

April 2021



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Insecurity Grips Deir ez-Zor: Locals Concerned Following a Series of Disturbing Murders

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In this joint report, Justice for Life (JFL) and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) provide an extensive account of the murders of Sa'da al-Harmas, Hind al-Khdair, and Aboud Ali al-Mhaimeed.

Background

The Islamic State (IS), locally known as Daesh, has been ramping up its activities in parts of Deir ez-Zor's countryside and al-Hasakah's southern areas, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remain in power. In January and February 2021, assassinations perpetrated by IS sleeper cells increased, targeting civilians, including two local female officials of the Autonomous Administration and a local activist.

In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), in cooperation with Justice for Life (JFL), provides the details and circumstances surrounding the murders of the Joint President of the Tal al-Shayer Town Council, Sa'da al-Harmas, and her deputy Hind al-Khdair. The bodies of the two women were retrieved on 22 January 2021, hours after a raid into their homes in Tal al-Shayer town, administratively affiliated to al-Dashisha district, south of al-Hasakah province. Eyewitnesses and relatives of the victims recounted that the two women were led out of their homes by force, kidnapped, shot, and killed by an IS-affiliated group who presented themselves as SDF intelligence personnel.

IS claimed responsibility for the two murders on 24 January 2021, sending shock waves through the ranks of Autonomous Administration workers and the local community. Workers and locals feel threatened and fear for their lives, particularly in the areas of al-Shadadi and al-Dashisha, south of al-Hasakah, and the countryside of Deir ez-Zor. These areas are located near the Syria-Iraq border strip and the *Badia* (desert) region, which IS fighters continually use to infiltrate surrounding areas and conduct smuggling operations.

On 4 February 2021, the SDF launched a military campaign against IS sleeper cells to avenge the murders of Sa'da and Hind. An SDF officer said that on 13 February the campaign resulted in the capture of one of the two perpetrators.

The rise of violence was not limited to areas south of al-Hasakah province. The Badia region also witnessed the murder of the civil activist Aboud Ali al-Mhaimeed, 33. The victim's body was found on 23 January. Two gunmen on a motorcycle drove behind al-Mhaimeed's car and shot at it. One bullet struck the victim, wounding him before he was kidnapped and later found dead.

Eyewitnesses claimed that the gunman stole al-Mhaimeed's cell phone and, later, a source from the SDF confirmed they used the phone to track one of the murders. The perpetrator confessed to the theft but denied having any link to the murder. The official added that the SDF is still searching for the other gunman who was still at large at the time of reporting, on 22 February 2021.

In addition to the murders of the two female officials, the countryside of al-Hasakah province witnessed several attacks that are widely linked to the IS cells and which target the SDF almost exclusively. In December 2020, a young man, Issa al-Nazal, an Asayish recruit, was kidnapped while on his way home in the al-Shadadi town. Issa's beheaded body was later found. However, the incident did not make headlines and was never claimed by IS. In other cases

over January and February 2021, SDF military vehicles were targeted over five times on the al-Khrafi road.

Unidentified assailants and attackers also continue spreading horror in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor, where rates of violence have been spiking. Assassinations, exchanges of gunfire, and raids carried out by SDF-affiliated security services protract the insecurity and instability of the region. In one incident, a man was shot and killed by a gun with a silencer on 22 November 2020 in Diban village, east of Deir ez-Zor. The perpetrator remains at large. In a second incident, the dead bodies of two former armed opposition groups were discovered on 27 November 2020. In a third incident, the SDF exchanged fire in Zghair town with the locals during a raid in January 2021. The clash resulted in the death of an SDF fighter, originally from the town, and the injury of 11 other locals and SDF fighters.

However, it was a [series of tribal sheikhs' assassinations](#) in Deir ez-Zor's countryside in 2020 that most affected the local community. The assassinations of tribal leaders led to protests in the streets, with people blocking roads with burning tires. The tribes, for their part, demanded that the Autonomous Administration make large-scale changes to improve its management and infrastructure.

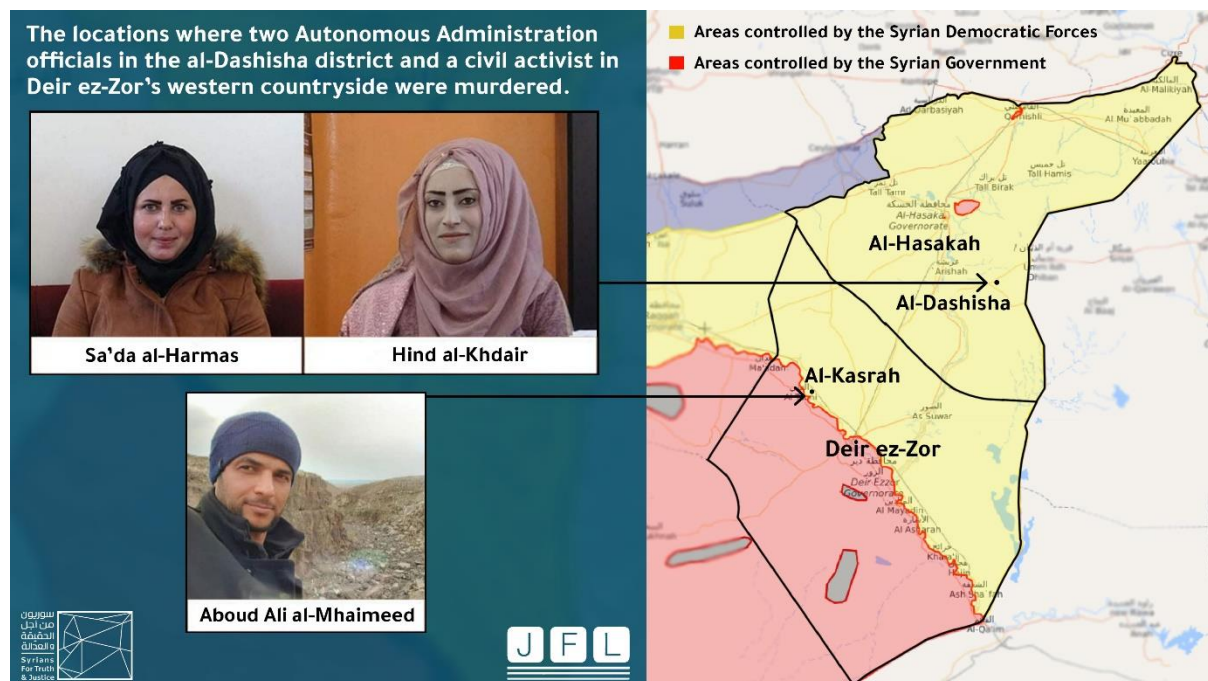


Image 1- Map of the locations where the three victims were murdered—the two female officials of the Autonomous Administration in the al-Dashisha district, south of al-Hasakah, and the civil activist in Deir ez-Zor's western countryside.

Methodology

To provide a detailed account of the three murders reported above and the violence that struck areas covered in this report, STJ and JFL conducted 11 interviews.

Pertaining to the murders of the two female officials, field researchers of the two organizations spoke to eight eyewitnesses, among them relatives and SDF officials.

The field researchers also probed into the murder of civil activist Aboud Ali al-Mhaimeed. They interviewed three witnesses, among them the victim's relatives and an SDF official.

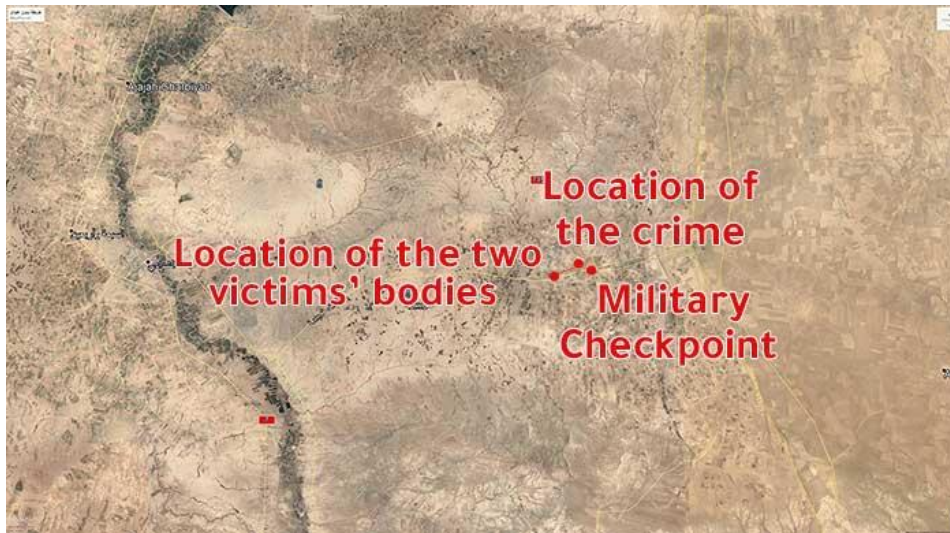
The researchers conducted the 11 interviews online between January and late February 2021 and consulted a variety of open sources that covered the violent crimes in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor and the areas south of al-Hasakah.

1. Two Female Autonomous Administration Officials Kidnapped and Murdered

IS fighters assassinated two female Autonomous Administration officials in Tal al-Shayer town, administratively affiliated to al-Dashisha district, south of al-Hasakah province on 22 January 2021. The fighters raided the two officials' houses wearing SDF formal outfits, kidnapped them, and killed them only a few hours later.

The two victims were the Joint President of the Tal al-Shayer Town Council, Sa'da al-Harmas, and her deputy Hind al-Khdair. Tal al-Shayer town abounds with IS sleeper cells, who choose it for its desert-like terrain and proximity to Iraqi borders, through which fighters infiltrate other regions and conduct smuggling operations.

Information obtained by STJ's field researcher confirms that the two officials were forcibly led out of their houses, shot, and killed. Their dead bodies were found near the town only a few hours after IS fighters kidnapped them.



Images 2,3,4- Satellite images locating the places where the two victims were forcibly taken and the site where their dead bodies were discovered later, as well as the nearest military checkpoint to the site of the murders.

A. Accounts from the Victims' Relatives

Hind al-Khdair's mother recounted to STJ the details of the raid into their house, Hind's kidnapping, and murder:

"It was almost 07:00 PM. An armed group stormed our house. I was there with my children. Some of us were asleep. The group members were driving a Hyundai H100. They were all masked and had military outfits on, which resembled the SDF's. Three of them burst into the house barbarically. They hit me. One of them even pointed his rifle at me and threatened to kill me if I resisted or screamed. Another member charged towards the room where Hind was and forced her out."

Hind's mother said that the attackers gathered accurate information about her daughter prior to the kidnapping. They appeared to know her very well and likely tracked her before breaking into their house. She added:

"They treated Hind rudely. They seized her cell phone and asked her to give them her second one. They were certain she had two. They did not leave us a chance to do anything and took Hind from among us. We could not resist because they said they were members of the SDF's intelligence service and that they will bring her back a few hours later."

The mother added:

"I never imagined that they would bring her back a dead body, for she was an employee only. The domain of her job was services. She did the work to help us survive and to make a living for her orphan daughter."

The masked group headed to Sa'da al-Harmas's house next, located a few kilometers away from Hind al-Khdair's house. One of Sa'da's relatives told STJ that the group kidnapped her in the same way they abducted al-Khdair. He added:

"A group driving a Hyundai H100, with lights off, raided our house too. I believe that it is the same group that kidnapped Hind al-Khdair, for Sa'da was forcibly taken from home less than half an hour after the attack on the first victim's home."

The witness said that the group wore camo military uniforms and carried 74U-AKs machine guns, the type often used by IS fighters. They likely also watched Sa'da closely before she returned home, because they knew her very well and possessed information about her during the kidnapping. He added:

"The group aimed their machine guns at everyone inside the house and asked us to hand them Sa'da. We told them that she was not at home, but they said that we were lying and that she returned home from al-Hasakah city about an hour ago. They took Sa'da out in a violent manner. We stood there, helpless."

He added:

“We could not keep a track of them. Even if we did, they would have killed us. However, we immediately reported the incident to the security forces of the Asayish and the SDF. Both were already informed of Hind al-Khdair’s kidnapping. They started searching for them in coordination with checkpoints, patrols, military, and security forces in the area. Finally, a few hours later, they found the two women dead on the town’s outskirts.”

B. Other Eyewitnesses

A resident of the Tal al-Shayer town, Muhammad A., told STJ that on the evening of 22 January 2021 he heard screams and a loud noise near the victim Sa’da al-Harmas’s house. He then observed masked gunmen in front of her door next to a car. He recounted the following:

“It took them only five minutes. They took Sa’da and sped off. I also observed a second car on the road, probably a surveillance car. Later, we heard that they found the two victims’ bodies on the road between Tal al-Shayer and Dashisha. About six hours later, the Anti-Terrorism forces arrested three of the town’s young men. They were all previously arrested on charges relating to IS and were released when their records proved clear. The Anti-Terrorism forces released one of the young men and kept a hold of the other two. They were being interrogated.”

A second eyewitness, a female employee at the People’s Council in Dashisha district, told STJ that in the period leading up to her kidnapping, Hind al-Khdair received several death threats. The witness said:

“I knew the victim Hind al-Khdair very well. We talked every now and then. One day, she showed up at the Dashisha Civil Council. She had some work to do there. We sat in my office and talked. That was in November 2020. That day, she told me that she is getting messages and calls from strange numbers, American, Swedish, and even Syrian. The callers either insulted or threatened her. But she thought that these were some childish acts done by someone trying to push her to give up her position or because she stopped a decision that would have served their interests. She barely gave the matter any thought; she did not even report the harassment to the concerned authorities even though I advised her to do so.”

The witness added:

“We instructed all relevant institutions and departments not to make any media statements regarding the death of the two victims, otherwise they will be liable to dismissal or interrogation since the two murders’ investigations and search operations for the perpetrators were underway, particularly because the security services had some doubts that persons involved in the murders are in the Tal al-Shayer town, where the victims lived. The suspects might have provided the perpetrators with information on the deceased women’s activities.”

An employee of the Organized Crime Unit, affiliated with the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) in the Dashisha district, reported to STJ how the team found the dead bodies of the two

victims. He said that around 11:00 PM on 22 January 2021 the team was reported by colleagues at Tal al-Shayer town that an anonymous group driving a car kidnapped two female employees of the town's council, pretending to be SDF intelligence personnel. He said:

"It was almost 1:00 am when the bodies of two dead women, with the same description of the reported kidnapping victims, were found. The kidnappers had the two women's hands tied behind their backs, shot, and executed them, and left them on the side of the road between Dashisha and Tal al-Shayer. The bodies were moved to a medical center in the district. When examined, the team confirmed that the executed women were Sa'da Faysal al-Harmas and Hind Latif al-Khdair, two officials of the Tal al-Shayer council. Almost a month before she was abducted, Sa'da al-Harmas reported to authorities sporadic WhatsApp threats she received from unknown persons using American phone numbers."

The witness added that preliminary investigations indicate that some people in Tal al-Shayer town and al-Shadadi district are involved with IS cells and that these persons have been providing the terrorists with information on the victims' moves, their phone numbers, and places of residence.

A security source from the SDF told STJ that security and military forces in the Dashisha district started search operations immediately after they received the report of the kidnapping of the two female officials by an armed group that impersonated SDF militants. The source added:

"At 01:00 am, one of our patrols discovered the bodies of the two victims on the road between Dashisha district and Tal al-Shayer town, closer to the latter. The two women were shot and killed, with their hands tied behind their backs. The patrol also found a spent cartridge fired from AkS-74U machine guns, which was the murder weapon."

The source noted that the news reported by a number of media outlets that the two victims were beheaded with a knife are all untrue, adding that the dead bodies were taken to a dispensary in the Dashisha district for the forensic expert to examine them before they were handed over to their families.

c. IS Claims Responsibility for the Murders

IS claimed responsibility for the assassinations of the two female officials of the Tal al-Shayer Town Council, run by the Autonomous Administration. In a statement published by its affiliated Amaq News Agency on 24 January 2021, IS said that its fighters raided the houses of two officials of the Autonomous Administration in the Tal al-Shayer village in Dashisha area and killed them with machine guns.



Image 5- Photo published by IS-affiliated Amaq News Agency, through which IS claimed responsibility for killing the two officials Sa'da al-Harmas, joint president of the Tal al-Shayer Town Council, and her deputy Hind al-Khdair.

D. Perpetrators Captured

Hawar News Agency, close to the Autonomous Administration, reported on 13 February 2021 that the SDF arrested the perpetrators of the murders of Sa'da al-Harmas and Hind al-Khdair.¹ Furthermore, an SDF official told STJ that the SDF captured one of the persons involved in the murders in the Tal al-Shayer town during a 14-day military operation against IS cells that the SDF launched on 4 February 2021 to avenge the dead victims.

The official added that the SDF captured one member of the terrorist cell responsible for the murders. The rest, however, were eliminated in coordination with the US-led coalition's forces after the cell was closely monitored and precise information was obtained on its members' movements.

The SDF press office reported that among the eliminated IS cell members are Abu Khalid al-Iraq, IS *Zakat* (alms) Officer, Abu Yassine al-Iraqi, *Zakat* officer in the western sector, Karar al-Iraqi, and Abu Hamza al-Souri. The office also published a video on 20 February featuring the captured member Ibrahim Abdulrazaq,² nicknamed Hitler, confessing his role in the murder of the two female officials.

¹ "SDF captures perpetrators of Sa'da and Hind's murders," Hawar News Agency, 13 February 2021, https://hawarnews.com/ar/haber/qsd-tlqy-alqbdh-ala-mrtkby-jrymh-qtl-sadh-whnd-h46195.html?fbclid=IwAR3IbEIPy_wI07gkjVHVfJqpkUnNw4kxpEc8LHJLo4bHkBDedRD-9ZD_akY (last visited: 27 March 2021)

² For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Y4JtE7rljsQ&feature=youtu.be>



Image 6-Screenshot from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing one of the perpetrators of the murders of S'ada al-Harmas and Hind al-Khdair.

In the video, the IS fighter confesses to joining the terrorgroup for money and that he participated in three terrorist operations implemented by IS cells, the last of which was the assassination of Sa'da al-Harmas and Hind al-Khdair on 22 January 2021 in the Tal al-Shayer town in Dashisha district, south of al-Hasakah province.

The IS fighter claims that five other cell members engaged in the operation using a Hyundai H100. He recounted the following:

“Abu Osman called me and asked if I was ready. I told him I was. He instructed me to go to a place where I will meet someone called Qasoura. I left immediately and met the man. Shortly after, we rode Qasoura's motorcycle headed to the al-Baqya road almost in the evening. There, a car was waiting for us, inside it were Abu Osman, Abu Khalid, Omar, and al-Hajji.”

The captured IS fighter points to another member of the same terrorist cell in the video – the fifth fighter responsible for killing the two women with a AkS-74U machine gun. He added:

“The car stopped on the highway. Then, they [Abu Osman, Abu Khalid, Omar and al-Hajji] ordered us to be ready, for we almost arrived at our destination. The car continued until we reached the front of a house. From that house, they brought out Hind al-Khdair. They asked us to tie her up. Qasoura did it. They brought Sa'da the same way and deposited her in the car. We drove back to the highway, not very far [five to six kilometers]. We got them out of the car. Abu Osman took them aside and talked to them. I do not know what they said. He then shot them dead. After that, we boarded the car. It was dark. They gave

us a ride to the place where we left Qasoura's motorcycle, who took me back to where I parked my motorcycle. I then returned home."

E. Horrified Locals

The murder of the two officials were shocking for all Autonomous Administration staffers, particularly Arabs. They felt threatened and feared for their own lives since IS sleeper cells' activities were on the rise lately in al-Shadadi and Dashisha south of al-Hasakah and the suburbs of Deir ez-Zor.

Locals from the targeted areas said that the IS-led attack in the Dashisha area, 85 kilometers south of al-Hasakah, is indicative of the group's ramped-up activities in SDF-controlled territories. In the past few months, IS carried out an ever-increasing number of attacks and expanded the scope of its activities, starting from the Syrian Badia and spreading to other areas.

A local source from rural al-Hasakah said that more violent incidents have occurred lately, most blamed on IS. In December 2020, a young Asayish recruit, Issa al-Nazal, was abducted on the way home in al-Shadadi town. The young man's beheaded body was discovered. However, the story did not make it into the media and IS did not claim responsibility for his murder.

Moreover, SDF military vehicles were targeted over five times on the al-Kharafi road in rural al-Hasakah in January and February 2021. Perpetrators, still unidentified, conspired to ambush the vehicles or assault them on motorcycles. Peculiarly, IS claimed responsibility for only a few of the attacks.

Similarly, IS has not claimed responsibility for assassinations in al-Hawl IDPs Camp, east of al-Hasakah, where a local source added that 15 people had been murdered in January 2021. The victims were all employees of the SDF or the Autonomous Administration. With no group taking responsibility for the attacks, the identity of the perpetrators has been left to speculation, and the region left at the mercy of rising violence.

2. Civil Activist Murdered in Deir ez-Zor Province

The dead body of Aboud Ali al-Mhaimeed, 33, was discovered in the al-Badia region on 23 January 2021. Gunmen on a motorcycle shot the victim from behind while driving his car headed to Abu Khashab village near al-Kasrah town in Deir ez-Zor's countryside.

Al-Mhaimeed has been a prominent civil activist in Deir ez-Zor since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, stopping his activism only after IS entered the area. When the hardliner group was expelled from the province, al-Mhaimeed resumed his activities and volunteered with several civil society organizations, in addition to his work as a coordinator for the Social Support Program with the Basic Services Unit of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).



Images 7,8,9 - Satellite images locating the site where the victim was shot and killed, as well as the location where his body was discovered.

A. Family and Close Friends' Accounts

A relative of the victim Aboud Ali al-Mhaimeed told JFL that a member of the SDF-affiliated General Security called him around 1:00 PM on 23 January 2021, telling him that a woman showed up at the General Security's headquarters asking for help because some persons kidnapped Aboud. The relative added:

"The woman told the General Security that Aboud was driving his car and giving her a lift to her workplace, located on the Abu Khashab village road and near the al-Kasrah town, where Aboud lives. On the road between the two areas, two masked gunmen shot at Aboud's car from the back. One bullet penetrated the car. The cartridge hit Aboud's shoulder and exited his mouth. When the car stopped, the gunmen forced the woman out of the car and drove Aboud, who was still alive, towards the Badia."

The relative said that it took the woman over an hour and a half to report the General Security on the incident, because she could not find a car to drive her and ultimately had to walk to the security's headquarters. He added:

"I called my relatives. We headed to the Badia to search for Aboud. The General Security and a number of the town's people helped us. Two hours later, we heard gunshots coming from an area in the Badia called al-Wa'ula, where oil is widely extracted with primitive tools. The gunshots were a signal that one of the search groups succeeded in locating Aboud. He was indeed found, but dead unfortunately. His body did not display marks of torture. However, all the car's contents were stolen, including Aboud's cell phone. Aboud's body was transferred to the al-Kasrah Hospital, near the General Security's headquarters. Then, the body was delivered to Aboud's family to proceed with the burial procedures."

The relative added that even though Aboud did not have any enemies, he received several threats from unidentified persons, the last of which was sent five months before his death. The latest threat was a promise to kill him if he refused to abandon his job. The relative added that Aboud felt safer when the threats ceased and started to move at liberty against his relatives' advice that he must be cautious. Aboud's relative said that senders most likely aimed these threats to financially blackmail Aboud because he was successful at work and was paid a sufficient salary.

The relative also commented on the performance of local authorities, which, at a certain point, played a key role in unearthing the details of the incident. He said:

"We tend to be pessimistic about local authorities' efforts in such incidents. In their reports, authorities often document such violent assaults as perpetrated by unidentified persons. In Aboud's case, the authorities barely reacted in the beginning. Later, however, they exerted serious efforts to reveal the details of the incident, after they managed to locate Aboud's stolen cell phone. A person tried to sell the cell phone to a shop in a nearby village. The shop owner kept the man busy and informed the security forces, which arrested the man."

One person close to Aboud said that his coworkers called him on 23 January 2021 while he was outside the village. They informed him that Aboud had been attacked and kidnapped. The indigurned him to call the victim's relatives and other persons close to him, who in turn told him that they were heading to Badia to search for Aboud. The witness recounted the following:

"I also called an employee at an office affiliated with the SDF security services. He told me that a woman they held captive was with Aboud when he was attacked. I kept in touch with a number of the people who searched for Aboud. The search in the Badia continued for nearly an hour and a half. Due to the weak cell phone signal reception, I lost contact with them. I went to the hospital, where they told me that they found Aboud, dead. The body was then moved to the family house."

The witness added that crowds of people waited at the victim's house to receive his body. He added that one of the people who searched for Aboud told him that they found his car in the area between the two villages of al-Harmoushiya and al-Kasrah, about 4 kilometers from the town of al-Kasrah. The witness added:

"When I was first told that Aboud was missing, I thought that it was unlikely he will be murdered because the area where they found him was always crowded with people and because similar incidents end with theft only. However, the late rains might be the cause why there were no shepherds in the area on the day of the incident. The odd thing about the incident is that it is the first time that a civilian is attacked in the western area of Deir ez-Zor. I remember that Aboud told me that he was financially blackmailed. He said that a man threatened him and demanded money, alleging that Aboud treated him disrespectfully once."

The witness added that local parties pressed authorities into taking action. The authorities captured one of the suspects while trying to sell the victim's cell phone, stolen from the car after Aboud was shot. The witness also said that the authorities are detaining and interrogating a number of persons. He added:

"Even though the SDF has set up additional security checkpoints, the security situation did not improve. The area witnessed several armed robberies after Aboud's murder. Such incidents affect stability adversely. For instance, just a while ago, the family of a murdered person displaced dozens of families related to the murderer."

Information obtained by JFL's field researcher indicates that the woman, who accompanied the victim before he was murdered, approached the first SDF checkpoint in the al-Kasrah town, known as the Abu Khashab Road Checkpoint. However, the personnel there did not respond to her plea. Then, she headed to one of the Asayish's posts, which handed her over to relevant authorities.

The field researcher said that the woman was terrified and could not recount all the incidents' details immediately. She told the interrogators the following:

“We were on the way to work onboard Aboud’s van car. People riding a motorcycle fired at us. Aboud was hit in the jaw. I started yelling, so they came back and forced me to get out of the car. I do not know what happened after that.”

B. One of the Perpetrators Arrested

A security source told JFL that after the woman who accompanied the victim reported the incident and its location, the security forces informed all military and security services to take needed measures to find al-Mhaimed and capture the perpetrators. The source said that the services’ reaction was slow because the location was far away and because it took the woman a long time to report the shooting. He added:

“Aboud was robbed of his belongings after he was shot and led to the Badia in his car. There, he was abandoned to die. His phone was stolen. In our official capacity, we reported the murder and theft to the owners of cell phone shops and others who maintain cell phones similar to the stolen one. Indeed, we managed to locate the cellphone and arrested a group of people. All the arrested were released, except for one, who confessed about the shooting and the theft, but denied having any link to the murder.”

The source also said that security services are still searching for a person whose name was mentioned during the investigation. The source recounted the following:

“We are working to arrest the other perpetrator, who is still at large without the slightest idea as to his location. However, we obtained information that he denies having any relation to the murder and that the arrested suspect is the one responsible for the crime. Both are trying to blame the murder on each other, but the investigations are still underway, and the results will be clearer once the free suspect is captured. The woman who was accompanying Aboud is still in our custody and we are trying to obtain information from her. She could not identify the suspects because she has been terrified and tense since the incident.”



About Syrians for Truth and Justice

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers, at Syrians for Truth and Justice, 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.



About Justice for Life

We work in a participatory manner with the exerted efforts locally and internationally in observing and following up the reality of human rights in Syria through observation, documentation, forming evidences, participating in initiating legal actions before courts and specialized parties, promoting the capacity of human rights defenders in Syria, and creating spaces for citizens, especially victims and the marginalized, to express and participate in the course of justice until reaching the state of law and citizenship.