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Syria: Silencing and Abusing Media Workers

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Media workers and journalist in north Syria continue to face daily threats of violence and intimidation from the different parties in control. In areas controlled by the opposition's National Army, particularly in Afrin and northern rural Aleppo, media workers can't even speak about the violations and abuses they suffer in their daily work. Situation is no better in the province of Idlib ruled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), nor in the Autonomous Administration enclave where cases of exclusions and arrests recorded against media workers.

Fearing retaliation and prosecution from the controlling armed groups, journalists do not openly report the violations committed against civilians.

STJ field researchers monitored the working conditions of media workers in the provinces of al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Aleppo and Idlib, and confirmed that journalists, media activists, media professionals and reporters are deprived of their right to disseminate information or report violations committed by those in military and political control of territories.

I. The hazardous working conditions of media personnel in northeastern Syria:

i. The reality of media work in Afrin and northern Aleppo

Turkish military and the Syrian National Army, affiliated to the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, took full control of Afrin on March 18, 2018 after the large-scale campaign Operation Olive Branch.

STJ interviewed a journalist resides in the city of Afrin on June 17, 2019.¹ He said that media workers in Afrin, from both locals and displaced, are subjected to continuous violations graver than those they faced in Idlib. The journalist added that quite a lot of media workers who moved to Afrin, after it came under the control of Turkey and its Syrian opposition allies, returned to Idlib due to the risks and abuses they faced.

The same journalist went on to say that a number of local and displaced media workers in Afrin were arrested by the armed groups in control. Passing information to media outlets and covering some incidents, though social and humanitarian and not related to the daily violence the armed groups commit, were the main reasons behind those arrests. Among those arrested were Laith Al Abdullah, the reporter of Radio Alkul and Bilal Sarioul. They both were subjected to severe torture. That resulted in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among media workers in the region.

In Afrin there is a security service office for each armed group as well as a criminal security branch and a political security branch. Besides, there is a presence of Turkish and Syrian-Turkish intelligence (a joint operations room between the Syrian National Army and the Turkish intelligence) and a police service. All contribute to restricting the exercise of the right to freedom of expression by independent media.

¹ The witness preferred anonymity for security purposes.

STJ field researcher asserted that practicing media is almost forbidden in Afrin. As if any media worker wanted to cover or film an event, he/she obliged to obtain consent from the Turkish governor (Wali), who is staying at the Saray building in Afrin. However, some armed groups issued the media workers permits for filming, which other groups don't recognize and thus confiscate their equipment. Basically, the media work in Afrin confined merely to covering the local councils' activities and demonstrations denouncing war crimes committed by the regime or those in solidarity with war-affected civilians.

The journalist added that he tried with other media workers to meet the Wali, but the guards at his door refused to get them in after long hours of waiting. They eventually managed to talk to his interpreter who said to them:

"The Wali is open and willing to cooperate with media workers, but he asks you first to obtain permits from Ankara for each of your missions or a 10-day-validity work permit, and he would ratify them for you.

Both the journalist and STJ field researcher confirmed that if any media worker reported violations committed by the armed groups in Afrin, he/she would be subjected to arrest, torture, insults or the confiscation and break of his equipment at best. In case the journalist seen covering a social event, he would be questioned at once and arrested if he/she didn't have a permit from the Wali.

As for the conditions of media work in northern rural Aleppo, specifically in the Euphrates Shield areas, the assessment of freedom of the media differs from one city to another. In the cities of A'zaz and Jarabulus media workers given greater flexibility than those in other cities and towns. Still, workers in media face many difficulties like being impeded by the Free Police and armed group agents who sometimes beat and insult them or seize and break their equipment.

Journalists are barred from covering bombings or protests demanding improved living conditions in the area. Controlling groups also banned photography in hospitals and Turkish displacement camps such as al-Zawghara camp, even if the journalist obtained a permit for that. Those who caught filming violations committed by armed groups are arrested immediately. It is worth mentioning that quite a number of media workers are informers to the controlling armed groups and the Turkish intelligence. They provide reports on the work of other media personnel and contribute to their arrest.

Sa'ad al-Sa'ad, head of the Union of Syrian Media, based in A'zaz, said that the Union's legal office intervene in the cases of four arrested media men and exerted pressure to release them, they were Bilial Sarioul, who was arrested by the Sultan Murad, Basel Izz ad-Din, arrested by the Lions of the East Army/ *Jaish Usoud al-Sharqia*, Hadi Tateen, arrested by the Political Security Branch in Afrin along with others mentioned by the Union on its official Facebook page.²

² The Union of Syrian Media formed by a group of Syrian media personnel in November 2017. It is based in A'zaz city, Aleppo. The Union defines itself as an independent institution with financial autonomy and that unit

Al-sa'ad added that the Union has no less than 300 media workers and seeks to recruit more. He also notes that the Union operate in cooperation with the Turkish government and Walis and has no connection to Turkish intelligence. The Union offers media workers several advantages and afford them protection from violations and abuses.

ii. The reality of media work in HTS areas:

STJ field researcher confirmed that in the province of Idlib, specifically in HTS controlled areas, the margin of freedom for the media work shrinks or expands depending on the incidents to be covered. The researcher noted that media personnel face several difficulties and harassments by both civilians and authorities:

“Official bodies and parties in control look down on media workers while the civilians undermine their work and often blame them for arrests, vandalisms, and other violations they suffer from.”, said the researcher.

The media worker is at risk of being arrested, kidnapped, assassinated or targeted by improvised explosive devices most of the time, especially if his work is focused on sensitive topics related to the headquarters of the armed groups and the violations they practice. Doing that media workers receive threatening messages from unknown entities through fake social media accounts, and they are more likely to be indirectly arrested by armed masked men on the roads. It is worth mentioning that HTS arrested some media personnel from their houses or while performing their work.

According to STJ field researcher, media workers are arrested either by being summoned to the nearest security office, through a notice ordering him/her to go to the Ma'asara checkpoint of the al-Iqab prison (The Punishment Prison) or to Jisr al-Shughur court, or arbitrarily from their workplaces or on the roads by masked men.

The media worker prevented completely from working and filming in Idlib if he/she didn't receive a permit/approval from the salvation government or from the HTS' security office. He/she also prevented from approaching military headquarters, prisons, detention centers and even the sites of explosions, such as those occurred in Idlib during March 2019. Approaching areas and buildings belonging to the Salvation Government or HTS, which were targeted by air raids is also prohibited. Media personnel are also banned from working and filming in the western rural Jisr al-Shughur, where agents of Guardians of Religion Organization/ *Hurras ad Deen* and those of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria station. The researcher explained that media workers don't even dare to approach those areas.

Despite all of the above-mentioned, STJ field researcher asserted that the media work became easier and more accessible than before, since HTS started to be open to cooperation with media, which was evident through the repeated appear of its leader Abu

Syrian media workers under an agreed code of honor and declared goals, in order to organize their efforts, develop their skills and protect their rights. https://www.facebook.com/uinonmedia_workersy.

Mohammad al-Julani on media. To freely practice work, media personnel have to obtain filming permits from the media office of the Salvation Government or the HTS' security office, and in some areas they only have to coordinate with those in charge of the event they wanted to cover, provided that it must only be social or civil.

iii. The reality of media work in the Autonomous Administration enclave:

The conditions of media workers in the areas of Autonomous Administration are different from those in other regions, despite the fact that some violations, harassment and difficulties are shared.

STJ field researcher in al-Hasakah said that the Autonomous Administration requires licensing any media institution or worker wanted to operate in its areas. However, some media agencies are provided facilities while others are stifled and neglected by the Autonomous Administration which also prevented several opposition media outlets to operate such as Orient News, Syria TV and al-Jisr TV. Yet, some of those banned still covering social and humanitarian events in the Autonomous areas without being stopped. The field researcher pointed out that the Kurdish security agents (also known as Asayish) arrested some media workers while covering certain incidents and confiscated the equipment of others and beat them as well. Some media workers also were prevented from covering events such as sit-ins.

II. Arrests and violations against media workers:

STJ field researchers documented several violations against media workers in north and east Syria during the first half of 2019 encompass arrest, torture, severe beatings and the confiscation or breaking of equipment.

i. In areas controlled by the opposition's Syrian National Army:

the media workers interviewed by STJ were too afraid and firmly refused to talk about the violations and abuses they were subjected to or about the conditions of arrest by the armed groups. Some even refused flatly to mention their names in this report or the abuses they told us, for fear of being questioned and beat again like what happened to an unnamed media man.

Media workers indicated that the armed groups of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement and the Sultan Murad are the most who abuse media workers and stifle their freedom.

ii. In the HTS controlled areas:

STJ researchers documented several cases of arrest, assassination and assault against media workers, including:

- The arrest of Ma'an Bakour from his house in the town of Arihah on June 14, 2019.
- The assassination attempt against Nour Harmoush, who was shot by an unknown in the city of Idlib on January 28, 2019.
- The assassination attempt against Muhammad Khoudair, who was shot by an unknown while on his way to his house in the city of Jisr al-Shughur, on January 26, 2019.
- The assassination attempt against Omar al-Demashqi by exploding an explosive device planted in a car in the town of Sarmada on June 17, 2019. He was seriously injured as a result and died later on June 23, 2019.
- The arrest of Muhammed Summaq by HTS agents on May 12, 2019.

The field researchers confirmed many instances of preventions from media coverage. Omar Haj Qaddour, Ibrahim al-Khateeb, Saif al-Ra'ad, Ghaith al-Sayed, Ali Mustafa Haj Suliman, Yousif Gharibi, Ahmed al-Atrash, Ibrahim al-Darwish and Abdul Razzak Madi were all prevented from covering movements of the Turkish monitoring patrols in southern rural Aleppo and Idlib.

iii. In the Autonomous Administration areas:

STJ field researcher documented the arrest of:

Security agents of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) arrested -for unknown reason- Hazem al-Faraj, director of Bissan FM, on January 30, 2019 at 2.00 a.m., from his house in the An Nawawi Mosque neighborhood in Raqqa after searching it. Taha Seno, the executive director of Arta FM, was also arrested on February 20, 2019 by the government's state security branch in the city of Qamishli which released him on May 16, 2019. Further, Muhammad Taufiq al-Sagher, correspondent of the Syrian News Channel and the director of its office in Qamishli, was arrested on June 4, 2019 by the Asayish who accused him of setting fires to wheat crop. Lastly, correspondent of the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and the Al-Manar TV in Qamishli, Khalid al-Hasan, was arrested for unclear reasons on June 12, 2019.

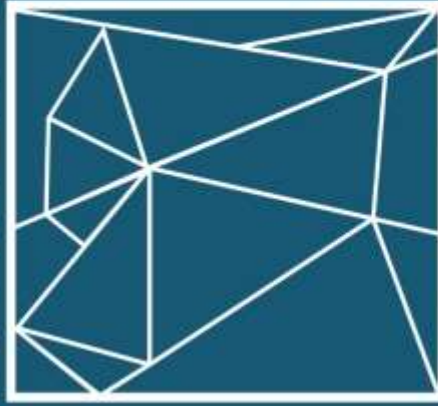
In a separate incident, the Northern Democratic Brigade, which is affiliated to the Syrian National Army, arrested the three media workers Issam Abbas, Radwan Khalil and Kaniwar Khleif.

on June 22, 2019. They were arrested near the city of Manbij, specifically in the village of al-Haisharia, while heading to meet a commander there in the context of filming a report on the Turkey-US agreement on Manbij. They unwittingly passed a checkpoint for SDF and lost their way to find themselves in front of al-Sajour Line, which separates the Euphrates Shield forces and those of SDF. It was the place from where they were arrested.

Media workers had been previously subjected to beat and torture by the Turkish border guards (Gendarmerie) and been deported with other asylum seekers from Turkey.³

³ "Turkish Gendarmerie Gun Down a Displaced Woman and Deport Syrian Asylum Seekers", STJ, June 13, 2019 <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkish-gendarmerie-gun-down-a-displaced-woman-and-deport-syrian-asylum-seekers/>

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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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