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Southern Syria: Military operations displace hundreds, leading to smuggling and abduction operations

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The military campaign in southern Syria, especially in Daraa province, during June, July and August 2021, forcibly displaced thousands of people from their original places of residence to safer areas nearby, as well as drove hundreds to travel through northern Syria towards Turkey and Europe. Others attempted to cross into Lebanon, fleeing the violence at home.

The [military campaign](#), conducted by the Syrian government and backed by the Russian forces, played a crucial role in people's decisions to flee southern Syria, in addition to other reasons such as the desperate economic situation, the decline of the Syrian currency, and the increase of kidnappings and assassinations across Southern Syria, notably Daraa, Suwaidaa, and Quneitra.

Young people, especially those who were being forced into compulsory military service, those who were late to join the military forces, or others who could not renew their "reconciliation cards" based on the first agreements in the area in 2018, preferred to leave rather than stay and be drawn into the regime's military operations.

This report investigates the transport and illegal border crossings of locals of southern Syria through human trafficking networks demanding large sums of money from desperate people fleeing violence, in addition to increasing cases of abductions for ransom. According to the statements received by STJ, several officers and members of the Syrian regular forces are involved in the trafficking operations by moving people in their private military cars through "military lines" dedicated for members of the Syrian Armed forces.

Displacements and Abductions

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented the abduction of more than 57 people, including women and children, by different conflict parties who control local border crossings in only the 40 days between August and September 10, 2021. All abductees were displaced from southern Syria and traveled into northern Syria. A number of those abductees, 36 people, were released for ransoms costing up to 15 thousand U.S. dollars, while the fate of the others remains unknown.

According to STJ's field researchers, many people in southern Syrian were discreet about paying ransoms for the release of their children and preferred not to talk about this nor share the experience with anyone, even their relatives, fearing for their and their family's safety. Therefore, it is difficult to define the accurate number of those abducted and/or extorted on their way seeking refuge, especially since we know young migrants are being illegally transported and smuggled across different borders daily.

"Muhammad al-Khalidi", an activist from Tal Shihab town in Daraa's countryside, says that young people are migrating for multiple reasons. He said to STJ that:

"Every day, new batches of young people from Daraa and Quneitra provinces are trying to leave Syria illegally, either because of the lack of economic prospects, the lack of security, or both. The number of migrating young people increased after the beginning of the military operation launched by the Syrian Government on the

neighborhood of Daraa al-Balad, and trafficking is taking place in coordination with a group of smuggling networks who are affiliated with officers of the Syrian armed forces or their supporting forces. They transfer young people in their vehicles while going on intelligence tasks either from their own towns or from Damascus and take them towards the Syrian-Lebanese border, for those who want to enter Lebanon, or towards the northern borders for those who would like to enter through opposition areas to Turkey where they coordinate with other migrant smugglers to move them to their next destination.”

“Al-Kahlidi” also revealed that many of those people trying to migrate do not usually arrive to their destination. Recent accidents have confirmed coordination between groups affiliated with the Syrian government’s security or military forces and smugglers. People are abducted and ransoms are demanded of their families for their safe release. In addition, Hay’at Tahrir Al Sham and other opposition groups affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA) active in Turkish-controlled areas are also part of these networks.

Parties Involved in Abductions and Extortions

A. Groups Affiliated with Syrian Intelligence Agencies:

On August 25 2021, Syrian military forces, notably the military intelligence branch, arrested 14 people, including 4 women and 4 children, from Maskanah town in the countryside of eastern Aleppo while they were fleeing towards Turkish-controlled areas, after a migrant smuggler turned them into Syrian intelligence.

Yusra Muhammad, a 25-year-old woman with two children, was among the convoy when they were detained. She told STJ:

“My husband has lived in Germany for three years and told me that the family reunion procedures may take longer than expected and that it would be difficult for us to go to Europe soon. Therefore, my friend, whose husband was also a refugee in Germany, and I decided to ask a smuggler to help us move to opposition-controlled areas in north of Syria to travel to Turkey, Greece, and finally Germany.

Yusra’s husband reached out to smugglers and called her on August 24, 2021 with the news that a person would transport them to northern Syria the next day. She continued:

“We were transported in a public transportation vehicle (van) from Damascus to Aleppo. It stopped in an area, I don’t know where, and another person picked us up in a KIA car and took us to Maskanah town (east of Aleppo city). We arrived there around 10 P.M. and the smuggler took us to an apartment with two rooms and a kitchen. Women and children stayed in one room and men stayed in the other.”

The witness told us about the ambush set for them and how the smuggler deceived them. She said:

“The smuggler told us he would be away for half an hour to bring food but after 15 minutes, members of security forces raided the house and took us to a security branch in Maskanah town. Later we learned that the branch was affiliated with military intelligence and one of the members asked us to call our families and inform them where we were. We were treated well, and no one was abused. We stayed one night in the military police station and after that they informed us that they would move us to Branch 220 in Sa’sa’ area in Rural Damascus and that we should not be afraid.”

Yusra and the group were taken in a public transportation vehicle to Sa’sa’ branch in Rural Damascus, known as Branch 220, where a community leader negotiated to release them. Yusra told STJ:

“We stayed for two days in the Sa’sa’ security forces’ branch and in the morning of the third day we were released and hosted by a well-known community leader in the area. I did not know him but the young men in my group said he was a member of the reconciliation delegation in Qunaiteria. When I finally arrived home, I called my husband and calmed him down. He told me that the smuggler had an agreement with security forces members in the branch of Sa’sa’. It seemed they, the smuggler, and the members of Syrian intelligence shared the money we paid to leave Syria.”

B. Groups Affiliated with Syrian Government Forces:

In addition to attempts by some people to go to northern Syria and Turkish territories, other arrests were documented of people trying to leave Syria through the border with Lebanon.

Muhammad Khaled, 44 years old, from Nawa in western-Daraa countryside, is a parent who sent his 18-year-old son to Lebanon to work and make a living. He told STJ the story of his son’s attempted border crossing and abduction:

“I got the number of a smuggler from young men whom he transported to Lebanon. I did not know him before. I coordinated with him to send my son to Lebanon, and he promised me that he would be safe and would not be stopped at any military check points.”

“Muhammad” agreed to pay the smuggler \$6,000 to smuggle his son to Beirut on the condition that the money would be delivered after his son reaches his destination. Yet, on August 6, 2021, in the afternoon, after his son left the house, he lost connection with both his son and the smuggler as well.

The next day, “Muhammad” received a WhatsApp voice message from his son’s phone by another person saying that he had abducted his son and would only release him for a ransom of \$15,000. The father said:

“I could not secure that amount of money even if I sold all my properties. I begged them to release him, but they insisted on the ransom. My brother negotiated with them and after two weeks they agreed to take \$3,000. I started to sell the belongings in my house to secure part of the ransom, and I borrowed the rest. They told me to

deliver money in Homs. When I arrived in Homs, I gave them my location and they asked me to stay where I was. In half an hour, a black car came, the window opened, and a person speaking with a Lebanese accent took the money.”

Muhammad believes that people who smuggled, abducted, and ransomed his son were members of the Lebanese Hezbollah

C. Groups Affiliated with Armed Opposition Groups:

Some Turkey-affiliated armed opposition groups in northern Syria use abductions and human trafficking for profit, sometimes asking for ransoms up to \$15,000 for one hostage.

Based on statements by witnesses and victims who tried to enter Turkey through areas controlled by the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA), STJ field researchers discovered that SNA members arrested a group coming from Daraa on August 18, 2021, after they arrived to Ras al-Ayn and tried to illegally cross into Turkish territories.

One of the eight, Hasan, 35-years-old, sat down with STJ. He said:

“Everything went well when we came from Daraa until we entered Ras al-Ayn where we were stopped at an SNA checkpoint, and they asked us about our identities and destination. My friend, Saeed, said we came from Daraa today and we wanted to go to Turkey. We were immediately arrested. Saeed thought they would welcome us as soon as they knew we came from Daraa fleeing regime-controlled areas and allow us to cross the border easily.”

Hasan continued,

“We were taken to a military base in the center of the city, where we were beaten and kept in a small room. We spent one night there and on the next day we were summoned and asked many questions: Have we defected from the Syrian Army? Did we support the regime? Did we have a reconciliation agreement with the regime? Why did we want to go to Turkey? The good thing was that we were all civilians. They asked for phone numbers of our next of kin and took us back to the same prison. We stayed there for 21 days without any investigation.

On day 22, a member summoned Saeed, me, and four other people, while two other young men from Tel Shihab in Daraa were left behind. They asked us to call our families. I called my father and told him I was fine, but he told me he would send the money they asked for and I would be released. We were taken to prison again where the young men told me that the forces called our families and asked them each for \$1,000 dollars to release us. The other two young men’s families could not afford the money and while we were released, they stayed. I do not know what happened to them.”

D. Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham:

STJ field researcher took statements from the brother of a defector from the Syrian Regular Army who tried to reach Turkish territories through the areas of the Syrian Salvation Government, affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

Medyan, 32 years old, lived in Jasem city west of Daraa province and defected from the Syrian Armed Forces in 2012. He went with his friend Ahmad, who lived in Daraa al-Balad, to the north of Syria towards Turkey, where they were arrested by members of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Medyan's brother told STJ:

"My brother Medyan defected from the Syrian Regular Army in 2012 and did not join any armed groups in the south of Syria under the control of the opposition. When reconciliation agreement happened in 2018, he signed it as others did and he reenrolled in his military unit. In January 2020, he decided to defect again. When the forces of the central government entered the city of Daraa al-Balad in July 2021, he and his friend, Ahmad, decided to go to northern Syria and refused to be transported in the buses brought by the Syrian Government's Army to move the people of Daraa Al-Balad because they knew that the regime would exert pressure on the families of those who left this way after they left. Therefore, they decided to use smugglers. They entered Idlib city on August 11, 2021, but they were immediately arrested by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham."

The victim's brother added:

"My brother was sentenced by a Shari'a judge there to a 5-year-imprisonment for oppressing peaceful demonstrations during his military service. The sentence was unjust and had no evidence — it was based only on guesses. He and his friend were sentenced at first for 11 years, but the sentence was commuted after we contacted some friends and community leaders in the area. His friend, Ahmad, was released after his family paid 12 million SYP."

As of the completion of this report, Medyan remains imprisoned.

Legal Analysis

The issue of human smuggling and trafficking is not related to migration itself because access to migration is a right to movement and accommodation protected by international conventions and norms. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state," and "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." The problem lies in following illegal and risky means —ways and mechanisms conducted by persons who organized gangs and networks experienced in secretly transporting and smuggling illegal migrants, risking their lives, in addition to other risks they may face during armed conflicts such as sexual exploitation, bribery, and organ trafficking.

Above all, [UN Resolution 2331](#), adopted in 2016, urged party states to ratify the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and the Protocol to Prevent,

Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons during conflicts and prosecute persons involved in these crimes.

A. Local Syrian Laws Against Human Trafficking

Syria, like other states, signed the Protocol of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2000. Yet, if you look into local Syrian legislations, you won't find any text incriminating these actions, particularly in the criminal code, before a special law was passed targeting smuggling in 2021. Even then, the Syrian criminal code only incriminated some of the actions involved in smuggling, such as forging travel documents or IDs, or possessing forged documents.

In an attempt to address the spread of this problem, the Syrian People's Assembly endorsed the law number /14/ in 2021 against the smuggling of persons and for the protection of migrants that stipulates twin regulations with those stated in article 11 of the international protocol to prevent "trafficking in persons", implementing several penalties and procedures to mitigate the growing issue of human trafficking. Article 2 stipulates that:

- Any person who establishes, organizes, operates, or takes part in an organized criminal group for the purpose of smuggling of persons shall be sentenced from five to fifteen years imprisonment and shall pay a fine of six million Syrian pounds.
- Any person who commits the crime of smuggling persons shall be sentenced from five to ten years imprisonment and shall pay a fine of five million Syrian pounds.

The penalties are stricter if the crimes are committed by a public employee using his position or use children while committing the crime.

Despite the 2021 law which attempts to deter smuggling by threatening steep legal consequences, human trafficking continues to occur across Syria, reflecting the gap between the enforcement of the law and the violations taking place daily. Furthermore, the prevalence of trafficking activities, as well as abductions for ransom, indicates a lack of willingness by the Syrian central government and other ad-hoc authorities in control of other areas to prevent the smuggling of persons.

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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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