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## Armed Clashes Claimed Lives of Six Civilians in Western Suwayda Countryside

“Conflicting Accounts about Executing Passengers of a Bus by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham-HTS”



## About Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ

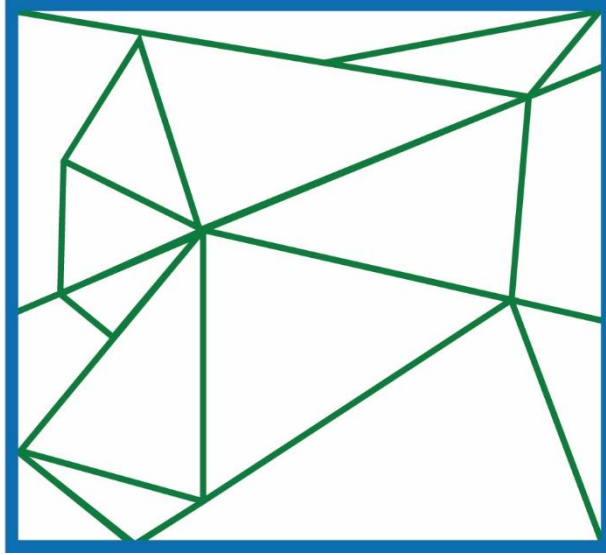
[Syrians for Truth and Justice /STJ](#) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental, independent Syrian organization. STJ includes many defenders and human rights defenders from Syria and from different backgrounds and affiliations, including academics of other nationalities.

The organization works for Syria, where all Syrians, without discrimination, should be accorded dignity, justice and equal human rights.

سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
والعدالة  

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Syrians  
For Truth  
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## Preface

Six civilians, from [Harran](#)<sup>1</sup> town, located in the western countryside of Suwayda, were killed on November 23, 2017, while they were returning from the city of Suwayda (center of Suwayda province) to their town. Anyway, the bus that was carrying them passed during armed clashes that erupted between the National Defense Forces/NDF<sup>2</sup> of the Syrian regular forces, on one hand, and local armed factions<sup>3</sup>, on the other, specifically on the way between the villages of Harran and Duerah in the western countryside of Suwayda. According to a [Syrian for Truth and Justice/STJ](#) reporter, these clashes erupted in the heel of targeting a military vehicle of the NDF with an improvised explosive device on its way coming back from western Damascus countryside to western Suwayda countryside on November 6, 2017.

On the other hand, there were conflicting versions of how those civilians, including a university student and government employees, were killed. As eyewitnesses, from Lajat area in Daraa countryside, informed that those civilians were killed due to the intensity of the military clashes that broke out on the road between Harran and Duerah, particularly, as the clashes was parallel with the passing of their bus from that road. However, other eyewitnesses from the western countryside of Suwayda reported that those civilians were subjected to summary executions and al-Nusra Front combatants mutilated their bodies.

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1 Harran is known as a majority-Druze village.

2 They are a group of young civilians who hail from Suwayda, the majority of them failed to perform compulsory military service and the reserve service in the Syrian regular army, instead they received training, weapons and support from the Syrian regular forces in exchange for security control over the majority of villages and towns in Suwayda.

3 These factions follow the Bedouin who reside near the village of Harran.



Image showing the bus that on November 23, 2017, all its passengers died; the bus was near Harran in the western countryside of Suwayda.

Photo credit: activists from Suwayda.



## Reasons of Eruption the Armed Clashes

On November 4, 2017, the Syrian armed opposition factions represented by "Jabal al-Sheikh Operations Headquarter<sup>4</sup>" in conjunction with "Mohammed Army operations Headquarter<sup>5</sup>" announced launching [a battle to break the siege of Beit Jinn village](#) in western Ghouta<sup>6</sup> several years ago, that was by opening a passage outlet in the surrounding of Syrian regular forces-controlled Hadar, a predominantly Druze town, which is adjacent to the village of Beit Jinn. Hadar people refused to do so, and called for military reinforcements from Suwayda in order to repel the attack of armed opposition factions. As a result dozens of NDF fighters in Suwayda pulled out to meet the appeal of Hadar people, and they succeeded in defeating the attempts of the armed opposition factions to break the siege of Beit Jinn. However, during the return of some of NDF agents from western Damascus countryside to western Suwayda on November 6, 2017, their car was targeted near [Al-Ariqah](#) village with an improvised explosive device planted on the roadside, this incident caused death of two NDF fighters and wounded 10 more. Anyway, accusation- finger pointed to Bedouin militants affiliated to armed opposition factions such as (al-Omari Brigades<sup>7</sup>, Shabab Asuna forces<sup>8</sup> and Ahrar al-Asha'r<sup>9</sup>) who live in tents, only a mile east of the Syrian regular forces-held Haran village with the majority Druze residents.

### First: Recriminations

According to a STJ reporter, versions conflicted concerning the party that targeted the military car of the National Defense Forces/NDF on November 6, 2017. Abu Ma'an, an activist of Lajat area in Daraa countryside, confirmed that an armed group, mostly affiliated to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS- al-Nusra Front, sneaked from the area of Lajat to the western countryside of Suwayda, specifically to the way between Haran and Ariqah villages on November 6, 2017. Abu Ma'an noted that those were the persons who planted the improvised explosive device that led to bombing IDF vehicle of the Syrian regular forces and resulted in the death of an officer and another one, as well as wounding 10, as they were on their way coming back from Western

4 It was established on November 3, 2017, in the besieged villages of Western Ghouta, as it consists of the Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and the Syrian Revolutionary Front.

5 This Headquarter was established on June 24, 2017, with the aim of controlling Al-Baath city in Quneitra countryside, which is under the control of the Syrian regular forces and consists mainly of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS, as well as other Syrian opposition factions, like AlWiya al-Furqan, Saif al-Sham Brigades, Liwa al-Sabtain and the Syrian Revolutionary Front.

6 Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ had earlier prepared a report highlighting the suffering of thousands of civilians under the siege imposed on several villages in western Ghouta.

7 One of the armed Syrian opposition factions activates in the eastern countryside of Daraa province and controls the majority of the villages of Lajat in Daraa countryside.

8 Formed on August 21, 2016 as a result of the merger of 21 military factions affiliated with the Syrian armed opposition in Daraa.

9 It was formed in 2014, and according to many sources, it receives support from Jordan and has fought against ISIS and Syrian regular forces in the eastern countryside of Suwayda and it is active in Daraa and Quneitra provinces.

Ghouta towards western Suwayda, following the completion of backing and aiding the regular forces there to prevent the armed opposition factions from lifting the siege that was imposed on Beit Jinn. In this regard, Abu Ma'an spoke to STJ saying:

"On November 22, 2017, a fighter of NDF identified as Fadi al-Abdullah Azzam, died of his wounds due to bombing the explosive device. The next day, November 23, 2017, immediately following his funeral, a group of NDF attacked a group of Bedouin tents belonging to Hawasnh Tribe located in east of Harran, a majority Druze village, the fighters indiscriminately opened fire on those tents and burnt two of them, resulting in minor injuries to a civilian Bedouin. Anyway, that NDF group withdrew at the request of the Harran people, who refused to escalate the situation with their neighbors that was parallel with the arrival of reinforcements from the armed opposition which had come from the area of Lajat."

Abu Ma'an added that the armed opposition fighters- the reinforcements- on the spot after their arrival targeted the road that links Duerah and Harran villages. That coincided with passing a bus carrying civilians, resulting in the death of all its passengers, and thus the clashes developed, particularly following the arrival of military reinforcements by the Syrian regular forces from Suwayda, as the latter targeted some villages in Lajat with mortar shells, and injured a civilian as a result.





Analysis of visual evidence illustrates the location of the incident.







[A video footage](#), published by activists on November 5, 2017, showed, what claimed to be "Fadi Al-Abdullah Azzam", a fighter of the NDF, he spoke about his counter the armed opposition

Factions during their attempt to break the siege of Beit Jinn village in western Damascus countryside.



Image of "Fadi Al-Abdullah Azzam", before being killed, standing next to one of the bodies of an armed opposition fighter, taken on November 4, 2017.

Photo credit: activists from Quneitra province.



## Second: The Other Version and the Accusation of al-Nusra Front to Commit Summary Executions

In a different version, villagers in western Suwayda countryside said that civilians who had died on the bus had been subjected to summary executions and mutilation of their bodies, the matter that Ghassan Warda, an activist from the village of Duerah in the western countryside of Suwayda, confirmed to STJ:

**"On November 6, 2017, some armed men intercepted a civil truck loaded with vegetables on the road that links villages of Ariqah and Harran, and then opened fire on it, the matter that necessitated dozens of NDF fighters to come from Ariqah toward that road in order to counter the militants. But an improvised explosive device targeted their military vehicle and killed three of them, they were identified as Alaa Abu Sarhan, Eanad Azzam and Ayman Mahasen, and injured seven, one of them is Fadi Al-Abdullah Azzam who later died of his wounds. However, the finger of blame was pointed, in the incident of explosion of the vehicle, to armed fighters of Bedouin whom live in tents near Harran who are believed to be affiliated to al-Nusra Front. Thus, after the funeral of Fadi Al-Abdullah Azzam, which means on the morning of November 23, 2017, thirteen young men from his relatives attacked Bedouins tents near Harran and burnt two of them, in addition to indiscriminate shooting, that matter necessitated the intervention of the villagers of Harran, as they refused to escalate the situation with their Bedouin neighbors. Moreover, NDF withdrew towards Ariqah village, but the Bedouins had already asked military reinforcements from armed men belonging to the al-Nusra Front in Lajat.**

Ghassan alluded that when militants to back up the Bedouins arrived to the site, they cut off the road between the villages of Harran and Duerah, opened fire in the direction of the village of Harran but with no injuries, and then a bus boarding six civilians, including a university student and government employees, were on their way back from Suwayda to their village Haran. Anyway, most of the passengers of the bus were subjected to summary executions, but before that some armed men, believed be from al-Nusra Front, forced the driver to call his family via mobile phone to ask them not to escalate or send any military reinforcements to the site, in this regard Ghassan continued saying:

**"We learned through the driver's call with his parents that the bus was held for about half an hour, as the driver said that all the passengers were killed except a girl to be released, she was identified as Marah Murshid. However, after the disconnection and pulling out of the gunmen following the arrival of NDF to the site, it was found that all the passengers had been killed and the driver's body had subjected to major distortions as a result of its mutilation, besides the bus had been burnt. Some of the civilian victims were identified as (Ayser Mounir Murshid, Mehran Mounir Murshid, Marah Nabil Murshid, Asym Shahir Murshid, and Aslaan Fadi Murshid), Moreover, after their murder, the clashes renewed again between the Al-**



**Nusra Front and NDF, subsequently two of NDF fighters identified as Omar Ghassan Murshid and Rabih Ramez al-Hassani, were killed."**

According to Ghassan, the area where the clashes occurred --in a reference to the road linking the villages of Duerah and Harran--is one of the most dangerous areas in Suwayda western countryside, as there were several kidnappings, robberies and explosions that affected dozens of people from Suwayda and Daraa. He also noted that those operations took place with prior knowledge and agreement between fighters from NDF Suwayda and fighters from al-Nusra Front in Daraa.



Image showing the victim Marah Murshid, a university student before killing her in the military clashes near Harran.

Photo credit: activists from Suwayda.



Al-Sweida 24 web site published a [video footage](#), on November 27, 2017, showing some militants, from the Lajat area, standing near the bus whose all passengers had been killed. STJ couldn't verify the authenticity of the video from an independent source.

As a STJ reporter confirmed, that the day after the incident, NDF of the Syrian regular forces, installed several military checkpoints near Harran and the villages in the western countryside of Suwayda as well.