

“Sawa'id al-Khair” and “Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice” New Security Arms of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib and Arihah

Special Report Highlights Suffering of the Locals due to Tightening the Grip on Aspects of Public Life in Idlib Province

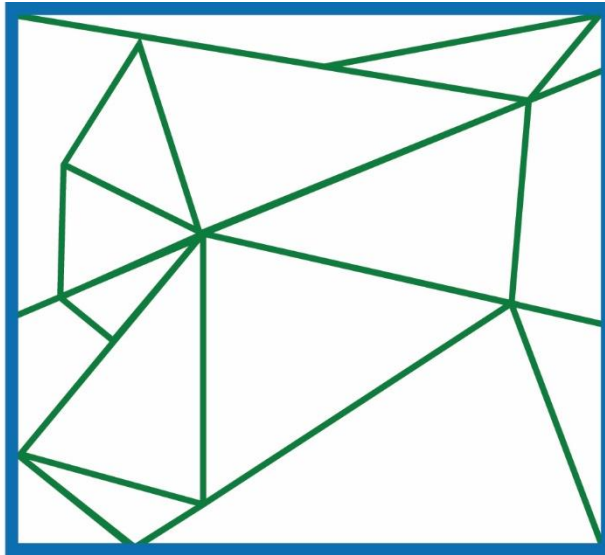
About Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ

[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.

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Preface

Practices of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-HTS/formerly al-Nusra Front¹ have varied against many civil institutions and civilians in the areas they control, especially in [Idlib](#)², the city center, and [Arihah](#)³ city in the south west countryside of Idlib. HTS seeks to exert more control over all aspects of life in those areas and attempts to dye them with a radical Islamic ideology, either through the so-called **Sawa'id al-Khair** (Goodwill Corps) launched in Idlib city (Idlib province center) on August 10, 2017, or through the **Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice** launched in Arihah in February 2017.

[Syrians for Truth and justice/STJ](#) obtained several testimonies said that Sawa'id al-Khair (Good will Corps) in Idlib city has been practicing restrictions on civilians and civil institutions in Idlib city, through issuing several decisions and obligating people to apply them. On February2, 2018, Sawa'id al-Khair members began tightening the grip on the medical personnel, under the pretext of applying Islamic Sharia orders, imposing the Sharia dress (dress code) and prevent intermixing between males and females.

On February 7, 2018, Sawa'id al-Khair members halted one of the free internal transport projects in Idlib City, on the pretext of preventing intermixing between both sexes, and they tightened rules on the peddlers on the pretext of preventing smoking and all the things related to its buying and selling. The shopkeepers as well had a portion of the harassment, because HTS imposed a dress code even on the "plastic models" in the shop fronts (mannequins).

Civilians and civil institutions in Arihah have not been spared from the practices and restrictions by the so-called Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice affiliated to HTS/formerly al-Nusra Front, and in particular, the educational institutions located in the city. Several decisions have been imposed on both workers and students, including wearing the Sharia dress for female students, even though those who have not yet aged seven, as well as separation females from males in schools, being students or teachers.

¹ On January 28, 2017, several jihadist factions in northern Syria announced integration under the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), they were and Fatah al-sham Front/ formerly al-Nusra Front, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwaa al-Haq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Jaysh al-Sunnah, Ansar al-Sham al-Islamiyya Movement. However, against the backdrop of the recent confrontations between Ahrar al-Sham Movement and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the north of Syria on July 15, 2017, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement announced its separation from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on July 20, 2017.

² HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front has been controlling the city of Idlib since July 23, 2017 until the date of preparing this report, early March 2018.

³ HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front has been controlling the city of Arihah since May 28, 2015 until the time of preparing this report, early March 2018.



STJ had earlier prepared a report titled [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS Impose Control over Service and Civil Institutions in Saraqib City, Idlib Countryside](#). STJ had also published a report [documenting HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front seizure of several public and private properties in the area of Jisr al-Shughur located in Idlib Countryside](#).

First, what is Sawa'id al-Khair (Goodwill Corps)?

On August 10, 2017, HTS established Sawa'id al-Khair/ Goodwill Corps" or the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Idlib city. The security arm includes **men and women from Saudi Arabia**, in addition to Syrians, wandering through Idlib streets with the support of security brigades affiliated to HTS/formerly al-Nusra Front. It is responsible for several things like monitoring the women's veil and Islamic dress, preventing smoke in public places and confiscating it from traders. Moreover, it prevents the sale and purchase of music instruments and everything related to it, and prevents mixing between males and females in Public and private places; in case of contravention of these instructions, this security arm warns the offenders either to close their shops or to imprison them.

Second: Restrictions on Personnel in Hospitals and Medical Facilities in Idlib

On February 2, 2018, Sawa'id al-Khair/ Goodwill Corps began to tighten the grip on the staff working in the hospitals in Idlib city, through issuing several decisions like the need to adhere to a dress code and prevent intermixing between both sexes. A nurse in Idlib confirmed this and told STJ that Sawa'id al-Khair began to really obligate staff and visitors in all hospitals to abide by the Sharia dress, following several pressures practiced on the Directorate of Health within the "Syrian Interim Government" ran by the opposition in Idlib province, to issue a generalization, specifically on January 4, 2018.



Image shows the decision issued by the "Directorate of Health" within the "Syrian Interim Government" ran by the opposition in Idlib province on January 4, 2018, which emphasized the need to comply with the Sharia dress at hospitals. Photo credit: a doctor from Idlib.

As a response to the previous generalization, a number of doctors and hospital managers in Idlib City issued a statement on February 10, 2018, refusing the interfere in the medical institutions affairs. In this regard, a doctor from Idlib said:

"We have issued this statement unanimously because of the frequent harassment our staff are experiencing in Idlib by the so-called Sawa'id al-Khair, in addition to the assaults on many of the visitors. We (the Federation of Physicians, the Pharmacists Association and the Labor Unions in Healthcare) reject the interference in our affairs, notably after the incident occurred on January 30, 2018, when Sawa'id al-Khair assaulted some visitors and guards, arrested them for several days, and then released them, on the pretext of intermixing between males and females and not abide by the dress code."



An image shows the statement issued by the associations of the doctors, pharmacists, and the medical facilities in Idlib on February 10, 2018.

Photo credit: a doctor from Idlib city.



Third: Suspension of a Free Transport Project in Idlib on Pretext of Intermixing

Sawa'id al-Khair not only did this kind of harassment; as on February 7, 2018, it halted a free interior transport project in Idlib city, a project supported by Violate Organization, on the pretext of intermixing between both sexes. The project had been launched since November 2017, with the aim of transporting people who cannot afford the transportation, in addition to school and university students, especially with the dramatically high cost of public transportation in Idlib and their scarcity in general. A member of Violate Organization confirmed this to STJ saying:

"The idea of the project came after several studies and reports carried out by the Organization's needs assessment team. It has been found that many people in Idlib cannot use public or private transport in Idlib, due to its high prices, so through *al-Khair Bus*, those people can secure their needs regularly, especially the elderly and those with the special needs. However, Sawa'id al-Khair elements affiliated to HTS stopped the drivers who were working on the free interior transport project on February 7, 2018. First, they took them to an unknown place and then released them several hours later, but without allowing to resume the project once again, all that under the pretext of preventing mixing between females and males. In addition, Sawa'id al-Khair halted the city's interior transportation work until an agreement is reached."



Image shows side of the work of the free al-Khair Bus in Idlib city.

Photo credit: [Violet organization](#).



Fourth: Restrictions on Peddlers and Shopkeepers

During February 2018, Sawa'id al-Khair put restrictions on peddlers in Idlib, under the pretext of preventing smoking and everything related to it either selling or buying. Abu Mohammed, one of the peddlers who sell smoke as well as other things to support his family, confirmed this to STJ, and said:

"I did not have another job opportunity to feed my four children, so I started selling some consumable goods and smoke in the street. On February 7, 2018, Sawa'id al-Khair warned that it would imprison me in case I sell smoke again, and it confiscated all my goods, estimated at about SYP 30, 000, so I became without a source of sustenance through which I could support my children. This is the case of the poor in Idlib, especially those who do not have any relations with elements of HTS, knowing that most of the customers who used to buy smoke from me were members of HTS."

[A video footage](#) published by IDLIB PLUS on February 11, 2018 showed some of the restrictions and decisions issued by Sawa'id al-Khair in Idlib city.

Harassments of Sawa'id al-Khair also affected the shopkeepers. On February 12, 2018, the elements of Sawa'id al-Khair began entering shops in Idlib city, and informed the shopkeepers that they need to comply with a dress code even on the plastic models "mannequin" in the shop fronts. They threatened to confiscate the goods and close the shops within 24 hours if they did not abide by the decision. Yasser al-Ali, a shopkeeper in Idlib confirmed this and said:

"It has been few months since Sawa'id al-Khair is bothering us, as they visit the shops periodically in Idlib city, fabricate reasons to harass residents. For example, we were forced to have a woman to sell in women's clothing stores and any man was prevented to be there in the shop. Being shopkeepers, we just implemented all of the demands of Sawa'id al-Khair in order to continue our work because it is the executive and military force in the city and works whatever it wishes without anyone stopping it. It is remarkable that the residents of Idlib city went out in several demonstrations and rejected al-Hisbah Apparatus that HTS provided on October 15, 2017, but HTS has deceived the people and changed its name from al-Hisbah to the Sawa'id al-Khair."



Ali added that, since early February 2018, elements of Sawa'id al-Khair had launched campaigns and imposed penalties on several issues. They interfere in civilians' special matters such as wearing the "jeans", the type of the shaving, and prevent mixing in the general transportation, indicating that the elements of Sawa'id al-Khair are engaged in such harassment in conjunction with the difficult security and living conditions Idlib city is currently witnessing. He continued:

"There's only one thing left, that Sawa'id al-Khair determine times of sleep and waking for all citizens. I still remember an incident in Selqin City on January 4, 2018, when Sawa'id al-Khair elements punished owners of women's clothing stores because they have not covered faces of the mannequin in shop fronts. Moreover, they forced the shopkeepers to remove women's photos of clothing brands, justifying that it is a promotion for imagery and the stirring of senses."



An image shows the removal of women images from clothing brands in Idlib city, due to the recent decisions of the so-called Sawa'id al-Khair.

Photo credit: violations of al-Nusra Front webpage.



According to several sources in Idlib, on February 12, 2018 elements of the security force affiliated to HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front flogged 13 youths in the city on charges of shaving like (Qaza') which means cumulus⁴ and wearing the "jeans". A witness told STJ that several security patrols were conducted in the streets, and then, the security forces of HTS took some youths to the Security Force Prison within the city, after that, they took the guys to one of the city's neighborhoods, where each young man was flogged with ten lashes on the back and other tens on the feet. Finally, they released them after signing a pledge not to shave like cumulus nor wear "jeans".

One of the well-informed sources confirmed to STJ that the commander of the campaign and the recent decisions of Sawa'id al-Khair (Goodwill Corps) is Ahmed Agha, one of the Emirs of HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front, who is known as the "Emir of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice". He has been the chief of al-Hisbah Apparatus and the Islamic Police Service recently that carry out these campaigns in the name of Sawa'id al-Khair.

Fifth: Intervention in the Educational Sector in the City of Arihah

The Committee of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice affiliated to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS, formerly al-Nusra Front, interfered as well in the affairs of the civil institutions in Arihah city located in the southwest countryside of Idlib. This committee has been formed since February 2017, to undertake several tasks, including monitoring the veil and the Sharia dress of women and even school female students, prevention of smoke trafficking in the city, as well as supervision of prevention of intermixing within public and private places and even within the educational sector. Moreover, it is designated to warn the offending people and shopkeepers, and most importantly, to implement the decisions entrusted to it by HTS. According to STJ's field researcher, this group since its establishment, has begun to intervene in civilians' matters, in addition to civil institutions, especially the education sector. A woman from Arihah confirmed that and said:

"When children reach the third grade of primary school, female students are immediately separated from males, and the girls are forced to wear a dress code (abaya, which means gown). Let alone the women's patrols of the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which stand in front of the schools doors to inspect girls' dress every day; if any girl does not wear the dress code, she is not allowed to enter her school and is forced to return home. The problem is that this ritual is harsh on children at this early age, but we do not have any leverage. Fear controls us because of the numerous arrests of anyone who

⁴ It is to shave the head and leaving some of it; a disapproved type of shave in Islam" according to sources.



violates these instructions. There is no doubt that these beliefs affect our children negatively, and more often, when our children inquire about the reason of separating females from males in school, we got no answers. For our children, this is a big suffering, but we are forced to lead this life."



An image shows an aspect of the educational situation in Arihah because of the decisions of the "Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice".

Photo credit: STJ

One of the female teachers in Arihah, told STJ that HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front is the supreme authority in the city and controls all aspects of life, pointing out that the so-called Committee of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has imposed a dress code on girls who have not been over seven years. They have not only separated male students from the females, but separated the teachers as well. She said:



"Even female teachers teach female students only, as is the case for male teachers; there are women in the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice who always supervise the teachers and students if they breached any instruction. Furthermore, these women watch the markets and shops, especially women's clothing shops. In addition, many young men in Arihah are harassed by HTS, that may reach the limit of arrest without knowing the reasons behind it, and this actually happened with many young guys in Arihah."



An image shows an aspect of the educational situation in Arihah city because of the decisions of the "Committee of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice".

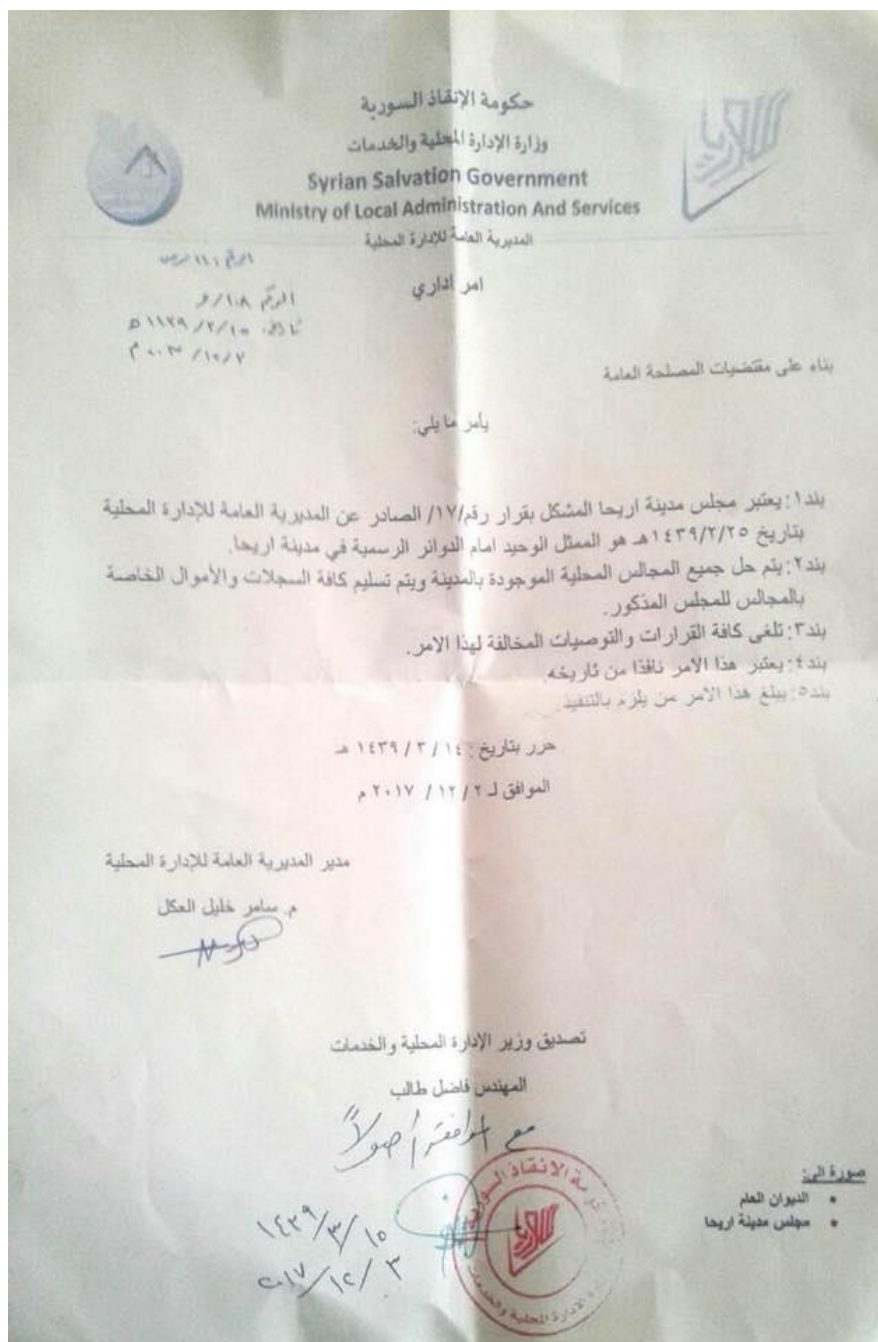
Photo credit: STJ



It should be mentioned that the Salvation Government⁵ affiliated to HTS had issued a decision on December 2, 2017, through which it dissolved the Local Council of Arihah, and considered the City Council, formed by HTS, on February 25, 2017, as the only representative to the official services in the city, in an effort to control all joints in the city.

In response, on December 6, 2017, the Local Council of Arihah issued a statement rejecting the dissolution decision altogether, asserting that locals of Arihah were the only ones authorized to dissolve or stop the Council.

⁵ On September 17, 2017, the Syrian General Conference was held in Idlib province, and ended with the formation of a constituent Council/Constituent body" to nominate a new head of government. In its final statement, it formed what they called the "Salvation Government" in order to regulate the liberated areas in the north of the war-torn country of Syria. Indeed the "Salvation Government" was formed on November 2, 2017, as it announced the nomination of its ministers at its founding conference, which led by "Mohammad al-Sheikh", who said that the formation of this government came after an initiative to form a civil administration by a group of academics, events, and entities in Idlib province. The government has faced accusations of subordination to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)/ formerly al-Nusra Front because it utilized elements of HTS in implementing several decisions.



A copy of the decision of Salvation Government affiliated to HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front, on December 2, 2017, to announce the dissolution of the Local Council in Arihah.

Photo credit: Activists from Arihah.



بيان صادر عن أعضاء مجلس مدينة أريحا

ردا على قرار حكومة الإنقاذ الذي جاء فيه حل المجلس المحلي في مدينة أريحا وتسليم مشاريع المدينة التي يديرها المجلس المحلي لمجلس المدينة المعين من قبل حكومة الإنقاذ:

إن الجهة الوحيدة المخولة بإيقاف أو حل مجلس مدينة أريحا هي أهالي المدينة... ولا يحق لأي جهة أخرى ذلك. ويرفض مجلس المدينة قرار الحكومة جملة وتفصيلا خاصة أنه جاء بعينه للمجلس وليس لجميع المجالس المحلية في المحافظة. ويتابع المجلس المحلي عمله بدوامه الرسمي بدون توقف.

ويبدي المجلس استعدادا كاملا لحل المجلس في حال وحيد، أن يتم اصدار قرار بحل جميع المجالس المحلية في المناطق المحررة بما يخدم مصلحة المواطنين.

2017-6-12م



A copy of the decision issued on December 6, 2017, by the Local Council of Arihah to refuse the dissolution decision.

Photo Credit: [The Local Council of Arihah](#).

According to STJ's field researcher, HTS/ formerly al-Nusra Front is still seeking to impose its authority by force of arms on civilians both in Idlib and Arihah, through Sawa'id al-Khair (Goodwill Corps) and the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice especially after failure to extend control on civil life in several areas of Idlib province, including Saraqib, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Taftanaz and Khan Sheikhoun, due to the civil public movement that rejects HTS's practices, its interfere in the civil life and the opening of headquarters like Sawa'id al-Khair. It is noteworthy that these practices are being carried out in conjunction with difficult security and living conditions the residents are experiencing in both Idlib and Arihah because of the on-going waves of displacement given the Syrian regular forces and its allies are shelling the rest areas in Idlib province constantly