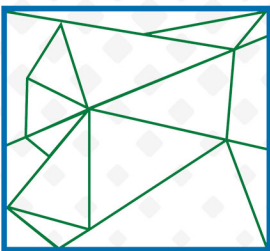


# Northeastern Syria: Raqqa Journalist Remains Detained while Restrictions Tighten on Colleagues

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## **Northeastern Syria: Raqqa Journalist Remains Detained while Restrictions Tighten on Colleagues**

*Journalists in the region continue to struggle with the tightening and  
discriminatory measures of the Autonomous Administration*

On 14 November 2022, the Internal Security Forces (Asayish), an agency of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, prevented the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria, an affiliate of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), from holding its fourth conference in Qamishli/Qamishlo city. Simultaneously, the Asayish banned journalists from filming the incident with the KNC.

Notably, this is not the first time a security agency of the Administration disrupts media coverage. Several journalists and workers in the field of media have been increasingly complaining about the tightening security measures in Northeastern Syria, considering the measures a violation of Media Law No. (3) of 2021. The law, passed by the Administration, purportedly safeguards the right of journalists to practice their profession according to international standards.

While condemnation of constraints grows within the media field, the security agencies of the Administration continue to detain the correspondent of *North Press*, [Ammar Abdul Latif](#).

In this brief report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) investigates the reported violations perpetrated against media workers in Northeastern Syria and the continued detention of reporter Abdul Latif.

For the purposes of the report, STJ reached out to four journalists and the family of Abdul Latif, who remains in detention in Raqqa city.

## Bans on Media Coverage

Commenting on the incidents on 14 November, a journalist with a local media outlet told STJ:

“We arrived at the Zana Hall in Qamishli/Qamishlo city, where the KNC was supposed to hold its 4th Conference. The hall was still closed. With a group of journalists, I left the venue and headed to the office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (PDK-S), located in the western neighborhood. The conference panel gathered in a basement across from the office of the PDK-S. The PDK-S often uses this basement to hold activities. We shot a few videos there. We were told that the KNC command was meeting somewhere else. However, the command arrived at the basement shortly after us, followed by the Asaysih immediately. The Asayish instantly asked the assembling people to leave and ordered us not to film. They said that filming was prohibited. Then, they sent the conference members out and prevented us from filming them while they left the place.”

Over a phone interview, a second journalist from a Kurdish media outlet gave STJ a matching account. On the condition of his anonymity, the journalist narrated:

“We reached Zana Hall at about 9:30 a.m. Members of the KNC told us that the Asayish did not authorize the conference. Therefore, we relocated to the office of the PDK-S in the western neighborhood, in Qamishli/Qamishlo city. The KNC members were gathering at one of the PDK-S's halls, amidst an extensive presence of the Asaysih forces. The forces warned us not to film, and several officers seemed ready to use force

to block journalists. Hostility was evident in the threatening tone they used with the attendees. One Asayish member threatened to smash any cell phone used for filming within the hall. Additionally, the Asayish members, who stood outside, confiscated the cell phone of a young man. He was secretly filming from a balcony in one of the buildings overlooking the entrance to the meeting place. The KNC was holding the meeting in a basement in a building located across from the office of the PDK-S.”

The journalist added:

“The Asaysih forces were brutal to at least two journalists as they forced them out of the hall. The forces were rough even though the journalists had in their possession official media authorizations to cover the event.”

The two other journalists STJ met corroborated the accounts of their colleagues. On the condition of their anonymity, they gave similar details about the ban on coverage and the threats the Asaysih members made to “destroy cell phones and cameras when caught recording.”

Notably, this ban falls under anti-media practices common to the Asaysih forces. On 28 September 2022, the Asayish forces [prevented](#) journalists from covering a protest held by KNC affiliates against the closures the Autonomous Administration enforced against several centers, institutes, and private schools that continued to teach the Syrian government (SG) curricula despite the administration’s clear bans.

Covering the anti-media measures in the region, STJ published an extensive [report](#) documenting at least 18 infringements of media freedom up to August 2022 in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration.

Notably, these infringements are a blatant violation of the administration’s [Media Law No. \(3\)](#) of 2021. In the preamble, the law stresses that it “comes to consolidate the values of freedom of opinion and expression, grant journalists more freedom of work, without preventing them from obtaining, publishing or transmitting information.”

## Raqqa Journalist Detained

Monitoring violations against journalists, STJ reached out to the family of *North Press* correspondent Abdul Latif, who remains in the custody of the Department of General Security of the Asayish. A relative of the detainee narrated:

“A father of three, Ammar Muhammad Abdul Latif was arrested on 19 September 2022 from a polyclinic in Raqqa city. He was making a report on the health situation in the city. As we learned later, he had an altercation with one of the clinic’s officials. He was arrested and relocated to the Department of the Internal Security Agency (Asayish). After the arrest, there was a rumor that Ammar received a remittance of 3,000 USD. However, we believe that this rumor was only malicious information that official was



circulating. Ammar is registered as the transfer recipient. However, the amount was only one million Syrian pounds (SYP), sent by an organization called SOT, and the transfer money remains uncashed in one of the remittance offices in the city.”

The source added:

“Shortly after Ammar's arrest, we received three visits from people who were detained with him. They visited us individually and delivered his message. He pleaded that we act to save him. He feared that he was going to be convicted for a charge he did not commit. However, we later learned that he might have been working for a media outlet unauthorized by the Autonomous Administration, called Sot.”

The source added:

“Ammar has massive financial difficulties. One of his children has a disability and is on a diet and medications that cost nearly 300 USD a month. Additionally, Ammar had to meet the needs of the rest of his family, which might be why he chose to work with different outlets, even if they were not licensed.”

The source added:

“Over the first month of his detention, we visited the Authority of Interior, the Media Office of the Autonomous Administration, the Office of the Detainees Affairs, and other security centers. None of these entities admitted to having him in their custody. Finally, after nearly 41 days, the Raqqa Department of General Security informed us that Ammar was relocated from al-Ahdath Prison in the city to ‘Ayed Prison and that his charges were security-related.”

The source added:

“Informed sources told us that Ammar was interrogated once. During that session, he was asked about the reports he wrote on corruption cases within some organizations. So, we believe that Ammar was likely detained based on malicious reports and that some influential figures are probably involved in his case. Notably, once an organization asked Ammar to take down an article he published, which alluded to corruption risks within one of its projects. Therefore, we, the family of journalist Ammar Abdul Latif, call on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to intervene, instantly disclose the fate of our son, born in 1992, and bring him before the court if he is subject to any charges.”

For its part, *North Press* made a statement on 18 October 2022, providing information on their inquiry into the arrest of their Raqqa correspondent. The outlet stated that the only information they were given by the General Security Service of the Internal Security (Asayish) was that “the reason for the arrest was security-related.”

The outlet added that “The arrest order was issued by the People's Defense Court in Kobanî [which oversees cases related to security and terrorism], and that the reason for the arrest was Abdul Latif’s work with media outlets unlicensed in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration.”

Additionally, the outlet demanded that “concerned entities disclose the reasons for arrest and bring their colleague Ammar Abdul Latif before a public court so that they can follow upon the judicial proceedings.”

Notably, the detention of Abdul Latif violates the legal frameworks the Autonomous Administration has set up to regulate both the work of the media and due process related to detention.

The arrest breaches Article 10(2) of Media Law No. (3). The article provides that “The freedom of the journalist is safeguarded in the law, and the information or opinion he publishes may not be a reason for his arrest or an infringement on his freedom.”

Similarly, the arrest contradicts the decisions of the Follow-up Committee of the National [Conference](#) for the People of Jazira and the Euphrates. In 2021, the committee approved the [formation](#) of the Office of the Detainees Affairs under the Autonomous Administration. Additionally, the committee provided that “The investigation period for civil cases is 48 hours, extendable to 15 days. In terrorism cases, the investigation period is a week, extendable to a month, after obtaining permission from the Public Prosecution.”

In addition to legal frames, the arrest functions against the reform package decided in late November 2020. The reforms were introduced during the National Conference for the People of Jazira and the Euphrates, held by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). The proposed reforms target the institutions of the Autonomous Administration, covering the administrative, political, economic, social, educational, military, and security aspects of their work.

Notably, in late 2021, the Co-Chair of the SDC, Amina Omar, addressed media outlets. In her [statement](#), Omar said that “The Autonomous Administration started implementing all the decisions of the National Conference for the People of Jazira and the Euphrates, beginning with the decisions the conference made when it was first convened in 2020.”

## “Systemic” Restrictions

Within this context, journalists and media workers in the region have been increasingly discontent with the tightening grip on their work. These journalists are going blatant about what they describe as the “systemic restrictions” the agencies of the Autonomous Administration have been imposing on their profession, especially after the administration passed the media law.

A journalist from a local media outlet commented on how the administration’s measures are hampering his work. On the condition of his anonymity for personal security reasons, the journalist narrated:

“The media office in the Jazira region has informed journalists that it would take them 40 to three months to obtain media authorizations. This duration is for running a

security check-up of the journalist. However, it has been five months since I applied for authorization. I did not get it yet, and this is obstructing my fieldwork.”

The journalist added:

“The obstacles are not limited to authorization. Journalists are obliged to communicate with the Department of Media, which established the Coordination Office. Journalists often wait for days before they get an appointment with the concerned official with the Autonomous Administration. Notably, the officials refuse to make any statements to media outlets unaffiliated with the administration if they do not follow this mechanism. This reveals one dimension of systemic restrictions and discrimination that continue to affect the pace of media coverage. For instance, I had to wait for days before I obtained statements on an urgent incident. The delay robbed my report of its value and relevance. Additionally, this demonstrates the extent of discrimination governing the stance towards journalists working within the departments of the Autonomous Administration and others working for non-affiliated media outlets. Discrimination is a violation of media law in northeastern Syria.”

Several of the restrictions reported by the journalist run against Article 10(6) of the media law, which provides that “Entities and institutions concerned with public affairs: Facilitate the task of the media person in accessing them and obtaining information.”

The same article, provision (7), states that “It is prohibited for any party to impose restrictions that hinder the freedom of information flow, or prevent equal opportunities for all media professionals to obtain information.”

Notably, the scope of restrictions tightens further when media workers report matters of a security character. For instance, several journalists were harassed by the security agencies of the Autonomous Administration for attempting to cover Turkish drone attacks. The attacks have been targeting civilian and military officials within the administration for months.

On 6 November, journalist Orhan Qahraman, a reporter for the Mjhar Media Platform, wrote a Facebook post, saying that the Internal Security Forces arrested him after he tried to film a bombing site in Qamishli/Qmihlslo city. That day, a Turkish drone targeted a car on the city's western outskirts. The attack killed and injured several civilians, according to local media outlets.

In a now-deleted post, Qahraman said that “He was released after two hours of interrogation and cell phone searches.”

## **International Legislation Guarantees Freedom of the Media**

Journalism in the context of [International Human Rights Law](#) is a reflection of the collective right to freedom of expression, which was also confirmed by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in [the General Comment No. 10](#). Therefore, the reported assaults or restrictions do not only violate the rights of affected journalists. They also undermine the right of individuals and society as a whole to seek and obtain information. Both these rights are guaranteed by

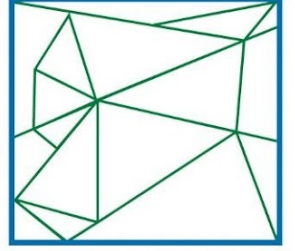
Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while several provisions of international human rights law ensure the protection of journalists. These provisions cover several rights, including the right to life, the right not to be subject to torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, and the right to effective remedies.

The regulation of the mass media [should](#) aim to protect and promote freedom of expression, and enable journalists and the public to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds. They should not be used as a political tool to prevent journalists from publishing. In his 2012 [report](#), the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression stressed that if there is any limitation to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression— including the right of journalists to search for, obtain and disseminate information, must conform to the criteria listed in article 19, paragraph 3, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This restriction must:

1. Be provided by law, which is clear and accessible to everyone;
2. Prove necessary and pursue the legitimate purposes of protecting the rights or reputations of others, national security, or public order (ordre public), or public health or morals.
3. Be the least restrictive means required to achieve the purported aim and be consistent with it.

The applicability of the criteria must be overseen by a body that is free from political and other unjustified influences, and unimpaired by discrimination or arbitrariness.





## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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