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Populace Enraged over Blackmail at Syrian Checkpoints in Quneitra

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Introduction:

In late August 2019, the Syrian security services in the [province of Quneitra](#), south of Syria, have set up several new checkpoints, amounting to more than seven fixed posts and two mobile ones, added to about 18 checkpoints spreading throughout the province.

The majority of these checkpoints are affiliated with the Military Security Service / Military Intelligence Division in Quneitra. A few others, however, are associated with the Air Force Intelligence Department, set up in different parts of the province—starting from the northern suburbs of the city of Khan Arnabeh, to the central suburbs of the village of Jaba and Suwaisah, as far as the southern suburbs of the village of al-Rafeed.

Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, for its part, has monitored several cases of blackmail and violations committed by these checkpoints against the area's locals, where the officials running these checkpoints demanded that the locals pay certain amounts of money in return for the release of those who have security reports filed against them and those supposed to perform the reserve military service, despite the fact that the majority of the province's locals are holders of the settlement card, a proof that they have underwent a legalization of status with the Syrian Government. The two categories are arrested for several hours, during which a process of negotiation is concluded with defining a certain amount of money the arrested person is to pay. Persons supposed to perform mandatory military service are also forced to sign a pledge form that they are to refer to their Recruitment Divisions within 10 days, knowing that a large number of Quneitra's youth are on a deferment period that ends in late November 2019 while they are entitled to extend it to March 2020, a staff member of the General Recruitment Division reported to STJ.

The new wave of security measures inspired a state of discontent and anger among the locals, as it paralyzed the population's mode of action and disrupted their work routine, especially since there is hardly any person who is not the subject matter of a security report or is not ordained to perform mandatory or reserve military service in areas that were previously held by the armed opposition in Southern Syria.

These measures have also caused an upsurge of concern among the province's people who are seeking refuge in Turkey and Lebanon, given the involuntary deportations imposed on Syrian refugees in both countries,¹ in addition to the detention of a number of Syrians at the military checkpoints of the Syrian regular forces after they were deported by the Lebanese Security forces. The repetition of these practices is feared, as they might target thousands of Quneitra Province's residents, who fled to Turkey and Lebanon as the armed conflict peaked and since many are threatened by security reports that the Syrian authorities yet keep hold of.

¹ See for example the following report: "Turkey: Renewed Concern Among Syrian Refugees over a New Wave of Illegal Deportations." STJ, October 29, 2019. Last visited: 27 March 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkey-renewed-concern-among-syrian-refugees-over-a-new-wave-of-illegal-deportations>.

According to STJ's field researcher, no one was spared the measures enforced by the checkpoints, for the inspections targeted women and elderly, as three women were arrested due to the security reports filed against them and were released a day later. Additionally, more than 60 cases of blackmail against civilians were recorded since these posts were first established.

1. Blatant Violation of the Settlement Agreement:

In accordance with the settlement agreement signed with the armed opposition groups in the suburbs of Quneitra on July 19, 2018,² the Syrian Government pledged to grant amnesty to all those who endorse this agreement and to cease the prosecution efforts of defected officers and soldiers, as well as to stop searching for civilians and allow for the deferment of mandatory military service. This package of promises backs the Russian guarantees that no one will be harassed for anti-government activity during the years leading up to the agreement, including protecting people from prosecution, writing off the names of wanted persons, and ensuring that no acts of reprisal will be committed by the Syrian Government and its affiliated security branches.

The agreement also affirmed the former state employees' right to return to their posts and university students' right to pursue their education, as well as the necessity to establish a committee to follow up the detainees' affair and guarantee freedoms, including the freedom of expression, under the law. The agreement also stated that those who do not wish to engage in its terms can leave the area to Northern Syria.

This agreement was signed in the wake of a similar agreement that was concluded by the armed opposition groups in the province of Daraa and the Syrian Government. It is worth mentioning that in Quneitra, the armed opposition groups, estimated with more than 20 armed bodies,³ had controlled the greater part of the province, covering over 80 percent of its total area— about 1200 square kilometers.⁴

2. Young Men Seeking means to Leave the Province and the Country:

The province of Quneitra is today almost void of population, reported STJ's field researcher who visited the province earlier on and managed to interview a number of civilians:

² "The terms of Settlement Agreement in Rural Quneitra, Concluded by Rebels and Damascus." Russia Today, July 15, 2019. Last visited: March 28, 2020. https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/958194-بنود-الاتفاق-في-ريف-القنيطرة-بين-الحكومة-السورية-والمسلحين/

³ On top of these armed groups were Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamia/Ahrar al-Sham, Maghaweer al-Golan/Golan's Commandos, Liwa al-Sabattayn/al-Sabattayn Brigade, Liwa Sayif al-Islam/Sword of Islam Brigade, Liwa Ahrar al-Golan/Rebels of Golan Brigade, Maghaweer al-Sunnah/al-Sunnah Commandos, Liwa Muadh ibn Jabal/ Muadh bin Jabal Brigade, Liwa Shuhada al-Mu'alaka/ Martyrs of al-Mu'alaka Brigade.

⁴ These armed groups held the reins to power in the province from mid-2012 up to July 2018.

“In Quneitra, today, the streets are witnessing a diminished movement on the part of citizens, especially in the central and southern suburbs, compared to action in the years prior to the settlement agreement, for in the past years, the province was a shelter to thousands of residents, escaping the western and northern rural parts of Daraa, as well as the displaced people who fled the armed conflict in rural Damascus.”

The almost nonexistent street life, civilians informed STJ’s field researcher, is thus because the province’s youth are heading to smuggling routes on a daily basis, seeking areas beyond the province and the country to escape the general situation. The situation deteriorated further as new checkpoints were setup throughout the province under resolutions issued by Branch 220 in Quneitra— known as the Sa’sa’ or the Quneitra branch, according to local activists.

In the past five decades, the population of Quneitra was the object of two displacement waves, the greatest compared to the ones witnessed by the rest of the Syrian regions. The first took place after the Israeli occupation took control of a large portion of its area. The war back then sent more than half a million Syrians in Quneitra on a flight of displacement, who spread throughout most of the Syrian provinces, suffering for forty years, both the scourge of displacement and the loss of home. The second wave, nonetheless, took place after 2011, when people escaped the war between armed opposition and the Syrian regular forces.

Today, a year into the Syrian regular forces’ return to the province, the area is witnessing almost daily emigration and smuggling efforts, as its young people are constantly attempting to flee it towards Lebanon and Turkey through the province of Idlib, wishing to dodge mandatory conscription or due to security concerns. A significant segment is, however, attempting an escape driven by the poor living conditions and the rising rates of unemployment.

Covering the period from August 29, 2019 to September 12, 2019, STJ’s field researcher in the province of Daraa managed to document the escape of 11 young men, mostly from the southern suburbs of Quneitra, who headed towards Northern Syria and Lebanon, triggered by the checkpoints erected in different parts of the province.

3. Tension Mounts as Military Security Sets up Checkpoints in Quneitra:

On August 28, 2019, the residents and locals of the province of Quneitra were surprised that the Military Security Service has established several checkpoints at the entrances to and exits of the villages of the northern, central and southern suburbs of the province, such as the ones in the towns and villages of Khan Arnabeh, Juba, Suwaisah, al-Rafeed, Qusaybiya and Ghadeer al-Bustan. The checkpoints, which threaten to destabilize the rhythm of the civilians’ life, took two forms:

Fixed Checkpoints: Five in number, according to STJ’s field researcher’s estimates, the checkpoints were placed in specific areas, highly sensitive when it comes to the population’s

movement between the different areas in the province, either for work or for other daily errands.

Mobile Checkpoints: Dubbed by the residents as flying checkpoints, these posts consist of militants of the Military Security, who drive a car equipped with a computer that contains files of all the prosecuted people. The cars change places suddenly, creating the quality of the checkpoints' name.

The Military Security's personnel, eyewitnesses confirmed to STJ, had ordered changing one of the vehicles affiliated with the Syrian Red Crescent/ Quneitra branch, which used to transport staff - into a mobile checkpoint. On September 2, 2019, the vehicle roamed the streets of the following villages and towns: Ghadeer al-Bustan, Qusaybiya, Karkas, Abu Ghara and Rabi al-Sakher. The witnesses also affirmed that a civilian Kia Rio was designated to the same purpose and that it carried out inspections in another set of villages and towns.

Going by the pseudonym Abu Sadam, one of Quneitra's sheikhs, said that the task allocated to the majority of these checkpoints is:

"These checkpoints are basically tasked with stopping any citizen on the street and inspecting his/her ID to know whether he/she is the subject matter of a security report or not. The reported citizens then unfortunately become the victims of these checkpoints, as they will be subjected to material blackmail and then involved in a process of negotiation to name a specific amount of money they are to pay in exchange for their release. The checkpoints are also coercing citizens, reported or those dodging mandatory and reserve military service, into signing a pledge form that they are to refer to the branch concerned with reports against them or the recruitment divisions within a week to ten days. To culminate civilians' fear, the inspector threatens to arrest these citizens at the first checkpoint they pass and of being held accountable on the due date. The militants at the checkpoint would usually exaggerate the crimes a citizen is supposedly charged with, saying expressions such as: 'Have you done all this? Hasn't the so-and-so branch arrested you yet?' Next, comes the role of another militant, who plays the intermediary, taking the citizen aside and telling him/her: 'I will help you, give me such and such a sum, and I will convince them not to write to the branch or recruitment division searching for you.' And indeed anyone who lives in this country and who knows the criminality of these security services will simply succumb to these demands."

4. Refugees from Quneitra in Turkey and Lebanon are Highly Anxious:

The effect of the new security measures applied in Quneitra reached beyond its administrative borders and its national ones, too, for they catalyzed a heightened sense of concern among refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, who are originally from Quneitra, given the forced deportations to which Syrian refugees were subjected to in the two countries. In a former report, STJ has documented the involuntary transfer of thousands of Syrian refugees

from Turkey to Syria,⁵ in the context of the latest campaign launched by the Turkish authorities against those whom they described as violating the state's laws— the campaign reached zenith in July 2019.

The Lebanese General Security, for its part, deported 2,731 Syrians between May 21 and August 28, 2019 and handed them to the Syrian authorities. The deportations followed a resolution made by the General Security on May 13, 2019, which provided for the deportation of all Syrians who entered Lebanon irregularly after April 24, 2019. Human Rights Watch, in a former report,⁶ documented the arrest of at least three Syrians by the Syrian authorities, who the Lebanese General Security deported to Syria despite the fact that they entered Lebanon before April 24. Concern is aggravating over the possibility of repeating these practices against thousands of people from Qunitera who are today refugees in Lebanon and Turkey and sought the two states after escaping the relentless armed conflict and the security reports filed against them, which the Syrian authorities are yet keeping.

Khaldoun M., 28 yrs., a resident of the town of Mushairfeh, north of Quneitra, has been a refugee in Lebanon for more than six years. He expressed to STJ his growing concern over the new security measures in the province of Quneitra, saying:

“I was arranging for my return to Syria, as I was planning to get married. However, my father and my friends advised me to take my time after the security forces set up checkpoints at the entrance to the town and arrested civilian residents who have already legalized their status. I am worried, how I am going to be treated that I do not even have a settlement card!”

5. Witnesses and Victims:

Documenting these overt violations, STJ has interviewed several people victimized by these checkpoints, whose real names are not reported for security concerns.

Said S., a 36 years old local of the province of Quneitra and a father of four, recounted to STJ that on August 10, 2019, he was subjected to blackmail by the personnel at the al-Heiran checkpoint. Going further into details, he added that:

“I was not surprised when a member of the Military Security asked for my ID. They do this every now and then. However, I was taken aback, when he ordered me to enter one of the checkpoint's rooms. Inside, the militant asked me: ‘have you referred to any of the security branches before?’ As I answered with negation, he told me that I was wanted for the al-Khateeb Branch in Damascus and asked me to sign a paper, according to which I am supposed to show up at the branch. I pleaded that he cancels the order, for I have a settlement card and my record is clean. I also told him that I will refer to the

⁵ “Turkey: Thousands of Syrians Forcibly Returned to Peril.” STJ, August 6, 2019. Last visited: March 28, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/turkey-thousands-of-syrians-forcibly-returned-to-peril/>.

⁶ “Syrians Deported by Lebanon Arrested at Home.” Humans Right Watch, September 2, 2019. Last visited: March 27, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/02/syrians-deported-lebanon-arrested-home#>.

branch when I can. Then, and without the slightest shame, he said: ‘Well, it seems that you are a good man; I will write it off this time. But you need to promise me that you will show up there as soon as possible and should tip me for the good news.’ By the tip, he means the money I am to pay him for releasing me. I had 4000 Syrian Pounds back then, but they were not enough. So, I pledged that I will bring him twice the sum the next day. However, he asked for about 15,000 Syrian pounds. I was willing to pay everything he requests, since the way into the branch is nothing like leaving it. In addition to the fact that if I was to enter the branch, I would have perhaps had to pay twice the sum, not to mention that I did not know for sure what was being reported against me, which might be a major felony.”

Said also stressed that dozens of civilians, elderly men and women included, were being blackmailed at the al-Heiran checkpoint, adding that they have arrested a female university student, who was the subject of a security report. They transferred her to Branch 220, where her family had to pay money in exchange for her release.

Abu Hayel, 54 yrs., another witness from the province of Quneitra—a modest shepherd who cultivates his land in the central suburbs of the province— was also subjected to blackmail at the military checkpoints. He narrated the following to STJ:

“On September 10, 2019, while on my way, with my eldest son, to the city of Khan Arnabeh, where I was to finalize the process of getting a family register, a number of officers in the city of Juba stopped me and asked for my ID. Shortly later, they summoned me inside the checkpoint, where the officer in charge of the inspection process, who sat behind a desk upon which a computer rested, told me that I was accused of bearing arms and that I had to refer to the Suwaida Branch. What made the situation worse was the fact that my son was supposed to perform the reserve military service. Noticing how perplexed I was, the officer asked me what I did for a living. I told him that I am a shepherd. He then said: ‘That is fine, the guys are craving barbecue. You get the lamb, and we will overlook your son. You, however, are facing a major charge.’ I got that he wanted more than a sheep, so I told him that I was ready for whatever he wanted. He, thus, ordered me to sit down and promised me that he would write off the security report filed against me and would stop the warrant issued by the branch that is searching for me. Nonetheless, he asked for a sum of 100,000 Syrian Pounds in exchange for that. I started negotiating the sum, as I told him that I could not afford it. With a threatening tone, he said: ‘When you will get into the branch, you will wish you had sold you house and never had to enter it.’ Here, I pleaded that he helps me. In the end, we agreed that I pay 50,000 Syrian pounds, which I indeed paid.”

Triggered by the practices carried out against the civilians by the militants at the checkpoints, Mohammed M., 32 yrs. and married, decided to leave the province of Quneitra to the city of Nawa, west of Daraa. He recounted the following to STJ:

“The city of Nawa is a lot more secure. I have been working there for a while— I do phone maintenance. When they set up checkpoints on the streets to my workplace, I

decided to leave Quneitra and live in this city. I am a married man, and I have a family. If I am to be forcibly recruited, my family will starve. I do not even have the money to bribe the checkpoints and the posts every day.”

6. Civil Action:

The violations committed by the checkpoints, affiliated with the Syrian security services, have charged the population with anger and discontent, for the measures have pushed the locals into a state of none action and hampered their businesses, as there is hardly any person who is not the subject matter of a security report or is not supposed to perform either mandatory or reserve military service in the areas that were formerly held by the armed opposition in Southern Syria. The situation, and the developments it underwent, is increasing the number of youths who are choosing to be smuggled abroad, desiring to leave the province for fear of arrest or forced recruitment.

Two weeks into the security measures, the dignitaries in each of Quneitra’s towns, unwilling to remain silent, have formed a delegation consisting of the community leaders of the towns and villages of the southern and central suburbs, including Dirar al-Bishr, the former head of the Free Quneitra Provincial Council and the directors of a number of local councils, associated with the opposition.

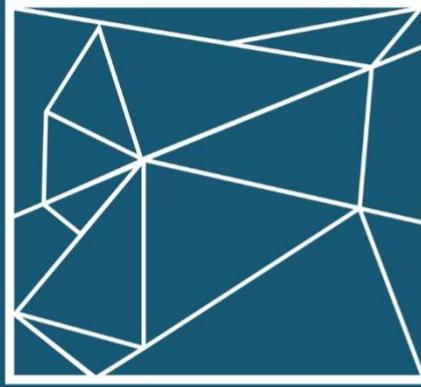
The delegation met Talal al-Ali, director of Branch 220—known as Sa’sa’ Branch, where they filed a complaint about these measures, which they considered provocative after the settlement agreement has been signed.

A delegation member recounted to STJ the details of the meeting, saying:

“The delegation consisted of about 20 persons, and the reception was good by the director of the branch, for he is respectful of the clan’s heads. When we filed the complaint, he was understanding and assured us that these checkpoints are only a temporary precautionary measure, and that he will issue an order to stop them immediately. His decision followed the explanation offered by a number of dignitaries concerning the tension created by the checkpoints among the people and that Quneitra became calm and stable after the settlement agreement was signed with the Syrian Government, unlike other areas in Daraa, which turned into a stage for assassinations, kidnappings and instability. The dignitaries added that it is this which makes it necessary to contribute and participate in maintaining stability instead of disrupting it.”

On September 13, 2019, STJ’s field researcher reported, only a few of the checkpoints of the Syrian security services have been removed; others, however, were relocated within the province of Quneitra, stressing that they were not totally eliminated. He added that a number of these checkpoints are intermittently active, and that a few are yet blackmailing the locals, pointing out that since some of the checkpoints were dismantled, 11 cases of blackmail have been recorded while the residents of the province continue to move around with a heightened sense of caution.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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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