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Northeastern Syria: The Autonomous Administration Cracks Down on Journalists

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Units (YAT) arrested four journalists on 17 and 18 July
2021

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The Internal Security Forces ([Asayish](#)) and Anti-Terror Units (YAT) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)— the military wing of the Autonomous Administration running areas in northeast Syria — arrested four Kurdish activists and journalists on 17 and 18 July 2021. Notably, the individuals arrested are members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria ([PDK-S](#)), which operates under the mantle of one of the Autonomous Administration’s fiercest opponents, the Kurdish National Council in Syria ([ENKS](#)).

On the evening of 17 July, a joint patrol of the Asayish and YAT forces arrested journalist Izzeddin Malla, the director of the *Kurdistan* newspaper’s office, and Muhammad Daham Ayo, a member of the PDK-S’s Advisory Board in the city of [Qamishli/Qamishlo](#).

On the same day, similar joint patrols tracked down and arrested Muhammad Saleh Shalah Ahmad, a member of the PDK-S’s Regional Council, headquartered in the town of [al-Jawadiyah/Cil Axa](#), in al-Hasakah province.

At dawn on 18 July, the same security forces arrested media activist Barzan Liyani, who works as a correspondent for the ARK program, which airs on [Zagros TV](#) in [Erbil/Hawler](#), the capital of [Iraqi Kurdistan](#). The SDF-affiliated personnel arrested Liyani from his home in the town of [al-Muabbada/Girkê Legê](#).

To gain insights on the arrests, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reached out to the detainees’ families and other eyewitnesses. The interviewees confirmed that the Asayish and the YAT personnel did not introduce themselves or their official capacity or present the detainees with warrants upon carrying out the arrests. Furthermore, the witnesses said that the forces trespassed on the house of journalist Barzan Liyani and filmed the nighttime arrest operation, ignoring his family’s protests and demands that they respect their privacy and stop filming.

Politically Driven Arrests

The reasons behind the arrests remain contested. When speaking with STJ, the detainees’ families were certain that the arrests carried out against their loved ones are politically charged. They said that the security forces do not have any other reason to detain the four journalists except for their political affiliation with the PDK-S—which has a reputation for its strong opposition to the Autonomous Administration’s stance in Northeastern Syria.

However, other sources that STJ met said that the arrests were probably retaliatory. The sources said that the Autonomous Administration is likely responding to earlier arrests carried out against their representatives from the Democratic Union Party ([PYD](#)). The PYD members were arrested by the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that supports and funds the PDK-S and the KNC.

On 10 June 2021, the KRG arrested two members of the PYD’s Public Relations Office, Mustafa Othman Khalil and Mustafa Aziz, and the representative of the Autonomous Administration in Erbil/Hawler, Jihad Hassan, while on their way to Erbil Airport to welcome a delegation on a visit.

The KRG released Khalil and Aziz on 29 July 2021, while they continued to hold Hassan in detention at the time of reporting: 7 August 2021.

Details of the Arrests

On the evening of 7 July, SDF-affiliated Asayish and YAT arrested Muhammad Saleh Shalal Ahmad— a member of the PDK-S's Regional Council— from his home in the village of Abira, in the countryside of al-Jawadiyah/Çil Axa town. Recounting the details of the arrest, a source from the Shalal Ahmad family told STJ that a force of more than 15 fighters riding several military vehicles arrested Muhammad around 9:00 P.M. The source added that the forces did not present Muhammad with an arrest warrant nor inform him of his charges.

The same evening, security forces arrested journalist Izzeddin al-A'bdin Mahmoud, 30-year-old and known as [Izzeddin Malla](#), from the center of the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo. Izzeddin is the director of the PDK-S-issued *Kurdistan Newspaper's* office in Qamishli-Qamishlo and a member of the party's Regional Council.

A source from Malla's family told STJ that the fighters of a security forces of the Autonomous Administration arrested Izzeddin from a main street at the center of Qamishli/Qamishlo, using force while the street's residents watched. The source recounted:

“Izzeddin and his wife were on their way back from his father's home in Qamishli. Around 9:30 p.m. a Hyundai Sonata suddenly stopped them. Two masked gunmen got out and arrested him. They led him towards the car at gunpoint.”

The source added that the armed men did not only terrorize Izzeddin, but they did not identify who they were, nor did they present an arrest warrant. The source narrated:

“Izzeddin's wife screamed and pleaded to protect her husband, but she could do nothing. He himself tried to resist the gunmen under the eyes of the neighborhood's residents, who only watched what was happening. They could not intervene; they feared the consequences, especially since a second car, a Jeep, with four other masked gunmen was monitoring the situation closely from the end of the street. The second car was also probably associated with the Autonomous Administration.”

This is not the first time that the Autonomous Administration's security services arrest Izzeddin. In 2015-2014, the security services detained Izzeddin for two months, charging him for his media and political activities within the PDK-S.

A little before midnight, on 17 July, Autonomous Administration security services arrested [Muhammad Daham Ayo](#), a member of the Advisory Board of the PDK-S and the former head of the local council of the KNC in Qamishli-Qamishlo city.

To obtain additional details about the third arrest incident, STJ reached out to a source from the Ayo family. The source claimed that a group of 10 masked and armed men from the YAT units arrested Muhammad around 11:30 p.m. The source added that the gunmen arrested

Muhammad from the opening ceremony of the Zankin Sweets Shop, which Muhammad's son owns.

The source stressed that Muhammad was arbitrarily arrested in front of the ceremony's attendees, adding that the force did not present an arrest warrant and led Muhammad blindfolded to an unknown place.

While this report was being compiled, Muhammad Ayo was still detained without any information about his whereabouts.

At dawn, on 18 July, a joint Asayish-YAT force arrested journalist Barzan Hussian Muhammad, a 48-year-old and known as [Barzan Liyani](#), from his home in the town of al-Muabbada/Girkê Legê in the city of Qamishli-Qamishlo.

Barzan is married and a father to four. He works as a correspondent for the Zagros TV-broadcasted ARK program, is a member of the PDK-S's Sub-Council, and is also a member of the Syrian Journalists Union.

To expose the details of the arrest, STJ interviewed the detainee's brother, Koulal Muhammad, 33, who called the arrest "arbitrary". Muhammad's brother recounted:

"At 2:00 a.m., on 18 July, more than 15 armed men, among them two women, affiliated with the Asayish and the SDF's intelligence service, stormed Barzan's house. They assaulted and barbarically arrested him as if he was a terrorist."

The brother confirmed that the force members did not introduce themselves nor present an arrest warrant, adding that they terrorized Barzan's family. He narrated:

"The gunmen had masks on. They did not reveal who they were and rapidly spread across the house with their weapons. They attacked Barzan and frightened his wife and children. They insisted on arresting him in his underwear. However, his wife protested and brought him some clothes. The worst thing however was that one of the gunmen had a camera. He was filming the shameful arrest operation."

Barzan's brother added that his niece protested the way the forces infringed on their home and filmed her father against his will late at night. However, the forces ignored her, refusing to show any respect for the family's privacy, and continued to film the arrest.

Barzan's family chose to hide the incident from his mother, fearing that she would collapse physically and mentally. Nevertheless, his mother learned a day later and had a stroke, heartbroken and concerned for her son. The stroke left her right arm and leg paralyzed, as well as unable to speak. Commenting on his mother's deteriorating health, Barzan's brother added:

"The news of [Ameen Issa al-Ali's](#) death under torture in the prisons of the Autonomous Administration shook my mother and had an adverse effect on her when she heard of the violent way my brother was arrested. We are working to improve her health with

doctors now and hold the Autonomous Administration and their military forces responsible for any harm that befalls her or my detained brother.”

Barzan Muhammad’s family posted a statement on 20 July 2021 renouncing his arbitrary arrest just a few days before Eid al-Adha. Furthermore, the family launched a plea urging international humanitarian and rights organizations to pressure the Autonomous Administration to release prisoners of opinion and to respect the dignities of detainees and their families. The family also demanded that the Autonomous Administration hold the perpetrators of these blatant violations of human rights accountable.

The Asayish and the Autonomous Administration’s intelligence services have previously [arrested](#) Barzan Muhammad several times. They arrested him for the last time on 13 May 2017 for his media and political activities, detaining him for nearly six months.

Voices Protesting the Arrests

The Secretariat of the KNC responded to the arrests in a [statement](#) on 18 July 2021, saying that, by arresting their members the Autonomous Administration is “underestimating the public opinion, establishing a climate of repression, and cracking down on holders of different opinions.”

The Secretariat added that the arrests aim to “undermine the anticipated negotiations, the resumption of which has been thoroughly discussed, accompanied by optimism that an agreement would be reached to unify the Kurdish position.”

In the statement, the KNC accused the security forces of the Autonomous Administration of arresting two other members of the KDP-S earlier, Farmaz Abdulkareem from al-Malikiyah/Dêrik city and Abdulghafar Muhammad from al-Jawadiyah/Çil Axa town.

Furthermore, the KNC called on rights organizations, SDF’s command, and the United States—the guarantor of the intra-Kurdish talks—to intervene and end these violations, release all detainees, and adhere to the principles of human rights and freedom of expression.

In addition to the KNC, Reporters without Borders (RSF) published a [report](#) on 20 July 2021, in which they renounced the arrest of the three journalists, Izzeddin al-Mala (the editor of the newspaper Kurdistan), Barzan Liyani (a reporter for ARK TV, a local station) and Muhammad Saleh (a former Kurdistan TV reporter).

Responding to the RSF report, the Department of Media of the Autonomous Administration published a [clarification](#) on 25 July 2021. In the statement, the administration refuted the arrest accusations and blamed international organizations and institutions concerned with journalists’ rights for exploiting criminal cases within the Autonomous Administration’s jurisdiction and turning them into issues of public opinion by presenting them as assaults on journalists and media freedom.

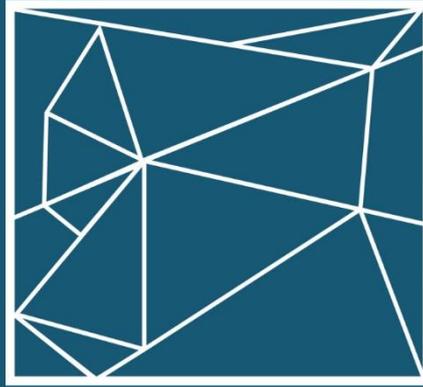
In the statement, the department said:

“Whether deliberately or not, these organizations are distorting the facts and are relying on false sources for the information they use to write their reports. This actually undermines the credibility of the reports made by the majority of these organizations, some of which have even started working in favor of certain agendas.”

On 7 August 2021— the day this report was written— the Autonomous Administration had only released Izzeddin Mahmoud, keeping a hold of Muhammad Daham Ayo, Muhammad Saleh Shalal and Barzan Liyani.

Similarly, the KRG continues to detain Jihad Hassan, the representative of the Autonomous Administration in Erbil.

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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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