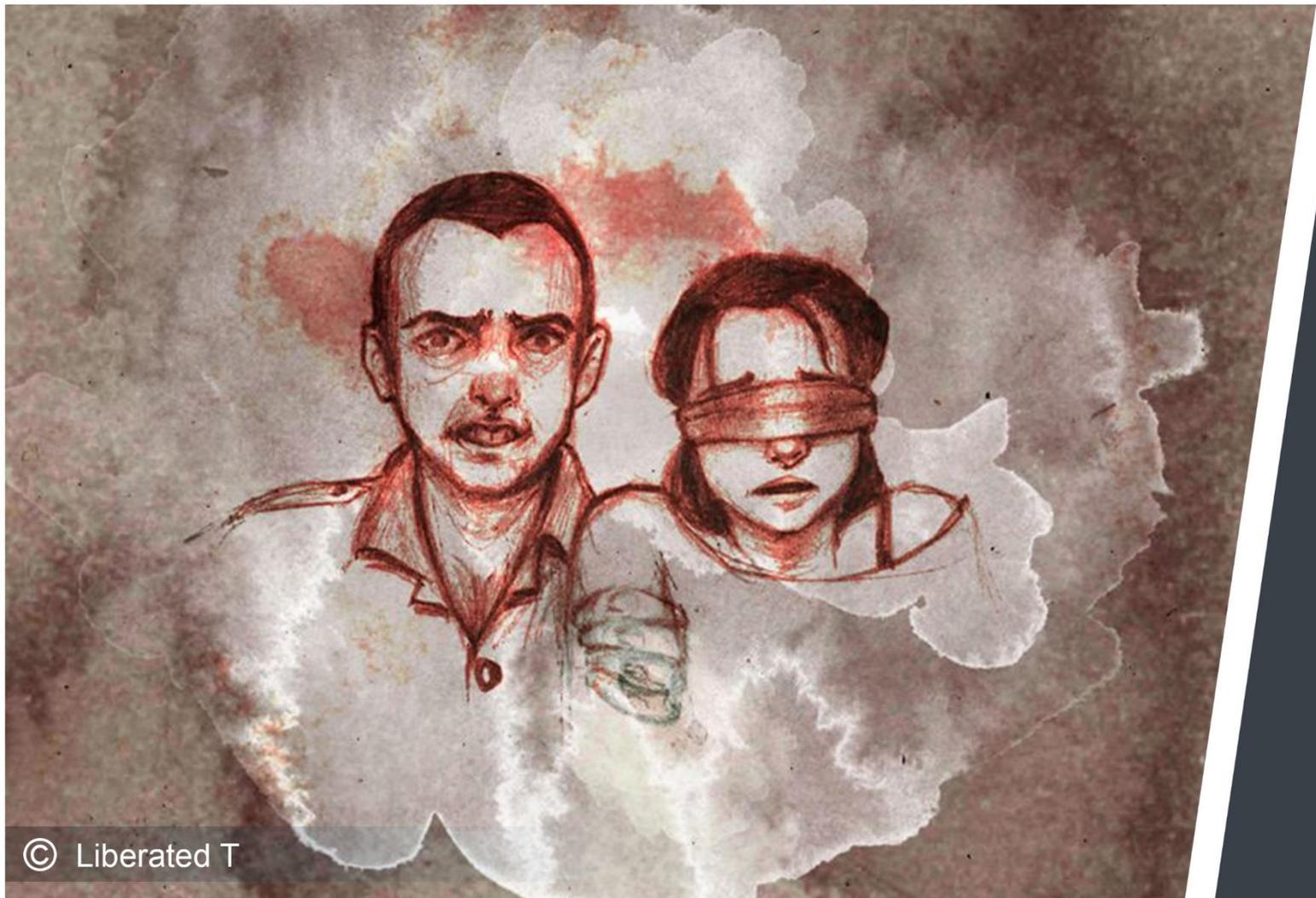


August 2019



**Syria: “They Coerced Us into
“Saying that We Are ISIS Wives**

Syria: “They Coerced Us into Saying that We Are ISIS Wives”

A special report narrating the stories of several women survivors, released in a prisoner swap deal between the Syrian regular forces and the Islamic State/ISIS

Summary:

Following the Syrian security services release of 17 female arrestees/detainees with their children in a "prisoner swap deal" on October 8, 2018, the two sides to which were the Syrian regular forces and the organization referring to itself as the Islamic State/ISIS, which is also known by the Arabic acronym Daesh, Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ obtained the exclusive testimonies of the women survivors, the majority of whom spent months at the Syrian security services' detention facilities while years were spent there by others. These women were detained on various charges, the top of which was "relatedness to terrorist organizations."

In this report, STJ provides an account of these women survivors' stories and testimonies, who vary in term of age and who suffered detention along with children, and sometimes accompanied by several family members, before they were let out in the swap deal mentioned above.

According to Hama-based STJ's female field researcher, who conducted the interviews in December 2018, these women survivors had no bonds what so ever with ISIS, and they are mostly born in Damascus, its countryside, al-Qunaitra, Aleppo's countryside, Daraa and al-Qamishli.

On this note, it is important to mention that STJ has concealed the real names of the witnesses and the women survivors, met in this report, cautious about their safety, even though the witnesses consented to publish their true personal information.

1. Swap Deal's Details:

On October 8, 2018, a prisoners' swap deal was concluded between ISIS on the one hand and the Syrian regular forces on the other, where ISIS released six women and children out of 27¹, whom it kidnapped from the Druze town of al-Shabaki², rural Suwaida on July 25, 2018, in return for the freedom of 17 women and 7 child detainees, whom the Syrian regular forces have accused of affiliation with ISIS.

¹ According to STJ's female field researcher, this release process was meant to be a first phase of the swap deal between the Syrian regular forces and ISIS. However, on November 8, 2018, the forces have embarked on a military operation in the eastern parts of the Suwaida's desert, leading to the release of the 28 remaining abductees, whom ISIS has kidnapped after a bloody attack on Suwaida province on July 25, 2018. The number of abductees freed on November 8, 2018, was 16 women and children, in addition to the bodies of a woman and two children who died for reasons yet unknown, for their bodies were transferred to the Military Hospital in Homs, as reported by STJ in the following news piece: "As Suwayda: All Druze Hostages Freed after a Military Action by SAA," November 9, 2018. Last visited: August 20, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/946/>.

² On July 25, 2018, the Suwaida province bore witness to bloody attacks by ISIS, which caused the death of dozens, in addition to the abducted 28 civilians, the majority of whom were women and children. While ISIS put to death two of them, another two died due to health-related issues. Six of the abductees were freed earlier on. On this note, STJ has published a news report titled: "21 Women and Children Kidnapped, Toll Victims of Bloody Attacks Rise in al-Sweida". July 30, 2018. Last visited: August 20, 2019. <https://stj-sy.com/ar/view/650>.

The names below belong to the abducted women and children released by ISIS:

1. Rasmiyeh Abu Ammar.
2. Abeer Masha'al Shalgheen.
3. Little boy Ya'aroub, Abeer Shalgheen's son.
4. Little boy Mulham, Abeer Shalgheen's son.
5. Little girl Ghaidaa, Abeer Shalgheen's daughter.
6. Little girl Amwaj, Abeer Shalgheen's daughter.

The names of the 17 women, let out of the Syrian security services' detention facilities, accompanied by a number of their children, were documented as follows:

1. Yassmin Ahmad Qudra Yahia, born in Damascus in 1994³.
2. Dania Muhy ed-Din Awad, born in rural Damascus in 1994⁴.
3. Amenah Mohammad Shuhadeh, born in Rural Damascus in 1972⁵.
4. Intissar Mustafa al-Darwish, born in Homs in 1965.
5. Fatimah Ahmad al-Haj Zaino, born in 1986 and her two children - Siba, a girl, and Bilal, a boy.
6. Jumanah Mohammad al-Ahamad born in Homs in 1987, and her three daughters, Taimaa, Taibah and Raghad⁶.
7. Sahar Hassan Hamshou, born in Damascus in 1967.
8. Mirna Akel, the daughter of Sahar Hamshou, born in Damascus in 2001.
9. Nadia Hassan, born in Damascus in 1997⁷.
10. Walaa Bassam born in rural Damascus in 1990.
11. Qamar Diyab al-Shaikha, born in Damascus in 1954.
12. Khadijah Hassan, born in al-Qunaitra in 1962.
13. Mirvat Saleh al-Share', born in Damascus in 1973.
14. Sawsan Ahmad al-Ashqar, born in al-Qunaitra in 1986⁸.
15. Bushra Ahmad al-Ashqar, born in al-Qunaitra 1995.
16. Ibtissam Aukle, born in al-Hasakah in 1970.
17. Amenah Sulaiman Hamadah, born in Raqqa in 1962.

³ Yassmin has been detained since July 2014 on charges of "funding terrorism," according to Urnammu organization's database.

⁴ Dania has been detained since October 2015, and her husband was dead shortly before her arrest, according to Urnammu organization's database.

⁵ Amenah has been detained on the charges of "funding terrorist activities", and because her brother Mohammad Shuhadeh is considered a "terrorist" in the charges filed against him, according to Urnammu organization's database.

⁶ Intissar Mustafa al-Darwish, Fatimah Ahmad al-Haj and Jumanah Mohammad al-Ahamad belong to the same family, according to Urnammu organization's database.

⁷ Sahar Hassan Hamshou, Mirna Akel and Nadia Hassan belong to the same family, according to Urnammu organization's database.

⁸ Sawsan's husband has been dead since a while, according to Urnammu organization's database.

On October 8, 2018, the Swaida News Network/SNN posted a video⁹, originally published by pro-Syrian government media outlets, streaming the first images of the Suwaida's kidnapped women and children, who were released on October 8, 2018, saying that they have been released in "a quality operation by the Syrian Arab Army."



Footage taken from a video posted on November 8, 2018, featuring a number of the women who survived captivity by ISIS. Photo credit: Swaida News Network/SNN.

2. "I was Held Captive, along with My Parents, Sister and a Woman Relative, Accused of Being Terrorists":

Roua A. a 46 years old woman and one of the captives released in the swap deal. On February 18, 2015, Roua was arrested at a Syrian regular forces-affiliated checkpoint, positioned on the al-Kiswah-Sahnaya road. Along with her parents, sister and her sister-in-law, Roua were arrested on the charges of being "terrorists," telling STJ¹⁰ that they were, then, led to a security branch, from which they were transferred to the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city. Continuing further into the details, she said:

"We were first taken to one of the security branches in Damascus city; where they instantly guided us to the interrogation room. At the time, extreme fear took hold of me. The interrogation lasted for two hours, through which they accused us of

⁹ "The Initial Photos of Suwaida Abductees Liberated in a Heroic Operation by the Syrian Arab Army". Swaida News Network. October 8, 2018. Last visited: August 20, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBdnI3sGArS>.

¹⁰ The woman witness was interviewed by STJ's female field researcher online early in December 2018.

being agents for the armed opposition, which is not true. Later on, each of us was held in a separate cell on the ground floor. We were summoned by the branch's personnel to the interrogation room, on the upper floor, every single day. There, the detective accused me of being the wife of a 'terrorist' while the personnel hit me with cables of steel and whips, trying to coerce me into a confession. Despite this, I always met them with denial and that I knew nothing about the armed opposition and that I had no relationship whatsoever with it. I continued thus for 19 days. I went through so much suffering. The meal they offered us consisted mainly of parboiled bulgur and moldy bread. This period was almost a nightmare until my dad and paternal aunt were released. My sister, my sister-in-law, and I, however, were transported to the Adra Central Prison, rural Damascus."

In the Adra Central Prison, Roua was held captive with other women for a year and ten months. Her sister and sister-in-law were already released while she was transported again to the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city. There, she spent three days, throughout which she hoped for a release. But, to her misfortune, she was transferred to various Syrian detention facilities and branches. For a while, she was detained at the Political Security Branch in Damascus, to be then moved into Branch 215. In the following, she recounts to STJ what she bore witness to in the last of these branches:

"I was deposited in a cell, which contained 11 women and 7 children. One of these women has been detained in this branch for three years. She was arrested with her three children. There was another woman, from Homs. The latter was also detained along with her four children for about two years back then. They kept a hold of me in that branch up to October 2018, when I was summoned with a group of detained women. We were to appear in a video in return for our release. I still remember it, they dictated our speech, as to say that we were ISIS wives even though this was not true. The video was shot ten days before our release. At 4 a.m. on October 8, 2018, we were let out and transported aboard a bus to the Qalaat al-Madiq area, Hama province. There, we were delivered to personnel of the National Front of Liberation/NFL and headed towards Idlib province."

3. "She is Still on My Mind; She was Hit in the Face with Military Boots":

Fadya M. is another woman survivor, released in the swap deal, between the Syrian regular forces and ISIS on October 8, 2018. Fadya got married and gave birth to a daughter in the city of Daraya, back then controlled by the armed opposition groups. She was destined to bear witness to the siege and the brutal shelling suffered by the city at the hands of the Syrian regular forces¹¹. In the end, however, she was forced to leave the city of Daraya to the capital Damascus, for her daughter was sick due to malnutrition and lack of medicines. Five months

¹¹ Late in 2012, the Syrian regular forces imposed a siege on the city of Daraya, which lasted for four years until the forces managed to take over the city in August 2016, following a settlement deal with the opposition armed groups that controlled the city during the cordon.

later, Fadya decided to head back to her city, but to her surprise, she was arrested by the personnel at a checkpoint of the Syrian regular forces on October 2015. She was arrested while on the way back home. She was first taken to the Special Missions Sections- Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city, where she was arrested for 35 days. Fadya told STJ¹² the following:

"I was detained in a solitary cell at the Special Mission Section. I was also summoned to the interrogation room, where I was subjected to beating by a plastic cane to admit being a 'terrorist,' being the wife of a 'terrorist' and that I hid information on the killing of security personnel by the gunmen of the armed opposition. I was forced into saying anything, just to escape the suffering and the pain I endured. A few days later, I was transferred to the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city, where I was detained for 20 days, during which I was subjected to interrogation five or six times. I was, then, transported to the Adra Central Prison, where I stayed for six months. I was again taken to the Air Force Intelligence Branch, to stay there since May 30, 2016, to October 8, 2018. The duration I spent at the branch was the cruelest phase of my life; I was beaten repeatedly; all of my body was lashed with plastic canes."

To the day, Fadya still remembers one of the women who were held captive with her at the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city. The woman, born in Ghouta and fifty years old, was hit in the face with military boots by one of the branches' militants, injuring one of her eyes. Fadya went through the details preserved in her mind; she recounted to STJ the following:

"At the Air Force Intelligence Branch, I was held captive with 35 other women detainees, of various ages. I still remember how we begged the personnel to allow us to take a bath, which was 'a toilet [practically]. We used to bath there, with cold water.' Late in September 2018, I was transferred to Branch 215, where I stayed for 12 days and got maltreated. They, then, informed me that I will be released with several detainees in a prisoner swap deal. However, we were forced into saying that we are ISIS wives to be let out. At dawn, on October 8, 2018, they actually did transport us aboard a bus to the Qalaat al-Madiq area, Hama province. From there, we continued to Idlib province."

4. "It Never Occurred to Her that Her Son's Treatment would Cost Her the Detention of Her Husband and Herself":

Aliaa M., 55 years old, married and a mother, is another survivor, for she also was released by the Syrian regular forces in the prisoner swap deal, according to what her brother has recounted to STJ. He added that his sister was arrested at a hospital in the capital Damascus

¹² The woman witness was interviewed by STJ's female field researcher online in mid-December 2018.

after she was forced to leave one of the provinces in Syria's east to Damascus as to provide her ill son with treatment. But the sister never thought that the price would be her and her husband's arrest, whose fate is yet unknown to the time this report was made on February 21, 2019. The brother¹³ of the woman survivor added:

"On September 27, 2018, the Syrian security services arrested my sister and her husband from the Mouwasat Hospital, Damascus, on an arrest raid. They did not even disclose the reasons for the arrest. She was at the hospital to treat her 17 years old son, who had a car accident. But instead of treating her son, she was faced with an arrest raid, during which she and her husband were arrested, which inflated the pain of her son who needed his parents at such a difficult time he was living. Due to the arrest, his health deteriorated, and he died after a while. Her son's death only increased my sister's pain and calamity."

Aliaa was led to Branch 215, Damascus city; her husband, nonetheless, was taken to an unknown destination. According to the brother, Aliaa was not subjected to any physical torture, for she was immediately held captive at a cell with other women detainees. The interrogation she underwent did not stop for a while, which affected her psychological state. Commenting on this, he said:

"My sister told me that she was detained with dozens of women at that branch and that she could see the beating marks on their bodies. She also told me that, throughout her detention, she could hear the voices of men and women emerging from the ground floors that were triggered by torture as well, for their screams were incessant. She also said that she was detained at Branch 215, in the company of two young women from Damascus, the first by the name 'Nour,' who was 18 years old then and used to work at a restaurant in Qudssaya area. The second was called 'Rama,' born in the al-Zabadani area in 1995. Both of the young women were arrested at a checkpoint, affiliated with the regime's forces, in the area of al-Qutayfah while on their way to Idlib. They were stopped at the checkpoint and asked about their destination. Filled with terror, they replayed that they were heading to Turkey, which caused their arrest to the date. My sister narrated the stories of many of the women, detained at that branch for more than six years, and that a girl, only 15 years old, shared the cell with her."

The eyewitness continued his account, conveying to STJ what his sister has witnessed at Branch 215, adding that one woman, called Dunia was detained with her children at the branch and that she was often subjected to torture. Once, they even bored boiling water on her body. Dunia was also hit by plastic cables and threatened to be murdered before her children's eyes. He said:

"My sister told me the story of another woman, from the city of al-Bab, Aleppo province. She was arrested along with her three children on the grounds of her

¹³ The brother of the woman survivor was interviewed by STJ's female researcher online early in December 2018.

husband's being a 'terrorist.' She also was tortured, in a manner that left marks on her body. There is also the story of another woman, from Homs province this time. She was arrested with her children and mother-in-law on May 15, 2018, during an arrest raid that the regime's forces launched in rural Homs. The second woman was similarly arrested for her husband's being a 'terrorist.' My sister was detained for 22 days at Branch 215 and was released on the prisoner swap deal, concluded by the Syrian regular forces and ISIS on October 8, 2018."

5. The Women Detainees Arrive in Qalaat al-Madiq Crossing in Hama Province:

"Abu Sharif," an official of the NFL¹⁴, told STJ that they picked up the detainees, released in the swap deal, at the Qalaat al-Madiq crossing in Hama province at the dawn of October 8, 2018. The Syrian regular forces, at the time, transported the detainees to one of their affiliated military checkpoints in the area, forcing the women to walk a distance of 300 meters to the place separating the opposition armed groups' areas of control from those taken over by the Syrian regular forces. He reported the following to STJ:

"The regime's forces made a video recording of these women, as being detained by the Harakat Rijal al-Karama/Men of Dignity¹⁵ in Suwaida and that they are ISIS wives. They made all these efforts to pride themselves on the victory they made in front of the Suwaida province's people. At the crossing, the militants of the NFL registered the names of the women detainees and phoned their families and relatives, for the majority were from Damascus, its countryside, al-Qunaitra, al-Bab and al-Tabqqa. Some of these women were detained for a short time and were more than 35 years old; others, however, were held captive for years. During the swap process, a number of the Civil Defense/White Helmets' volunteers provided the detainees and their children with first aid, for both their fatigue and the beating marks were apparent on their bodies. They were pale and in a bad shape in terms of health. Then, buses were secured to transport them to Syria's north."

¹⁴ The NFL was founded on May 24, 2018, following the integration of several opposition armed groups, on top of which are al-Sham Legion/Filaaq al-Sham, Free Army of Idlib, 1st Coastal Division, Second Army, Jaysh al-Nasr/Army of Victory, Martyrs of Islam Brigade – Daraya, Liwa al-Hourya/ Freedom Brigade and al-Forqa 23/23rd Division.

¹⁵ Harakat Rijal al-Karama/Men of Dignity was founded in 2012 in Suwaida province. It is an independent armed faction, consisting of the province's men. The faction was formed by Sheikh Wahid al-Balous, a prominent Druze spiritual and political leader, who was assassinated by an unidentified side in 2015. The Syrian security services attempted to deny their responsibility for the arrest through filming the women survivors as being held captive by the Rijal al-Karama, which the women detainees refuted while speaking to STJ.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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