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## *Syria: Killings and Robberies Sweep Idlib and Hama*

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*In addition to dozens of robberies, at least 12 killing incidents were recorded in the provinces of Hama and Idlib in early 2019*

## Introduction

The areas, held by the armed opposition groups/anti-Syrian Government factions, in the provinces of Idlib and Hama are yet suffering a state of rampant insecurity, with which robberies and killings up surged targeting many civilians in January and February 2019, giving rise to additional concerns among the areas' residents, as it is not only the shelling that is depriving the locals of their right to a normal life, imprinting every aspect of it, but also the murders and the robberies which have become another crippling obsession.

According to the female field researcher of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, no less than 12 killing incidents were documented in the provinces of Hama and Idlib in February and January 2019, accentuating that most of the murders were committed for financial ends, obtaining money, given the state of security chaos and the random proliferation of weapons that is met by neither censorship nor accountability on the part of the opposition armed groups.

At the onset of 2019, the field researcher added, the town of Maarrat Dibsah, rural Idlib, had alone suffered over 30 robberies, unleashing the residents' contempt, whose basic demands have not been answered, including stability and security, as no single day marks an end without a robbery being committed by face-covered persons and gunmen.

In Idlib, killings also peaked, effected by the rampant insecurity that stressed the beginning of 2019, for no less than 23 kidnappings were recorded in the areas throughout Idlib province alone, almost all of which were money-purposed.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Young or Old, Killings are Sparing No One in Idlib Province

The killing incidents' hike in Idlib province, where the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS holds reins almost in the full range of the area, made anxious many of the residents, especially since the killings are indiscriminate, showing no regard to the victims' age, being young or old, and because in most cases the perpetrators remained unidentified, as shown by the many testimonies that STJ obtained.

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<sup>1</sup> "Idlib: Abductions Culminate in early 2019", STJ. March 21, 2019. Last visited: October 30, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/1230/?fbclid=IwAR2EaFhcKS-EvncHBjIZDBg3WIm-tl0dVJT7ivKEjXjfKQJlw5UL4yPsoBg>.

## **A. Little Girl and Her Teacher Killed under Suspicious Circumstances in Jisr al-Shughur City:**

On February 11, 2019, little girl Maryam al-Bakri, five years old, and her teacher Fatimah Mohammad al-Omari, 30 years old, were confirmed dead in the city of Jisr al-Shughur, rural Idlib. Both have headed to Mamoon Haj Bakri School in the morning, but neither of them showed up later that day, Maryam's father, who is married and has three children, narrated to STJ. He recounted the following:

**"In the morning, Maryam accompanied her teacher to a kindergarten within the Mamoon Haj Bakri School, located 500 meters from home. Maryam was late home; I became worried, especially since I knew that her teacher had not yet returned home herself. We immediately reported the matter to the security forces in the city of Jisr al-Shughur, the Free Police and the Civil Defense. The whole area was alarmed, and many of the area's residents started searching for them with us. However, we found no trace of them. The teacher's husband told me that his wife had the feeling of being watched by certain persons, but to which reason, she did not know exactly. It was then when I was sure that my daughter and her teacher had been abducted by unknown persons. The day passed and neither the Free Police nor the Civil Defense could find my daughter or her teacher. They were years, I felt, not hours, that passed with her being disappeared. All that I wanted was to hear some news about my little girl. I prayed to God that she be unharmed. But, at the same time, I was overcome by a strange feeling and cringed from the thought that the sun would rise without me seeing Maryam. The next day, in the morning, a relative of mine showed up and told me to refer to the security department. I was on the street in no time, only to find the people gathering in front of one of the abandoned buildings near my house. I charged into the building and started searching the place. It was something beyond shock, for I saw my daughter and her teacher —both killed monstrously and in cold blood. I was taken aback; I stood there screaming at the top of my lungs. The people and the security forces came. The area was encircled, and the bodies were examined by the Civil Defense. The perpetrators were unidentified and the case is yet being investigated by the security department in Jisr al-Shughur city. It seems that the perpetrators intended to steal the golden jewelry the teacher had on, to which my little girl became a victim too."**



A photo of the little girl Maryam al-Bakri, taken before her death on February 11, 2019. Photo credit: Maryam's family.

## **B. Militants of the Armed Opposition Groups Accused of Robbing and Killing a Young Man in Rural Idlib**

On January 18, 2019, Anas al-A'askar, 30 years old, a married man and a father of three, who was displaced from the town of Jalyan to that of Josef, rural Idlib, was killed by face-covered persons and gunmen. The details of the incident were narrated to STJ by the victim's brother as thus:

**"That day, in the morning, I left home with my brother. We intended to go to an exchange and remittance office in the town of Furaykah, western rural Jisr al-Shughur, about 11 kilometers from Josef town. We took a taxi. On the way to the west, we were surprised by a van. It emerged from behind a dirt mound and blocked our way. Aboard the van were face-covered men. In the back, two persons were seated, and they were the ones who started to shoot at us from every direction. They fired about 40 bullets. And then, one of the gunmen got off the van and approached me. We had a fistfight. Two face-covered men then came from behind me and started shooting at us. I was hit by four bullets. Two of the gangsters were shot by mistake as well. And I think that one of them died. I crawled for about 7 meters. My face was all trenched with blood. I started screaming, calling my brother Anas. There was no answer. I was sure then that my brother was killed."**

The brother continued his account, adding:

**“The face-covered men managed to escape after they stole all the money in our possession, about 30,000 USD. Shortly after, a shepherd noticed me and ran in my direction. I told him that I had relatives at a distance of 200 meters. I implored to him that he goes and inform them so they would come and hospitalize me. He did. Then, two HTS militants, who were stationed at a checkpoint, set up about two kilometers from the incident’s location, approached me. During this, my relatives have already arrived. They rushed me to the hospital with my brother Anas, who received a bullet in the cheek that exited through his head. They have taken us to a hospital in rural Idlib. But, alas, my brother was dead by then. He was gone, leaving a scar in my heart and three children behind, the youngest of whom was not seven yet.”**

The witness added that he narrated the details of the incident to the HTS-affiliated militants while in the hospital. He told them that one of the thieves was shot and that he may have been taken to a hospital near the incident’s site. The brother added:

**“It was the gangsters’ stupidity that led to the group’s capture, for one of its members, called M. A’a., was rushed to the Jisr al-Shughur Hospital. They were put under surveillance, and an ambush was awaiting them at the hospital. They were finally arrested, including M. A. from Tal Waset, rural Idlib, and an HTS-affiliated militant, in addition to five militants, associated with the armed opposition groups<sup>2</sup>. There were also A. A., a militant of the Guardians of Religion/Huras ed-Din Group from the countryside of Ma`arat al-Nu`man and M. J., a militant of the National Front for Liberation/NFL from the town of Sraif, rural Idlib. The latter was the only one to escape the arrest, and he is now in the city of Manbij, rural Aleppo.”**

One of the armed opposition groups’ accused militants, the witness said, had fled with the money to Atmeh town, rural Idlib, planning to escape to Turkey later on. However, militants affiliated with another armed opposition group managed to arrest him. The arrested militant did not return the money, claiming that militants of the group that detained him have robbed him of it. Investigation into the case is being conducted to the date, and one of the NFL militants is still loose in the city of Manbij to the moment. Commenting on this, he said:

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that STJ did not reveal the full names of the involved persons for security concerns.



**“The place where M. A’a. stayed after he escaped to the city of Manbij was identified, and it was confirmed that he joined a different armed opposition group following the incident. On February 28, 2019, I informed the Security Investigation Office in western rural Aleppo and provided it with sufficient evidence for the latter’s role in the killing and robbery of my brother. They, nonetheless, told me that the case might take a long time, as it requires the intervention of a committee and the verification of the sentences. I am still waiting for that moment when M. A’a. and the rest of the gangsters would be brought before the court because so far no sentence has been passed against any of these criminals.”**



A photo of the victim Anas al-A’askar with one of his children before his death in January 2019.  
Photo credit: The victim’s family.

### **C. ISIS-affiliated Fighters Accused of Killing and Robbing a Young Man from Rural Idlib:**

Hussain Ma’arouf, 30 years old married man and a father of three, was another victim of the killings that took hold of Idlib province, the city of Sarmada in particular. Hussain used to work at one of the exchange and remittance offices in the city until he was shot dead on January 29, 2019, while in the company of his relative Mohammad Mandil, the owner of a gold jewelry shop. A relative of the victim went through the incident’s details, recounting the following to STJ:

**“At 5:00 p.m. on that day, Hussain closed the remittance shop; Mohammad Mandil also closed his gold jewelry shop, gathering all the gold pieces in a bag. The latter, then, boarded his car, along with him my relative Hussain, intending to go back home. Not there yet, face-covered persons and gunmen shot at Hussain, who died on the spot. Hussain was holding the bag. Mohammad, however, rushed out of the car, attempting to escape. The gang decidedly chased him; he started screaming: ‘Thieves! Thieves!’ Mohammad, then, was shot in the leg. A number of the gunmen were riding a motorcycle; the others were on board a car. They all managed to escape after they stole the money and the gold. Mohammad was immediately taken to a hospital.”**

The gunmen stole the bag, which contained about 7 kilograms and 200 grams of gold, in addition to a sum of money of about 5000 USD and 300,000 Syrian Pounds, the witness added, saying that nearly three weeks later on January 18, 2019, a person, who owns a gold jewelry shop in the al-Bab area, rural Aleppo, informed them that someone has offered to sell them a kilogram of gold, the descriptions of which matched that of the stolen gold and which have been generalized by the security forces. Commenting on this, the witness said:

**“When the stolen gold was reported, the security forces managed to arrest the thieves, who have been transferred to the HTS’ police station in the city of Sarmada. We were also given back the stolen gold. However, 600 grams of were missing. One of the captured gangsters, a merchant called Samir Salem, was trying to escape abroad with the stolen things, especially since his involvement in the robbery was reported. Through the investigations, two of the gunmen, who took part in the killing and the robbery, one of whom is known as Hassan al-Ba’aj, were later identified as associates of Daeash<sup>3</sup>. The perpetrators were then referred to the Sharia Court to meet their fair punishment.”**

## **2. Wholesale Robberies in Idlib Province**

Also in Idlib province, robberies underwent a marked increase, especially at the outset of 2019, for several incidents were recorded, some of which ended with the robbers succeeding in realizing their plans and others with failure, as Khalid Da’aboul, 40 years old resident of Maarrat Dibsah, who himself was a target for one of these incidents in February 2019, recounted to STJ. He said:

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<sup>3</sup> Daesh is the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State/ISIS/IS.



**“On February 7, 2019, around 1:00 a.m. while at home with my brother, we heard a noise; it came from the outside. We went out to find faced-covered persons attempting to steal my car. They run away immediately. I reported to the HTS-affiliated security forces. However, we obtained no evidence of who these people could be. They are yet unidentified.”**

Abdou Ahmad al-Sulaiman, a married man and a father from the town of Maarrat Dibsah, said that he too was a victim of a car theft incident in late January 2019. He recounted to STJ the details of the incident:

**“On January 31, 2019, unknown persons stole my car which was parked in front of my house. It just disappeared; I could not find any trace of it. I reported the car robbery and its descriptions on the social networking sites and informed the HTS-affiliated security services. Nonetheless, the perpetrators have not been identified to the date. The car was my sole source of living, aboard which I transported workers [to their jobs] every day.”**

Ramadan al-Abrash, another witness from the Maarrat Dibsah town, told STJ that his car was almost stolen on February 3, 2019, by face-covered persons. He felt that something was going on and yelled at them, which immediately sent them off. This also applies to Ahmad Dauoud from rural Idlib, who was about to lose his car on February 2, 2019, for unidentified face-covered persons attempted to steal it, too.

According to STJ’s female researcher, in early 2019 the town of Maarrat Dibsah, eastern rural Idlib, was a site to several killing incidents, where face-covered persons would shoot civilians to death or kill resorting to explosive devices.

On January 26, 2019, Subhi Saif ed-Din Judaie and his family were victims of an attempted assassination, for an explosive device was planted in his car by unknown persons. Due to the blast, Subhi was severely injured and died later. His wife and children, however, had less serious injuries, in addition to his brother whose leg was amputated.

On January 18, 2019, Mohammad Ameen al-Ragheb was shot at in the town of Maarrat Dibsah by unknown persons who managed to escape. The shooting caused no casualties.

### 3. Killings and Robberies becoming Numerous in Hama Province

The areas in western rural Hama, controlled by several armed opposition groups<sup>4</sup>, have also been witnessing a marked rise in killing incidents, due to which many civilians fell dead while the perpetrators' identity remains obscure, according to the many testimonies obtained by STJ.

On January 26, 2019, Suleiman Aloush, 50 years old man from the town of al-Hwaiz, western rural Hama, was killed at his house. One of the victim's relatives recounted to STJ the details of Suleiman's death:

**"Suleiman was a modest and beloved person, hearted by his town's people; one who had no enemies. He spent most of his time in the company of his family, consisting of three daughters and two sons. On January 26, 2019, Suleiman got his pension, 100,000 Syrian Pounds, in addition to the salary of a relative, 500 USD, and returned home. The next morning, his sister was surprised to see the door to his room open. Blood was everywhere in the room. She started screaming, and he was still alive back then. He had been hit on the head, for his sister was taken aback by the blood-covered pan, which the criminal has presumably used to hit her brother. Suleiman was immediately rushed to Idlib Hospital, where he spent 12 days in the intensive care unit, unconscious. He finally died there. We reported the incident to the security services in the town, but they have not been able to identify the perpetrators to the moment."**

The spread of robberies was not limited to Idlib province, for Hama province has also had a fair share of these incidents, according to Alkamah al-Qasab, 28 years old resident of western rural Hama. On January 23, 2019, his house, located in the town of Sahriyah, was raided by unknown persons. About the incident, he recounted to STJ the following:

**"On the mentioned day, I was at home with my family. I heard noises coming from outside and went there to see what was going on. I was surprised by face-covered and armed young men, in front of my house. I was scared. They greeted me. I asked them who they were, to which they answered that they are militants of HTS and want to search the house, seeking people they were prosecuting. I told my family what they were there for. A few moments later, they put a weapon to my head. One of them cocked the weapon. They got me all tied up, along with my sister-in-law and my father, who had a heart attack. They have even prevented him from taking his**

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<sup>4</sup> Most notably HTS and the Jaysh al-Izza/Army of Glory.

medications. My mother, for her part, was so scared that she passed out, for she was also sick and had high blood pressure. During this, they stole everything they came across in the house. They were seven and had stolen 1500 USD and 400,000 Syrian Pounds, in addition to 128 grams of gold, an antique Ottoman cane, which I inherited from my grandfather, and five cellphones. They then took the car keys, which they also stole, after they deposited us in one of the rooms and closed the door shut. They escaped. My sister-in-law managed to loosen her handcuffs; she loosened mine as well. I ran for a distance of 700 meters to a farm, the closest to us. We informed the security services and generalized the type of car they had stolen. We rushed my father and mother to a hospital in rural Idlib. The gang that raided our house and robbed us has not been captured to the date.”



The house of witness Alkamah al-Qasab, rural Hama, which was robbed on January 23, 2019. Photo credit: The witness himself.

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## 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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