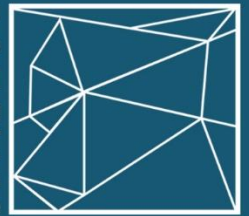


September 2021

سوريون
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Syrians
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& Justice



Syria: Three Women Murdered; Their Killers Remain at Large

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Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented the murder of three women over June and July 2021 in the areas controlled by the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) and their affiliated armed groups.

The first femicide took place in the city of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, which is controlled by the Turkey-backed SNA. STJ documented the murder of the wife of a fighter from the SNA-affiliated Sultan Murad Division. The victim's family say that the fighter killed their daughter and faked her suicide, while *de facto* authorities did not conduct any investigation into the murder nor interrogate her husband.

The second femicide, which resulted in the death of two women, occurred in the city of Sarmada, in Idlib province, which is controlled by the military group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). STJ documented the honor killing of a young woman and her mother. A paternal male cousin of the young woman killed her with her mother after the young woman posted a photo of herself on social media without a hijab. The perpetrator escaped to Shaykh al-Hadid district, in Afrin region, which is controlled by the Turkish Army and the SNA, seeking protection from his armed group the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat).

Importantly, the two perpetrators are still at liberty with total impunity. Both murderers resumed their normal life after they obtained "protection" from the SNA's factions they fight with or the tribes they belong to.

Furthermore, the impunity the fighters enjoyed was reinforced by the other *de facto* authorities in the areas where the murders took place. These authorities did not take any legal measures to address the femicides and eventually closed the cases with the burial of the three victims' bodies.

1. Nadiya: Killed by Her Husband's Military Rifle

Salim*¹ (22) killed his wife Nadiya* (19) on 2 July 2021. Salim is a fighter with the Sultan Murad Division. He shot and killed his wife with his military rifle in their house in the city of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Nadiya's body was transferred from the city to Turkish territories and then delivered to her family in Idlib through the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing on 3 July.

Nadiya's family accused the husband of murdering their daughter. They said that he was provided with protection and help from a commander in his division to obtain a "forged" forensic report to corroborate his claims that Nadiya took her own life.

Moreover, the family accused the authorities in control of the region of being legally passive because they did not carry out a serious investigation into the murder nor interrogate Nadiya's husband and neighbors. Instead, the authorities composed a routine report on the incident, adopting the husband's narrative and closing the case. The authorities did not treat

¹ *connotes the use of an alias

Nadiya's death as a homicide and privileged the husband's account, insisting that Nadiya was not killed, but committed suicide.

A. *A Life of Domestic Violence*

Nadiya is not only a victim of femicide. She also was a victim of child marriage. Nadiya married Salim at the age of 14 and was constantly beaten by him throughout their five-year marriage. She repeatedly complained to her family and relatives about the abuse she received at the hands of her husband, but they never helped her nor provided her with a solution.

To investigate Nadiya's murder, STJ interviewed her mother and a relative, who confirmed that she was repeatedly subjected to domestic violence and abuse throughout her marital life.

Rabya, the victim's mother, told STJ that her daughter and her son-in-law were both born in al-Ghab Plain in Hama's countryside. They married in 2016 and later moved to the city of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. They relocated to the city after her husband's faction, the Sultan Murad Division, began operating there under the command of Fahim Issa. Nadiya's mother added that her daughter and her husband had three boys together.

Nadiya's mother recounted the painful details of a phone call she had with her daughter a few hours before she died with researchers with STJ. The mother said:

"On the evening of 2 July, I had a video call with Nadiya. She was crying and imploring. She wanted an escape from her husband's violence. I saw beating marks and cigarette burns on her body. She said that he hit her with a metal cable and a plastic pipe in front of her three sons."

The mother narrated:

"She blamed us. She said: 'Why did you abandon me to this animal! I need a way out of all this, and I want to return to live with you. I can no longer take the beating, insults, and all the swearing.' She told me that, every evening, after he finished a shift with the faction, her husband returned home as if drunk. She suspected he was on narcotics. She added that he would beat her the minute he arrived home. He hit my daughter with his hands, feet — anything he could use. I do not know what sin my daughter committed that he beat and tortured her."

She added:

"Over the same call, Nadiya told me that he threatened to kill her should she call and tell us that he was beating her. She begged that we come and take her home."

STJ also talked to a relative of Nadiya's. He corroborated the mother's account and said that Nadiya repeatedly sought his help, complaining about beating and torture. The relative recounted:

"Salim proposed to [Nadiya] in 2016. They married only two months after the engagement. Our inherited traditions do not stand as a barrier to wedding girls at such

an age [14]. Since 2016 until she died, there were problems between the two all the time. She always had scars of beating and torture on her body. Every time he beat her, she would come to me and ask that I divorce her from him. I used to refuse due to the region's traditions and customs which ordered women to show patience towards their husbands as they waited for their lives to stabilize."

He added:

"In the spring of 2018, [Nadiya] again asked me to help her. She showed me her body, the marks of barbaric torture, and cigarette burns. Her husband was determined to beat her even though she gave him three sons. The labor was quite difficult in the three births, it was like death to her.

However, I returned her to her husband every time she asked for my help. In 2020, Salim travelled to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, where his faction Sultan Murad Division operated. Every time she called, she complained about beating, torture, her miserable life, drugs, and alcohol at home. Ultimately, he killed her in cold blood, and we got her back as a dead body."

B. *The Details of the Murder*

Nearly three hours after the video call Nadiya had with her mother, her husband called one of her relatives and told him that she committed suicide.

STJ reached out to the relative. He recounted:

"On 2 July, almost three hours after the call between Nadiya and her mother, the husband Salim called and told me that she accidentally killed herself with a rifle. I immediately told her father and a relative. Nadiya's relative called Salim to learn how she died. Salim told him that when he returned from the *ribat* shift at the faction's post,² Nadiya went to the kitchen to make dinner. He added that he suddenly heard the sound of gunshots coming from the kitchen and when he went in, he saw Nadiya on the floor drowning in a pool of her blood while the rifle was still mounted on the wall. The husband said that probably Nadiya went near the rifle and moved it in some way so that it accidentally fired three shots. The bullets ripped through her shoulder and killed her."

He added:

"On the same call, Salim told Nadiya's relative that he would bury her in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê because it was impossible for him to transfer her body to Idlib. The victim's father refused and insisted on burying his daughter in Idlib."

The source added that Nadiya's father asked for help from a SNA commander and managed to transport Nadiya's body from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to the Bab al-Hawa Crossing through Turkish territories. The family, based in Harem town, was delivered Nadiya's body on 3 July,

² In general usage, *Ribat* refers to defending Islam.

one day after her death. The family summoned a coroner to examine Nadiya's body because they did not trust the findings of the report issued by the coroner in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

STJ accessed a certified copy of the forensic report issued by the Forensic Medicine Department of the Ras al-Ayn Healthcare Directorate. The copy was without an issuance date or serial number but carried the department's reporter Urwa al-Qa'ed's signature, as well as the seals of the department and the Ras al-Ayn Local Council.

The report lays out these conclusions:

"Upon examining the body of the woman referred to as [Nadiya. . .], it became clear that she was just in her early thirties, about 170 CM long, white, and with long black hair. Her pupils were dilated. There were traces of excessive bleeding on the body and a nearly 3 cm radius bullet entry hole up the wishbone, with a ring around it caused by burning. Additionally, there was a nearly 1.0 cm radius bullet exit hole on the backside of the right shoulder blade. Also, there was a blue spot on the humerus bone in front of the muscle, that happened hours ago, and a bluish bruise on the inside of the humerus bone. The examination of the left arm revealed seven parallel line-shaped marks, about 5 cm each, on the inside of the wrist. Two of these lines indicate a deep wound, probably of a piece of glass. There were no other marks across the body. The time of death, since the examination started, is about three and half hours ago. The cause of death is excessive hemorrhage due to a gunshot. There is no need for an autopsy to identify the cause of death. The gunshot happened from a close range, of approximately a meter and a half...These conclusions are based on my official expertise."

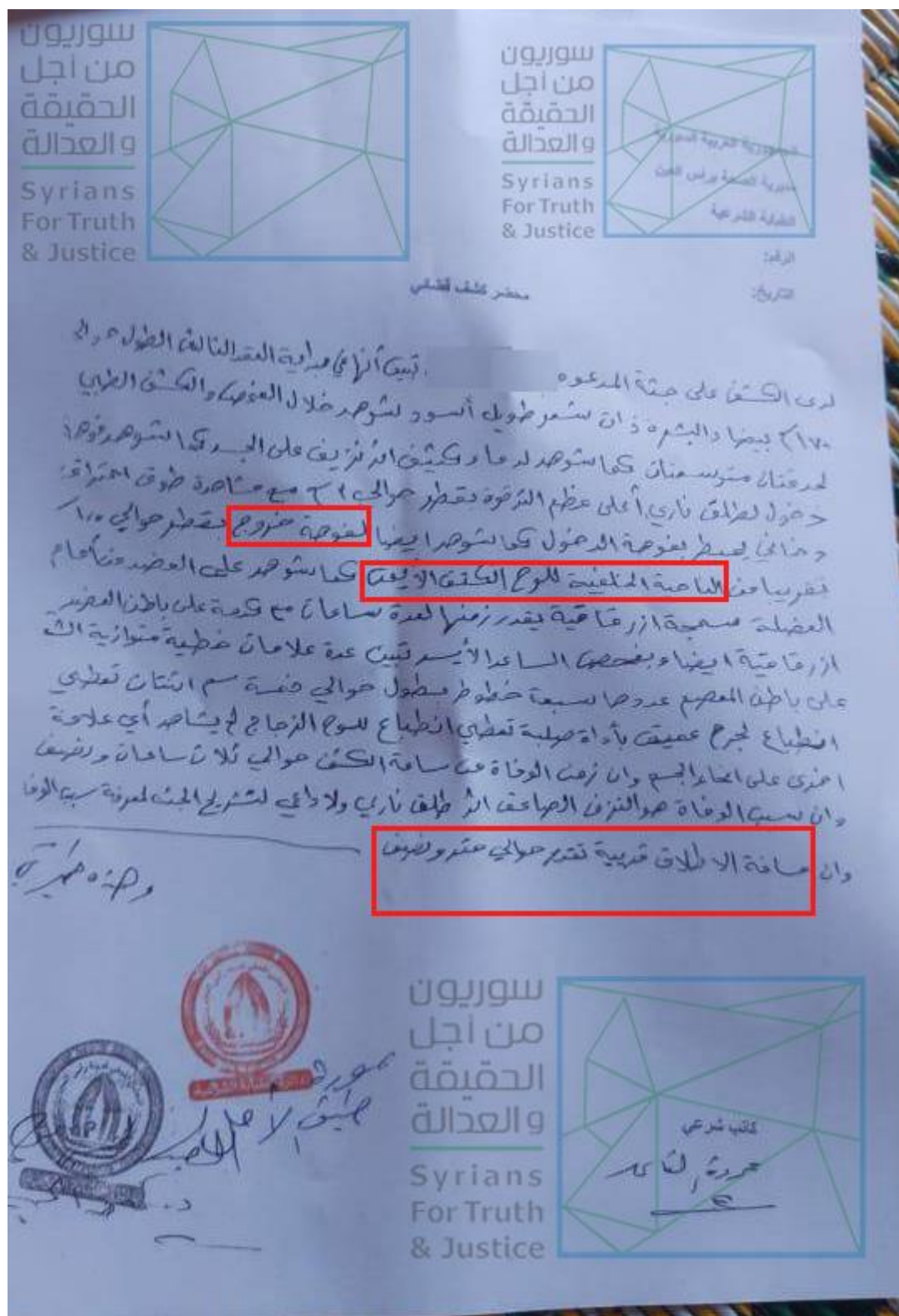


Image 1- Copy of the forensic report issued by the Ras al-Ayn Healthcare Directorate regarding the body of the victim Nadiya. The report says that the bullet entered from the front side from a meter and a half. Assuming that the report's findings are correct, it would have been impossible for the victim to commit suicide using a Russian automatic rifle from a meter and a half. Credit: STJ.

For their part, the family asked another coroner to examine Nadiya's body in Idlib province. Field researchers with STJ talked to sources informed of the proceedings of the forensic examination. The sources said that the findings of the forensic examination carried out in Idlib did not corroborate the results of the report issued by the Forensic Medicine Department in Ras al-Ayn. The difference was particularly in the direction of the bullet's entry point.

One of the sources said that the body was examined by the Forensic Medicine Department of Healthcare Directorate of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), affiliated with HTS. The coroner confirmed that the victim was shot from behind from a meter and a half, whereby the bullets exited from her chest, contrary to the results of the former report. The coroner also stressed that the cause of death was not suicide or wrongful death.

A second source, a female neighbor of the family, told STJ that the family asked for a forensic examination of the body once it arrived in Idlib. She quoted the family as saying that the report confirmed that Nadiya was killed from the back and that the bullets pierced her back and left through her chest and that there was a huge hole in the victim's chest.

Matching the sources' accounts of the findings of the forensic report from Idlib with both the report from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and the husband's narrative, we can deduce:

- The Ras al-Ayn report confirms that there are bruises on the victim's body, corroborating the family's claims that Nadiya was being tortured and subjected to violence the day she was killed.
- The number of bullets remains contested. The husband told Nadiya's relative that three bullets killed her, while both reports concluded that it was one bullet despite the conflicting results on the direction of the bullet's entry point.
- The place where the victim stood and the distance between her and the rifle are also conflicting. While the husband told Nadiya's relative that the rifle was hanging on the kitchen wall and that the victim caused it to fire, accidentally shooting herself, both reports declared that the gunshots were fired from a distance of a meter and a half from where the victim was standing. The reports' conclusions therefore refute the husband's claims.
- The Ras al-Ayn report demonstrated that the victim was in her early thirties, but the family members STJ interviewed—the mother and the relative— confirmed that she was 19 years old.
- The Ras al-Ayn report demonstrated that the bullet entered the victim's body from the front side of the wishbone and exited from the backside of the left shoulder. These findings contradict the family's claims and the findings of the Idlib report, which said that the bullet entered the victim's body from the backside and exited from the front side.

C. The Lack of Legal Action Facilitated Impunity

The military authorities in charge of the area, including the military and civil police services, did not investigate Nadiya's murder. The police services dismissed the homicide as a regular death incident and treated it as such in legal proceedings because the husband is a fighter in one of the area's armed groups.

The police's negligence of the murder was corroborated by a fighter from Salim's faction, the Sultan Murad Division. The fighter told STJ's field researcher that Salim still lives in his house. The police neither arrested nor summoned him for interrogation. The fighter added that Salim also continues to perform his duties within the faction as usual because he maintains good ties with one of the division's commanders who provided him with protection and assistance throughout the murder case.

2. Timaa: Killed Along with her Mother in the Name of "Honor"

In some Syrian ultra-conventional communities, reasons and customs that lead to honor killings are no longer limited to committing what perpetrators and shame-driven social circles refer to as *fahisha* (illicit sex). With the advent of social media, women are being killed or subjected to domestic violence on numerous grounds. Among these women are Timaa (22) and her mother (43). Timaa's cousin killed her because she posted her photo without a hijab on a Telegram channel, leading to a flood of insults and obscene comments.

To wash away the shame the post brought on the family's name, Timaa's cousin, a fighter of the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), killed her and her mother inside their tent in the al-Amal camp for internally displaced persons, near the town of Sarmada, in Idlib province. The cousin shot Timaa with three bullets and her mother with seven and escaped to the areas where his faction operates in Afrin, controlled by the Turkish army and the SNA.

Like Nadiya's murderer, Timaa's cousin was offered protection by the faction until the death-related disputes between the two tribes— the one Timaa hails from and the one her mother belongs to, were settled.

Timaa's disturbing murder echoes the horrific honor killing of [Shimaa Baseis](#). Shimaa's brother killed her for similar reasons and also enjoyed the protection of a military faction.

A. Details of the Murder

On the morning of 11 June 2021, Raafat A. (33) killed Timaa and her mother in their tent using his personal gun.

Raafat then called his uncle, Timaa's father, and told him that he killed his daughter because she had posted her photo on social media without wearing a hijab and his wife for defending her daughter and attempting to prevent him from shooting her.

STJ obtained this account from several of Timaa's family members. The relatives added that the photo that Timaa was killed for exposed only her hair and no other parts of her body.

One of these family sources told STJ that Timaa's photo was likely leaked, not purposefully posted. The source recounted:

"Timaa used a phone chat app to make money, through sharing photos and voice notes to various chat groups with friends. The photo was likely leaked by a member of one of these groups, and ultimately reached a Telegram channel dedicated to scandals and defamation. Someone told Timaa's cousin of the matter. The cousin saw the photo the morning he killed her."

In addition to family sources, STJ reached out to R.S., a witness from the camp where Timaa used to live with her family. S. narrated what happened on the day of the murder:

"Around 10 a.m. Raafat entered his uncle's tent. Suddenly, there were screams. We heard Timaa's mother shouting and saying: 'Do not believe anybody...my daughter would never do this!' After that, we started to hear cries for help and calls for neighbors to intervene. None of us dared to go inside the tent because it was a family dispute. A few seconds later, we heard gunshots and the screams faded away. I saw Raafat run frantically out of the tent, a gun in his hand. He mounted his motorbike and drove crazy fast. We entered the tent and saw Timaa and her mother's dead bodies. Their clothes were soaked with blood."

B. *Investigating the Photographs*

Searching for the photo, STJ tracked news and posts on Telegram and discovered a channel run by Zaino Yasser al-Mahamid. STJ could not verify whether the user's name is real or fake. However, STJ discovered that a large segment of the channel's content is rumors and inflammatory posts that mostly incite violence against women and describe them using obscene language. In addition to scandalous materials, the channel published posts in which they claim to "reveal truths" and expose atrocities committed by armed opposition groups.

STJ came across two posts pertaining to Timaa's case. The first was published on 14 June 2021; namely, three days after Raafat killed Timaa and her mother. The post referred to another circulated-on Facebook. The Facebook post is likely the leaked photo of the victim. In other words, Timaa's photo was first published on Facebook and then on Telegram. STJ could not find the original Facebook post.



Image 2- Screenshot of a post published on Telegram on 14 July 2021 by Zaino Yasser Mahamid. In the post, the account denied that they were the first to publish Timaa's photo. The rest of the post is blurred because it contains insults against the victim's family and other people.

The second post was posted on 18 July 2021. The same Telegram channel reposted the leaked photo, with Timaa's face concealed. The channel posted the photo to confirm they possessed the real photos and threatened they will soon post the explicit photos, in retaliation to the accusations that they were the first to publish the photo.



Image 3- Screenshot of the post published by the Zaino Yasser al-Mahamid Telegram channel, threatening the father of Timaa's murderer, Rifaa, that he will soon post photographs that are sufficient to ruin his reputation.

A. *Impunity Under Tribal Rule*

Both Timaa and her murderer, Raafat, belong to the D. tribe³, her mother belongs to the Q. tribe. After Raafat escaped to Shaykh al-Hadid district to seek protection from his faction, the Q. tribe demanded retribution for the mother only, letting Timaa's grievance go unpunished.

Under tribal codes, the honor of the tribe is largely dependent on the honor and chastity of its female members. Hence, tribes are keen on cleansing the reputation of their women when involved in honor killings by men from outside the tribe. Based on this, the Q. tribe sought to prove that Timaa's mother adhered to the norms of "chastity" and did not commit any "dishonorable act". Ultimately, the Q. tribe reached a conciliation agreement with the murderer Raafat on the condition that he acquits and admits the innocence of his uncle's wife and pays 24,000 USD in blood money.

For their part, neither the D. tribe nor Timaa's father sought to bring justice to the young woman who lost her life. The father did not press charges against the murderer, nor ask his nephew for any form of redress. On the contrary, the case was closed and both father and the murder resumed their lives as if nothing had happened.

The silence of Timaa's father was echoed by the SSG and the HTS's security services in Idlib. These services remained on the sidelines of the murder case and did not take any measures nor investigate the murders, considering the case a tribal affair. Authorities in Afrin, to where Raafat escaped, were similarly silent about Timaa's killing.

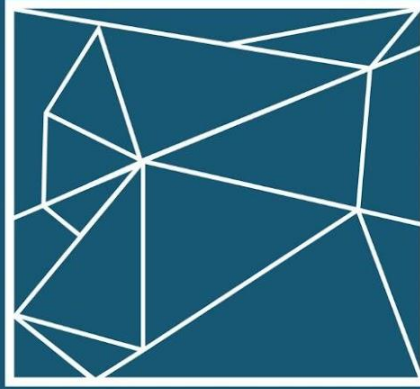
Honor killings and femicides remain rife across Syria despite the extensive coverage by the media and the massive efforts made by rights organizations to elevate women's voices against the injustices they are exposed to. The three murders recorded in this report are just a few of a larger number of crimes committed against women, many of which are concealed under the thick veil of tribal or factional protection, or codes of honor that govern many Syrian communities.

Covering shame-driven murders and other gender-based hostilities against women, STJ [documented](#) at least 24 cases between January 2020 and February 2021. 16 of these women were killed by spouses or male family members for honor-related reasons and six others were killed for unidentified reasons, amid reports that also attributed their death to honor. One of the recent cases documented by STJ was the [story of Abeer M.](#), a young woman from Quneitra who reportedly disappeared while several sources confirmed she was a victim of yet another honor killing.

³ The names of the tribes have been omitted for the safety of our sources.

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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.