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Syrian Executive and Security Forces Take Advantage of COVID-19 Curfew to Oppress Civilians

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*Forces in charge use the curfew to arrest individuals and take bribes
from others in exchange for not arresting them*

Background:

Syria was the last of its neighbors; Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, to officially report coronavirus (COVID-19) cases. The first case of COVID-19 in Syria was announced on March 23, 2020, following which a partial curfew from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am was imposed by the Ministry of Interior in all regime-held territories, and entered into effect on March 24, 2020, until further notice. Later, a new decision issued by the Ministry specified the curfew hours on Fridays and Saturdays from 12:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. next day, starting from April 4, 2020 until further notice.¹

The District Attorney of Damascus countryside told al-Watan Online website on March 25, 2020, that anyone violating the curfew will be sentenced to between six months and three years' imprisonment, in addition he/she will be fined SP.50.000 to SP.500.000. The police issue the violators tickets and then transfer them to the Public Prosecution to be tried before Criminal Court of First Instance.² According to the Attorney, this penalty is set out in the Article 13 of the 2007 act on the prevention, reporting and control of infectious diseases, which says:

"Anyone who intentionally conceals a person who has infected or makes someone vulnerable to a contagious disease, or intentionally caused the transmission of infection to others, or refrains from carrying out any procedure required of him to prevent the spread of the contagious disease, is considered to have committed a crime and shall be punished by imprisonment from six months to three years, and by a fine from SP.50.000 to SP.500.000, and the aggrieved party shall be compensated for the damages suffered if he/she complaints³."

¹ A statement by the Ministry of Interior on the implementation of the curfew, SANA, March 24, 2020 (last visit: April 13, 2020) <https://sana.sy/?p=1127981>

² Abdel Qader: Up to three years in prison and a fine of up to SP.500.000 for violating the curfew, al-Watan Online, March 25, 2020, (last visit: April 15, 2020), <https://www.alwatanonline.com/%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%89-%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7/>

³ Legislative Decree 7 of 2007: Communicable Diseases Prevention, Report and Control Act, Syrian Parliament official site, January 21, 2007. (Last visit: April 13, 2020). <http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4955&RID=-1&Last=9903&First=148&CurrentPage=187&VId=-1&Mode=&Service=&Loc1=&Key1=&SDate=&EDate=&Year=&or=%20ORDER%20BY%20%20country&Country=&Num=-1&Dep=-1&src=204&>

On April 2, 2020, the Syrian government Ministry of Health announced the isolation of the towns of Sayyidah Zainab and Mneen, in the Damascus countryside.⁴

Thereafter, on March 29, the Ministry of Health [announced](#) the death of the first coronavirus case out of the 16 registered in Syria, two cases recovered, according to the Syrian Health Ministry.⁵ With the recovery of these two cases, the number of infections declined to 12, given the fact that two fatalities out of the 16 cases were previously reported. However, reliable sources confirmed to STJ that the real numbers of coronavirus infections are much more than those reported by the Ministry, especially in the cities of Duma and Ghouta.

Introduction:

Members of the security forces and the police in regime-held areas, especially in the province of Hama and the city of Duma, are taking advantage of the curfew, which was imposed as a part of the measures taken to tackle the spreading novel coronavirus (COVID-19), by looting properties of civilians and making arrests among them, according to statements gathered by STJ.

On March 25 and 26, 2020, STJ recorded 36 arrests made against civilians, among them 9 children, in Hama, by police and security patrols, for breaking the coronavirus curfew. The Military Security branch also arrested an unknown number of people and released them later for fines. Reportedly, many of those arrested had been beaten.

Many shops in Hama and Duma were looted during the curfew hours, as reported to STJ. Owners of those shops, however, don't dare to make complaints, as they will be perceived to be direct accusations to police and security members.

⁴ The full post: "In the framework of the measures taken to restrict movement in areas with high population density in order to preserve public safety, the government team concerned with the strategy to tackle the Coronavirus epidemic studied a gradual isolation mechanism for overcrowded areas of populated areas, and it was decided to isolate the town of Sayyidah Zainab in the Damascus countryside governorate", Source:

[https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/529262584397729?_xts__\[0\]=68.ARChDiQwyw_KNJKBpryHZFWp7wNSISd5dKX5-Sh9BxqrdKml6vImNiFXKFxETq91i2xRomncczHLdS1Ylyjdyvx28AaKokjgud8eeclCubTH7XDxpn2CouncX0Cm_Ddu4f9x74U2KaHXwKxV4_OApd_hoF9f9ZWYQ_KrHVq4VDF3Ar8pJK_6HqswUppQO7Ic7RoALfILr27dY51i0QVNAHVguQihlt1bHVDGAWm2D31pzCrsgjQlHIS58DVZUP0GwAcw3DhlqimAr-oNhhHk3OGVPpXrJaCt7-JjPWl7kLJvEH9yyzSWoZgbd7Lgbl2tOQ8IVzj9cluxHxQSM&_tn_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/529262584397729?_xts__[0]=68.ARChDiQwyw_KNJKBpryHZFWp7wNSISd5dKX5-Sh9BxqrdKml6vImNiFXKFxETq91i2xRomncczHLdS1Ylyjdyvx28AaKokjgud8eeclCubTH7XDxpn2CouncX0Cm_Ddu4f9x74U2KaHXwKxV4_OApd_hoF9f9ZWYQ_KrHVq4VDF3Ar8pJK_6HqswUppQO7Ic7RoALfILr27dY51i0QVNAHVguQihlt1bHVDGAWm2D31pzCrsgjQlHIS58DVZUP0GwAcw3DhlqimAr-oNhhHk3OGVPpXrJaCt7-JjPWl7kLJvEH9yyzSWoZgbd7Lgbl2tOQ8IVzj9cluxHxQSM&_tn_=-R)

⁵ The full post: "Two coronavirus cases out of the remaining active 16 registered in Syria have recovered, bringing the number of infections to 12 after the death of two previously.) Source: Ministry of Health official account on Facebook, April 4, 2020. (Last visit: April 13, 2020).

[https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/530238597633461?_xts__\[0\]=68.ARD9SUGTr8RbqhiVZ-zBEHQaBh59Z9IdIM-SmWeN_A_KR1urFs_ajOrwlWrcGwpsxcPn1CPBYrmrwLG4dUi8_uvNvTc9JqinIAf_zNmIm1CHNpu5V9SxQr2t2oi9qqwmmfrQjArq8ohRVA28AfEZ0irlUuBEIbrMOia-8mGeP-iA9vIEdm4rRHDDcyL9NA_pW0nsaLK0CEHOvTg8luyWCP2Q-dFcOFvA3_JrWF39Txzbyn_VaE_XW_xsiUulU_sPiFXiD9GjgWB0LiFbO32VWibYKYXq4pl_kGx5IyNc2zZy0ioUxq2MUiveAeOTrrRXnul1jAxTakNBEPc05eA&_tn_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/530238597633461?_xts__[0]=68.ARD9SUGTr8RbqhiVZ-zBEHQaBh59Z9IdIM-SmWeN_A_KR1urFs_ajOrwlWrcGwpsxcPn1CPBYrmrwLG4dUi8_uvNvTc9JqinIAf_zNmIm1CHNpu5V9SxQr2t2oi9qqwmmfrQjArq8ohRVA28AfEZ0irlUuBEIbrMOia-8mGeP-iA9vIEdm4rRHDDcyL9NA_pW0nsaLK0CEHOvTg8luyWCP2Q-dFcOFvA3_JrWF39Txzbyn_VaE_XW_xsiUulU_sPiFXiD9GjgWB0LiFbO32VWibYKYXq4pl_kGx5IyNc2zZy0ioUxq2MUiveAeOTrrRXnul1jAxTakNBEPc05eA&_tn_=-R)

For the purpose of this report, STJ interviewed six people, among them a volunteer in an awareness-raising team, active in Hama, and two locals from Duma, who confirmed the robbery of stores located in markets and streets in which security and police members are deployed.

1. Unreported coronavirus cases in Duma, Damascus countryside:

Two locals of Duma confirmed to STJ that a number of people in the city showed symptoms similar to that of coronavirus, some were taken by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to a quarantine center, while others have been quarantined in their homes.

A local source said that a soldier of the government forces called M. Teameh, showed coronavirus symptoms after returning to his home in Duma, and it is likely that his family got the infection. Another soldier from al-Masri family also showed symptoms when he returned to his home in Duma's al-Hajariyah neighborhood from the regiment he serves in, near the village of Harf Banmara in the province of Tartous. He was taken to Hamdan hospital in Duma and then transferred to the Military Hospital 601 in al-Mazzeh. Subsequently, the police evacuated the building in which the soldier lives, leaving only his family quarantined in it, and watched by a police patrol to prevent any contact with people.

Another local source spoke to STJ on the situation of public and health care services in Duma, saying that there are only three health facilities in the city which are Hamdan Hospital, al-Yaman Hospital and a post of the SARC in the Jala'a neighborhood. The witness said that people are tested for coronavirus only by taking their temperature, and if any suspected to be infected, he/she would be transferred to Damascus Hospital (also known as al-Mujtahid).

Coronavirus measures have reshaped the everyday life in Syria; the partial curfew which aimed at relieving congestion and gatherings to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, had an opposite effect causing greater overcrowding, especially at bread and food distribution centers of the government, from which they can purchase rationed quantities of tea, rice, sugar, gas cylinders and other stuff using the "smart card". Citizens had to stand in long queues (200 to 500 people) for long hours to obtain only one stuff, without following the WHO protective measures, even the personal, like wearing face masks or gloves.

Yamen, a volunteer in an awareness-rising team spoke to STJ field researcher saying:

"The curfew would be for nothing, it would even further aggravate the risk of the virus spreading, if people continue to crowd for hours every day in front of the food centers to get the indispensable bread. Moreover, the delivery staff are often late, which increases congestion and waiting time. Food stuff is available at retailers, but sold for twice the price which most people can't

afford. The government is dealing with this epidemic catastrophically at all levels, including the health, food and security.”

2. Coronavirus curfew violators extorted, arrested or detained:

On March 25 and 26, STJ recorded more than 36 arrests and detentions of civilians, including nine children, for violating the partial curfew. The arrests/detentions were made by police and security patrols, which asked violators for sums ranging between SP.25.000 and SP.100.000 in exchange for not arresting them. However, those who failed to pay—among them four children—were transferred to the police station in order to bring them to justice.

According to locals, the bulk of the arrests/detentions were made by the police patrols which were deployed at the entrances to neighborhoods, while the rest were conducted by members of the military security (military intelligence), who patrolled the streets and alleys. The latter took curfew violators to their main branch of the military security on the Homs-Hama road, and there they beat, held or released them in exchange for money.



People lining up in front of a bread distribution center in Hama’s al-Baath neighborhood, Mar. 21, 2020. Credit: local activists.

The arrests in Hama were made as follows:

- 1- On March 25, 2020, STJ recorded 17 arrests against civilians, among them seven children, by patrols of the al-Mahatta police station in the districts of al-Mahatta, al-Baath, al-Jarajmeh and Bab Qibli. However, 11 of those arrested, including the children, were later released.

details:

- In the al-Jarajmeh district: at 8:00pm., a police patrol detained three children between the ages of 12 and 17, while on their way to their homes in the district. The police men confiscated the children's cell phones, took the money they had and held them for two hours near al-Abaseya School. Mahmoud, father of one of those children, said to STJ:

"When the curfew was first imposed, it was not clear if the movement within the same neighborhood is banned or not. My son and two of his friends were detained while on their way home after attending a private lesson at the house of a teacher within our neighborhood. My son was late coming back, so I called him on his mobile, but I was answered by a police man who told me not to allow my son to get out of home during the curfew hours otherwise he would be taken to the Criminal Security Directorate."

- In the al-Baath district: at 10:00pm, a police patrol arrested 12 people, including two children, for standing in front of their homes. The patrol gathered those arrested near a wedding hall in the same neighborhood and released them after an hour, except for a young man who is a soldier in the government forces who had come home on a leave, which has expired since months.

A friend of one of those detained talked to STJ saying:

"That day, a patrol of two police cars drove around the district, and detained all those seen outside their homes. The police men gathered the detainees near a wedding hall, took their IDs, made a list of their names and sent it to the police station. However, one of the detainees has a personal acquaintance with a police man on the patrol, so he asked him to set him and the other detainees free in exchange for money. The police man discussed that with his fellows and they agreed to tell the police station that the detainees vowed not to violate the curfew again and that they were only standing at the doors of their homes and didn't walk in streets. Eventually, all of the detainees were set free- but I don't know if that was done for money or not-except for the soldier who was held by them for not holding an ID and because it turned out that he is a deserter, as he hasn't rejoined his regiment months after the expiration of his leave."

- In the Bab Qibli district: at 11:00 pm, a police patrol detained a young man and a child-relatives- from near the al-Douri alley. The child was released after being beaten while the young man was taken to the police station in order to issue him a report under which he would be tried. Ahmed, a resident of the Bab Qibli district, talked to STJ saying:

“People are allowed to move between the neighborhood houses during the curfew hours, but those two persons tried to watch the main street then, just out of curiosity, so they were seen and thus detained by the police patrol stationed at the corner. The patrol released the child after beating him, and drove the young man to the police station after they knew that he didn’t have money; the patrols are taking advantage of the curfew to collect money.”

- 2- On March 26, STJ recorded the arrest of 19 people, including two children, by the military security branch, in the province of Hama, specifically in the districts of al-Kousor, Ain Alloza, 8th March and Janob al Malaab.
- In the Ain Alloza district: a patrol of police and security members arrested a young man, as reported by Ali, a grocer in the neighborhood:

“From the balcony of my house, I saw patrols of the security force, which were roaming the neighborhood in civilian cars, arresting a young man and he is still held in the security branch as of today. I’ve learned from locals that if anyone is seen on the street during curfew hours, he/she will be imprisoned in the branch for two weeks.”

According to information obtained by STJ field researcher in Hama, most of those arrested by the military security were taken to its main branch. Some of them were released later under the mediation of someone or in exchange for sums paid to officers in the branch.

3. Robberies during curfew hours:

Several shops in Duma and Hama were looted during the curfew hours despite the presence of police and security patrols in all streets and alleys.

On the evening of March 25, 2020, around 20 shops were robbed in the 8th March market and the al-Marabet street in Hama, despite being vital areas in the city flooded with police patrols. In this regard, STJ spoke to Hassan, a worker at a store in the market; he said:

“On the curfew’s second day, wholesale, clothes, shoes and other stores, were found robbed with their locks and doors broken. Police came to those stores and wrote reports on the robberies and they later arrested two suspected, as we learned. But I don’t think that those robberies were done by two people only and without the knowledge of the police and security force; it’s impossible.”

On March 31 and April 1, three groceries in the city of Duma; near the Almasjed Alkabeer (the Great Mosque) and on al-Malaab road; were robbed, according to a local. Those groceries are owned by civilians, who haven’t dared to file complaints on the robberies since they were made during curfew hours.

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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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