



1 February 2021



“My Mother still Hopes He’s Alive”: Dozens of Syrian Families Told their Detained Loved Ones are Dead

"My Mother still Hopes He's Alive": Dozens of Syrian Families Told their Detained Loved Ones are Dead

Hundreds of "certificates" are delivered to the civil registration departments in Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra, declaring dead persons detained by Syrian security services

Executive Summary

Many Syrian families were horrified to learn that their beloved ones have died in the detention facilities of the Syrian security services, some of whom were detained and forcibly disappeared for months, even years.

Detainees were recorded as deceased by the civil registration departments across Syria, particularly by those in the Syrian government territories, such as the city of Deir ez-Zor, and the provinces of Homs, Hama, and Damascus, which is the culmination of the efforts made by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) for months, as the team monitored death reports from the second half of 2019 to November 2020, as well as Daraa and Quneitra south of the country which was covered in this report between August 2018 and October 2020.

For the purposes of this report, STJ has obtained exclusive documents from the families of detainees and forcibly disappeared, demonstrating that dozens died in the detention facilities run by Syrian security services. In addition to documents, STJ interviewed inside sources in a number of civil registry departments.

In the cities of Homs and Hama, the Syrian government's civil registry departments provided many families with death certificates of persons detained by security services. The families, however, do not have the slightest hint as to the circumstances of death, or the burial places of their beloved ones. They were granted only the death certificate, stating nothing but the date of death and other personal information.

In Damascus and its suburbs, STJ documented the death of at least five detainees, including two women, in detention facilities of the security services. Families were given death certificates by the civil registry department in Damascus.

In the city of Deir ez-Zor, nearly 370 detainees, including 28 women, were reported dead by the Syrian authorities to the civil registry department between 1 October 2019 and 1 November 2020, a source of the department told STJ.

In the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, the Syrian authorities delivered certificates to families, declaring the death of at least 54 detainees between August 2018 and October 2020.

It ought to be mentioned that both provinces are subject to a reconciliation/settlement agreement, signed under Russia's auspices in August 2018. The agreement legalizes the status of individual signatories and protects them from arrest by the Syrian security services, and potential death in detention facilities. Nevertheless, the agreement is apparently ineffective, for the overwhelming majority of the death certificates delivered to families in Daraa and Quneitra are of persons detained following its enforcement.

In the remaining cases, the victims were detained prior to the agreement in August 2018, but were declared dead after it became operative.

Within the period reported, STJ observed that the Syrian authorities were less keen on informing families of the death of their relatives, unlike former occasions, namely before 2019.

This time, a large proportion of the bereaved families were told the death news by coincidence. Upon referring to the civil registry departments in their areas to obtain detainees-related documents, such as a family civil registration extract, family members would be shocked by reading the word deceased under the names of their fathers, sons, husbands, or wives and daughters.

In most cases, families were not delivered the bodies of their dead relatives. Except for the death certificates, families were even denied access to all other details, including death reasons or burial places.

Only rarely, families were informed of the deaths by parties other than the civil registry department, such as the neighborhood's mukhtars,¹ the local police, or the security services which detained the deceased. A few families were delivered bodies.

According to information obtained by STJ, some of the detainees were reported dead shortly after their arrest. In Damascus city, one woman's death was recorded as having occurred only two months after her arrest. Another woman, in Duma city, was recorded dead one month after her arrest.

Several challenges hamper the victims' families attempts to obtain death certificates from the civil registry departments. This is the case in Southern Syria areas particularly, where families are subjected to extortion and are coerced to bribe employees to get necessary certificates.

In a May 2020 report, covering similar struggles in Southern Syria, STJ documented thousands of families' inability to obtain death certificates for relatives who died while fighting for armed opposition groups, including Islamist ones, during the active fighting across Syria, or in ground attacks or air raids on the area when it was still controlled by the said armed opposition groups.

Families were denied access to death certificates due to the decisions, unwritten and "unpublished", made in early August 2018 by the departments of the civil registry or the secretariats of the Syrian Ministry of Interior in Southern Syria.²

In a former report, covering Hama province, STJ has also documented the death of hundreds of detainees, as recorded by the civil registry departments from late 2018 to late 2019.³

¹ The governor or head of the neighborhood.

² "Southern Syria: Thousands of Survivors Fail to Register their Dead Relatives" STJ, 21 May 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/southern-syria-thousands-of-survivors-fail-to-register-their-dead-relatives/> (last accessed: 24 January 2021).

³ "New Notifications Declare Dead Hundreds in Syrian Security Services' Detention Facilities", STJ, 18 June 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/new-notifications-declare-dead-hundreds-in-syrian-security-services-detention-facilities/> (last accessed: 24 January 2021).

Methodology

This report draws on a total of 21 interviews and testimonies, mostly of families delivered death declarations of relatives detained by the Syrian security services from the second half of 2019 to early November 2020.

STJ's field researchers interviewed three of the said families in Homs city; three in Hama city; and five in Damascus city, as well as two in northern Hama countryside and six in Daraa province.

Furthermore, the researchers obtained accounts from a media activist and informed sources of the civil registry department in Deir ez-Zor city.

It should be noted that some of the interviews were conducted online, others in person. However, they were all made between late 2019 and early November 2020.

1. Dozens of detainees declared dead in Homs and Hama

In December 2019 and November 2020, the Syrian government-affiliated civil registry departments gave dozens of families death certificates of relatives detained by Syrian security services.

Families were informed neither of the death circumstances, nor the burial places of the victims. They were granted certificates that highlighted merely the death date, and the demographics of the deceased.

Most of the interviewed families reported to STJ's field researcher that they were exploited, or blackmailed. They were pressed into paying exorbitant sums of money to lawyers or influential figures in exchange for the release of their relatives, or at least their transfer from the notorious Sednaya Military Prison to other ones, so they can visit detainees there.

Other families said that there are dozens of death certificates at the civil registry departments in Hama and Homs, but the concerned families are reluctant to discuss their relatives' death for fear of persecution or security services' retaliation.

A. Death declarations in Homs city

Samir K. is one of these victims, born in Homs city in 1987, married and a father. In late 2019, the family received the shocking news of Samir's death, who was detained in Homs city in March 2018 by the personnel of the Military Security branch that raided his house in the al-Inshaat neighborhood. Samir returned to Syria in late 2017, after he sought refuge in Lebanon like many other Syrians.

Throughout his detention, Samir's family failed to obtain any information as to his exact whereabouts. All they managed to know was that he was transferred to Damascus, helped by a middleman.

In early September 2019, Samir's wife referred to the Homs civil registry department to obtain a family civil registration extract. There, her heart was broken by the word deceased under her husband's name. One employee asked her to get a death certificate, which contained only the death date as in August 2019—namely, a year and a half after Samir was arrested. A family member recounted the following to STJ:

"In 2013, Samir travelled to Lebanon because the Syrian security services were persecuting him. When his finances tightened in Lebanon, he legalized his status in Syria and returned. He immediately referred to the military security and state security branches to settle the matter. A few months later, the military security arrested him. In 2019, we learned that he was dead. He was executed in Sednaya Military Prison, a person close to the security forces told us."

الجمهورية العربية السورية
وزارة الداخلية-الشؤون المدنية

بيان وفاة

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

اسم المتوفي وتبنيته الرقم الوطني	اسم وتبنيته الاب الرقم الوطني	اسم وتبنيته الام الرقم الوطني	تاريخ ولادة المتوفي	محل الوفاة	الجنس	الجنسية	تاريخ الوفاة	الأمانة	محل القيد	رقم القيد	متضمن الاسم
				دمشق	ذكر	سوري		حمص			

ملاحظات:

بيان صادر عن أمانة: حمص

في محافظة: حمص

إلى أمين السجل المدني في:

تم تسجيل الوفاة في سجل واقعت الوفاة في أمانة حمص بتاريخ

م ويرقم

يرجى الاطلاع واجراء مقتضى

عائدة الى

Image 1- Death certificate of victim Samair K., defining the death date as in August 2019, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ.

Nazir Kh. is a second victim, born in Homs city in 1984. The family received Nazir's death certificate in late 2019. He, a civilian, was arrested with four of his friends in an ambush set up by the Military Security branch in late November 2011, near al-Khaldia neighborhood.

Nazir was held incommunicado, until the family was told he was dead when his mother referred to the civil registry department to investigate into his whereabouts. The death date

was documented as in April 2019. A female relative of the victim recounted the following to STJ:

"Nazir was ambushed and arrested, after he and his friends were lured out of the al-Khaldiya neighborhood. He was on the wanted persons lists of almost all the Syrian regime forces, which hunted him for his revolution-related activities. We learned that Nazir and his friends died at the same time only when his mother referred to the civil registry department. They were all sentenced to death, the father of one of Nazir's friends told us. Nazir's friend also was executed and recorded dead in the civil registry department."

بيان وفاة

الجمهورية العربية السورية
وزارة الداخلية - شؤون المدنية

اسم المتوفي ونسبته	اسم ونسبة الاب	اسم ونسبة الام	تاريخ ولادة المتوفي	محل الوفاة	الجنس	الجنسية	تاريخ الوفاة	الأمثلة	محل القيد	رقم القيد	تمثيل الاسم
				دمشق	ذكر	سوري		محض			
ملاحظات:											

بيان صادر عن أمثلة: محض

في منطقة: محض

إلى أمين السجل المدني في:

تم تسجيل الوفاة في سجل والأحداث الوفاة في أمثلة حملة بتاريخ:

اسم المراجع:

تاريخ الميلاد:

تاريخ التسجيل في السجل المدني:

تاريخ الوفاة:

عائلة الكردي

Syrians For Truth & Justice

Image 2- Death certificate of victim Nazir Kh., reporting the death date as in April 2019, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ.

Fahed M., born in Homs city in 1933, is a third victim, who also died in the detention facilities of the Syrian security services. In late 2019, the family was handed over a death certificate by the civil registry department.

Fahed was arrested in 2013 in Damascus city under suspicious circumstances. With his death registered as on 11 November 2014, Fahed was most likely executed because he was a defector from the Syrian regular forces.

الجمهورية العربية السورية
وزارة الداخلية - الشؤون المدنية

بيان صادر عن أسرة: _____
اسم المتوفي وشيئة: _____
الرقم الوطني: _____

اسم الأب: _____
الرقم الوطني: _____

في محافظة: _____
تاريخ ولادة المتوفي: _____
اسم الأم وبسملها: _____
الرقم الوطني: _____

مكان الولادة: _____
الجنس: _____
تاريخ الوفاة: _____
الأمثلة: _____

رقم القيد: _____
رقم القيد المدني: _____

ملاحظات: _____

أول أمين السجل المدني في: _____
تم تسجيل الوفاة في سجل وأعلنت الوفاة في الأسرة ضمن في محافظة _____ بتاريخ: _____

أول أمين السجل المدني: _____
توقيع المراقب: _____

تاريخ الوفاة: _____
تاريخ الزرع: _____

اسم وتوقيع الممثل: _____
تاريخ التسجيل في السجل المدني: _____

هاتف الاستعلام الصوتي: ١٠٥

موقع الشؤون المدنية على الانترنت: www.syriamol.gov.sy

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

Image 3- Death certificate of victim Fahed M., reporting the death date as in July 2018, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ.

B. Death declarations in Hama city

Tarik A., born in Hama city in 1982, was arrested at the city's al-Assi Square by the Air Force Intelligence on 13 February 2012. Tarik was detained at the Sednaya Military Prison, a released inmate told the family.

In late 2019, news was circulated in the city that lists with detainees' names were brought to the civil registry department, Tarki's family was shocked to know that he was one of the detainees declared dead. The family was given a death certificate including the death date as on 5 March 2018.

The family was subjected to extortion. They have paid money to transfer Tarik from Sednaya Prison to Hama Central Prison, but all their efforts were futile. He was dead. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

"Tarik's family paid nearly 10 million Syrian pounds. They gave a lawyer, who supposedly had influence inside Sednaya Prison, several installments in exchange of his transfer to the Hama Prison, where they could at least visit him. The lawyer always made them promises; they were all unmet. He was dead, we finally got to know. The lawyer stopped answering our calls since then."

الجمهورية العربية السورية
وزارة الداخلية والشؤون المدنية

بيان وفاة

اسم المتوفي واسمته الرقم الوطني	اسم ونسبة الاب الرقم الوطني	اسم ونسبة الام الرقم الوطني	تاريخ ولادة المتوفي	محل الولادة	الجنس	الجنسية	تاريخ الوفاة	الامانة	محل القيد	رقم القيد
.....	198	دمشق	ذكر	سوري	حماة

ملاحظات:

بيان صادر عن امانة: حماة

في محافظة: حماة

إلى أمين السجل المدني في:

تم تسجيل الوفاة في سجل واقعت الوفاة في امانة حماة بتاريخ:

يرجى الاطلاع واجراء المقتضى

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

Image 4- Death certificate of victim Tarik A., reporting the death date as in March 2018, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ.

Rami M., born in Hama city in 1987, was a night guard at a textile factory in the city. He was arrested by the Air Force Intelligence at a checkpoint in the al-Dhahiriya neighborhood in August 2013. Rami was arrested due to a security report.

In late 2019, a relative told the family that he saw Rami's name on dead detainees' lists in the city's civil registry department, with the death date recorded as on 25 July 2018. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

"The whole neighborhood new what a well-mannered employee Rami was. When he was arrested, we tried to know his charges and reached out to several people to release him. However, all our efforts failed. Sometime later, a friend called me and said that he saw my surname on the deceased lists brought to the civil registry department. We referred to the department on the same day. It was Rami's name; he was dead. We also obtained a death certificate."

اسم المتوفي واسمته	اسم ونسبة الأب	اسم ونسبة الأم	تاريخ ولادة المتوفي	مكان الولادة	الجنس	الكنية	تاريخ الوفاة	الأسرة	مكان الدفن	سجل الوفاة
رامي م. م.	م. م.	م. م.	25/7/2018	سجل	ذكر	سوري		سجل		

Image 5- Death certificate of victim Rami M., reporting the death date as in July 2018, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ.

Muhammad N., born in Hama city in 1979, was a truck driver, married and a father of four. The eldest of his children was only six when he was arrested.

Muhammad was arrested by the Air Force Intelligence on the way back from Jordan. A checkpoint stopped him on the Damascus International Highway on 22 January 2012.

Two years passed before Muhammad's family was able to obtain a hint as to his whereabouts. Helped by a lawyer, they knew that he was detained at Sednaya Military Prison. But still, they could not visit him once.

In early 2019, the family referred to the city's civil registry department upon hearing that dead detainees' names have arrived at the department. Muhammad was among them, and his death date was recorded as on 14 May 2014, his wife said.

Talking to STJ, Muhammad's wife said that she suffered on many levels after she lost her husband. She could barely make ends meet. To earn a living for her children, she contracted with a shoe factory. Every day, she customizes 2000 pairs of shoes with stickers in return for 20 Syrian pounds per shoe. She added:

"When we lost my husband, we lost our breadwinner too. Our finances worsened. So, I had to work and take care of my children at the same time. There was also the family pressure, both my parents and my in-laws were trying to control my life, not to mention society. I was a prey to society's ideas, deemed an easy target for exploitation since I was a woman without a man. Society is showing me no mercy; instead, I get harassed. Our life was completely changed after my husband's arrest. I am a breadwinner and a single mother."

2. Death declarations in northern rural Hama

In the northern countryside of Hama, STJ's field researcher documented the death of two detainees in the facilities of the Syrian security service. The Political Security in Suran city notified the two families of the case in August and July 2020.

Abdulkareem K., born in 1982 in Suran city, northern rural Hama, was arrested by the security services in the city on 15 January 2013. He was captivated during a raid on a friend's house. He was first taken to the military post annexed to one of the city's checkpoints, and then to the Deir Shamil Detention Facility.

Abdulkareem's family was notified of his death on 5 August 2020. A relative told STJ the following:

"Abdulkareem was held at Deir Shamil Detention Facility for three months. Next, he was transferred to one of the security branches in al-Mazzeah neighborhood in Damascus city. There, he spent another month and a half. He was later taken to the al-Qaboun Military Police Branch. The family learned of his final whereabouts after they appealed to influential people and paid money, nearly a million Syrian Pounds. His uncle managed to visit him twice there and said that his health was fine. Seven months later, he was transferred to the Terrorism Court in al-Mazzeah on terrorism-related charges. Once again, they took him to the Military Police Branch in al-Qaboun, where he spent a week. He was then taken to the Adra Prison, where he stayed for two years. Later, he was transferred to Palestine Branch, and then to Sednaya Military

Prison. All contact with him was lost since then. In August 2020, the Political Security summoned us to receive Abdulkareem's identity document and death certificate, which said that he died on 6 December 2014. The news left us heartbroken, especially since we were not delivered his body."

Khaled H., born in Suran city in 1986, was married and a father to a little girl. Khaled was arrested from his house in the city by personnel of the Military Security on 7 August 2013. The family was notified of his death in July 2020. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

"Khaled was first deposited at the Deir Shamil Detention Facility, western rural Hama. Next, he was transferred to the Military Security branch in al-Qaboun neighborhood. There, Khaled suffered from memory loss due to torture. He was treated at the Tishreen Military Hospital in Damascus city, but his health kept deteriorating. He never recuperated. Since then, the family did not have the slightest idea as to his whereabouts, even though they tracked released detainees in the hope of getting any hints. Unfortunately, the family could not afford a lawyer. In July 2020, the Political Security in Suran city summoned the family to receive his identity document and death certificate, which reported his death as on 6 July 2018. His poor mother collapsed and lost her mind. She would roam the streets, saying 'I want Khaled.' His wife and little girl were left to their own devices, particularly as the wife refused to remarry to take care of her child."

3. Death declarations in Damascus and its countryside

In and around Damascus city, families were also traumatized as the civil registry departments reported the death of their beloved detained relatives. STJ documented the death of two detainees from Duma city, Damascus countryside, one in late 2019 and the second in October 2020.

STJ also documented the death of a female detainee, a mother of two from Duma city. The civil registry department reported her death news in September 2019. Another female detainee, from Deir ez-Zor, was reported dead by the Palestine Branch in Damascus city in May 2020.

A fifth detainee was reported dead by the civil registry department in Damascus. The family received the victim's death certificate in February 2020. These victims include the following:

Ayham B., 45 and born in Duma city, was married and a father of five. He was arrested at rural Damascus by a checkpoint of the Syrian regular forces on 28 August 2013. Ayham went missing until a released inmate told his family that he was held in Sednaya Military Prison in 2014. The victim's brother told STJ the following:

"My brother was arrested unjustly at one of the regime's checkpoints during the Duma city siege. They charged him with terrorism. In late 2019, I went to the civil registry department in Damascus; I had to obtain some documents. There, I was shocked to know that my brother was dead since April 2014. The department gave me his death certificate. My brother's arrest was tragic. My mother's health deteriorated. She died

without seeing him. My sister-in-law and his children also had to survive extreme difficult financial conditions. As if that was not enough, they were later displaced from Duma to northern Syria on board the green buses. They are in al-Bab city today. I try to support my sister-in-law and my brother's five children in every way possible."

Samira H., 27 from Duma city, was a widow and a mother of two, one of them a suckling. Samira was arrested by the Military Security at the Hamish checkpoint in Damascus city on 2 May 2018. She went missing for four months. Her family then learned that she was detained at the Air Force Intelligence in the city, and then transferred to the Adra Central Prison. The family hired a lawyer, but Samira disappeared again. One of the victim's relatives told STJ the following:

"Samira left her house to a nearby market to buy some stuff. It took her too long. Her family attempted to call her, but she never picked up. It was evening, and Samira was not home yet. A neighbor then told the family that he saw her being arrested by the security personnel at the Hamish Hospital checkpoint. Four months later, the family had some news. She was detained at the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city. They hired a lawyer, who asked for 400,000 Syrian pounds. The family sold their furniture to pay the lawyer. Later, they were told that she was transferred to the Adra Central Prison. The lawyer was not following the case all this time."

He added:

"In September 2019, Samira's mother went to the civil registry department to obtain a family registration extract. There, they told her that her daughter died on 12 July 2018, almost a month after her arrest. The mother lost consciousness and later had a heart attack. She remained silent for 25 days, and all she did was hugging her grandchildren and crying, because both their parents were dead now."

Ahmad M., 37 from Duma city in rural Damascus, was arrested with his brother in late 2017 from his workplace in Suwaida city by the security services. They were first taken to the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus city, and then separated. Ahmad's younger brother was deposited at the Political Security Branch in Damascus city and was released a year later. The victim's brother reported the following to STJ:

"My brothers were arrested just because they were born in the city of Duma. We lost all contact with Ahmad after my younger brother was released. What kept us going was the hope that he might be released soon. We had already hired a lawyer, but these efforts were all useless. In October 2020, my sister referred to the civil registry department in Damascus city to obtain a family civil registration extract. She was devastated upon seeing the word deceased written under my brother's name. She could not believe it at first. She broke the news to the family, but my mother still hopes that Ahmad is alive."

Raed M., born in 1972 in Aleppo city, was a journalist and a father of a teenage boy. He was arrested at Damascus city by the Military Security on 3 July 2012. He was taken to the Palestine Branch in the city and went missing since then.

In 2020, Raed's family was informed of his death in a detention facility by the civil registry department in Damascus. His death was recorded as on 11 November 2016. Raed's wife told STJ the following:

"Later, we managed to know that my husband was being held at the Sednaya Military Prison. I visited him, for the first and last time, in October 2016. His health was poor; but I could not be happier that I have visited him. At the time, my heart was broken to see him in such a bad condition. The visit was so brief, that it barely lasted for moments. In September 2017, he was completely out of reach. Then, one released inmate told us that Raed died in the prison. In early February 2020, my brother-in-law went to the civil registry to obtain some documents, where he was told that his brother has been dead since 2016. I have not recovered from this catastrophe yet. I have been through a lot since his death, particularly in raising my son. I am both his mother and father. Today, we live alone, just me and him, without any one to fend for us."

الجمهورية العربية السورية
وزارة الداخلية-الشؤون المدنية

بيان وفاة

بيان صادر عن الوابة الالكترونية للشؤون المدنية بتاريخ: 11/11/2016 ورقم: 11/11/2016

اسم المتوفي وتسميته الرقم الوطني	اسم ونسبة الأب الرقم الوطني	اسم الأم ونسبتها الرقم الوطني	تاريخ ولادة المتوفي	محل الوفاة	الجنس	الجنسية	تاريخ الوفاة	الأمانة	محل القيد	رقم القيد	متسلسل الاسم
				دمشق	نكر	سوري					

ملاحظات:

اسم المستخرج: مركز مديرية الشؤون المدنية بـ
تاريخ الواقعة: 11/11/2016
رقم الواقعة: 11/11/2016

ديما قباني

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

Image 6- Death certificate of victim Raed M., reporting the death date as in November 2016, with other information blurred at the family's request. Credit: STJ

Hala R., born in 1985 in Deir ez-Zor province, was arrested by the Military Security at the Department of Immigration and Passports in Damascus city in March 2020, while she was completing the visit procedures for her brother, who lived in Qatar. In May 2020, two months after Hala's arrest, the family was informed she was dead. Her brother told STJ the following:

"My sister and her husband moved to Damascus from Deir ez-Zor; they escaped the security chaos there. My sister has not participated in any revolution-related activities. She kept a distance from action. My brother also left Syria to Qatar in the beginning of the war and wanted to visit Syria. Hala went to the Department of Immigration and Passports to get him a visitor's card/permit. There, she was arrested. We spared no efforts to know any hints as to her whereabouts, but we failed to get anything. On 11 May 2020, the Palestine Branch in Damascus city called her husband and demanded that he shows up urgently at the Tishreen Military Hospital to receive Hala's body. The whole thing appeared unbelievable to him. So, he rushed to the hospital, where he identified Hala, whose body displayed marks of torture. The administration of the hospital, also located in Damascus, gave him a death certificate. Her body was taken to Deir ez-Zor and buried there. The experience was heart wrenching. And no words could possibly describe our family's misery that my sister died this way."

4. At least 370 detainees, including 28 women, declared dead in Deir ez-Zor city

Nearly 370 detainees, including 28 women, were reported dead to the civil registry department in Deir ez-Zor city between 1 October 2019 and 1 November 2020, an official of the department told STJ. He added:

"This time, we were not reported the causes of death. Over 94 families have applied forms to obtain death certificates, only 36 applications were processed so far. This delay is due to the difficult security procedures enforced by the State and Military Security Branches in Deir ez-Zor. Many families have given up on the matter altogether and did not seek to obtain a death certificate. This issue particularly, namely the death certificates, was handled differently. The deceased detainees' family members are subjected to a security checkup, especially men. Families are denied the death certificate should any member be a subject to a security report. When these families are rarely given a certificate, the cause of death would be defined exclusively as the security branches see fit: 'shot dead by sniper fire; died in the shelling; or kidnapped by the terrorist armed groups,' they would say. In other cases, branches would attribute the detainees' death to 'a heart attack, or a car accident.' Families are never delivered the bodies of the deceased."

The source even named a few of the victims, reported dead to the civil registry department in Deir ez-Zor city from late 2019 to early November 2020. The victims are:

1. Aboud Z., born in 1982 in Abu Kamal city, died at the State Security Branch in Hama city. He was arrested for terrorism-related charges.

2. Issa Z., born in 1994 in Abu Kamal city, died at the Military Security Branch in Deir ez-Zor city. He was arrested on charges of "advocating terrorism."
3. Hamza A., born in 1987 in Deir ez-Zor city, was arrested at his house in 2017 on charges of "undermining the prestige of the state and passing information to terrorists."
4. Rasheed H., born in 1991 in Deir ez-Zor city, died at Branch 243 in Damascus city. He was arrested at the al-Qutayfah checkpoint, rural Damascus, for his media activism.

5. At least 58 detainees declared dead in Southern Syria

In Southern Syria, particularly in Quneitra and Daraa provinces, the Russia-guaranteed settlement/reconciliation agreement signed with the Syrian government in August 2018 did not deter the Syrian security services from detaining the provinces' residents, many of whom subsequently died.

At least 34 detainees were declared dead between January and October 2020. Of these, 19 were former armed opposition groups fighters who signed a settlement agreement. Other 15 were civilians, and mostly signatories to the agreement, according to the information STJ's field researcher has collected from various sources, many of them are families of the victims.

Earlier in Daraa, between 1 August 2018 and 1 January 2020, over 24 families were granted detainees' death certificates by the civil registry departments, STJ's field researcher reported. In most of these cases, the families were not told the reason of death or the detainees' burial places; they were even denied the bodies of their beloved relatives. In other cases, the death news was reported to families through notices issued by police stations.

The majority of these victims had signed settlement agreements with the Syrian government and had been arrested on various charges, most notably assuming command positions within the ranks of the armed opposition groups. Some of the victims were regular army defectors, relief or media activists, the sources told STJ's field researcher.

In Southern Syria, families were informed of their relatives' fate through a number of institutions and services.

A. Civil registry departments

Abdulaziz, 50, was born in al-Sheikh Maskin city in northern rural Daraa. The family knew of his death in February 2020 as they visited the civil registry department in Daraa. A source close to the family told STJ the following:

"We are certain that Abdulaziz was tortured to death. He signed a settlement agreement, but still the regime's forces arrested him on 28 October 2018. He disappeared since then. In February 2020, we were told that the authorities have sent a list with the names of detainees who died at security branches to the civil registry department. The family referred to the department and were given a death certificate. The death cause was reported as due to a sudden heart attack."

Samer S., 39 from An Nasriyah town in western rural Daraa, was doomed to a similar fate. On 4 April 2016, Samer was arrested at a military checkpoint on the Damascus-Daraa International Highway. He was taking his wife to the hospital. His wife told STJ the following:

"I was pretty sick back then. The doctors told me to go to the al-Mouwasat Hospital in Damascus to do some tests. On the way there, and at the notorious military checkpoint in the Mankat Hattab village, 35 kilometers south of Damascus, the bus driver collected our IDs and handed them to the personnel. The IDs were to be scanned by a device that detects the names of wanted people. They asked my husband to get off the bus and arrested him. We have not had the slightest idea as to his whereabouts since then. On 12 May 2020, I went to the civil registry department in Daraa; I was obtaining a family card and needed to register my three children. A woman employee there asked me about my husband; I told her he was missing. She asked for a family civil registration extract. I referred to the designated section, where the employee told me that my husband was dead and handed me his death certificate."

B. Military courts in Damascus

While working on this report, STJ observed that the civil registry department in southern Syria does not treat all citizens equally. In Daraa and Quneitra, employees sometimes deny families information about their detained relatives; either because they do not possess such information, or for personal motives. Employees sometimes ask the victims' families for bribes.

This is the story of the larger proportion of the detainees' families in Southern Syria, who go through the utmost suffering to obtain the death certificates of their relatives.

Families thus resorted to military courts in Damascus. At the relevant departments, the family applies a "missing person" form to the Military Prosecutor's Office, demanding information about the involved person.

The Prosecutor's Office refers applicants to the Military Police headquarters in al-Qaboun neighborhood in Damascus. The police, for their turn, search for the detainee's files. Families are denied information when the detainees are found to be alive and are transferred to the Tishreen Military Hospital should the detainees be dead. The hospital's administration gives the family the detainees' death certificates and personal belongings, such as their ID or wallet.

In Quneitra, the family of Ahmad M., 32 from the al-Qusaibeh town, were informed of his death in the Sednaya Military Prison in February 2020. Ahmad was arrested in 2019 for being a defector from the Syrian regular forces, even though he had signed the settlement agreement. A family member told STJ the following:

"Ahmad did not engage in any anti-government activities. Indeed, he abandoned his regiment to escape military service, but he never held a weapon against authorities. He worked for relief organizations and only briefly. This is not a crime that deserves a death punishment. Everyone was surprised when he was transferred to the Sednaya Military Prison. And this was the reason why we applied a 'missing person' form at the

Military Police headquarter in al-Qaboun. The police referred us to the Tishreen Military Hospital, where we were handed his death certificate."

Hassan B., 41 and based in the Yarmouk Basin, was arrested in 2017 at a security checkpoint at downtown Damascus. Hassan was planning to move to Lebanon in search of a job, knowing that he was not involved in any arrest-deserving activities, military or other, when the armed opposition groups were in control of the area. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

"Hassan was arrested in March 2017. We have cautioned him that he might get arrested, but he never listened, saying that he was neither a part of the conflict, nor a participant in anti-government activities. The driver of the taxi that Hassan took that day told us that a security checkpoint in Damascus asked him to get off the car and guided him to an unidentified destination. The taxi driver was told to leave. Since then, we had no information regarding Hassan's whereabouts, other than the piece of news we received through a middleman. He was detained in Palestine Branch, the man reported. Later, we heard that the Syrian authorities have released a detainee from Daraa, who was held at the Sednaya Military Prison. We visited the released inmate, who told us that they were detained at the same ward in Sednaya Prison. Hassan had developed tuberculosis in July 2020. When his health worsened, the prison administration transferred him somewhere else, and he disappeared since then. The inmate added that it has been common knowledge that detainees whose health deteriorates and get transferred, never come back again. We called a lawyer, who told us to refer to the Military Court, to know whether he lived, or not. Hassan's sister sought the court, and next headed to al-Qaboun. There, she was informed of Hassan's death and was delivered his death certificate."

C. Local police

In rare cases, it is the area's police service that breaks the death news to families, particularly when the Syrian authorities intend to deliver the deceased detainee's body to relatives, STJ's field researcher reported. In Inkhil town, north of Daraa, the police summoned the relatives of Muhammad R., 26, to receive his body from the Tishreen Military Hospital, only three days after he was arrested.

Muhammad was a former fighter of the armed opposition groups, he served as the commander of a unit affiliated with Alwiat Mujahideen Horan/Brigades of Horan's Mujahideen. Muhammad was arrested despite the settlement agreement he signed. A relative of the victim told STJ the following:

"Muhammad signed a settlement agreement with the regime and held a card that demonstrated his status. He later joined the State Security service in Inkhil city. However, they tricked him. They arrested Muhammad, with a friend, on 7 May 2020 at one of the service's checkpoints in the city. On the third day, the police asked the family to show up at the Tishreen Military Hospital, where they will receive his body. At the hospital, Muhammad's relatives were given a death certificate that stated the

death reason as a 'heart attack.' There were beating marks all over his body, proving that he certainly died due to torture."

In al-Sheikh Maskin, it was the police also that informed four families of the death of their detained relatives. The detainees were declared dead in September 2019, a Daraa-based activist told STJ, adding that:

"In October 2018, personnel of the Criminal Security and the Air Force Intelligence launched an arrest raid in al-Sheikh Maskin city, south of Daraa. They arrested Abdulmunim H., former commander of the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Ibn Taymiyyah Battalion, which operated in Southern Syria, Mustafa B., an Imam of a mosque, Alaa Kh., an army defector since 2012, and Abdulstar A., a relief activist. All four had signed a settlement agreement with the regime. In September 2019, the families of the detainees were delivered death certificate by the al-Sheikh Maskin Police Station, nearly a year after their arrest. The certificates were a proof that they all died in the security detention facilities in Damascus. The families were not delivered the bodies of any of the deceased detainees, for the bodies were buried in the Najha cemetery, south of the capital Damascus. The arrests and the subsequent death of these men was catalyzed by Abdulfatah Rahal, director of the Daraa Agriculture Directorate. Rahal had personally pressed charges against all anti-government residents of Daraa, including relief workers, members of local councils, and former commanders of armed opposition groups, among others."

Myasar M. was detained at the Sednaya Military prison. In late 2019, the Mukhtar of the Mia`rbah town, 32KM east of Daraa city, informed Myasar's family of his death, nearly a year after he was arrested. A relative of the victim reported the following to STJ:

"Before Southern Syria was subjected to the Russia-guaranteed settlement agreement, Myasar was the head of the executive force of the Dar al-Adel Court in Horan. Many have advised him to leave the country, but he chose to sign a settlement agreement with the regime. In November 2018, a few months after he signed the agreement, personnel of the regime's Air Force Intelligence arrested him from his home. They told him it was a matter of formalities; he will answer some questions and be released because he defected from the State Security Branch at the onset of the protests. Myasar's family paid exorbitant money to persons within the Air Force Intelligence in exchange for his release. They were being blackmailed and achieved nothing. All the family managed to know was that Myasar was transferred to the Sednaya Military Prison. In September 2019, the Mukhtar told the family that Myasar was dead and gave them his death certificate."

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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