



HTS Did Not Spare Women Detention or Physical Abuse

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The report documents the stories of the relatives of forcibly disappeared women and others who survived HTS' detention facilities, spreading in the province of Idlib

Executive Summary:

In the province of Idlib, most of which is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS, women are subjected to numerous violations—including the blatant acts of detention and physical abuse, which they suffer in HTS' prisons spreading in different areas of the province, not to mention the death sentences executed against a number of them, which were extra-judicial and put into effect following summary proceedings.

The pretexts and charges under which women were detained and killed, however, were various, including "insulting deity" and "espionage" for the benefit of the Syrian regular forces, as well as "adultery", among other accusations.

In this report, the female field researcher of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, has monitored – relaying on different sources - the detention of at least 86 women and girls in HTS' prisons in the province of Idlib from early 2019 to early January 2020, given that 23 women were released at different intervals, while the remaining 63 were yet held captive on the date this report was prepared, namely on January 21, 2020.

STJ managed to interview one of the woman who survived detention at HTS' prisons. The witness, a married 18 years old young woman and a mother, was released accompanied by her sister, 38 years old, after they were both detained in August 2019 and subjected to abuse in the Idlib Central Prison in Idlib City, where she spent three months after she was charged with sorcery and got leashed 40 times for a crime she did not commit. The detention was a turning point in the witness' life, one that she cannot overcome to the day, for she was divorced and denied seeing her children.

STJ documented a second case, where the women detained, 40 years old, was this time charged with espionage for the benefit of the Syrian regular forces. During her 15-day detention period in Idlib Central Prison, she was forced to endure various types of torture so severe that even men could not bear. She was bet with batons, dangled from the ceiling, and threatened with death in one of Idlib's squares, which caused her great physical and psychological harm after she was released, because she sustained a fracture in one of her arms while psychologically tormented by the torture she was put through, not to mention the community's skeptical opinions, which yet holds her suspect since she was accused of working for the of Syrian regular forces.

In a third case, STJ has documented, a senior woman, 60 years old mother and grandmother, who HTS detained in late November 2019 on charges of insulting the deity, continued to be imprisoned to the date this report was prepared- end of January 2020, although she suffers from several diseases, most notably high blood pressure and diabetes. STJ has also managed to document the detention of a fourth woman from the province of Hama, 40 years old mother, who was detained on the same pretext/ insulting the deity and for the same period.

¹ Idlib Central Prison/Idlib City: It is divided into two division— the first is affiliated to the Ministry of Justice under the Salivation Government, the associate of HTS. The second, nonetheless, is run directly by HTS, which is also made into sections, where both military and civilian detainees are held captive.

Survivors, whose testimonies have been obtained by STJ, stated that after their release, HTS has coerced them into signing a pledge form, where they were not to speak to any media outlets, a procedure that probably aims to keep their experience classified and to prevent the women from publishing any information regarding the ill-treatment they were subjected to while detained in several prisons, including the Idlib Central Prison in the city of Idlib, the Harem Central Prison,² which also holds the name of the city where it is located and the Salqin City Court Prison.

Women, moreover, were not spared the death row, for they did not survive the extrajudicial death sentences issued by HTS, which the latter put into effect according to summary proceedings and without informing the families of the victims. In July 2019, HTS executed a death sentence against a senior woman in the province of Idlib— the victim was 60 years old mother and grandmother. The detainee was stoned to death for adultery, after which her dead body was handed to her family. The incident significantly marked her family's life, especially since her children failed to prove her innocence to people and were turned into the object of the townspeople's insults and harassment.

The evidence and testimonies, that STJ includes in this report, indicate that HTS has detained and tortured women in the province of Idlib, showing no regard to their being women while it escaped accountability. The detention of women, witnesses reported, might be HTS' means to terrorize people, as to assert that the detentions will affect everyone with no exception and for various reasons.

In addition to the stories of the women survivors, this report also highlights the unfair psychological, physical and social impact of the detention experience on these women, beginning with the psychological disorders they suffer after their release, which may amount to suicide, to divorce, and the social stigma and rejection.

These violations were committed by HTS in conjunction with the violent military operations the Syrian regular forces and their allies launched against it, for these operations have caused the displacement of thousands of civilians and killed many of them.³ STJ, for its part, has published a report documenting the detention of a number of civilians, including women and children, in the province of Idlib at various intervals in 2018 and 2019, which were all carried out by HTS on various charges and as a result of which detainees, including children, were subjected to beating and ill-treatment while some were released.⁴

² The Harem Central Prison: It is a central prison established by the Syrian Government which HTS took over and is running directly today, while it also incubates both civilian and military detainees within its sections.

³ "The Bombing of Idlib's Marketplaces by Syrian Regular Forces and Allies, a Repeated Pattern." STJ, January 14, 2020. Last visited: April 4, 2020. https://stj-sy.org/en/the-bombing-of-idlibs-marketplaces-by-syrian-regular-forces-and-allies-a-repeated-pattern/.

⁴ "Idlib: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Arrests no less than 38 Persons." STJ, February 2, 2019. Last visited: April 4, 2020. https://stj-sy.org/en/1168/.

[&]quot;HTS Arrests 22 Civilians in Idlib for Different Reasons." STJ, December 27, 2019. Last visited: April 4, 2020. https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-arrests-22-civilians-in-idlib-for-different-reasons/.

Report Methodology:

In terms of methodology, the report is based on the testimonies of (2) women survivors who were held captive in HTS' prisons and had spent various periods of detention in 2018 and 2019. Additionally, STJ's field researcher interviewed (2) relatives of the women who were yet forcibly disappeared in the armed group's detention facilities when the report was being prepared, particularly on January 21, 2020.

Covering the cases mentioned above, the field researcher has also obtained the testimony of a **relative** of one of the women killed under summary proceedings and a **woman media activist**, who documents cases of women detentions committed by HTS. Both interviews are backed by the commentary of a **woman psychological consultant** in the province of Idlib, whose statements help make clear the unjust repercussions of detaining women.

Most of these interviews were conducted between December 2019 and mid-January 2020, some of which were conducted in person by STJ's field researcher and others were carried out online. In addition to the interviews, the report cites many open sources, as to cross-check information and evidence about the cases the report documents.

1. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS:

In January 2012, the Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front emerged in Syria, today known as Hayat Tahrir al-sham/HTS, functioning as an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq-Qaeda in Mesopotamia in the beginning.

In April 2013, al-Nusra Front refused to merge with the Islamic State / Daesh/ ISIS and pledged allegiance to Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who announced in November 2013 that the Front was Qaeda's sole representative in Syria.

In July 2014, the leader of the al-Nusra Front, a Syrian national dubbed Abu Mohammad al-Julani, opened up about his ambition to form an "Islamic emirate" similar to the "caliphate" that ISIS had announced at the time, and soon the US and other countries designated the Front a terrorist organization.

The al-Nusra Front fought against ISIS, and, in return, it cooperated with a number of Syrian armed opposition groups to combat the Syrian regular forces. Since 2012, the Front, along with a number of armed opposition groups, has been able to progress into and control several areas throughout Syria. In 2015, the Front within a coalition named Jaysh al-Fath/al-Fath Army, consisting of various armed opposition groups, managed to take over the full range of the province of Idlib. In July 2016, under tremendous external pressures, al-Julani announced al-Nusra Front's disengagement from Qaeda, changing its name to Jabhat Fath al-Sham/ Fath al-Sham Front.

A few months into these developments, several jihadist armed groups in Northern Syria announced merger under the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS, particularly on January 28, 2017. The body that adopted the new name included Fatah al-Sham Front, former al-Nusra

Front, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haq/al-Haq Legion, Jabhat Ansar al-Din / Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al- Sunnah/Army of Sunnah, and the Harakat Ansar al-Sham al-Islamiay / Islamic Ansar al-Sham Movement. The general command of the merged armed group was also assigned to al-Julani. On July 20, 2017, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement decided to abandon HTS, as the latter clashed with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya/Ahrar al-Sham on July 15, 2017.

In 2018, as military confrontations between HTS and other armed opposition groups took a repeated pattern, HTS, being the most powerful and well-organized, managed to force armed opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, out of large areas in Idlib. It thus managed to hold the reins to power in over 60% of the province. For their part, the remaining armed groups, led by Ahrar al-Sham, spread in a limited area.

In the province of Idlib, HTS controls the key trading crossings, the ones that link the province with Syrian Government-held areas and others that link it with Turkey in the north. In addition to this, many sources attribute HTS' influence to its hegemony over commerce, trading traffic to and from the province of Idlib, the revenues of which it uses to finance its activities and gain authorities beyond its capabilities.

2. How Do Women Live in the Shadow of HTS?

As its control areas expanded in 2014 and 2015, HTS / al-Nusra Front opted for tightening the noose over women, ordering further restrictions on their movement throughout the cities and towns under its authority, especially in public places. When it took over the entirety of the province of Idlib, HTS imposed a specific uniform on girls and young women in schools, universities, and educational institutes, as it made statements threatening any woman who fails to abide by the sharia-based dress code with dismissal.

In 2016, the University of Idlib was a stage for several restrictions, enforced by HTS' Hisbah Office, religious police, which deliberately expelled female students and denied them exams, for their lack of commitment to the sharia-based clothing style ordered by HTS. Women and girls were also denied access to cafes and restaurants unless they were accompanied by first-degree relatives. In 2018, al-Nusra Front, changed into Fatah al-Sham Front, and finally HTS, was keen to separate female students from their male counterparts in all areas it controlled, doing thus at colleges, institutes, and schools. It also imposed several decisions on the administration of the University of Idlib since 2016, the most noted of which was assigning different education spaces for male and female students, as it ordered the erection of a cement wall between the quarters of each of the two groups.

HTS has also deployed a number of its security members and the Hisbah Office/Religious Police near colleges to monitor the behavior of female and male students, knowing that HTS' security apparatus had arrested more than 10 students in 2017 only because male and female students could be seen on the streets during attendance hours, since HTS prohibits the men and women from meeting in public spaces, cafes and restaurants, unless they are married or are first-degree relatives. In 2016, HTS imposed further restrictions on working women in the

rural parts, as well as in major cities, as it prohibited men and women from mixing, not to mention that, in 2019, it denied female students, who applied to the University of Idlib, access to departments of mechanical engineering and veterinary without providing any justifications.

In the province of Idlib, particularly HTS-held areas, women are having a life of restrictions that extend to the minutest details of their daily lives, including clothing options and work opportunities, traveling and studying, which are all added to preventing men and women from getting together. Women are not allowed to fully embrace their freedom, a media activist, who documented cases of women detention, reported to STJ, adding:

"HTS seeks to instill terror and fear in the hearts of the people by arresting women and children, as it intends to assert that everyone is liable to detention, excusing no one and for whatsoever reasons, the thing that coerced several families to abandon their areas as to dodge prosecution and arrest. Since the beginning of 2019 till the onset of 2020, the number of detentions that HTS carried out against women exceeded 63 women and girls throughout the province of Idlib, who continue to be missing and whose names are already documented, in addition to other 23 women, who were arrested and then released. The key charges on which women were being detained are insulting deity, mixing with men, and sorcery, while a number of women were additionally detained for the simple reason that they sought the province of Idlib coming from regime-held areas. The released women informed us that HTS has forced them to sign a pledge form, providing that they never speak to media outlets on their life in the prison."

3. Relatives of Forcibly Disappeared and Survivor Women Speak of detention at HTS' Prisons:

Once in control of the province of Idlib, HTS has been cautious to arrest those it considers a source of concern and a threat to its fighters or its military influence, let them be civilians or militants, using religion as a cover to tighten its grip over the province. It, thus, arrested its opponents under fatwas/rulings, which it came up with to absorb the locals' anger.

HTS did not exclude women from its arrest campaigns, but it rather practiced arrest and torture against them, putting them under the same deteriorating conditions that it subjected men to. On different occasions between 2018 and 2019, HTS arrested a significant number of women and girls on various claims using laws it created and lived by, especially those that addressed clothing, mixing between the two sexes, adultery, insulting religion, sorcery, and espionage on behalf of the Syrian regular forces.

Dozens of women and girls have been held in prisons located throughout the province, most famous of which are the Idlib Central Prison, the Harim Central Prison, the Salqin City Court Prison, Mar'yan Prison, and the notorious al-Oqab Prison.⁵

In this report, STJ provides the testimony of a number of women survivors who were held captive in HTS' prisons for varying periods of time and for various reasons, some of these women were married prior to detention, only to be abandoned and divorced after their release, where they continue to face, to this day, the consequences of this violation, not to mention society's injustice and marginalization. Concerned over their safety, STJ opted for using pseudonyms for the witnesses throughout the report.

A. Detained by HTS, She was Divorced and Denied Seeing Her Children:

Fatimah M., 18 years old young woman from western rural Idlib, is a wife and a mother of three. She is one of the women detained by HTS in mid-August 2019, accompanied by her 38 years old sister on charges of sorcery. In the prison, she went through the bitterness of captivity and was the object of various forms of physical and psychological torture, which all enhanced her suffering as a victim to early marriage. She was not happy as a wife, she said, adding that still she was gifted three children, her three boys— Omar, 4 yrs., Mohammad, 3 yrs., and Ammer, who is not a year old yet— in whom she found the joy she missed for a long time.

Fatimah used to live in the al-Ghab Plain area, Hama Province, before she was coerced to leave with her family to one of the camps in northern rural Idlib in mid-2019, escaping the military operations and the ever worsening living conditions in their residential area. However, she never imagined that she will be detained by HTS for three months. Narrating her story to STJ, she said:

"In mid-August 2019, I, accompanied by my married sister, headed to the court in Harem City, intending to file a lawsuit against my husband. I wanted a divorce as I was forced into the marriage at an early age and was never happy with my husband. At the door to the court, we went through an inspection by the women of the HTS-affiliated Hisbah Office. Unfortunately, they found an amulet, which I always carried around for protection from envy. My sister and I were immediately detained and accused of sorcery at the end of the preliminary investigation."

Once he heard of the incident, Fatimah's brother-in-law, tried to question into their condition in the Harm City Court, but HTS ordered his detention for five hours for no obvious reason. He was then released without getting the chance to check on neither his wife nor her sister

⁵ The al-Oqab Prison: It is made of two separate parts, located near the village of Kansafra in Mount al-Zawiya, Idlib. The two parts were originally caves in a mountain; one of them was expanded through digging. This prison was constructed in 2014 after it used to be in a poultry farm in the Mount al-Zawiya.

or have the slightest information about them until they were transferred to Idlib Central Prison. On this note, Fatimah added:

"We were held captive in a tiny cell, jammed with women, girls and children, in the Idlib Central Prison. The majority of the detainees there were being imprisoned on the charge of insulting deity. Some of the women had torn out clothes and were excessively suffering due to poor nutrition and the bad detention conditions. In the beginning, neither my sister nor I were subjected to beating. A few days later, nonetheless, we were leashed 40 times each and were next brought before a man, who functioned as a judge under HTS. He sentenced us to three months in prison on charges of sorcery."

Fatimah recounted that during her stay in Idlib Central Prison, she was able to hear the whining and screaming of the men detainees while they were subjected to torture by HTS' fighters. She was jailed for three months and released only after paying a fine of 100, 000 Syrian Pounds.



Satellite image locating Idlib Central Prison, where Fatimah was detained.

Fatimah's suffering did not end with her release, after which she had to battle with another form of torture, especially since her husband gave up on her, choosing a divorce, and deprived her of seeing her three children. Fatimah remained confined to her family's house, where she was banned from leaving home for a while, besides dealing with a society that rejected her, for she was divorced and a former detainee, the thing that caused her severe depression, one she has not recovered to date.

Later on, Fatima resorted to working in harvesting olive to support herself and secure a living, given that she was left stranded by her surrounding community and even her own family.

Fatimah continues living in the hope of meeting her three children, the joy of her heart, one day.

B. Physical Abuse Inflicted upon Women in HTS' Prisons:

Rua, 40 years old from Hama Province, is another woman detained by HTS during her stay in Idlib Province, particularly in late January 2018, on charges of dealing with the Syrian regular Forces. In the prison, she was subjected to grave physical harm.

Rua was living with her family in the city of Hama and working as an Arabic language teacher at one of the city schools, before she made up her mind and decided to leave to Turkey illegally through Idlib Province, in the hope of starting a new life. Arriving in Idlib and staying there for a while, she was resolved to work as an activist, seeking to cover the happenings in the province's areas. Nonetheless, detention was a shocking change of plans that marked her life with severe psychological and physical torments, the effects of which continue to haunt her to the day. She recounted her story to STJ:

"I headed to Idlib Province hoping to take the smuggling routes to Turkey. I stayed there for a short time, until a group of HTS' personnel raided my place of residence in northern rural Idlib for no clear reason. They tied my hands and blindfolded me; I was, then, taken to an unknown destination, which was a dungeon in Idlib Central Prison. Before taking me to the cellar, I was searched by one of the Hisbah women, who found the cellphone I was keeping and which included a number of a person who asked me to cover happenings in Idlib Province. When finally in the cellar, I was severely hit with batons, all to force me into calling that person. I, however, endured the beating and did not give in to their demands. After this, I was subjected to interrogation on charges of filming HTS' military posts, which I fiercely denied."

In detention, Rua was subjected to various forms of torture, which did not really differ from the torture that is often practiced against detained men. She was dangled by her hands from the ceiling for two hours and blindfolded and handcuffed for continuous days, during which she refused to eat, causing her health to deteriorate. On this regard, she told STJ the following:

"During my interrogation, I was threatened with execution in one of Idlib City's squares and of getting my death filmed, on charges of working for the Syrian regular forces. One officer even beat me on the head with weapons to force me into making a confession. Detained for about 15 days, I was finally released, after intermediaries communicated with the court and I signed a pledge not to talk to the media about what happened to me in prison."

Rua left Idlib Central Prison suffering from a broken hand, a fracture she sustained during torture, and a deteriorated psychological and physical condition. She added that her family was not informed of her whereabouts during her detention period, which had a negative impact on her mother's already poor health. Rua also pointed out that detention has a grave effect on a person's psychological well-being, as she continues to be hit with panic attacks. In addition to the mental torment, Rua has to deal with society's skeptical opinions, especially that she was accused of working for the Syrian regular forces, which denied her access to job opportunities.

C. Detention of Elderly Women despite being Sick:

Even elderly women were not spared the detention practices that HTS carried out throughout Idlib Province. Sabiha S., 60 years old woman from rural Hama countryside, is a mother of five and a grandmother. She also was forced to go through the pain of detention in the Harem Central Prison in late November 2019. She was held captive on the charge of insulting the deity, a relative of Sabiha recounted to STJ, adding:

"When we learned that Sabiha was being detained in the Harem Prison, we immediately rushed there to check on her, but HTS' personnel arrested me, as well. They beat me after saying that my cousin Sabiha was an apostate woman. I was held in Harem Prison for three days, during which I met a child from Jabal al-Zawiya, he was not over nine years old. The child also was being detained on charges of insulting deity. Later on, I was released due to my poor health condition and because my hands were amputated. Sabiha, unfortunately, remained in detention, and when her husband and son-in-law sought her in Harem Prison, in an attempt to visit her, they were arrested by HTS' security apparatus for five hours. The apparatus shaved their heads and denied them seeing Sabiha."

After a while, HTS' judiciary sentenced Sabiha to four months in prison, and she was then transferred from Harem Prison to Idlib Central Prison, despite the fact that Sabiha was old and suffered from several diseases, most notably high blood pressure and diabetes. The judiciary also ordered her to pay a sum of \$5 a day during her detention as a food allowance in prison, while it prevented her family from visiting or seeing her, the relative added, as she was still detained when the report was being prepared, namely on January 22, 2020.



Satellite image locating Harem Central Prison, where Sabiha was detained.

It was not Sabiha alone who was detained on charges of insulting deity. Rather, it appears that many of Idlib's residents were being detained on this charge, especially women. STJ's field researcher learned that Aida, 40 years old woman from western rural Hama, a mother of four children and displaced in the Deir Hassan Camp on the Syrian-Turkish border, was also detained on the same allegations in early November 2019. According to her relatives, Aida is still detained in the HTS-affiliated Salqin Prison after she was sentenced to several months in prison. Aida's imprisonment had negatively affected the life of her family, especially since she was the one raising her children.

4. Summary Execution of Women by HTS:

In the areas it controls throughout Idlib Province, HTS carried out a number of summary executions of civilians, based on laws and rulings it come up with to implement the laws of Islamic Sharia. Once again, women were not spared the violation, for dozens of them were killed since HTS expanded in Idlib in 2015—the women were either stoned to death or executed.

Umm Mohammad, 50 years old from the town of al-Najiya in rural Idlib, is a mother of three and a grandmother. She also was one of the women who HTS killed, putting into effect a death sentence passed against her. The execution is often carried out in an unknown place and time.

Umm Mohammad was stoned to death on the charge of adultery, and was handed over a dead body to her relatives in early July 2019. A relative of her recounted the following to STJ:

"Prior to her stoning, my cousin Umm Mohammad had gone to visit a family member in the province. On her way back, she could not find a transportation means home. By chance, she met one of her neighbors, a man older than her, and asked him to take her on his motorbike. Before they arrived at the entrance to the town, an HTS-affiliated checkpoint stopped them and asked the man about his relationship with the woman; he answered that she was one of his neighbors and that he was taking her to her house, but the officers quickly arrested them and took them to one of the HTS' security departments, and then to Idlib Central Prison. There, my cousin and that man were both sentenced to stoning to death, although she assured the officers that the man was her neighbor and was trying to get her home, but HTS went ahead with the sentence and killed them."

The killing of Umm Mohammad had a negative impact on her family, especially her sons, who were deprived of their mother after being accused of adultery and were unable to prove her innocence to people, becoming the townspeople's subject of insults. The relative added that killing their mother thus will remain engraved in their minds till death.

5. Unfair Psychological, Social and Financial Impact on Women:

Detention leaves deep psychological, social and financial marks on women, for captivity makes a difference in life that cannot be overcome, even when the women are let out. In this regard, Hala M., a psychological consultant in Idlib Province, reported to STJ that the most serious consequence that women grabble with after their detention is social stigma, especially if they are married. She added:

"Most of the women who experienced detention, especially those who are married, suffer from a state of severe tension and depression. Some became divorcees after their husbands give up on them, while others find it very difficult to deal with their children and families after their release, as many of them experience a state of isolation and fear, which is the result of both filial and societal rejection, a thing that makes them more vulnerable to developing psychological disorders, when they are not welcomed by their families and communities. Some of them might attempt a suicide, particularly survivors who view themselves as a stigma incarnate after leaving the detention facilities. In addition to this, there are grave financial effects, for many of these women, especially those who get divorced, find themselves stuck in extremely poor financial conditions after losing their breadwinners and were, thus, coerced to work while facing massive difficulty in finding a source of livelihood."



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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