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New Notifications Declare Dead Hundreds in Syrian Security Services' Detention Facilities

Update: At least 700 death certificates delivered to the civil registry directorates in the province of Hama alone in early 2019

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Introduction:

Starting early in December 2018 until late in February 2019, the Syrian Government-affiliated civil registry directorates have resumed informing relatives of detainees of the latter's death in the government's detention centers. Under this, and in the two provinces of Hama and Idlib, dozens of victims' families were shocked at the death news, which came after many years of anticipation. Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ was told by eyewitnesses and many of these families that the Civil Registry Directorate in Hama province has handed them over certificates announcing the death of their relatives, while no bodies or details of burial locations were given. Numerous documents and information, obtained by STJ, indicate that the death of many of these detainees was recorded not so long after they were arrested. However, death incidents were only reported at the onset of 2019.

According to the information attained by STJ's female field researchers in Hama province, there are about 700 death certificates of detainees, which have been delivered to the Civil Registry Directorate in the city of Hama and its countryside from the beginning of 2019 to the date this report was written in May 2019.

Late in 2018, the Registry Department of Civil Status in the city of Hama has been crowded with unprecedented throngs of detainees' families, who have all been notified of their relatives' death, the researchers recounted, adding that the majority of the people who referred to the department were women, for the particular reason that no man dares to approach the department as to get information or demand answers about their detained relatives' whereabouts, as they fear being arrested themselves. In December 2018 alone, the death of 60 detainees at least was unveiled by the registry departments of civil status in the full range of Hama province, the researchers reported.

Beginning in May 2018, lists arrived in many Syrian provinces, on top of which are Damascus, its countryside, Hama, Aleppo and al-Hasakah, containing the names of arrestees and detainees, who met their fate inside prisons affiliated with the Syrian security apparatus or those under the custody of the Syrian government. Later on, some of the families were informed of the death of a relative upon trying to obtain a detainee or a missing person an individual or a family civil registration extract from a civil registry directorate. Through a report, in cooperation with Sawt al-Asima/The Voice of the Capital and the Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism/SIRAJ, STJ has documented many deaths among detainees in the jails of the Syrian security apparatus.¹

In the aftermath of the information released on the death of numerous detainees and missing persons in the Syrian prisons, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry

¹ "Syria: Death in the Custody of the Government", DARAJ. September 4, 2018. (Last visited on June 15, 2019). <https://daraj.com/سوريا-موت-في-عهد-الحكومة/>.

See also: "Different Methods Recently to Inform Detainees' Parents of the Death of their Sons in Syrian Detention Facilities", STJ. August 2, 2018. (Last visited on June 15, 2019). <https://stj-sy.org/en/655/>.

on the Syrian Arab Republic has issued a sheet² on November 27, 2019, in which it concludes that the updates on the missing persons' registries are a confession on the part of government officials, including the senior members of the Military Police in the Syrian Arab Republic, that they own details on the fate of the deceased - the deemed date of death among others. It is for this end that the State also, implicitly, admits knowing the location where the detainee was upon his/her death and the role it might have played in the executions under a court order and others implemented outside the wake of jurisdiction.

I. New death notifications handed over to families in Hama province in early 2019:

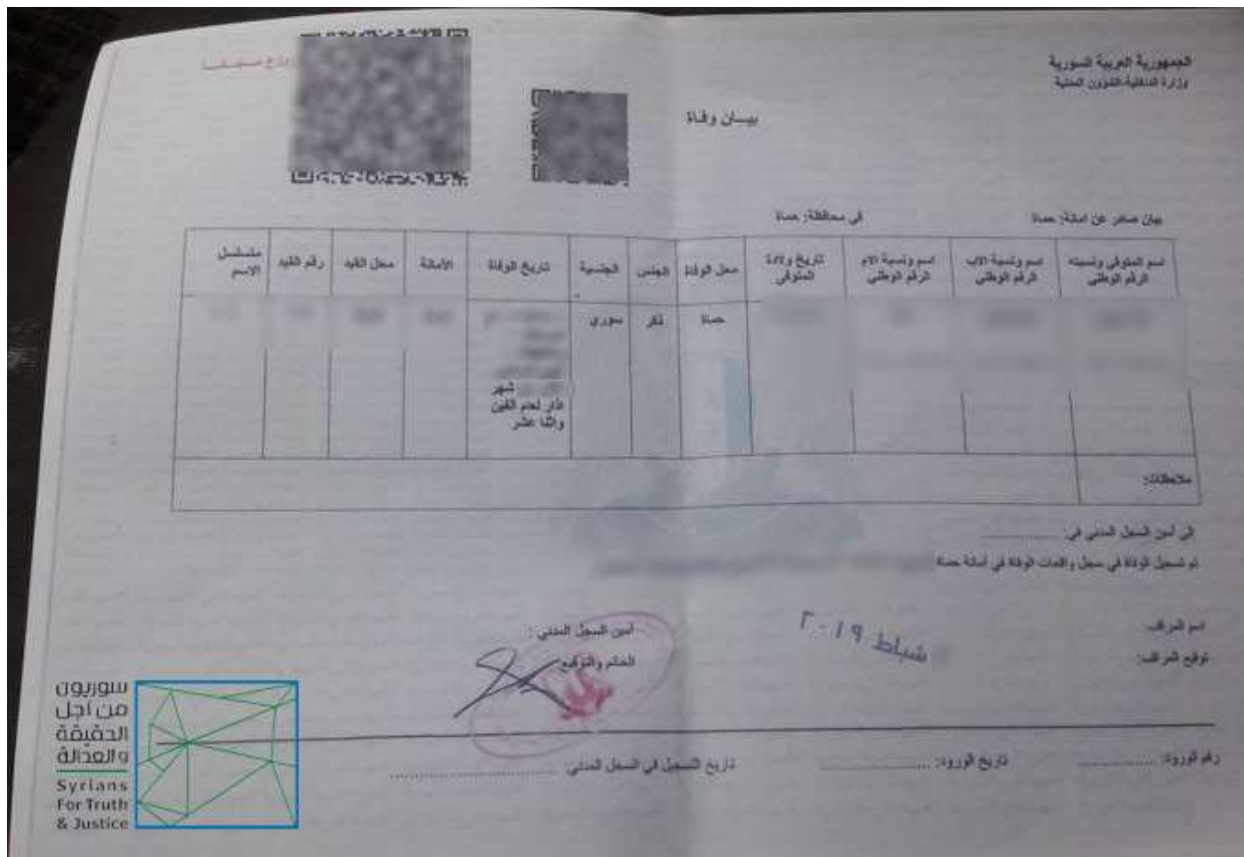
At the dawn of 2019, STJ documented the reception of death certificates by countless families in Hama province, held by the Syrian government, which are proof of the death of their detained relatives. These certificates have been there, in the civil registry directorate, for many years, as the families and relatives of victims reported.

In September 2011, "Khalil M.", born in Hama, married and a father, was arrested by personnel operating under the Military Security Branch/ Military Intelligence Division, who raided his house. Early in 2012, a detainee, released from Branch 215 in Damascus city, informed Khalil's family that he was held there too and that his health was worsening. News about their son went lacking until mid-2014, where another detainee, released from the very same branch, told them that he died due to sickness and torture. At the beginning of February 2019, the family was handed over a death certificate by the Civil Registry Directorate in Hama city, as one of the victim's family members recounted to STJ.

He said:

"My brother was arrested due to a fake/malicious security report. When the regime sent the lists of the deceased detainees to the civil registry directorate, we repeatedly sought it, but we have never got an answer. The last time we went there was early in February 2019, they gave us a death certificate. The employee told us that the certificate was not in their possession earlier on. The document carried March 2012 as the date of his death, which marks a few months into his arrest."

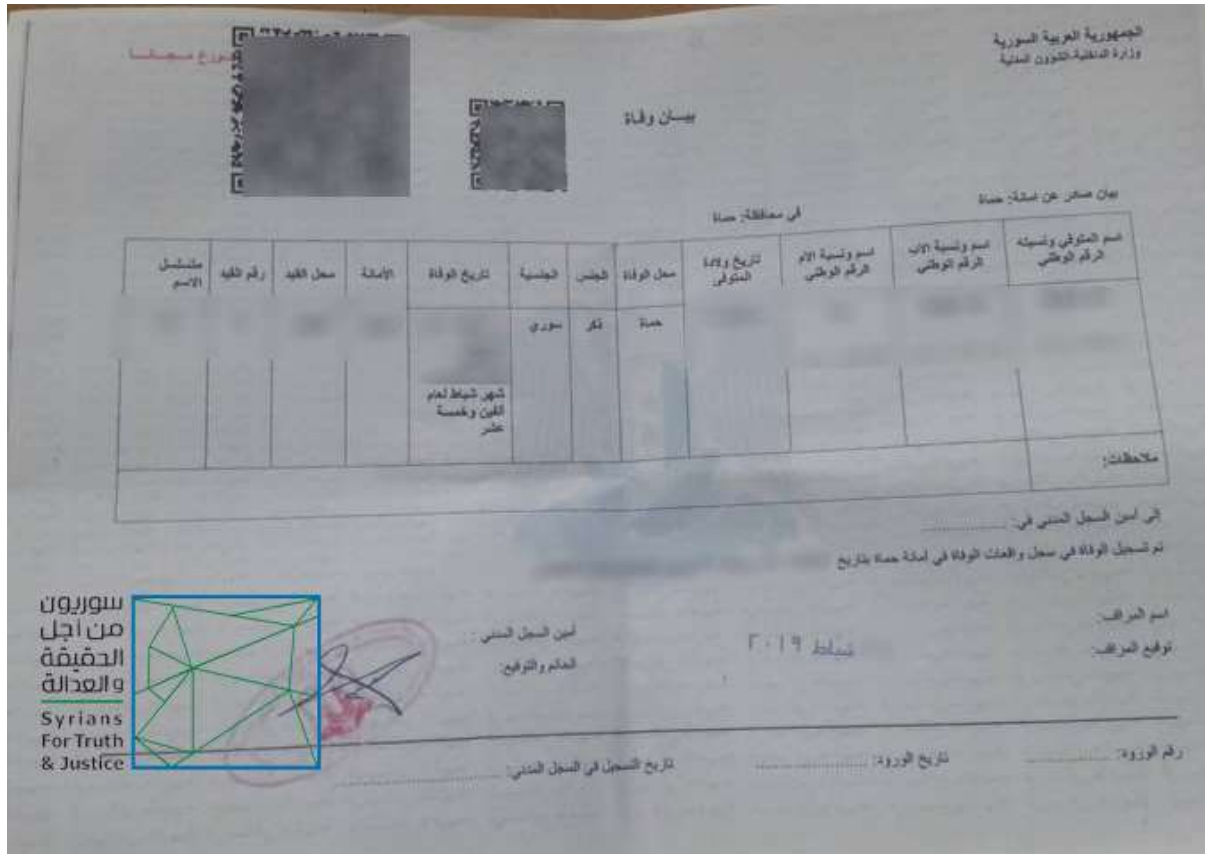
² "Death Notifications in the Syrian Arab Republic", Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. November 27, 2019. (Last visited on June 15, 2019). <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/death-notifications-syrian-arab-republic-enar>.



The death certificate of detainee Khalil M. Photo credit: STJ.

On June 2013, “Samir M.”, another man from the city of Hama, was arrested by the city’s Military Security Branch-affiliated personnel, after which he was transferred to Sednaya Military Prison in April 2014, where his family managed to pay him a single visit, after they paid a large sum of money to a middleman. The family, just like Khalil’s, was informed of Samir’s death in February 2019, upon referring to the civil registry directorate to obtain a civil registration extract. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

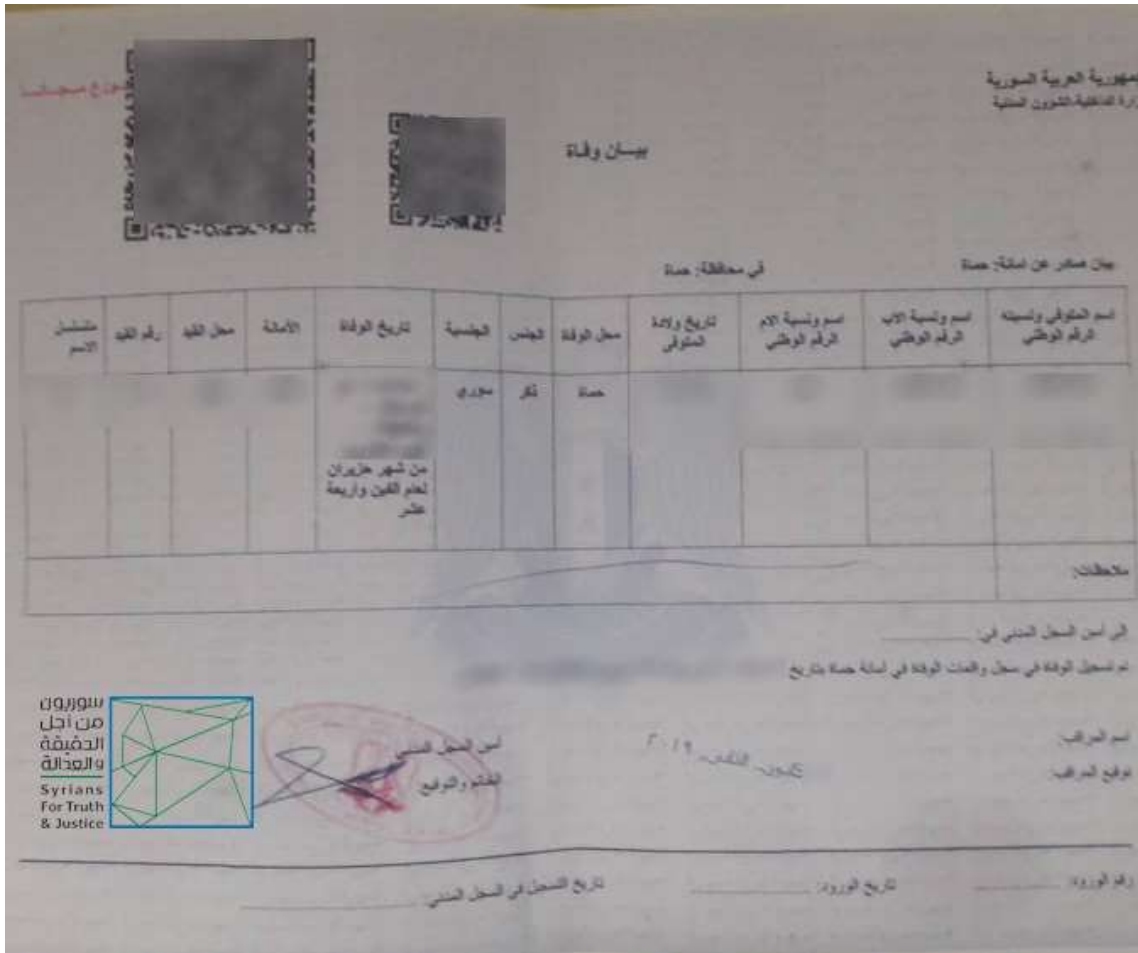
“We never expected his death news, as we have always been informed that he was alive. We were paying persons to release him; we were made promises that he would be set free. However, we were smitten when the employee of the civil registry directorate told us that Samir’s name was on the list of the deceased detainees. His name was reported to the civil registry as dead long ago. But we did not know that until February 2019, even though his death date was registered in the certificate as in 2015.”



The death certificate of Samir M. Photo credit: STJ.

In another testimony, an acquaintance of the victim “Amer N.”, born in the al-Bayada Neighborhood, Hama city, in 1990, said that Amer was also subjected to arrest along with his friend “Ahmad H.”, born in 1988 in the al-Baroudia Neighborhood, by militants of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate in the al-Murabit district, Hama city, in February 2012. The families of the two young men were informed of their sons’ death through the city’s civil registry directorate, in January 2019 in specific, despite the fact that Amer’s death was registered as have happened in June 2014 and that of his friend Ahmad in April 2016. STJ was told the following by a person close to both families:

“Amer and Ahmad were arrested together by the Air Force Security. Throughout the duration of their detention, both their families received no news of their whereabouts. Informed of the death of their son by the civil registry, Amer’s family dispatched the news to Ahmad’s, who in turn headed to the civil registry to make sure if their son was also dead or still alive. There, they were given a death certificate. Amer and Ahmad worked together in the distribution of aid to the families of martyrs. An informer reported them, and they were both arrested while on the way to the house of a needy and impoverished family in the al-Murabit district.”



The death certificate of the detainee Amer M. Photo credit: STJ.

Interviewed by STJ, several of the victims’ families in the city of Hama said that an employee at the Civil Registry Directorate has informed them that about 700 death certificates of detainees from Hama and its rural parts have been handed over to the directorate, which in turn is dispatching the death news to a number of detainees’ relatives every now and then, as not to cause ado among the area’s population, based on administrative orders the source of which was not revealed by the employee.

II. Families’ Hopes Crushed while 2018 drew to an End:

In Hama, while 2018 dragged itself to an end, the hopes of countless of detainees’ families were being trodden upon as they received notifications indicating the death of their beloved ones. “A Q.” recounted that his relative “Rami Q.”, 30-year-old, also passed away in the jails of the Syrian security apparatus, for his family was handed over a death notification in December 2018. The victim was arrested in Hama city in 2014, getting moved from one security branch to another, those of the Military Security and the Political Security apparatus included. In 2016, Rami was transported to Sednaya Military Prison, on the

charges of “terrorism and undermining the prestige of the state,” as well as the murder of several of the Syrian regular forces’ militants, as his family came to know.

“Four years into his arrest, Rami’s death news in Sednaya Military Prison reached us, for late in December 2018, the Mukhtar (governor of a neighborhood) informed us of the necessity of showing up at the civil registry directorate to get Rami’s identification document, stressing that we do not hold any funeral, otherwise we would be liable to arrest. When she referred to the civil registry, Rami’s mother received her son’s death certificate, which indicated the cause to the death as being a heart attack. Seeking answers concerning her son’s body, the employee told her that it was buried and that he knew nothing about its location,” the relative added.

On the same note, one of the detainees, who have been released from Sednaya Military Prison early in 2019, told STJ that he was being held in the same prison cell with the victim Rami Q. for four months in a row. He added that the victim was taken to the prison’s square late in 2017, where he was subjected to various forms of torture and forced to endure shabeh³ for five consecutive days, after which the other detainees heard nothing of him at all. Later on, they managed to know that he passed away affected by the torture he suffered.

The fate that awaited “Ali Th.”, from the city of Hama, was not that different from Rami’s, whose story has been narrated to STJ by his brother, saying that Ali, 37-year-old, was arrested by the Syrian security apparatus in 2012, which raided his house at night, for no other reason but participation in the anti-government demonstrations that swept the streets back then. He was accused of “backing terrorists.” The family managed to know that he was being held at the Hama Air Base, from where he was transferred to the Military Security Apparatus and then to the Palestine Branch. There, the family was informed, he went blind due to torture. In December 2018, following six years of arrest, the victim’s family received their son’s death news by the Civil Registry Directorate in Hama city and were summoned to be handed over a death certificate. Ali’s mother did actually refer to the directorate, where she was given a death certificate, elucidating the cause to the incident as being a heart attack. Demanding the body of her son, the employee denied having any information about it and stressed that his mission is limited to notifying her of her son’s death, the witness said.

STJ, for its part, managed to obtain a confirmation from a detainee who has been released from Palestine Branch in April 2018, where he spent a detention period of 4 years. The witness said that Ali Th. was being held with him at the same ward and that the latter died due to severe torture, at the outset of 2018 specifically.

“K Q.”, a female witness from the city of Hama, told STJ that her brother “Gh Q.” was arrested late in 2015, for participating in the anti-government demonstrations. The last

³ Shabeh is a torture position where the detainee’s arms are tied up backward and upwards so that the upper part of his/her body is forced forward and downward due to the imbalance of weight.

thing they knew of him that he was being detained at the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Hama city, after which he remained in the dark for three years. On November 2018, his family was notified of his death.

The sister said:

“My family received a call from the al-Hamidiyeh Police Department, located in al-Hader district, as to inform them of my brother’s death. Upon heading to the department, my mother was told that my brother died affected by an electric shock while using a food heater. They asked her to refer to the civil registry directorate to get his identification document and death certificate. It is all engraved in my memory; my mother went there; she found my brother’s name on the dead detainees’ lists. She went on the street, crying and beating herself in disbelief, for, to the moment, she hopes that his death certificate is a fake and that my brother is alive and kicking.”

In the same context, a detainee, released from the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Hama city in 2017, reported bearing witness to the victim being subjected to non-stop torture and severe beating, which mainly targeted his head, until he died in June 2016 due to a skull fracture.

In October 2018, the family of “Rafat H.”, from the city of Hama, was also informed of their son’s death. Rafat’s brother told STJ that the late detainee, 40-year-old, married and a father, was being detained in the prisons of the Syrian security apparatus since 2014. Reminiscing on the details, he said:

“My brother was arrested due to a malicious report. We lacked the slightest idea about him, except for his being detained in the Sednaya Military Prison. In October 2018, we were informed of his death by the Civil Registry Directorate in Hama city and we were asked to show up there, as to get his death certificate, in which his death was attributed to asthma. We actually did go there, where my family was handed over his identification document and death certificate. Attempting to get an answer concerning his body, the employee said that he was buried on the spot. However, my mother insisted on knowing, due to which the employee shouted and literary said, ‘Be thankful to God that you are informed of his death.’ Hearing these words, my mother started sobbing. We tried to conduct a funeral worthy of my brother, and my mother asked the Mu’athen (a person who calls people to prayers through Adhan) to mourn my brother. The regime’s personnel caught us off guard and broke into the funeral’s location, on board of their vehicles, which they equipped with Dushka machineguns. They yelled at the people, forcing them to leave the funeral and threatening to arrest them. In the end, we had to call off the whole thing, so no one would get hurt.”

One of the detainees, released from Sednaya Military Prison in mid-2019, told STJ that victim Rafat H. was held with him in the same cell. He recounted that his stomach was infected by some sort of bacteria, which rendered him severely ill and caused his death late in 2017. The infection resulted from dire sickness and lack of food and medications.

In July 2018, the relatives of "Samer L." were informed of his death in one of Hama city's detention centers. His brother told STJ that Samer, 46-year-old, was arrested in 2016, accused of dealing in dollars. His house, located in the city, was raided and all his furniture was sabotaged by personnel of the Syrian security apparatus. Later on, his family knew that he was being held at the Sednaya Military Prison and paid a lawyer a sum of 5 million Syrian pounds, only to release him. But all of this was to no avail. One day, his brother was summoned by the Civil Registry Directorate in Hama city to take his own brother's death certificate and identification document. He added that his mother, in her nineties, did not survive the incident, for she soon died out of extreme sorrow.

A detainee, released from the Sednaya Military Prison in July 2017, stressed that victim Samer L. shared the same prison cell with him, adding that a short time before his release, the deceased was taken into the prison's square. For two weeks, his inmates heard nothing of him, until a later point in time, where they knew of his death due to torture, as he put it.

III. New Death Notifications in Idlib Province as well:

The province of Idlib has also had a fair share of death notifications, where several families were informed of the death of their detained sons by the civil registry directorates that are affiliated with the Syrian government. In April 2019, for instance, the family of the victim Abdullah Mazen al-Saud, born in the Ma`arat al-Nu`man district in 1989, was informed of his death, for one of the dead detainee's relatives has mourned the victim through a post on the social networking sites, to which he attached the death certificate. It is important to mention that STJ has documented the detention of the victim by the Syrian security apparatus on February 21, 2012, during which he was a university student, studying sociology under the Department of Arts and Humanities in Aleppo University.⁴

⁴ "Joint Report: 'Years without a Trace'", STJ. August 27, 2017. (Last visited on June 16, 2019). <https://stj-sy.org/en/237/>.



The Facebook post through which the relative of the victim Abdullah Mazen al-Saud confirmed the death of the latter and published his death certificate. Photo credit: The personal Facebook account of Abdurrahman al-Saud.

On December 9, 2018, the father of the victim Ahmad Abdulhameed al-Mustafa, born in the town of Kernaz, rural Hama, in 1980, was also informed of the death of his son in the prisons of the Syrian security apparatus. In the city of Muhradah, the Civil Registry Directorate, to which the Kernaz town’s civil records are affiliated, summoned the father and verbally broke out the death news of his son as on May 25, 2012, in a prison which he did not define. On August 7, 2011, Ahmad was arrested at one of the Syrian regular forces’ checkpoints in the city of Idlib. About this, Hussain Wardeh, a relative of the victim, told STJ the following:

“Ahmad was a holder of a high school diploma and a father of three children. The regime’s forces arrested him in the city of Idlib, particularly in 2011. There, one of the regime-affiliated military checkpoints stopped him for an inspection and detained him while driving his car, according to one of the regime’s officers, who played the intermediary and informed us of the incident as we missed Ahmad for over a week. Since then, we had no clue of Ahmad, we have not even been told what charges he was facing. A month into his arrest, we managed to get his car back. Searching for him in 2016, his wife and father-in-law came by the information that Ahmad was detained in al- Qaboun Prison, Damascus. In the prison, they asked an officer about him, who reassured them that Ahmad was still alive.”

Concerning the fact that the Civil Registry Directorate in the city of Muhradah provided Ahmad's father with neither his son's death certificate, nor his identification document, Wardeh added:

"Ahmad's father was summoned by the Civil Registry Directorate in the city of Muhradah, asking him to show up as soon as possible. This alarmed the father, who only to hear whatever news of his son, spent 6 years traveling between the branches, the prisons and the judiciary departments of the regime's forces. What the employee of the Civil Registry Directorate in Muharada told him, nevertheless, blocked before Ahmad's father all the ways out. The father listened to the employee with tears streaming down his face and a heart about to cease while it beat with grief, as he knew that his son fell dead only ten months after his arrest. The father was informed of the calamity by means of words, for he was not given any sealed or signed document. Demanding information on his son's body, the employee told Ahmad's father that he had not the slightest idea."

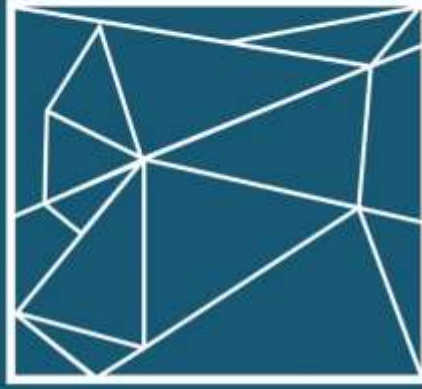
Sattouf Taleb al-Ahmad, born in the Muhambal district, Idlib province, married and a father of two, was also arrested by the Military Security Apparatus in the Southern al-Ramel district, Latakia province, on October 25, 2014. Late in 2018, the family was informed of his death, says Imad, the victim's brother, to STJ:

"On the day-named, our house was raided by personnel of the Military Security Apparatus, in the district of Southern al-Ramel, Latakia province. They arrested my brother and led him to an unknown destination. Later on, we came to know that he was taken to the detachment of the Military Security in Latakia, a detainee who was being held with my brother Sattouf, and got released later, told us. From him, we also knew that the charges filed against my brother were participating in anti-government protests and the formation of terrorist groups. Driven by psychological pressure and the anguish that Sattouf's absence from home caused, not to mention the continuance mental preoccupation with his fate, my father decided to go to Damascus, regardless of his old age. He wanted to look for his son and pay money to lawyers, so he might succeed in getting any piece of news that would ease his afflicted mind. He finally met a lawyer, who demanded a sum of 400.000 Syrian pounds, in return for transferring Sattouf to Adra Prison, instead of leaving him in the notorious Sednaya Military Prison. Without hesitation, my father agreed to pay the money. Ten days from my father's return home, the lawyer called him and asked him to come to Damascus. Back then, all my father could think of was that he would finally see his son. He was stricken when the lawyer told him that Sattouf died on November 14, 2015, almost a year after his arrest. He also told him that he has to refer to the Military Police in the al-Qaboun District, Damascus city, to get a confirmation and the identification documents. Adrift, my father went there a week later; his eyes caught the sight of my brother's name in the list announcing the names of detainees who died due to health-

related reasons. Crippled by his agony and tragedy, he decided to head back home without getting my brother's death certificate."

Sattouf's father died of a heart attack, for the pain and the suffering have taken a toll on his health. His mother is still feeding on hopes that she will meet Sattouf again, just like his children, 4 and 6 years old, who pray all the time that their father has survived while anticipating the moment of reunion to the day.

سوريون
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الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

STJ is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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