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Tell Abiad: 13 Arrests and Further “Violations by the “National Army

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*Numerous violations were committed by the Levant Front in January
2020, ranging from arrest, torture, kidnapping and robbery at
gunpoint*

The Turkish-backed National Army of the Syrian Interim Government-operating under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces- continue to abuse civilians in the city of [Tell Abiad](#), to the north of the province of Raqqa, with the support of Turkish intelligence patrols, arresting 13 people arbitrarily in January 2020.

The National Army's Levant Front/*al-Jabha al-Shamiya* is the responsible for the violations against civilians which went further to kidnapping for ransom, torture, mistreatment and threats at gunpoint in order to rob money and other stuff. Moreover, the Levant Front turned the private and public buildings it seized during "Operation Peace Spring", into detention centers.

For the preparation of this report, STJ met families of a number of detainees and relatives of a civilian, who has been kidnapped and tortured. The organization also monitored recent establishment of detention centers and managed to locate them. The interviews were conducted online and by phone.

Background:

On October 9, 2019, Turkish president Rajab Tayyip Erdogan [announced](#) the launch of "Operation Peace Spring" into northern Syria by Turkish forces and allied rebel groups in the National Army of the Syrian Interim Government, operating under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.¹

Just a day before the start of the operation, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces released a statement supporting the Turkish announcement of a looming military operation in the region. The statement said "The Coalition supports the efforts of the National Army, the Ministry of Defense and those of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We confirm the readiness of our National Army to combat terrorism in cooperation and joint action with brothers in Turkey."²

The Minister of Defense, Salim Idris, announced on October 7, that the National Army has completed the necessary training for the upcoming military operation in northeastern Syria.³

This was preceded by other military arrangements, as the National Army and the National Front for Liberation announced their full integration on October 5, 2019.⁴

¹ Erdogan in a tweet: "I would like to kiss the foreheads of all hero members of the Mohammadan Army, participating in "Operation Peace spring", and I wish success to them and all the local supportive elements that stand side by side with Turkey in this operation, God bless you and was in your help", Erdogan's official Twitter account, October 9, 2019, (last visit: January 25, 2020) https://twitter.com/rterdogan_ar/status/1181927322271830016?s=20.

² "Syrian Coalition Reaffirms Commitment to Fighting Terrorism & Liberating Syria from Tyranny & Terrorist Orgs", a press release by the Syrian National Coalition – Syria Department of Media & Communications, October 8, 2019, (last visit: October 22, 2019) <http://en.etilaf.org/press/syrian-coalition-reaffirms-commitment-to-fighting-terrorism-liberating-syria-from-tyranny-terrorist-orgs.html>.

³ "National Army completes preparations for military operation east of Euphrates", Yeni Şafak, October 7, 2019, (last visit: October 22, 2019) <https://www.yenisafak.com/ar/news/3438458>.

STJ has earlier issued a press release calling for an investigation of state and individual responsibility for the Turkish invasion/incursion into northeastern Syria as it constitutes a violation of international law.⁵

I. Arrests made in January 2020:

The Levant Front arrested nine people, for undisclosed reasons or for alleged accusations, like dealing with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the involvement in the bombings which hit the area recently; the arrestees are still unaccounted for. In turn, a patrol of the Turkish intelligence arrested four people on charges of dealing with the SDF and released them later, however.

STJ documented the arrests and met families of some of the arrestees:

- 1- On January 3, Ismail Khalil Al-Badrani,18, and Abdul Basit,18, were arrested from their home in the village of Ain al-Arous, near Tell Abiad-for allegedly belonging to SDF cells- by members of the Levant Front headed by Sheikh Jouma'a, the commander in the group's security office who is directly responsible for the arrests against those accused of involvement in the bombings which took place in the area.
- 2- On January 7, another group, also affiliated with Sheikh Jouma'a, arrested Abd Rahim Mohammad, 18, Mustafa Hussein al-Khalaf, 55, Arif Mohammad al-Musa, 30, Abd al-Karim al-Ibrahim and his brother Izz al-Din al-Ibrahim from their homes in the village of Ain al-Arous, for the same abovementioned charge.
- 3- On January 18, a Turkish intelligence patrol raided the homes of Mustafa Al-Ahmad Al-Mustafa, Yassin Al-Ahmed Al-Mustafa, Aziz Yassin Al-Mustafa and Ismail Hassan Idris in the village of Tell Abiad Sharqi, near Tell Abiad, and arrested them on charges of dealing with the SDF. However, they were released after a week; on the 27th of the same month.
- 4- On January 22, a group of armed men came in a white van to the house of Jouma'a Mustafa al-Khalaf and arrested him, for unknown reasons. It was later revealed to the detainee's family that the group perpetrated the arrest belongs to the security office of the Levant Front.
- 5- On January 27, a group affiliated to the security office of the Levant Front group led by a man named Abu Abbar raided an exchange office owned by Ali Al-Aidu. The group allegedly took Ali in order to give them information about a \$200,000 money transfer sent by the organization Médecins Sans Frontières. Ali hasn't been released as of the date of this report.

⁴ "Merging the "National Army" with "The Front": A Syrian Step Against Who?", The New Arab, October 5, 2019. (Last visit October 22, 2019), <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2019/10/4/%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%86-1>.

⁵ "Statement regarding the Peace Spring Operation by Turkey in Northeast Syria", STJ, October 19, 2019 (last visit: February 20, 2020) <https://stj-sy.org/en/statement-regarding-the-peace-spring-operation-by-turkey-in-northeast-syria/>

II. Detention centers of the Levant Front:

STJ traced the locations of the Levant Front's detention centers in the town of Tell Abiad with the help of information provided by locals. It revealed that the group seized public and residential buildings and turned it into holding centers.

It is worth noting that these centers are unofficial, as [Tell Abiad's central prison](#) is the official held center for the Syrian opposition's National Army, where it held the civilians arrested, along with members belonging to it who allegedly committed abuses and violations.⁶

Locals, detainees' relatives and former detainees confirmed the Levant Front's use of the following buildings as detention centers:

- 1- Post and Correspondence Building:** located at the northern end of the town of Tell Abiad, close to the border crossing with Turkey, and always surrounded by guards.
- 2- Women's Union Building:** located at the northern end of the town of Tell Abiad and near the border crossing with Turkey, directly opposite the municipal building. The group uses it as a security headquarters and brings detainees to it at night. The garage next to the building is used as a place of detention as well.
- 3- Al-Anbarji Buildings:** residential buildings owned by Syrian Kurds who displaced from the town and used to be members of the SDF. The buildings, which are located in the city center on the main road to the town, were seized by the group and turned into headquarters for its members. A basement in these building is used as a detention center. Thus, the entire residential square is closely watched and guarded as no one is allowed to approach it.

⁶ For more see: "Raqqa: Violations Committed by the "National Army" in Tell Abiad", STJ, November 18, 2019, (last visit February 20, 2020) <https://stj-sy.org/en/raqqa-violations-committed-by-the-national-army-in-tell-abiad/>

see also: "Arrests and Tortures by the National Army in Tell Abiad", STJ, November 28, 2019, (last visit February 20, 2020) <https://stj-sy.org/en/arrests-and-tortures-by-the-national-army-in-tell-abiad/>

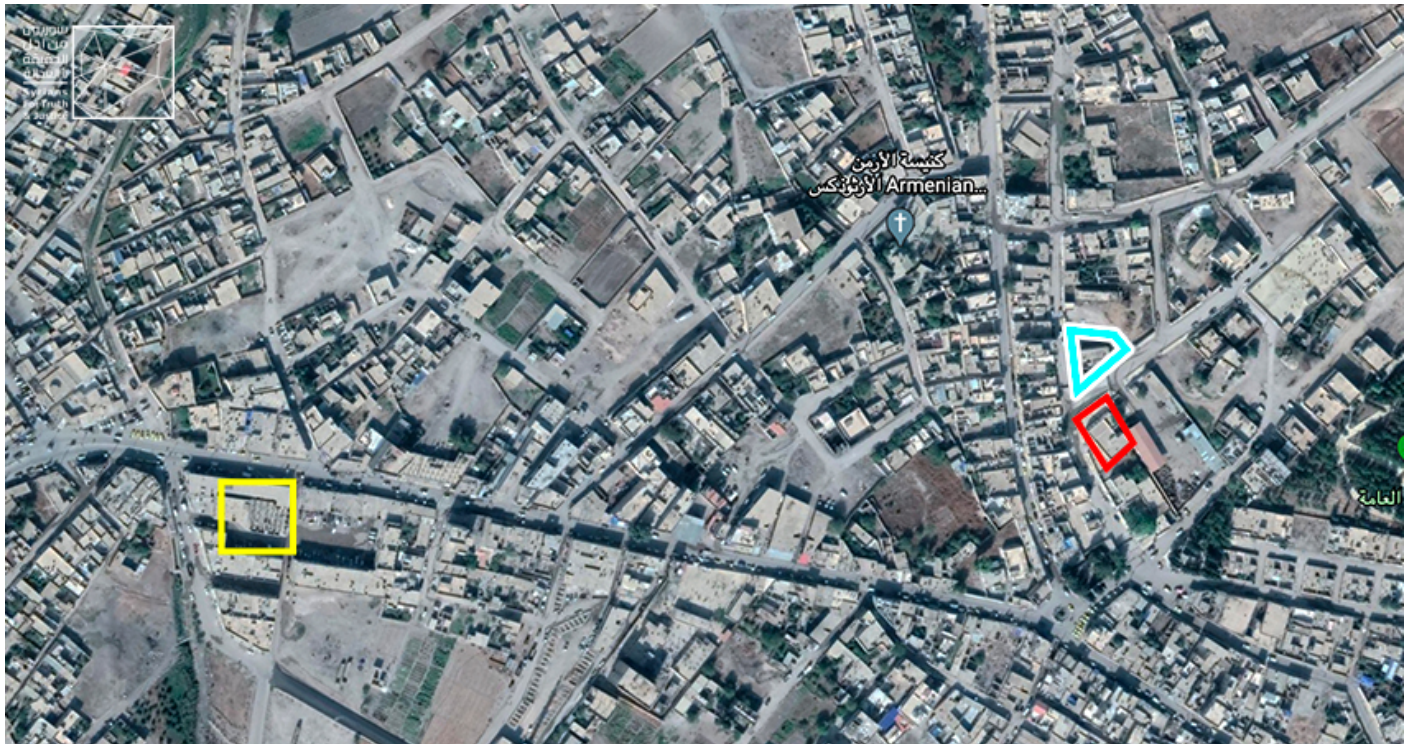


Image (1) the Turquoise square marks the location of the Women's Union Building. The red square marks the location of the Post and Correspondence Building. The yellow square marks the location of Al-Anbarji Buildings.

III. Violations committed by the group members against civilians:

Recently, members of the Levant Front committed various kinds of violations such as the seizure of public money at gunpoint, torture and kidnappings for ransom. STJ field researcher documented two incidents and met with families of the affected and the victims, and the incidents came as follows:

- 1- On February 6, 2020, the Levant Front arrested Darwish Ibrahim al-Darwish at a checkpoint of it named "Umm al-Barameel" near the village of Skeero. A member of the group later contacted Darwish 's family and sent them photos of him with visible marks of torture on his body, and asked them to pay \$1500 for his released.

STJ field researcher talked to a relative of Darwish who said:

"Darwish Ibrahim al-Darwish hails from the village of Frea'an to the west of Tell Abiad, and on the contact line between the National Army and the SDF. Darwish was arrested by the SDF about 15 days ago and sent to forced recruitment. He, however, managed to escape and tried to reach Tell Abiad, but was captured at the Levant Front's Umm al-Barameel checkpoint on charges of joining the SDF."

The witness added:

"A member of the Levant Front sent me several photos show the marks of torture on Darwish 's body. The member asked for \$1500 for the release of Darwish. However, we told the Levant Front's security office about the incident and sent them a call recording and the photos we received. The security office said that the accused member was referred for prosecution to the military judiciary, but so far Darwish has not been released and we do not know his fate."



Marks of beatings on the body of Darwish Ibrahim al-Darwish, who is held by the Levant Front.
The photo was provided to STJ by a relative of Darwish.

- 2- On December 26, 2019, the two security leaders in the Levant Front, Mohammad al-Zeno, nicknamed Abu Abbar, and Abu Ubai, stormed the local council in the town of Tell Abiad, threatening its head and employees with weapons, and asked them to pay for repairing an electric generator seized by the group from the Water Department building and moved to one of its headquarters, located near the council, which was previously the Women's Union building.

A witness said to STJ field researcher:

"Levant Front members headed by Abu Abbar and Abu Ubai, surrounded the local council's building and fired indiscriminately at it and at a car parked near it, which belongs to an employee's relative. Then, the two leaders entered the building and threatened to arrest all present if the council did not pay SP.250.000 for repairing the electricity generator in the group's headquarters. Abu Ubai put the barrel of his gun on the chest of the local council's head compelling him to obey the orders, so he was forced to pay the required amount."

The witness pointed out that the local council lodged a formal complaint to the Turkish authorities responsible for the area, but the latter took no action.

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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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