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On the Anniversary of Hama's “Children of Freedom” Massacre, Perpetrators are Still at Large

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Syrian security services opened fire on Hama residents before they arrived in the al-Assi Square, where they intended to assemble for the peaceful protests on 3 June 2011

The 3rd of June 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the massacre committed by Syrian government security forces on the Friday of the Children of Freedom in 2011 in Hama city. Eyewitnesses told Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) that security forces fired live ammunition, killed, and wounded several young people and children who assembled to hold a protest in al-Assi Square. The perpetrators of the massacre remain at large to the day. Many of the victims' families did not seek accountability or file lawsuits demanding a probe into these hostilities, fearing the retaliation of security services.

On the anniversary of the massacre, STJ interviewed a number of survivors and relatives of victims, as well as four health officials and workers who treated the larger segment of the wounded and witnessed the deaths of many protestors.

While STJ's field researcher in Hama documented the deaths of 80 protestors, among them at least two children, local activists said that the number is likely higher, particularly the number of child victims, stressing that at least 15 children died that day. Health workers, for their part, said that nearly 200 people lost their lives at the hands of security services.

What Happened?

On the evening of 3 June 2011, residents from several neighborhoods in Hama city marched towards the al-Assi Square for the usual Friday protest, calling it the Friday of the Children of Freedom. Syrian government security forces, mostly of the Military Security Department, shot live rounds at the protestors in the square, and at others who were still on the way there. Survivors of the massacre and eyewitnesses from that day's peaceful protests said that the shooting continued for 10 minutes. They added that some of the involved security personnel wore plainclothes, but the majority were in the military khaki uniform. The survivors called those in civilian clothes *Shabiha*, thugs, and stressed that they operated under a para-military auxiliary force.

Survivors interviewed by STJ said that security forces were stationed at three sites and snipers were deployed on the rooftops of government and residential buildings in three major areas. In al-Murabet area, security forces took positions in the orphanage and surrounding buildings to target protestors coming from the neighborhoods in the al-Souq area, including al-Jarajmeh, Bab Qibli, al-Shaikh Anbar, al-Ta'aouniya, al-Shajarh, and Tmaneh Azar. In al-Hader area, security forces were stationed at the new building of the Ba'ath Party and the facility of the Police Command to target protestors coming from the neighborhoods of al-Manakh and al-Hamidiya and those who will assemble in the area extending from the Sa'id al-As Street to the al-U'baisi Bridge. In the al-Assi Square's area, the forces spread on rooftops of the provincial building, the cultural center, the Abdulbaqi Compound, the old Civil Registry building, and the old al-Ba'ath Party building to attack the protestors arriving in al-Assi Square through all the routes leading to it, including al-Hader, al-Murabet, al-Dabagha, and the al-Mua'almeen Street. Security forces also gathered at the center of the al-Assi Square fully equipped.

The witnesses Khaled al-Hamoui, Ahmad Abu Mahmoud, Kamal Abu al-Majed and Muhammad Skaf provided STJ with extensive accounts of that day's hostilities. They said that security forces blocked some of the streets leading to al-Assi Square on Thursday's night. They added that against their usual practice the forces were not stationed at the end of al-Hader Street. Instead, they took positions near and on the rooftops of residential buildings.

Local activists documented that day's hostilities. They posted a [video](#) they said of protestors coming from the al-Hader region and the reported shooting by security forces near Umm al-Hassan Park.

A Firsthand Account

STJ interviewed the eyewitness Abdulhamid Abou Arouba, one of the activists that used to coordinate protests in Hama city. He detailed the stages of the protest, the places where security posts were deployed, and security forces' violent crackdown on peaceful protestors:

"On Friday, we gathered at al-Assi Square as usual, coming from various neighborhoods. I used to participate in preparing the signs in the al-Hader region before heading to the al-Manakh Mosque, from which protests would kick off after the Friday prayers. The protestors would march towards the al-Hamidiya neighborhood and then to al-Assi Square. We were numerous and had flowers, we intended to give them to security personnel. Security forces were heavily deployed at the end of the Sa'id al-As Street, next to the new [al-Ba'ath] party building and the Police Command facility. We had not planned to clash with them; we were extremely cautious about keeping it peaceful. We continued marching towards the square. There were no indicators that security forces would attack the protestors because they often created a human wall at the end of al-Hader Street. The wall personnel would point their weapons, shoot, and fire teargas canisters to prevent us from reaching the square. That day, there was no wall; security forces took positions near buildings and on rooftops."

He added:

"When I arrived near the party's new building, with the rest of the protestors, I stood adjacent to the Khatab pharmacy. Only a few seconds passed before I heard the sound of a single shot in the air. The sound came from the direction of al-Assi Square, as if a signal for security forces to open fire. We were showered with bullets, the people started falling to the ground on every side around me. Masses ran in different directions towards the al-Manakh and al-Baroudiya neighborhoods to escape the street which was exposed to security forces on rooftops. There were many of us; we covered the distance from the Omar Ibn Khattab Mosque to the Shafiq al-U'baisi Bridge. The shooting continued for 10 minutes before it became sporadic. Most of the protestors shot in on the street died. Others, found near the buildings where security forces took positions, were arrested. The congregating people dispersed and kept fleeing to secondary streets and whatever entrances they came across. In the

beginning, we could not hospitalize the wounded or recover the bodies of martyrs because the shooting was heavy. When we managed to catch our breath, people started taking the wounded to hospitals and pulled those who they could from the street because snipers were aiming at anyone they caught leaving the secondary streets to the one where the protestors assembled.”

Health Workers Speaking Figures

Covering the medical response to the day’s hostilities, STJ interviewed one director of the Hurani Hospital, Muhammad. Preferring to withhold his surname, the director confirmed that the Military Security asked the administration to close the hospital and ordered them not to attend to any of the wounded. The witness narrated:

“Shortly after the Friday prayers, scores of wounded and dead people were brought into the Hurani Hospital. That day, the hospital admitted nearly 200 persons, half of them were dead. To respond to the massive number of wounded, we were ultimately forced to attend to their conditions in the corridors. Units, operation rooms, and the emergency department were all stretched beyond capacity. Half an hour later, an officer from the Military Security called me and ordered me to close the hospital’s gate and ban [the staff] from receiving any wounded, or else he will punish the hospital. I told him, ‘Come down here and do it yourself! You prevent the entry of wounded!’ and hung up. Thousands of protestors encircled the hospital to protect it against potential invasion from security forces. Most of the dead were shot in the chest or the head.”

Director Muhammad said that the Military Security Department arrested him only a day after the massacre.

STJ also interviewed a former nurse at the Hurani Hospital. Going by the pseudonym Shaimaa, the nurse recounted:

“I cannot tell how many people the hospital hosted that day, because the injured and dead were countless. However, I can definitely say that there were more than a hundred wounded and dead persons, in addition to eight serious cases who died a few days after the massacre. These eight people had critical head and chest injuries.”

The director of the emergency department at al-Bader hospital, R. J., told STJ that nearly 70 persons were brought into the hospital that day. She narrated:

“On the day of the massacre, al-Bader Hospital admitted approximately 70 wounded and dead persons. At the time, the hospital failed to accommodate the large numbers and suffered a shortage of medical supplies, amidst acute need for blood transfers. The intensive care units were full of critical cases. It was an unforgettable day! The hospital drowned in the blood of the protestors!”

Going by the pseudonym Zaina, a nurse from the Hama City Medical Center confirmed that protestors were mostly shot in the head and the chest. She said:

“It was a horrible day! A day I never experienced my whole life! The wounded were being transported to the hospital in taxis and Pickup trucks. We took in at least 20 wounded every five minutes. Most of them had head, back, and shoulder injuries. Some of the injured even developed permanent disabilities, such as paralysis, or lost an eye. The hospital rooms were full of the injured. The intensive care unit was also bursting with critical cases.”

Official Registration of Deaths

The interviewed survivors and eyewitnesses told STJ that eighty of the protestors killed that day were pulled from the street and buried by their families because the security forces did not recover any of the dead bodies from the targeted sites. One of the eyewitnesses added that they found nine dead bodies abandoned in the Umm Hassan Park two days after the massacre.

The father of one of the dead protestors told STJ that security forces coerced him into signing a document stating the death cause as during a shooting by terrorist armed groups. He had to provide them with the signature to be permitted to bury the body of his son and proceed with the registration of his death in the Civil Registration Department.

An administrative official from the Hurani Hospital said that death reports issued by the hospital clearly demonstrated the death cause as a bullet in the head or the chest, based on the case in question. He added that the Criminal Security — in charge of composing reports on deaths— forced the families of the victims to sign documents saying that their relatives died from the fire of armed groups and prevented the Civil Registration Department from fully documenting the deaths or allowing the burial of the bodies unless families presented this document and the report stamped by the Criminal Security.

No Accountability, or Justice, for the Victims to the Day

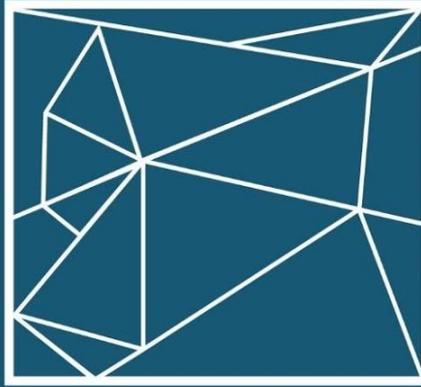
Eyewitnesses interviewed by STJ provided the name of the officer in charge of the Military Security Department at the time of the peaceful protests. The witness said that the Brigadier General Adel Mustafa was killed in 2015 during clashes in the Bab Qibli Neighborhood. Mustafa’s car was hit with a mortar shell, and he was succeeded by Muhammad Mufleh.

Muhammad, one director of the Hurani Hospital, told STJ that in addition to his arrest after the massacre, the Military Security Department rearrested him during the term of Muhammad Mufleh. Muhammad met al-Mufleh during the interrogation and quoted his words:

“When I was detained, al-Mufleh told me that he had nothing to do with the massacre and that he had evidence that exempted him from responsibility. Al-Mufleh added that Adel Mustafa is the one to hold responsible. Back then, Mustafa acted upon direct orders from Maher al-Assad.”

Activists and relatives of dead protestors said that the majority of those who lost a relative during the massacre cannot summon the courage to file a lawsuit requesting an investigation of the massacre and holding accountable the perpetrators. Even though some of the bereaved families have left Syria, they still cannot demand accountability fearing that security forces might persecute their relatives and the families of other victims who stayed in the country.

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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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