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Syria: Arrests and Kidnappings on the Rise in Hama

The report covers February and March of 2019

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In the city of Hama and its countryside, the Syrian security services continue to arbitrarily arrest civilians, for 9 civilians were arrested upon trying to obtain passports from the Immigration and Passport Department in Hama city. In addition to this, other four arrests were recorded, which the Military Security Apparatus/Military Intelligence Division is responsible for in several towns in the southern countryside of Hama province. These arrests corresponded to an upsurge in kidnappings in the absence of accountability and supervision, for 10 cases of kidnappings, conducted by unidentified persons, were recorded in February and March 2019 in the city of Hama, 6 of the kidnapped were released after a separate ransom was paid for each of them.

1. Civilians Kidnapped in Various Neighborhoods in Hama City

As reported by the field researcher of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ in Hama city, the kidnappings were mainly conducted in the Kazo neighborhood and on the Hama-Homs road. In the areas where the kidnappings took place, the researcher noted, there are military checkpoints affiliated with the Syrian regular forces, at which cars and passersby are inspected, and their identification documents are examined.

STJ's field researcher interviewed Mr. Yousef M., a resident of the Kazo neighborhood, who commented on the kidnapping incidents the neighborhood is bearing witness to:

"A state of fear has taken hold of the neighborhood due to the increasing abductions. The people are scared of leaving their houses at night, and everyone is full of questions. Since the neighborhood is surrounded by the regime's checkpoints, who is, then, conducting the kidnappings? Who lies behind them! It is important to mention that no one dares to carry arms unless he is working for the army or the security forces – these are many in this neighborhood. More than 7 persons of well-to-do families have been kidnapped while it is impossible for a gang to exist without coverage from the checkpoints."

STJ's field researcher has documented the following incidents of kidnapping:

- A. **The First Incident:** On February 12, 2019, the civilian "S. A." from Kazo neighborhood (40 years old, married and a father of five) was kidnapped by an identified group, driving an "Opel," while on the way out from his Block Manufacturing Plant around 9 PM. The kidnappers released him on the 27th of the same month, after receiving a ransom. The victim S. M. recounted the incident's details to STJ:

B.

"I leave my work late in the evening, as I am the owner of the plant. On that day, I left as usual. I headed to the street where my car was. There, two persons came up behind me. Carrying rifles, they ordered me to accompany them. Back then, I thought they were security personnel. They placed me in their car, covered my head with the sweater I was wearing and drove me to a place, half an hour away from the location where I was

kidnapped. I could not tell where the place is. Throughout the 16 days of my abduction, I lived in hell; beyond description beating, starvation and bad smells. The kidnappers forced me to appeal in voice notes they sent to my wife's WhatsApp number, as to demand a ransom of 15 million Syrian pounds, which after negotiations they agreed to cut down to 10 million. Upon receiving the money, they took me and ran me off the public road between Kazo Neighborhood and al-Ba'ath Neighborhood."

- C. **The Second Incident:** On February 21, 2019, Mu'ayyad (19 years old high school student) was kidnapped by unidentified persons, driving a black "Verna". Near the Great Mosque of Kazo Neighborhood, four men hit Mu'ayyad and put him in the car while on his way back home. He was released in return for a ransom on March 6, 2019. A relative of the victim told STJ's field researcher about the incident:

"Mu'ayyad was kidnapped for about two weeks; we thought that he had been arrested by the security forces. However, the kidnappers contacted his father four days from the abduction, demanding 25 million Syrian pounds in return for his freedom. They threatened to kill him. They sent photos of Mu'ayyad; his face and head were smeared with blood due to beating. Following the negotiations, a ransom of 15 million Syrian pounds was paid. They abandoned Mu'ayyad near the al-Assi river, in Kazo. We believe that the kidnappers are from the neighborhood and that they have hidden him in the neighborhood as well. Mu'ayyad failed to identify any of his kidnappers."

- D. **The Third Incident:** On Friday, March 22, 2019, four young men were kidnapped together by unidentified persons, on their motorcycles from the city of Hama to the al-Rastan Dam, on Hama-Homs roadway. The young men are Tareq Hatem Koujan (20 years old), Ashraf Kamal al-Ashraf (20 years old), Omar Musa'ab Hijazi (21 years old) and Mohammad Ameen Abdullah al-A'assaf (22 years old). A day into the abduction, the kidnappers sent their families a video on WhatsApp, demanding a ransom of 50 million Syrian pounds to release them. A few days later, media outlets, close to the Syrian government, published a video of the four young men as being released. Nonetheless, how they were released, the circumstances of the kidnapping and the identity of the kidnappers were not elucidated.
- E. **The Fourth Incident:** On March 29, 2019, three young men were kidnapped around 10 PM. near the al-Kouthar checkpoint, Bab Trablous in Hama city– also by unidentified persons. The destiny of the young men is still unknown, and the kidnappers have not contacted any of their relatives to the time this report was made. STJ's field researcher pointed out that the mentioned site contains several military checkpoints, affiliated with the Syrian regular forces, and it never lacks in security forces' patrols.

- F. **The Fifth Incident:** On March 28, 2019, young man “Abduljabbar Sh.”, a resident of Kazo neighborhood, was kidnapped by unidentified persons while heading to the Khattab village, near Hama city, on his motorcycle. Gunmen, driving a “Kia Rio,” abducted him and contacted his family, asking for a 15 million Syrian pounds ransom. A relative of the victim told STJ’s researcher the following:

“Several persons told us that a car chased him on the road to Khattab. Then, he was out of reach, until the kidnapers contacted us from his cellphone, demanding a fanciful sum of money. Negotiations with them are yet ongoing. What really strikes me as strange is that where are the regime’s checkpoints and patrols, given all these kidnappings that are frighteningly increasing.”

2. Civilians Arrested at the Immigration and Passport Department in Hama City:

On March 8, 2019, personnel of the Political Security Division in Hama city arrested 8 civilians at the Hama City Immigration and Passport Department, who referred to the Passport Department to finalize their personal transactions. Two of the arrested civilians are elderly.

STJ’s field researcher interviewed an eyewitness, who was there during the arrest:

“I was at the Immigration and Passport Department to obtain a passport. Out of the blue, ten armed personnel came in and arrested the civilians in one of the offices on the ground floor. They, then, placed them in their vehicles and kicked off. One of the officers stayed in the Department; he went into the Brigadier General’s office and got information on the transactions the arrestees were working on. Upon asking the employees of the Immigration and the Passport Department about the incident, they told me that the cause to the arrest was these people’s attempt at obtaining passports for their sons, who the regime is prosecuting for different reasons.”

On a similar arrest incident, “Abdulmueen K.”, a refugee in Lebanon, said that he sent his father to the Hama City Immigration and Passport Department to renew his passport, attempting to save the time he would lose upon going through the process in Lebanon. He sent his passport and the required documents with a driver. In March 2019, his father was arrested by the Political Security Division for three days, to be released later on. He narrated to STJ the details of his father’s arrest incident:

“I have been based in Lebanon for seven years. Every time my passport expires, every two years, I send it to my father for renewal, with obtaining all the required documents from the Recruitment Division. Upon referring to the Immigration and Passport Department in Hama, they asked my father for a video that proves me being in Lebanon. I sent him the video. Referring to the department again to hand them the video, they arrested him on the allegation that I am required to perform mandatory military service, given that all my deferral documents are official. Three days later, they released him, after they investigated him concerning me.”

On the same note, a transactions’ broker from the city of Hama, specialized in obtaining passports for Syrians abroad, said:

“Arrests, every now and then, target civilians at the Immigration and Passport Department, coming to obtain passports for their relatives abroad, who are usually prosecuted by so-and-so security branches. The Immigration Department has a list with the names of the prosecuted persons. When their families approach the Department, they get held captive in one of its offices and the security branch gets informed; [personnel], then, show up and conduct the arrest.”

3. Arrests against Persons from Southern Rural Hama:

In March 2019, four arrests were recorded in the towns of al-Damina, al-Meshiah and Hirbnafsah, which targeted Syrian government loyalists and others responsible for sealing the national reconciliation agreements. Some of these arrests were based on malicious reports.

Under the pseudonym of Mohammad A’azam, a local activist from southern rural Hama, who is now based in the armed opposition-held areas, recounted to STJ the details of the arrests, which he obtained from the relatives of the arrestees and residents of the villages where the arrests took place.

According to A’azam, the arrests happened as follows:

- A. **The First Incident:** On March 23, 2019, the Military Intelligence Division arrested Nasser al-Qahkam at his house in the al-Damina village, for reasons that are yet unknown. It is worth mentioning that al-Qahkam was the former head of the village’s free local council. He, later on, worked for the national reconciliation committee in the area. At a previous date, al-Qahkam was a target to an assassination, where his house was bombed by the armed opposition groups in April 2018.

- B. **The Second Incident:** On March 23, 2019, the Military Intelligence Division arrested Khalid Faouzi al-Amouri, from the al-Meshiah village, due to a dispute between him and a family member, Abdulrahman, who is a dignitary and one of the tribe's leaders. Both of Khalid and Abdulrahman were attracting young men and convincing them of joining the pro-Syrian government armed groups. However, things went wrong between them, and they filed a complaint against each other to the security service. The matter ended with arresting the two of them almost at the same time.
- C. **The Third Incident:** On March 13, 2019, the young man Mohammad Abdulkareem, from the Hirbnafsah town, was arrested at the Kasab Syrian-Turkish border crossing, after he returned from Turkey based on a reconciliation he underwent, helped by a mediator, and paying one and a half million Syrian Pounds "as not to be subjected to harassment." He was taken to the Military Intelligence Division.
- D. **The Fourth Incident:** Mohammad Bakour (33 years old) was arrested at his house in the Hirbnafsah town. For unknown reasons, personnel of the Military Security Division took hold of him, giving no clear reason for his arrest.



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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 - ✉️ editor@stj-sy.org