevant element.

- Right to an effective remedy (Article 2(3) ICCPR)

A violation of the right to an effective remedy was found when instances of enforced disappearance were not adequately investigated by the state.[35]

Applicability of IHRL obligations to non-state actors

When acts of enforced disappearance are attributable to non-state actors, the state is under an obligation to investigate the violations effectively, provide those who claim to be victims with equal and effective access to justice and provide effective remedies to victims.[36] However, in circumstances in which an armed group exerts stable control over a certain territory the state is usually unable to impose its will. A number of commentators support the notion that human rights obligations bind also *non-state actors* such as armed groups, especially when such groups exercise significant control over territory and population and have an identifiable political structure.[37] It follows that under international law the prohibition of enforced disappearance applies also to non-state armed groups that satisfy the aforementioned conditions.

International Criminal Law

Pursuant to Article 7(1)(i) of the Rome Statute "enforced disappearance of persons" constitutes a crime against humanity "when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack".

Enforced disappearance is a crime against humanity and as such is a crime under customary international law. Under international law each state is permitted to exercise universal jurisdiction in relation to those responsible for enforced disappearance.

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[35] UN HRC, *Aouabdia v Algeria.*
[36] Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law, principle II.
[37] See A. Clapham, P. Alston, D. Murray. Murray lists the two following conditions: "the armed group must exist independently and must be sufficiently organised that it can impose its will on its members".

First: Kidnapping Gangs and Their Links

Many witnesses, being former abductees, families of the current abductees or activists, hesitated before testifying about abductions and the people behind them because this hot file is the most significant and complicated files in the region, given it has too many divergence based on the diversity and multitude of the parties that conduct the abductions on the one hand, and that the abductions took place within border line areas (specific villages between Daraa and as-Suwayda) on the other hand. The parties behind kidnappings vary according to the purpose, aim and the way. They are divided into:

1. Abduction Gangs to collect Money "Ransom"

These gangs multiply in as-Suwayda province in the west northern region because the towns here are on the borderlines directly with towns in the eastern countryside of Daraa and towns of al-Lujat. The gangs are divided into several groups:

- The first group are locals from as-Suwayda who work inside as-Suwayda and their mission is to lure or kidnap the victim and hand him/her over to another group within towns in the eastern countryside of Daraa.
- The second group hides the victim in towns in the eastern countryside of Daraa or al-Lujat area, contacts families of the abductees and orders a ransom.
- The third group serves as a mediator between the kidnappers and family of the abductee, and provides for the agreed swap of ransom.

The most significant groups are:

- **Within Daraa province:** Akef al-Asafira Group from al-Karak al-Sharqi town, Ismael ash-Shoukri Group from Nahta town, Hamoud an-Naked Group from al-Lujat area, Obada al-Mof'alani Group from Nahta town, and Khaled al-Hrraki Group from al-Meliha al-Gharbiya.
- **Within as-Suwayda province:** Rashad Shalgheen Group from Majadel town, Naji ash-Sha'rani Group from ad-Dour town, Sameh Naser from Sami' town, Mohammed as-Saleh Azzam Group from Ariqah town, Wissam at-Taweel Group from Shahba city, and Fandi Abo Sarhan Group from Labeen town.

Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ could document several names of abducted persons from as-Suwayda on the hands of gangs from Daraa, including:

1. On November 15, 2016, Sajee' Salha and Muwafaq Abo Hassoun were kidnapped, and their ransom was 25 million Syrian pounds, and were released later.
2. On January 2, 2017, Abbas Zein was kidnapped, and his ransom was 5 million Syrian pounds, and was released later.

3. On September 6, 2016, Omar Azzam was kidnapped and his ransom was 11 million Syrian pounds, and he was released later.
4. On June 12, 2016, Fendi ash-Sha'rani was kidnapped and his ransom was 7 million Syrian pounds, and was released later.

2. Abduction Gangs for Settling Scores

These gangs often carry out kidnappings as a result of disputes with other gangs, including drug traffickers, arms dealers and fuel traders between both provinces.

In this regard, STJ could document several incidents including:

1. On January 16, 2017, gangs in Daraa city kidnapped both Ogab al-Ghawi and Leith Kaboul following a dispute between them and the arms dealers from al-Lujat area. Relatives of the abductees paid 13 million Syrian pounds as ransom for the release of Leith Kaboul, after the gang in Daraa killed and decapitated Ogab al-Ghawy in order to press pressure on Leith's family to pay the ransom, and that what happened actually.
2. On August16, 2016, gangs in Daraa kidnapped Ayoub an-Naser after a dispute with fuel traders from Daraa province, and he was released later.
3. On January15, 2017, gangs in Daraa kidnapped the young man Walaa Shoker after a dispute with stolen cars traders in al-Lujat; Walaa's family paid 19 million Syrian pounds and he was released later.

3. Gangs Affiliated to the Security Apparatus

Many of whom interviewed for this report think that this kind of gangs carry out the kidnappings in order to unsettle the social relations between both provinces and make use of the diversity of the components of both provinces. STJ could document several incidents that might fall under this category, including:

1. On September17, 2016, gangs affiliated to the security apparatus kidnapped Shadi Rdwan from as-Suwayda and published video clips showing the torture of the abductee with a view to pit the local community in as-Suwayda against the locals in Daraa. It appeared later that Shadi Rdwan was detained in the military detachment in al-Jdiyah twon located in al-Lujat area in the regime forces-held province of Daraa.
2. On October22, 2016, it was fabricated that Wael Amer who hails from as-Suwayda was abducted with a view to mobilize the local community in as-Suwayda against the community in Daraa. Some sources told STJ that the incident was fabricated and that Wael Amer was working in the security state branch.

4. Gangs by Parties from Daraa Kidnap Persons from as-Suwayda to Press Pressure on the Security Branches to Release the Detainees

STJ could document several incidents of abduction from as-Suwayda by parties from Daraa to press pressure on the regime and the security apparatus to release the detainees, including:

1. On August 16, 2016, an armed group in the east countryside of Daraa kidnapped four persons identified as Farooq al-Hamdan, Modar al-Hamdan, Maher al-Halaby and Hatem Abo Hassas, with a view to press pressure on the security state branches to release nine detainees seemed to be belonging to that group or to be from that area.

2. On July21, 2016, Salem al-Bouri Group that pledged alliance to ISIS kidnapped two families from Hamayels Family in order to demand the release of detainees at the security apparatus; a woman along with two children were released from one of the families but no information about the fate of the rest including two men from Hamayels Family.

5. Fake Kidnapping Gangs

In strange situations, fake abductions occur when a person hides himself with the help of others and then news of his abduction spread in order the family of the person, who hided himself, conduct counter-abduction. After that, family of the truly abductee person pay ransom to free their sons, and consequently the money goes to the person who hid himself at the beginning.

STJ could document several incidents, including:

1. On January 14, 2017, Basil al-Halaby kept out of sight; subsequently his relatives kidnapped some displaced persons from Daraa province and robbed 10 million Syrian pounds from them on the pretext of paying the ransom of their kidnapped son Basil al-Halaby.

2. On February 24, 2017, Ghazwan Shalghín kept out of sight, so his family kidnapped displaced people from Daraa, and robbed 19 million Syrian pounds from them on the pretext of paying the ransom of their kidnapped son.

3. At the beginning of 2017, Basem as-Sabe kept out of sight; therefore, his family kidnapped displaced people from Daraa, and robbed 10 million Syrian pounds from them on the pretext of paying the ransom of their kidnapped son.

According to one of the witnesses interviewed, most of abduction and robbery gangs in as-Suwayda operate under the auspices of the security system, apart from that most of the gangs members belong in a way or another to the armed militias affiliated with the Syrian regular forces.

Second: Accounts and Testimonies of Former Abductees and their Relatives from Daraa Province

STJ could contact many eyewitnesses and listen to statements of former abductees between Daraa and as-Suwayda in addition to their relatives. A witness identified as Salem al-Zo'ebi, alias[38], from the east countryside of Damascus, described his abduction experience by a family from the as-Suwayda, he said:

"I used to work on a vehicle for transporting goods from Daraa to Damascus; I used to take the road that passes from as-Suwayda on a daily basis. However, on January2, 2017, at night while I was driving back from Damascus, a group of gunmen halted me specifically in al-Mazraa town located in as-Suwayda countryside; one of them threatened me with the guns and asked me to get out of my vehicle. They put me in another car, and took me to a house that I later learned it to be in Rima al-lahf village that administratively follows as-Suwayda. As soon as I arrived at that house, they told me I was an abductee until their kidnapped brother in Daraa came back. I tried repeatedly to explain that I had nothing to do with the kidnappers in Daraa, but they replied each time "you are from Daraa, then you are a target."

Al-Zo'ebi added that the family not only kidnapped him, but also detained nine others from Daraa (refusing to disclose their identity as well). He said they were placed in the same room where he was held, it was cold and the food was insufficient, and going to the toilet was allowed only once a day, as he described. He continued:

"At first, the kidnappers told us that 50 million Syrian pounds should be secured for our release, and then they allowed us communicate our families to ask them secure the money. The kidnappers were threatening to kill us and loaded the guns over our heads before every call to force us persuade our families to secure the amount claimed, I had to pay 5 million Syrian pounds, but I did not have that much. Seven days later, the kidnappers said they had reduced the ransom to 10 million Syrian pounds. Two of the abductees paid 6 million Syrian pounds equally after contacting their families in Giza town and al-Ghariyah al-Gharbiya town and were released, whereas the remaining amount was distributed equally among the rest of us. On January 16, 2017, my brother borrowed some money from a relative and paid 500, 000 Syrian pounds to a person in the eastern countryside of Daraa in coordination with the kidnappers in as-Suwayda. Once they received the money, I was released. They released the rest of the abductees as well."

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[38] The witness's identity is not mentioned for security purposes.

In another testimony, Abo Sufiyan who hails from Um al-Mayathen town in Daraa countryside confirmed that one of his relatives was subjected to kidnapping in as-Suwayda countryside on January21, 2017, pointing that the party responsible for the abduction was the popular committees[39] affiliated to Syrian regular forces. He said:

"Ahmad was a lorry driver and used to drive through as-Suwayda villages on a daily basis. On January21, 2017, ha was astonished when he saw a checkpoint run by a group of people on the road to as-Suwayda, it turned lately that they belong to the popular committees. They took him to an anonymous place where nine others from Daraa were abducted with him. The kidnappers treated them somehow well at the beginning and told them they were guests and would be released as soon as their kidnapped son identified as Khaldoon as-Saba' was released."

Abo Sufiyan added that he received a phone call from the kidnappers four days later and they asked for 3 million Syrian pounds as a ransom, but Abo Sufiyan illustrated that he could not secure that much. Meanwhile, two of abductees were released after the family of each one paid 3 million Syrian pounds. The eight rest of the abductees, as Abo Sufiyan described, remained detained until new negotiations between kidnappers from both provinces agreed to reduce the ransom wanted for each kidnapped to reach 500, 000 Syrian pounds instead of 3 million Syrian pounds. Abo Sufiyan deposited the ransom to a person in as-Suwayda, and as soon as the kidnappers in Daraa released the abductee Khaldoon as-Saba', Ahmad along with all of the abductees were released on January30, 2017.

Concerning kidnappings that increased lately, Abo Sufiyan said:

"Most of the abductions against Daraa locals are a reaction by our neighbors as-Suwayda with the predominantly Druze following the abduction of their relatives amid mysterious circumstances. Nevertheless, during the process of freeing my cousin, Ahmad, and contacting the kidnappers in both Daraa and as-Suwayda, I found out that there are joint gangs include members of the Druze from as-Suwayda and members from the Bedouins from Daraa, and they only concern about getting as much money as possible. Leaders of these gangs are in several villages in Daraa, including Nahta and al-Meliha al-Sharqiya and some villages in al-Lujat and they are the ones who communicate directly with families of the abductees so that they start negotiations, receive the money and free the abductees."

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[39] Popular committees are a group of local young men from as-Suwayda, mostly who failed to perform compulsory service or the military reserve service in the Syrian regular army. They received training, guns and finance support from Syrian regular forces in exchange for prevailing security over the majority of cities and towns in as-Suwayda.

Abo Sufiyan noted that the popular gangs not only kidnap people, but also steal cars and cattle, as exactly happened in the Druze-majority town of al-Qurrayya where a number of cows were stolen from Wael Abu Hadir's ranch on January19, 2017. Therefore, young men from his town abducted 10 Bedouins who lived near the area, after that, Abo Hadir received a phone call from the thieves in which they demanded 5 million Syrian pounds as a ransom to be delivered in Era village in as-Suwayda. Abo Hadir succeeded in obtaining the ransom from the kidnapped Bedouins and then delivered it to the kidnappers. Later, most of the abductees were released.

Third: Testimonies of Former Abductees from as-Suwayda

The survivor Alaa. M, 46, from as-Suwayda, is married with three children; he was kidnapped in on November 23, 2014. He explained that the party kidnapped him were Islamic battalions close to al-Nusra Front, and said:

"I work in the field of selling cars by installments between Daraa and as-Suwayda, and I used to pass from the border villages between both provinces. Once, while I was driving my car towards Somma village in as-Suwayda countryside, I was surprised when four gunmen stopped me. At first, I thought they were from the "free Syrian army" according to their military uniforms, I tried to inquire and ask about their identity, but they did not answer. They searched my car and let me got out of it, after that, they put me in the boot of their vehicle under the threat of weapon. They set off, drove about two hours until we got to an anonymous region. They parked, blindfolded me, and took me to a house that I think was on the outskirts of a village and it housed a family close to one of the kidnappers. It was hard for me to determine where I was taken, but later it turned out that it was near Bosra al-Harir located in al-Lujat area. They placed me in a room like a cellar, and at first, they treated me in a good way, as they served me food and drink, and told me that things would be okay, and that they were waiting for someone code-named ash-Shaikh to investigate me. However, ash-Shaikh was late and did not come that day, it was clear that the kidnappers were at a high level of professionalism, which means it was not the first time that they kidnapped someone. "
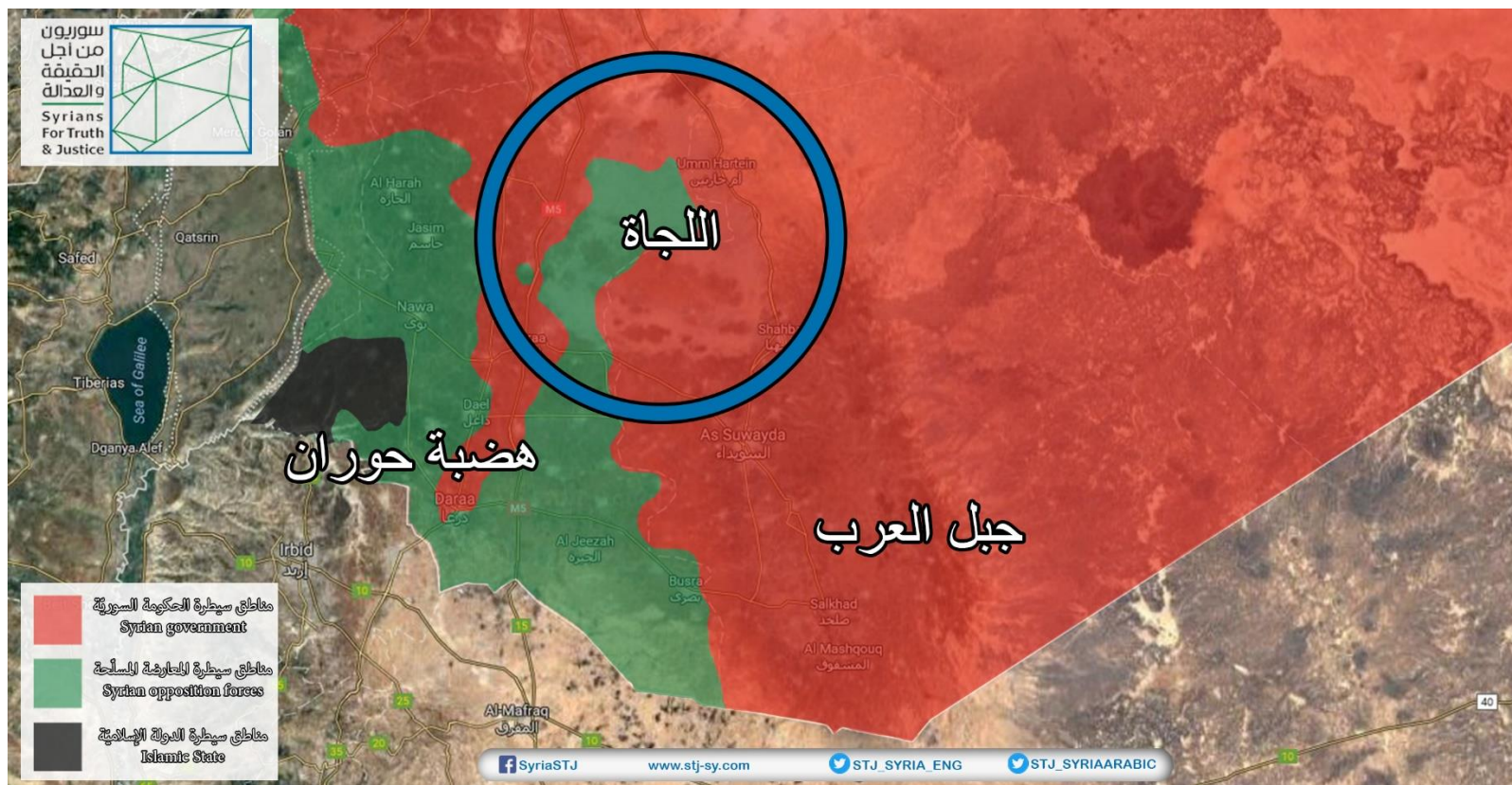
Satellite image shows the location of al-Lujat area in Daraa countryside where the witness (Alaa. M) was detained in one of its villages.

Alaa. M added that the treatment of the kidnappers changed on the evening of November 23, 2014, as they attempted to intimidate him with weapons although they were listening to an Islamic religious songs all the time; on the next day of his abduction, the expected person, ash-Shaikh came. Alaa. M added:

"I heard ash-Shaikh calling and asking about the infidel Druze (which was me), then one of the gunmen entered and blindfolded me again in order not to see ash-Shaikh, then the latter entered the room accompanied by about four people. Ash-Shaikh started investigating me, asking about the reason of going to a border area, after that, the series of beatings and torture started. One of the gunmen assaulted me and threatened to kill me, and the other loaded his gun at my face, until they succeeded in getting one of my brother's phone number, and asked me to talk to him and order 10 million Syrian pounds. At first, I refused to obey them, so they continued beating and abusing me, using fists, legs, and hoses all over my body. Finally, I complied with them, and called my brother and informed him. For a few more days, I remained in this situation between beating,

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torture, threats to murder and liquidation, or transfer to the Grand Court of al-Nusra Front in Daraa. Actually, I was frightened very much, as I knew two persons from as-Suwayda who were transferred to that court and their fate is still unknown, they are Raed Mesr and Khaled Rezq. Negotiations were taking place between my family and the kidnappers without knowing anything about it; the kidnappers were just telling me that they gave my family a whole week to secure the ransom."

Four days after kidnapping Alaa-M, the kidnappers initiated a religious probation for him, as he described; they gave him religious lectures, and telling him constantly that the money they had asked from his family was but an urgent need to continue fighting the Syrian regular forces, Alaa. M added:

"It seemed that the gunmen who kidnapped me belonged to Islamic battalions because they always accused me of infidelity and threatened to transfer me to the Sharia Court. One time I was able to see one of their vehicles that has a religious slogan; I still believe they were Islamists. The guard who watched the room was the only person I was allowed to see his face and talk to; so I got some information from him little by little. The guard assured, boasting, that he had moved among several battalions to fight, including the Free Army and al-Nusra Front. He proved this by showing me a video footage of a battle he had participated in, and it was clear through his accent that he was from Horan, but the accent of the rest kidnappers was nomadic Horanian, besides, they were calling each other with names I do not think to be true like Abo Zubayr, Abo Mo'az and Ali.

Finally, fourteen days after Alaa M.'s abduction, a solution was reached for negotiation, the kidnappers asked him to get ready to be released, and indeed, the next day on December 18, 2014, they took him out of the house and asked him to get into the car. After that, they blindfolded him again, and threatened to kill him if he uttered a word in the way, and in this regard, Alaa M. said:

"We set off, driving more than an hour and a half; until it got dark and it was around 8:00 pm. Then they placed me on a motorcycle and one of them rode me in the sub-roads for more than two hours, until we finally arrived [Kharba village](#), which al-Mouthana Islamic Movement controlled at the time. We stopped by one of the roads where they placed me in a cab, and asked the driver to go to a border area close to Kharba village that is adjacent to Daraa city. We arrived at that area where I was greeted by 'the clergyman" of as-Suwayda Church and a number of mediators from Daraa, they in turn took me to As-Suwayda, specifically to the house of ash-Shaikh identified as Hinawi. There was exchange between me and nine persons from Daraa, who were also kidnapped for money, one of them was identified as Ghassan al-Hariri."

Alaa. M added that the period of his abduction coincided with the kidnapping of a person from al-Hadi Family, he was from Umm al-Rumman town in as-Suwayda; a group from Daraa had kidnapped him, but after the negotiations failed, the kidnappers sent him a dead body to his family. He said that three people were also kidnapped by an unknown group, one of them was decapitated and sent to Somma village, a border village between Daraa and as-Suwayda, specifically to the House of ash-Shaikh identified as Jamal al-Henedi, the leader of the town, because they were unable to pay the ransom either.

In a related context, Jamal. D, 32, from as-Suwayda, refused to disclose his real name for personal security, spoke to STJ about the kidnapping experience he was subjected to on September 4, 2016. He said:

"I was a driver of a big truck; I transported construction materials such as sand and gravel from Damascus to as-Suwayda. One day, on September4, 2016, I was lured by several people from [ad-Dour town](#) in as-Suwayda, on the pretext of delivering a quantity of sand to that town. I got to the agreed place which was a farm next to ad-Dour town, I found no body waiting for me, but a few minutes later, three people, dressed in civilian clothes, came in a Kia-Rio white vehicle, in addition to a fourth person who rode a motorcycle. They headed towards me and I was surprised when they threatened me with guns and murder if I did not get on their vehicle with them, I did get on their vehicle and they drove me westward to Nahta town, the first towns of Daraa eastern countryside, and then to al-Meliha al-Gharbiya town in Daraa countryside, too. After a short time, we got to an old building; they took me out of the vehicle, put me in a basement, locked the door, and never talked to me. It should be noted that they were unmasked. "

The young man Jamal. D confirmed that half an hour after placing him in the basement, he heard a woman yelling and cursing a person identified as Khaled. Hence, it was clear that one of his kidnappers was called "Khaled". Jamal pointed that the place where he was held was a dirty little room, with no windows or a bath, only a very small outlet near the roof, in addition to a sponge mattress, and old bloodstained clothes. The young Jamal learned that this group had utilized the basement previously to detain other abductees. He added:

"A few hours later, one of the men came in and immediately asked about the name and phone number of one of my family in order to communicate with them for the ransom, so I was forced to give him my brother's name and phone number. On the first day of my abduction, I stayed with no food or water, but the next day, the same person entered and gave me a small bottle of water, a loaf of bread and a little milk, saying this was my food until tomorrow. Indeed, throughout my seven-day detention, they served me the same food, and I was peeing at a corner of the room. Things remained the same until the fourth day, when three men entered and severely beat me causing a tumor in my foot and my face. After that, they recorded my voice while I was screaming, and I learned later, after my release, that they had sent it to my family to press pressure on them

and let them pay 11 million Syrian pounds as a ransom. Things remained the same until the seventh day, when they told me they would release me after the negotiations succeeded."

On September 11, 2016, the young man Jamal. D was released. The kidnappers placed him in a car, drove him to Busra al-Harir town located in Daraa, and then to al-Masika town located in al-Lujat area, where he was delivered and the ransom was paid in the presence of two mediators; a mediator from ad-Dour town identified as Saleh ash-Sha'rani and a Bedouin person from al-Lujat area identified as Abo Obeid as-Saleh. Jamal was placed in a car that headed to as-Suwayda. Jamal said:

"After my release, and through my persistent follow-up and research on the party that kidnapped me, I found that the building where I was held was owned by a person identified as Khaled al-Harraky from Daraa countryside. Besides, it turned out that he is a leader of a gang that carry out kidnappings, robbery, and theft just to collect money."

Fourth: Testimonies of Activists about the Abductions between Daraa and as-Suwayda

Valiken Ra'ad, an activist from al-Thaala village in the western countryside of as-Suwayda, testified to STJ about the numerous kidnappings against his hometown in the previous years. He said:

"Kidnapping incidents are not something new, in 2012; an armed group affiliated to the Syrian armed opposition[40] abducted seven people from al-Thaala village on their way to as-Suwayda. The abduction came as a response to the events that had taken place in al-Mjemir village of that year, when a joint security checkpoint between the Syrian National Party and the Lebanese Hezbollah captivated a number of Syrian opposition militants from Daraa, killed them and mutilated their bodies. Therefore, the abduction was a response to those events, and, up to this moment, the fate of those abducted persons remains completely unknown, some of them are Jamal Ezzaddin, Khaled al-Halaby and Mu'nes ar-Rahal, but almost certain information indicates that they have been liquidated."

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[40] STJ field researcher said that al-Nusra Front carried out the kidnap whereas other opposition factions did many efforts to return the abductees. There were many negotiating sessions, and STJ field researcher witnessed many of them, but then, al-Nusra Front was firmly in control of the area and accused of "apostasy" anyone who defended any person from the Druze.

Moreover, Valiken Ra'ad assured that in 2013, Bedouins from the area kidnapped the young man Ghaleb al-Ali from al-Thaala village and his fate remains unknown until the date of writing this report. In 2014, a group of Bedouins kidnapped Dr. Nasr, a dentist and one of the first activists who opposed the Syrian regular forces, they transferred him to al-Lujat area in Daraa countryside, placed him in a cellar along with a number of abductees, but he was released after his family paid 4 million Syrian pounds. Valiken continued:

"At the beginning of 2015, counter-abductions began, when an armed group from Umm Walad village located in the countryside of Daraa[41] kidnapped a girl and her two brothers from Era village located in as-Suwayda in order to pressure the Syrian security services to release some of the women detained at the Air Force Intelligence Branch in as-Suwayda. As a response, the villagers kidnapped several young men from Daraa province, but when things got worse, the Syrian security services was forced to release the female detainees, and the tragedy ended and most of the abductees returned to their families."

Mr. Ra'ad continued that the kidnapping evolved to become a commercial commodity by 2016, and had the following title: "**If you want to become a capital owner, you must kidnap a Druze man and sell him to al-Nusra Front**. Members of the gangs repeatedly said this phrase, additionally what is known as "the Crisis Traders" started to spread, all with the help of the security apparatus and intelligence services in as-Suwayda, which primarily aimed at creating a rift between both provinces. In this regard, he said:

"In September 2016, contact was lost with the young man Maher al-Halaby who is from al-Thaala village, as an anonymous party kidnapped and detained him in al-Karak town located in the eastern countryside of Daraa. In response, his family abducted several persons from al-Karak, so officials of the ruling Baath Party intervened to resolve the dispute, and it was agreed to pay (31) million Syrian pounds to the kidnappers. Dignitaries from al-Karak took the amount to release their children, but terms of the agreement did not apply, and the young man, Maher al-Halaby, was not freed as Baath Party officials promised. Consequently, the file was closed until December 28, 2016, when he was released by prisoners swap agreement at the Military Security Branch in as-Suwayda. "

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[41] STJ field researcher said the kidnapper was a person identified as Abo Hala from al-Karak al-Sharqi town, and he is not from Umm Walad town. He carried out the kidnapping following the arrest of his wife and her sister by the regime forces at the National Hospital in as-Suwayda.

Mr. Ra'ad indicated that, at the beginning of 2017, several abductions occurred, and some abductees had been subjected to serious torture, such as that on January 2, 2017, when gangs from Daraa kidnapped the young man Abbas Zein from as-Suwayda. After Abbas's release on January 19, 2017, his leg was amputated as a result of the torture he was subjected to by those gangs.

Image of Abbas Zein, the former abductee after his release on January 19, 2017, when he underwent amputation of his leg as a result of the severe torture he was subjected to.

Photo Credit: activists from the city.

In turn, Mr. Ra'ad, emphasized that there is a dealings, which became known for everybody in as-Suwayda, between the security services of the Syrian regular forces and some of the Bedouin gangs in al-Lujat area located in the countryside of Daraa. Notably that the security services overlook many smugglers whom believed to have an active role in kidnappings that occur in as-Suwayda countryside.

On the other hand, Ahmed Firas, an activist from al-Meliha al-Sharqiya in Daraa countryside, noted that the kidnappers' gangs are but a cell stretching from Daraa, through Bedouins in al-Lujat area and to as-Suwayda. He said:

"The target is determined by the gang members in as-Suwayda on condition to be from a well-known or a rich family, and then they kidnap him and deliver him to the Bedouin geographically adjacent to the villages of as-Suwayda. Eventually, they hand him over to the leader of that gang in Daraa, especially in the villages of Nahta, al-Karak, al-Ghariyah, al-Meliha al-Sharqiya and al-Meliha al-Gharbiya as well as al-Hrak, given most of the members of that gang belong to Islamic armed factions, including al-Nusra Front. The Courthouse in Horan failed in its most attempts to arrest some of the members of that gang in al-Meliha al-Gharbiya, including two brothers code-named as Awlad Sahar, which means "sons of Sahar" in addition to a person identified as Qaz'er. Of course, kidnappings most often took place in Sami' ,the Druze area, also known as the "free Zone", as it is a zone for exchanging foodstuffs and building materials, besides it is near al-Meliha al-Sharqiya town."

In the same context, as-Sweida Plus 1 published a video clip showing moments of torturing the abductees "Walaa Shoker Zainedin" when he had been kidnapped by an anonymous party from Labeen village located in as-Suwayda on January 22, 2017, and was released later in exchange for a ransom, according to Sweida 24 .

Image of Walaa Shoker Zainedin, a former abductee after his kidnappers released him in exchange for a ransom on February 24, 2017. Photo Credit: Sweida 24 .

Fifth: Testimonies of the Judiciary Personnel from Daraa and as-Suwayda

Esmat al-Absi, a judge and the head of the courthouse in the opposition-held Daraa, confirmed in his testimony to STJ that mercenary gangs supervise kidnapping processes and conduct them with a view to collect as much money as possible. He added:

"According to the courthouse estimation, numbers of the members of those gangs in the eastern countryside of Daraa are approximately 20 persons, they spread in regions on the border lines with al-Lujat like Nahta, and al-Meliha al-Sharqiya, given they are far from headquarters of the courthouse. This make it too difficult to arrest them; some of them were arrested a while earlier when we carried out raids, but the masterminds of the gangs stayed at large. I think that intervening of the revolutionary factions to help the court arrest the masterminds is very important at this phase, all this can be achieved through installing checkpoints and depending robust security plans."

Commenting on the possibility of cooperation between both Daraa and as-Suwayda to end the phenomena of kidnappings, al-Absi added:

"Currently, we have been communicating with a fellow from the Syrian regime-held as-Suwayda, whom I cannot mention his name as there will be much risk on his life, he has such a basic role in freeing several abductees lately. We agreed with him to chase the gangs inside the liberated areas in Daraa and as-Suwayda. Nowadays, end of this phenomena is the priority of the courthouse work and it will be eliminated before the first half of the current year. "

Concerning the exchanged kidnapping phenomena among anonymous gangs in both Daraa and as-Suwayda, Ayham[42], one of the personnel in the judiciary field in as-Suwayda, testified in another testimony that kidnappings are not that described as to be between two blocks, the first is from Daraa and the second is from as-Suwayda or vice versa. He asserted that what is going on is "human trafficking" in the broadest sense, in addition, it is a trade based on the "terrorism" policy and political interests and orientation. He said:

"Certainly, it is impossible for the kidnappers from Daraa to accomplish kidnapping a person from as-Suwayda without their association with partners from as-Suwayda itself. There must be gangs including partners from both sides. Criminals from both Daraa and as-Suwayda agree to kidnap people from as-Suwayda for the benefit of this network; the abductees then are detained in regions in Daraa which is outside the control of the regular forces, except for rare cases in which the abductees are kept in as-Suwayda, and this is because as-Suwayda province is still held by the regular forces. After that, the network is running the process of negotiating concerning the abductees in Daraa."

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[42] He preferred not to disclose his name for personal security.

Ayham noted that the security branches of the Syrian regular forces in both provinces are the one that head these gangs in one way or another. Sometimes those branches compete among themselves to carry out crimes, but this does not preclude some limited kidnappings when the purpose was to pressure the Syrian regular forces to release detainees from Daraa. According to the testimony of Ayham, the purpose of the abductions is often security, financial and social trading, as a tireless attempt to create antagonism in any form. Kidnappings were sometimes just clearly visible plays and dramas.

Ayham's testimony was followed by a series of questions raised by STJ, in order to obtain precise answers:

- **What do you mean when you say, "Create antagonism"?**
- I mean to create a situation of "disputes and racism" among people of both provinces.
- **How was the relationship between these two provinces historically?**
- The historical relationship is a quiet relationship[43], trade and mutual farming, and there was no controversy or kidnappings before the Syrian revolution.
- **Why do you look certain when talking about the role of Syrian regular forces security services in kidnappings?**
- Being in the judiciary, I am privy to identities of the kidnappers and smugglers whom their names are mentioned in the kidnapping and smuggling cases, and who are in contact with security personalities.
- **Were kidnappings directed against a certain group of the community, i.e., was there any common link between the victims of kidnapping, such as age, sex, material level or political orientation?**
- When kidnapping becomes a trade, then the nature of the kidnapped is not important, the kidnapped becomes a hunting, and here I reiterate that there are sometimes "play kidnappings, i.e. fake kidnappings", when the abductee kidnap himself in favor of the kidnapper, and agrees with him to order a ransom.
- **Have you personally met one of these cases?**
- Yes, I have. It was not a comfortable meeting, as it was clearly a security operation, as this person was kidnapped in exchange for the release of nine persons from Daraa who were displaced in as-Suwayda. I think it is a very thorny issue, and needs an independent judiciary and a serious investigation, and then the details of any crime can be revealed.
- **Are there any initiatives to go to the courts to arrest or stop what you call "kidnap gangs" or the attempt to search for them?**

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[43] A female activist from as-Suwayda province commented on the historical relationship between Daraa and as-Suwayda and said: "it is true that there were no kidnappings before 2011, but there had always been skirmishing especially in the border villages. Residents of T'ara, Doweri, and al-Qaser villages always spoke about burning agricultural crops from both sides and breaking the cars and not allowing them to pass; there had often been controversy and individual quarrel that soon turned to quarrel between the adjacent villages from both sides.

- In the judiciary field, we need a plaintiff, and the plaintiff and his families do not trust the court to recover their kidnapped son, for example, the judiciary in as-Suwayda does not have the power to bring the kidnapper from Daraa. I think no one has tried to sue in the court; there are only few minutes of kidnapping incidents that are transferred from the judicial police section to the courts for prosecution and investigation, but nothing actually happens.

- **You said, "The abductees are often detained in Daraa province because they are beyond the control of the regime," but on the other hand, what is the role of the regime's security services and Police Corps when Daraa persons are detained in as- Suwayda?**

- They have no role, considering that it is a "counter-abduction" caused by a state of outrage and seethe, and sometimes this kidnapping is sponsored by a class of ash-Shaikhs known as "Mashaeikh al-Aqel which means Elders of the Mind"

- **Since many locals of Daraa are currently in as-Suwayda, do you think they are at risk because of the persistence of these practices?**

- Yes. I think so, because "malicious security machinations" are so many, so I feel the danger to them from reactions. Nevertheless, the danger in the public sense, no, I do not think so.

- **How do you explain that kidnappings are infrequent, in the sense that there are periods when kidnappings are very widespread and, and others tend to be calm?**

- I cannot say that, but I think that it depends on the interest of the security branches.

- **How are the abductees treated?**

- When the purpose of the abduction is to release detainees held by Syrian regular forces, none of the abductees is often tortured, but on the contrary, when kidnapping is for ransom, the kidnapped is tortured to pressure his relatives and blackmail them. In general, kidnappings are not initiated by groups of as-Suwayda, but are "counter-abduction" with the aim of negotiating the release of persons from as-Suwayda who are kidnapped in Daraa.

- I repeat that these kidnappings are human trafficking and have negative security and political investments in the history of the two neighboring provinces; the geographical identity of the kidnapper is not important compared to his political and security identity.

- **How were the kidnappers negotiated? And how did this process end?**

- Sometimes the negotiator is a relative of the kidnapped person, and sometimes one of "Mashaeikh al-Karama which means Elders of the Dignity[44]" or members of the "National

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[44] A Movement found by a group of Mashaeikh "Elders" after 2012, it was led by ash-Shaikh Abu Fahad Wahid al-Bal'ous. The aim was not to enroll young men in the compulsory service but to preserve the security of the people of as-Suwayda and the security of its arrivals, besides, it has a soul that clearly opposed the Syrian regular forces. However, the group of "Elders of the Dignity "disintegrated after the assassination of ash-Shaikh Abu Fahad Wahid al-Bal'ous on September 4, 2015, and is currently led by a "symbolic" ash-Shaikh identified as Raafat al-Bal'ous, but the actual ash-Shaikh is called "Abu Hasan Yahiya al-hajjar ".

reconciliation" committees, as well as "Mashaeikh al-Aqel/Elders of the Mind[45]". The process ends with either paying a ransom or exchanging kidnapped persons; there is no particular form of negotiation or its outcome, each kidnapped case has its own circumstances and details.

- **Who pays the ransom? Are they the family of the kidnapped, or are there certain bodies to do that?**

- The ransom is collected from the family of the kidnapped, or sometimes from the villagers. Recently, with the imaginary figures that have been demanded as a ransom, supposing the sum of 50 million Syrian pounds, families of the kidnapped carry out a counter-abduction against persons from Daraa who are displaced in as-Suwayda and ask for ransom with the same amount. Upon securing this sum, it is given to the first group that carried out the abduction, and then people who were kidnapped as counter-abduction are released.

- **Is it true that some of the abductees were found dead on the way?**

- Yes, it is. A person identified as Alaa al-Atrash, 50, was kidnapped few months ago, and 25 million Syrian pounds was asked for his release, but after ten days of his abduction, he was found dead in an area on the road between Damascus and as-Suwayda. In this incident, there are suspicions that the kidnappers are from as-Suwayda itself.

- **Was he killed before the ransom was paid or after it?**

- He was found dead before the ransom was paid due to the conditions of detention. He was from a wealthy family. There were also 16 persons from as-Suwayda who had been kidnapped four years ago in December January of 2012, their fate remains unknown, and it was said that the kidnapper was "al-Nusra Front", but I am personally more likely that the system has a role in this case. The people are:

1- Jamal Ezzaddin from al-Thaala.
2- Nashat al-Hamad from al-Thaala.
3- Refaat Rahah from al-Thaala.
4- Nasouh al-Hamoud from al-Thaala.
5- Khalid al-Halaby from al-Thaala. .
6- Loawi Monther from al-Mazraa.
7- Sameh Danon from Shahba.
8- Mursel Abo Ghawi from ar-Raha.
9- Omar Redwan from as-Suwayda.

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[45] They are practically the official Mashaeikh "Elders" of the community of as-Suwayda and are recognized by the Syrian regular forces, they are "al-Hijri Family", "al-Hinawi Family" and "Jerbo'u Family".

10- Rimon al-Wahbeh.

11- Anwar Abu Hassoun from Jreen.

12- Essam Kiwan from Mimas.

13- Nasif Mehna.

14- Hisham Abo Khalil from as-Suwayda.

15- Khaldoun Jamoul from Somma al-Bardan.

16- Zaher Ogab Abo Rasheed from al-Ghariyah.

- **Have groups or individuals from as-Suwayda carried out kidnappings first? Was not that a counter-abduction against groups or individuals from other provinces whom might have kidnapped people from as-Suwayda?**

- A person had already been kidnapped from Latakia; he was a merchant who visited as-Suwayda for business and trade. He was kidnapped and his car was robbed, and then thrown into a graveyard until his stolen car was disposed of. However, destiny intervened in his favor when someone heard his screams and saved him. After that, he stayed under the protection of Mashaeikh al-Karama/Elders of the Dignity, and after the investigation, it was found that the kidnappers were locals from as-Suwayda who worked under security cards in favor of the Political Security and the Air Force Intelligence Branch.

- **What is the role of civil society in as-Suwayda province in preventing or ending both these risks and kidnappings?**

- There is no organized civil society in as-Suwayda; there are individual calls and statements from political and religious blocs on this issue, no more.

Sixth: Testimonies of Specialists and Researchers on Kidnappings Occur between Daraa and as-Suwayda

In a crosschecked testimony with Ayham's testimony, the journalist Ahed Murad, who documented kidnappings between the two provinces, confirmed that more than half of the abductions occurred are fake kidnappings, which means the person kidnaps himself for the purpose of obtaining a ransom, hence carrying out a counter-abduction will have pretexts. Ahed, the journalist said:

"The abductions, which have been carried out so much, have nothing to do with the local peace between both provinces (it can be said that this is the cover they are hiding within), but they can be described as fraud processes. It is quite clear that these processes are an integral part of the security system in as-Suwayda, to the extent that the latter may share the profits with the kidnappers. However, this does not negate the existence of real kidnappings taking place in as-Suwayda, and people who carry out kidnappings are well known to most of the townspeople, and they are somehow associated with the military security in as-Suwayda. I want to point out here that sometimes the objective may not be material, but rather the dispersal and division of the people of as-Suwayda itself in order not to become one block. The investigation, I worked on,

showed that the main goal of all this kidnappings is to make kidnappings a common thing or even a familiar habit for the population in as-Suwayda, in order to divide the society at any moment, and all the parties exchange recrimination"

According to the journalist Ahed Murad, there is no sectarian diversity, as most of its indigenous people are of the Druze, that is what distinguish as-Suwayda. therefore, the security system after its failure to divide the province through the idea of alliance and opposition for more than three years, has created the idea of "thieves" and kidnapped victims, as a perfectly suited idea to disintegrate the community and communal fabric in as-Suwayda, as well as causing a major rift in the structure of the society, especially when the minority transforms to a majority demographically and becomes a significant threat to the security system. Ahed said:

 "When we tried to document kidnappings between Daraa and as-Suwayda provinces, we discovered four or five cases that could be cited, and I think there is a deliberate way to make the kidnapped persons find out the party that kidnapped them because this contributes to the spreading of rumors, which later becomes the basis of generalization across the province. I reiterate that I do not deny cases of kidnapping, but as I said, it serves the dominant promotion of the subject as a strained relations between Daraa and as-Suwayda. The people of Daraa in general and in the popular sense are not qualified to open a front against the people of as-Suwayda as well as for the people of as-Suwayda, even if there is hostility historically between the two provinces, the regime had created that, nevertheless, it is not sectarian hostility. Unfortunately, through the findings on the ground, it is clear that the process of these abductions has caused a great fragmentation of the communal fabric within as-Suwayda, especially among the same Druze community. In addition, it has contributed to the creation of a new generalization, for example, everyone in as-Suwayda is now circulating that Shalghín Family conduct kidnapping, even though one of them is committing that, so is the case with Rekab Family and so forth. The system has become a group that deals with the Druze community as family blocks which in turn transformed into fronts, because the system desperately needs the splitting to be within blocks, so as to accomplish its desired purpose."

Humam al-Khateeb, a researcher and a specialist in the Syrian case, has described abductions of civilians as "networks of outlaws" that spread between Daraa and as-Suwayda, which most of its elements were formerly Shabiha militias who have penetrated more extensively within the security institutions of the regime. The regime had previously armed them with the aim of suppressing demonstrations, and thus they turned into "real militias". Concerning the role of the General Wafiq Nasser, head of the "Military Security" branch in as-Suwayda, Humam al-Khateeb said:

"Wafiq Nasser" plays the role of "the military ruler" of the region, he is the "Godfather" of this file acting through his agents inside and outside the province, relying on as-Suwayda Bedouin more than the Druze agents; the reason is the "possibility of exploiting the Bedouin and investing their minority status within a minority", as well as their ability to move more freely and access to "areas that the Druze cannot enter", either westwards to Daraa, or eastwards to the areas between Jaadel village and al-Ariqah village down to al-Lujat area which is controlled by tribal groups of Bedouin that had pledged alliance to the Islamic State. Most of the obtained testimonies agree on calling these kidnappings as "human trafficking", as kidnap-network members sell the abductees people from as-Suwayda to the elements of the network that deal with them in Daraa, who assume the process of negotiation and ransom demand, and it is remarkable that kidnappings began in an early period of the Syrian revolution".

This is what the journalist Mazen Azzi confirmed through his experience and work on the abduction file between Daraa and as-Suwayda. Mazen Azzi pointed out that the process of kidnapping began since 2011[46], when a group of Daraa kidnapped several young men from al-Thaala, west of as-Suwayda; among the abductees was an elder man from a family in the village. He was later seen in a video clip that was exchanged through social media, and appeared as a "server" for the benefit of the kidnappers. Until this moment, fate of the man and the other abductees who were with him is unknown, but most likely that they have been killed."

Concerning conditions of the abductions, Azzi indicated that they were changing according to the developments. We always noticed that they were increasing coinciding with the preparation and lunching battles in the region, as it is now. Since the Syrian armed opposition factions in Daraa commenced the Battle "Death rather than Humiliation", mutual abductions increased between the two provinces. Azzi added:

"These processes take two forms: the first is "starting the abduction" as these networks kidnap civilians from as-Suwayda as part of random kidnaping of men and women of different ages, social and material levels and of different political orientations. Those processes often concentrate in the western part of the province, which the locals started to call it "Bermuda Triangle", referring to the frequent abductions happening there. In the next step, they communicate with the victim's family through a telephone call or by filming the abductee while

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[46] STJ field researcher said the first kidnapping was in 2012 against two Christians who were from al-Usulha town in the western countryside of as-Suwayda, they were charged of "working for the regime". A group belonged to the Free Syrian Army had carried out the kidnap, and this group had had an extremist ideology and later became the nucleus of the Islamic Mouthana Movement, but other groups of the Free Syrian Army freed the kidnapped. Things remained generally quiet until 2013. As for the border villages (between as-Suwayda and Daraa), al-Nusra Front was the dominant group, and entering of the Druze people from as-Suwayda posed a threat to them personally and to all those who hosted them by Daraa people.

being tortured in bad conditions of detention where they clearly lack necessities of life such as food and drink; this contributes to the emotional blackmail of the relatives of the abductees to pressure them to pay the ransom. While the second type is included within the framework of "counter-abduction", which means abducting some persons of Daraa whom are displaced in as-Suwayda to press pressure on their relatives either to release their kidnapped son, or to force them to contribute in paying the ransom."

Humam al-Khateeb agrees with the witness, Mazen Azzi, who said that kidnappings increase during the preparation of battles in Daraa, but they take other dimensions concerning causes and objectives. Abductions also work to "create sedition and antagonism" between the two neighboring provinces, and contribute to breakdown the community fabric within the same province. The regime exploit that in order the population look away from the harsh living conditions in as- Suwayda, by creating an enemy outside the province and drawing all the attention to it as a threat, besides involving some local forces in the province, such as the "Mashaeikh al-Karama/ Elders of the Dignity " in lost battles.

There does not appear to be any role for the police to play in prosecuting the kidnappers or searching for the abductees. Azzi, the journalist, attributes this to the "complete collapse" of the police service in the province, because the actual power is concentrated in the hand of the armed militias who were formed by the Syrian regular forces through its security branches, specifically the "Military Security", which drives all armed actors on the ground. Those armed actors' role ranges from kidnappings, or facilitating kidnappings, as well as their constant quest to create sedition between the people of both provinces, and between the people of as-Suwayda themselves, or between them and the Bedouin. All the testimonials we got agree on this Point.

On the other hand, the economic factor plays a major role in the kidnappings, as very large sums of money goes to the militias and the security branches that sponsor them, forming by that an essential part of their economy which in turn contribute to the financing of their movements. A report published in May 2016 by "AlModon Online Newspaper" indicates that the largest beneficiary is the "Military Security" branch, and that the total amount of ransom payments is up to 850 million Syrian pounds from as-Suwayda alone, except for the ransoms paid by families of the kidnapped from outside the province.

Azzi links between the abductions processes and the assassination of ash-Shaikh Wahid al-Bal'ous on September 4, 2015, the founder and the leader of what is known as Mashaeikh al-Karama/ Elders of the Dignity, because he had a role in reducing kidnappings by imposing control over the western region of as-Suwayda which people used to call it "Bermuda Triangle" the most prominent point to carry out kidnappings. In addition, he had coordinated with factions of the armed opposition in Daraa to regulate the area from the two sides. All that caused indignation by militias that lost one of their most important sources of income, and therefore, they murdered him. It is rumored currently that Mashaeikh al-Karama/Elders of the Dignity who lost their

prestige after the assassination of their leader al-Bal'ous, are attempting to regulate the region once again.

Among those cases was the release of the young man Khaldoon Nabil as-Sab'e on January 30, 2017, as posted by [Akbaar al-Mazraa](#) news Network", an online page on the transmission of local news in as-Suwayda, it says:

"On 20 January, contact was lost with Khaldoon, who hails from [al-Mazraa town](#) in the western countryside of as-Suwayda. Khaldoon was a car mechanic. He received an anonymous call asking him to repair a broken car on the junction that links [Sami' village](#) with as-Suwayda countryside, and the source of the news network said that Khaldoon's family received a call informing that Khaldoon was kidnapped in the eastern countryside of Daraa. The kidnappers demanded a ransom in return for his release, after that, Khaldoon's family had to carry out a counter-abduction. Approximately 15 civilians were abducted from Daraa, and their families were asked to collect 30 million Syrian pounds as a ransom, but after negotiations between families of the abductees and the kidnappers, the amount was reduced to 17 million Syrian pound to be paid to an intermediary. After that, all abductees were released from both sides on January 30, 2017."

In turn, [Suwayda 24](#) indicated that the number of abductees in as-Suwayda had reached to (10) abductees in June 2017. Some of them were released after paying a ransom whereas the fate of some others are still unknown. The source noted that the last case of disappearance and abduction in the province was on July 4, 2017, when contact was lost with the 17-year-old student "Omran Ihsan Badran", the source said:

The student, Omran Ihsan Badran, was lost in as-Suwayda amidst mysterious circumstances, according to what relatives of "Badran" said to "Suwayda 24". The source explained that Omran Badran went out on the morning of July 4, 2017 from his home located in al-Kornish al-Gharbi in as-Suwayda city, headed to "al-Hikma" private school, and then contact with him has been lost since then, and up to this moment, there is no information about his fate. In another context, contact was lost also with the young man, Ashraf Ali Sharrov from Qanawat town amidst mysterious circumstances on the same day, and sources close to him reported that he was heading to the National Hospital at around 2: 00 pm, but then he was lost a with no information about him available."

[Suwayda 24](#) , also reported the release of a former kidnapped identified as Majd Abu Sarhan from [Labeen village](#) in the western countryside of as-Suwayda. Anonymous gunmen had abducted Majd since the beginning of April 2017; his relatives said that he was kidnapped in al-Lujat area in Daraa countryside, and was subjected to torture by the kidnappers, and in response, Majd Abu Sarhan's family kidnapped two persons from al-Mazraa village located in as-Suwayda and demanded the release of Majd in exchange for their release.
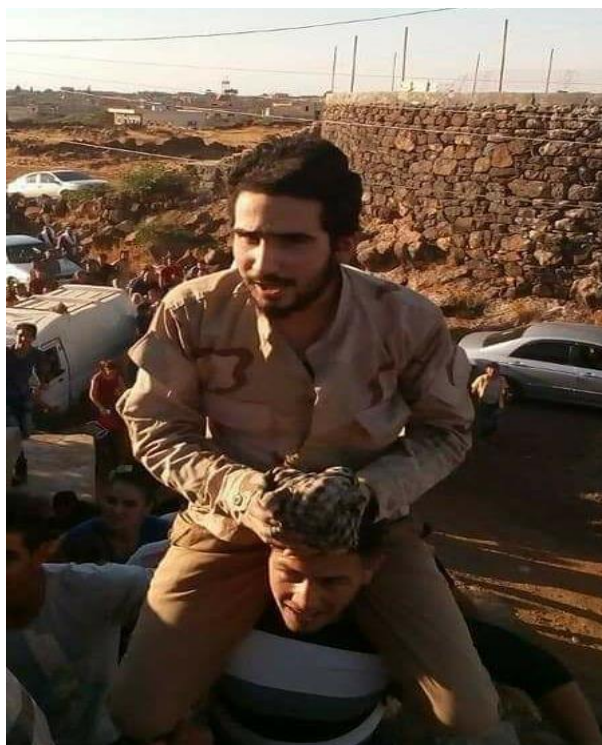
Image of the young man Majd Abu Sarhan who had been kidnapped since the beginning of April 2017. The kidnappers released him on June 24, 2017. Suwayda 24 had published the news on its own Facebook account.

Photo Credit: Suwayda 24

An STJ field researches confirmed that many of the incidents that had occurred against the displaced persons from Daraa in as-Suwayda are incidents of looting, either by the regime-based security elements or by persons posing as security elements, and those incidents often occur during raids and house searches. Some incidents by security patrols on the sub roads occurred where theft and car looting took place. In return, cars from as-Suwayda were looted and exported to Daraa. However, the researcher confirmed that 70% of the armed opposition factions fight against this phenomenon.

A field researcher from as-Suwayda said that the incidents of cars looting was concentrated on the cars operating on the Lebanon line, which are usually loaded with too many goods and sums of money, and in many cases the cars that carried plates of the (northern provinces of Syria) were hijacked.