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Syria: Prominent Activists Arbitrarily Arrested in Raqqa

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Local authorities failed to justify the arrests

Introduction:

The Autonomous region in Raqqa, controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF, has witnessed a new wave of arbitrary arrests of, at least, 14 civilians including six prominent activists of civil society organizations, which have started to operate in the province after the Islamic State/IS (also known as Daesh) being expelled from it. The arrests were done by security forces of the Autonomous Administration and SDF, between August 1 and 23, 2019, for undisclosed reasons.

For the purposes of this report, STJ has interviewed several witnesses, detainees' relatives and local activists to know how the arrests were made and find their probable causes. The sources, however, asked for anonymity for security purposes and for fear of arrest and/or reprisals. The interviews were conducted online or in person by STJ field researchers and local partners.

Several eyewitnesses confirmed that no arrest warrants were shown to those arrested or to their families, nor were they informed of the reasons and legal basis for their arrest. Further, most of the families couldn't even know where their sons were held nor could they appoint lawyers to defend them. Reportedly, at least, one of those arrested had been beaten and his personal stuff confiscated.

international instruments do not always use the same terminology to refer to deprivations of liberty: they may refer to “arrest”, “apprehension”, “detention”, “incarceration”, “prison,” reclusion”, “custody”, “remand”, etc. For this reason the Commission on Human Rights, in its Resolution ,50/1997opted for the term “deprivation of liberty”, term that eliminates any differences in interpretation between the different terminologies¹.

I. Arrests against prominent local activists

- On Saturday, August 10, 2019, a patrol of the General Security stormed the Greek House Restaurant,² located in the town of Al Kasrah, near [Raqqa](#) city, searched it and told everyone there to present his/her identity card. And then arrested:
 1. Salah ad-Din al-Abed al-Kate', a board member of the [Future Makers](#) organization and the head of its media office.
 2. Anas Hasan al-Abou, the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at the Future Makers organization.
 3. Khalid Saud al-Salama: director of 'Traffic Safety' project at the Future Makers Organization.
 4. Eyas Hasan al-Abou: a media officer at the [New Horizons](#) Organization.

¹ “Fact Sheet No. 26, The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, GE.99-46207
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet26en.pdf>.

² The term “internal security forces” is sometimes used to refer to “general security”.

An eyewitness detailed STJ about the arrests made, saying:

“At about 09.30pm, a patrol consisting of three pick-up and two vans arrived at the restaurant. Seven men got out of the vehicles, some of them were in military outfit while others in plainclothes. They stormed the restaurant and asked all people there to present their IDs. Salah, Anas, Khalid and Eyas were then at the management office, they asked the patrol leader to come there and asked him their business. Then the latter asked the patrolmen to search the restaurant and they eventually arrested the four guys and a worker, who is a displaced from eastern rural Aleppo.”

It is evident from the eyewitness’ statement that the those who conducted the arrests didn’t disclose the reasons behind them nor the charges on which they had been arrested, which violates the obligation that says “Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.”³

Official authorities haven’t stated the real reasons behind the arrests and detentions as of the moment of compiling this report. Many relatives of those arrested, however, confirmed to STJ that the detainees were transferred by the authorities to the juvenile prison, near the train station in Raqqa and then to the Ayed prison [al-Tabqah](#).

Relatives of the detainees also went to the Public Security office in Raqqa and to its Court of Justice to ask about the fate of their sons. However, both entities did not show any cooperation or provide any information about the detainees, as reported by a detainee’s relative.

- On Friday, August 16, 2019, other security forces arrested the activist Hassan Kassab from his home in the city of al-Tabqah, Raqqa, without providing reasons. Kassab is the coordinator of the Euphrates Project in the Creative Foundation, of the START program which is funded by the US State Department.

Hassan’s relative detailed STJ field researcher about the incident saying:

“At approximately 06:00pm on August 16, just one day after Hassan's wedding, security agents raided his house and took him out while beating as he was resisting. They were four; two of them were in military outfit and the other two were in civilian clothes. They had a big fight with Hassan and the residents of the building gathered. Two of the patrolmen entered the house and took Hassan's black handbag.”

Hassan’s family along with local dignitaries headed to the Public Security office to ask about the reason for Hassan’s arrest and his whereabouts but they didn’t get an answer, and were thus unable to appoint a lawyer to defend him.

³ Article 9 (2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

- On Saturday, August 17, 2019, other security agents, who identified themselves as being affiliated to the General Security, went to the headquarters of the [Enmaa](#) Organization in the city of Raqqa, and arrested the executive director, Ahmed al-Hashloun, from in front of the building.

“A friend of Ahmed said that the latter was warned about possible arrest. As he received a call on the morning of the day of his arrest from an SDF member who asked him to go into hiding but he didn’t heed this warning saying “They have nothing against me. I have done nothing wrong. Whoever wants to arrest me can find me in my office in the organization.”

An eyewitness told STJ:

“On Saturday, August 17, at approximately 04:45 pm, a patrol of three van vehicles arrived at the organization's building and asked the janitor to inform Ahmed al-Hashloun to go out and talk to the patrol. Ahmed went out with a friend to talk to them. They were three men, one of them in military outfit. They asked Ahmed to go with them without explaining the reason or presenting any arrest warrant or summons.”

STJ learned that Ahmed's relatives had went to the General Security office in Raqqa city to ask about the charges against Ahmed and if they could appoint a lawyer to defend him, but the officers did not provide them any information.

II. The International Coalition’s responsibility for the Arrests

A witness who attended the meeting of representatives of civil organizations in Raqqa, on August 25, 2019, quoted an official source saying that International Coalition is the entity which ordered the arrests of the activists. The witness went on to say:

“The monthly meeting of the organizations’ office of the civil council of Raqqa was attended by the representatives of the Creative Organization’s four programs (Euphrates, Enjaz, Wi’am and Rashad), in addition to Mr. Mishlab Darwish, the Joint Chairman of the Civil Council of Raqqa and Abdul Salam Hamsourk, the Co-Chair of the Committee on Social Affairs and Labor, who spoke on behalf of the Civil Council, asking local and international organizations to focus their support on agricultural and service projects. At the end of the meeting, Darwish spoke about the arrests conducted against NGO activists in Raqqa by SDF but at the behest of the International Coalition. He said that he knew Ahmad al-Hashloun from a young age because of their kinship and that he was very far from being linked to IS, or to be a member of it .Hamsourk asserted that the arrest took place at the request of the International Coalition.”

A number of activists’ families and humanitarian workers said that the arrests are unlikely to be conducted by the International Coalition, citing the way they were done. As the Coalition

usually airdrops its soldiers at the middle of the night to arrest people wanted by it, with the support of SDF forces.

An agency close to the Autonomous Administration released a report [news](#) accusing one of the arrested to be a member of an IS sleeper assassination cell. The news was told by the Anti-Terror Forces (HAT units), and has not been verified from independent sources, which caused an outcry among the Syrian activists.⁴

The same agency [published another report](#) on August 23, 2019, entitled “Internal Security dismantles the largest IS cell in Raqqa”. The report made consistency between the [news](#) that published by the Internal Security Forces in Raqqa on its Facebook page on August 22 and the agency's first [news](#) report on August 19, 2019 of obtaining a "document" from HAT confirmed that the two detainees Ahmad al-Hashloun and Hassan Kassab have links with IS. Although the ISF's report did not identify the accused. It only said “the captured cell” was one of the largest sleeper cells which have been arrested by our forces recently in Raqqa.



[News](#) of arresting IS sleeper cells in Raqqa Photo credit: ISF's Facebook page.

⁴ The Arrest of the IS 'Assassination Cell' in Raqqa, North Press Agency, August 19, 2019

https://www.npsyria.com/blog.php?id_blog=3152&sub_blog=14&name_blog=%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82+%D9%84%D9%80+%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AB+%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B3%3A+%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84+%22%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%22+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A9+%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9+%D9%81%D9%8A+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9&fbclid=IwAR0-p59APB-yZgpMF39146CKB5iWqePbDzwzWSbqV5J7CFCWWFaF3udrGQ

In a talk to Syria Direct website, Mustafa Bali, head of SDF media office, denied his forces' responsibility for the Raqqa activists' arrests, saying that such operations are not for his forces.⁵

In turn [AL-Raqqa Observatory Human Rights](#), a local group that monitors the human rights situation in the province of Raqqa, said that the arrests took place for unknown reasons and the detainees' families were not told the place of their sons' detention or even allowed to hire lawyers to defend them. The Observatory called for the International Coalition to justify the activists' arrests and to tell their whereabouts and to allow families appoint lawyers to defend their sons in legal frameworks.

III. Further arrests

STJ field researchers documented seven arrests against civilians made by security forces of the Autonomous Administration/SDF, most of which on the basis of 'malicious reports' and the arrested are still unaccounted for as of the date of this report:

- On August 1, 2019, a security force patrol of SDF arrested Mohammed Saleh Ahmed (born 1979 and working as a teacher) from his home in the village of Al-Andalus and released him recently. An eyewitness recounted the incident saying:

"At about 11:00pm, a number of soldiers came to the house in the village of al-Andalus and introduced themselves as agents of the General Security. They searched the house and arrested Mohammad Saleh Ahmed. His family asked them repeatedly about the reason of his arrest, but the soldiers replied in threatens with arrest if they kept asking. They placed Mohammad in a white pick-up, escorted by a white van, and drove him to an unknown destination. The soldiers who stormed the house were in civilian clothes, except for two in military outfit."

- On August 9, 2019, Khaled al-Alali was arrested from his home in the village of Suluk by SDF members, who provided no information on the reason for the arrest and the place of detention .
- On August 11, 2019, Ziad al-Na'is was arrested by the General Security from his home in the village of al-Akirshi.
- On August 16, Hamid al-Abbar was arrested from his home by the General Security.
- On August 18, Mohammed al-Sheikh and Khalil al-Sheikh were arrested from their home in the village of Mushrifit al-Azu by the General Security.
- On August 23, Tha'er Musa al-Assaf was arrested at the al-Mansoura checkpoint in his village of al-Sehel. On the same day, Khalaf Darwish was arrested by the General Security from his house in the village of Hazema.

⁵ Mohammed Abd al-Sattar, Ammar Yasser Hammo, "The ambiguity of the motives of the SDF arrests of humanitarian workers raises questions and concerns in Raqqa, Syria Direct, August 19, 2019 <https://syriadirect.org/ar/news/%d8%ba%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b6-%d8%af%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%aa%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%82%d8%b3%d8%af-%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a5%d9%86%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%86/>

IV. Arrests made by the International Coalition

STJ field researchers reported that the International Coalition has executed two airdrops in Raqqa to arrest two people in suspicion of being IS members.

- On August 9, 2019, Ammar al-Akoush, a carpenter, was arrested from his home in the al-Nahda neighborhood by an airdrop carried out by the International Coalition.
- On August 19, 2019, a man was arrested following an airdrop of the Coalition in the Dar'iya neighborhood, which coincided with house-to-house raids by the SDF forces, resulting in at least two arrests, according to the available information.

STJ field researcher spoke to a former detainee, who was arrested following an earlier airdrop by the Coalition and released recently. He talked about the way and circumstances of his detention saying:

"My brothers and I were at our house in the al-Nahda neighborhood in Raqqa. At 11 p.m., we heard the sound of an approaching helicopter. About 15 soldiers-fully dressed in black- of both the International Coalition and SDF, get out of it and stormed the house. They ordered us to turn our faces to the wall, then they blindfolded and handcuffed us and ordered us to move towards the door with two soldiers hold each of us. They placed us in a car which drove us a long way to the military base in the Ain Issa district. They threw me in an incommunicado detention knowing nothing about my brothers.

Two weeks later, they called me for questioning which continued for about two months on several sessions. I was not beaten or physically hurt. They accused me of joining IS. But they found out that I was abroad and have backed recently, so they released me after two months."

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Personal freedom is a natural right enshrined in the international human rights instruments, in particular article 9 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁶ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)⁷ protect the right to personal liberty, meaning that no one shall be arbitrarily detained.

Detention, which, in itself, is not a violation of human rights and can be legitimate, becomes arbitrary when the deprivation of liberty is carried out in violation of fundamental rights and guarantees set forth in relevant international human rights instruments.⁸ The UN Working

⁶ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UN, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

⁸ 'Arbitrary Detention', Al-Karamah, <https://www.alkarama.org/en/issues/arbitrary-detention>

Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD)⁹ has defined several categories under which detention is arbitrary:

- ✓ When it is impossible to invoke any legal basis for the deprivation of liberty (as when a person is kept in detention after the completion of his sentence or despite an amnesty law applicable to him/her);
- ✓ When the deprivation of liberty results from the exercise of the rights or freedoms guaranteed by the UDHR and the ICCPR, such as the right to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association;
- ✓ When international norms relating to the right to a fair trial have been totally or partially violated, for example if the person has been imprisoned without charge or denied access to a lawyer;
- ✓ When the deprivation of liberty is based on discriminatory grounds such as, amongst others, on ethnic origin, religion, political or other opinion or gender.

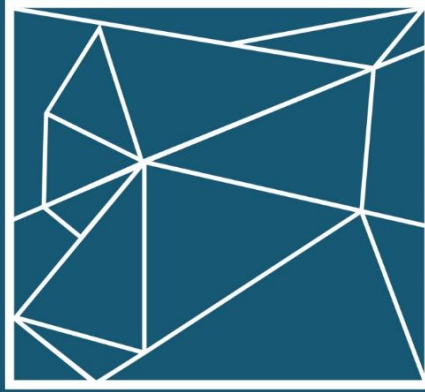
Recommendations:

1. Local authorities should explain and clarify the legal basis for every arrest or detention and publish them in a language clear and understandable by all citizens, especially in cases of arresting civilians and activists.
2. Arrests must be carried out only by competent authorities, on the basis of official permits issued by the Office of the prosecutor or those authorized to issue such orders.
3. Detainees should be given the right to communicate with their relatives and lawyers without delay. They also should know the reasons for their arrest, and be promptly tried or released.
4. Upon indictment, the accused must be tried fairly before an independent court and domestic and international human rights organizations should be allowed to monitor trials.

⁹ For more info, see: 'Working Group on Arbitrary Detention', UN, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/detention/pages/wgadindex.aspx>.

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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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