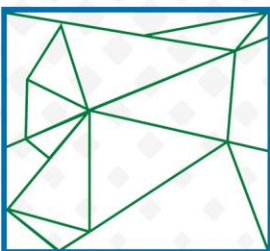


# Syria Protests Escalate in the Areas Controlled by the Government and the



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For Truth  
& Justice



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## **Syria: Protests Escalate in the Areas Controlled by the Government and the Latter Responds with Arrests and Ready-Made Accusations**

*Some detainees were accused of rebelling against the authorities, inciting a coup, collaborating with external parties, infringing the national identity, and undermining the prestige of the state*

In the last few months, Syrians have been enduring the worst economic crisis since the beginning of the conflict, with spiraling inflation, currency plunge, severe fuel shortages, lifting subsidies on essentials including bread and gas, households receiving a few hours a day of electricity, and increasing the cost of living. Therefore, residents of areas controlled by the government criticized living conditions and demanded protests to improve them.

As a result, many demonstrations took place in these areas demanding improvements and criticizing the ruling class. Moreover, the residents of the Syrian coast criticized the Syrian President and the ruling family in an unprecedented manner, holding the government responsible for the deterioration of their economic conditions and living standards. This prompted the security services to carry out a massive arrest campaign in areas under government control.

## The Arrest of Journalist Lama Abbas:

On 4 September 2023, Syrian security services [arrested](#) the Journalist Lama Tawfiq Abbas (born in Jableh) at a military checkpoint on her way from Jableh to Damascus (where she resides). Lama Abbas is a member of the Syrian National Party, one of the national front parties allied with the authorities in Syria. She is an activist known for her closeness to the ruling regime in Syria.

On 27 July 2023, the journalist was subjected to an [attempted arrest](#) in her apartment in Damascus because she [criticized](#) the government's policies on Facebook. She also called for protests and demonstrations in areas controlled by the government and mentioned the responsibility of the ruling family for the "Saroja Fire" of 16 July 2023 and linked it to the fires in the Syrian coast on 26 July.

The arrest of Lama Abbas came in the context of an intensive campaign of repression and arrests carried out by the security services in areas controlled by the Syrian government, especially on the Syrian coast. This campaign emerged due to the protests and harsh criticism after the economic collapse and considering people's despair of any real change occurring under the existing regime.

## Popular Rage in the Areas Controlled by the Government:

On 9 August, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had an [interview](#) with Sky News. When he was asked "After all these years, what is the opposition that you recognize", al-Assad answered, "The one produced locally, not abroad". Moreover, he denied that "security concerns" were an obstacle to the return of refugees, attributing the reason for their staying abroad to "the economic conditions that the country is suffering from after the war against terrorism".

This interview sparked a widespread wave of frustration and anger in various regions because it seemed that the government had no real intention to stop the ongoing conflict in Syria or to end the economic, social, and human rights crises that Syrians were suffering from, in Syria and abroad.



These statements and the various reactions they provoked were followed by the Syrian government's [decision](#) (on 17 August 2023) to lift fuel subsidies and raise the salaries of the public sector, which sparked an additional wave of anger among Syrians in government-controlled areas. As a result, calls for peaceful protests, demonstrations, and civil disobedience spread across social media.

Later, protests broke out in Daraa and As-Suwayda calling for Assad to go and demanding the implementation of Resolution 2254. Moreover, in the coastal governorates, the establishment of the "[10th of August Movement](#)" contributed to the call to demonstrate and to present a set of demands. Several videos spread on social media of Syrians from the coast criticizing the Syrian president and his wife and holding him responsible for the economic and social collapse of the country.

While the government tended –for undeclared reasons– to ignore the unprecedented protests in As-Suwayda and to refrain from arresting anyone there,<sup>1</sup> it carried out a massive arrest campaign in other governorates under its control.

## Testimonies of Detainees in Government-Controlled Areas:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented four testimonies of detainees and families of detainees who were subjected to arbitrary arrest in August, in Jableh (Latakia), Daraa, and the Damascus countryside. Furthermore, it verified evidence of other arrests that occurred in Tartous and Damascus. Moreover, STJ conducted interviews with two journalists (one of them works for al-Baath Newspaper and the other for the General Organisation of Radio and TV) who expressed their opinion on the reasons behind the widespread criticism of the Syrian government.

The information obtained by STJ indicates that the most prominent accusations that the detainees face are based on Articles 285, 286, and 287 of the [Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949](#), and its amendment in [Law No. 15 of 2022](#) (addressed in a STJ's report [Syria: Penal Code Amendments End the Spaces Left for Freedom of Opinion and Expression](#)).

On 20 August 2023, the Syrian intelligence arrested "Ahmed Ibrahim Ismail", born in 1969 in Jableh (Latakia), after publishing several posts on his Facebook account, criticizing the difficult living conditions and high prices. STJ spoke to the victim's daughter who narrated:

**"My father was arrested by the Military Security service in the city of Jableh. A Military Security patrol arrested him from his place of work. Two hours later, the patrol came to the house and confiscated my father's phone and laptop. We went to the Military Security branch, but we were not allowed to see him or to know the charges. At the gate, we were told to wait until they transferred him to the military court building in the al-Qalaa area in Latakia**

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<sup>1</sup> On 8 August 2023, several Facebook accounts and pages circulated a leaked "directive" issued by the Office of the Syrian Minister of Interior ordering not to arrest anyone from As-Suwayda Governorate, except in cases of flagrante delicto. See [Appendix No.1](#).

after his interrogation was completed. We appointed a lawyer for him, but the branch refused to allow him to attend the interrogation”.

She added:

“Two weeks before my father’s arrest, a man from our village phoned him and introduced himself as a member of the '[al-Areen](#)' Foundation.<sup>2</sup> Later, they met at the Mukhtar's house (the village headman). He stated that he was authorized by the Presidential Office to come and offer a sum of money to my father to stop publishing those posts”.

On 23 August 2023, in the Daraa countryside, “M.A.”<sup>3</sup> was detained for 48 hours by Syrian government forces after participating in [demonstrations](#) protesting the deteriorating economic conditions and living standards. He stated:

“On that day, a patrol of the Military Security arrested me from my home as part of a campaign that targeted several young men who participated in the demonstrations. I was detained in the detachment building for 48 hours. They forced me to confess the names of the participants and asked me about my previous work as a photographer and a media activist before the regime took control of Daraa. In the investigation, the investigator threatened me and accused me of rebelling against the authorities, inciting a coup, collaborating with external parties, and violating the settlement agreement that I signed in 2018. I was not allowed to communicate with my family or to have a lawyer. During my detention period, my family did not know my whereabouts or who arrested me. I was released after I was forced to close my accounts on social media and sign a written pledge not to participate in the demonstrations”.

Moreover, “W.A.” from the Daraa countryside, was arrested by Syrian government forces in Daraa on 23 August 2023, after participating in the demonstrations. He narrated:

“I was arrested by members of a checkpoint called the ‘Felfleh’ (controlled by the Fourth Division and Military Security) and I was transferred directly to the Military Security branch on charges of participating in anti-state demonstrations and in armed activities. They released me after 24 hours when the investigator learned that I was a relative of the leader of a group affiliated with the State Security branch. The investigator asked me to communicate with him after my release periodically, and to send him a list of the names of all those who participated in the recent demonstrations, as well as to inform him of those who have connections with media websites or military figures abroad”.

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<sup>2</sup> “Al-Areen Humanitarian Foundation” established in 2020 and managed by Asma al-Assad.

<sup>3</sup> STJ shall not mention the data of some detainees at their request or the request of their families.

Ayman al-Fares was born in 1979 in Tartous Governorate. He is married and has three daughters. Al-Fares was arrested on 26 August 2023. On 12 September, STJ interviewed his lawyer who stated:

**“Al-Fares was arrested on 26 August at the 'Al-Adliya' checkpoint on the Damascus–As-Suwayda international road, on his way to the As-Suwayda Governorate. He was arrested with another person from As-Suwayda called 'Basel Syyah al-Hussein'. While the latter was released hours after his arrest, Ayman remained detained”.**

She added:

**“Ayman was arrested because he published several videos on his [Facebook account](#) containing criticism of al-Assad and his wife such as accusing Asma al-Assad of stealing the aid provided by the Gulf States to Syria after the earthquake, and saying that the families of the killed government forces cannot afford bread. After several hours of detention, Ayman was forced to delete the videos. Now, he is still under investigation and no charges have been brought against him yet. He will be transferred to the military judiciary in the city of Damascus when the interrogation ends”.**

On 29 August, days after the arrest of Ayman al-Fares, the Syrian authorities arrested the popular poet “Hussein Haidar” (born in 1970) from his home in al-Ghab. Haidar published on his [Facebook account](#) several articles and videos of him reciting poetry against the ruling family. After his [arrest](#), those posts were also deleted from his account. Until today, the fate of Haidar remains unknown.

## **The Opinion of Several Journalists on the Escalation of Criticism of the Government:**

A journalist who works for the al-Baath Newspaper expressed his opinion on the possible reasons behind the wave of criticism of the Syrian government:

**“The Main reason is the worsening economic and humanitarian crisis in the country, which has affected all of society, especially poor and vulnerable people. Also, social media has become accessible and made it easier for Syrians to express their criticisms and demands. In addition, the currency plunged 99% and the essentials including food, fuel, medicines, and electricity became scarce. We can say that people tend to blame the Syrian government for mismanaging the economy, diverting aid, and failing to provide adequate services and infrastructure”.**

He added:

**“Another reason is the continued repression and human rights violations by the Syrian government and its security forces that targeted anyone who expressed a dissenting opinion. After the evolution of social media, security services can no longer deny arrests”.**

On the other hand, STJ interviewed a journalist from As-Suwayda, who works for the General Organisation of Radio and TV - Syria. He believes that there are several differences between the demands of 2011 and of today:

**“The protests in 2011 took place in cities like the Damascus countryside, Homs, Daraa, Aleppo, and Hama... Today, the wave of criticism and protests has spread to different parts of the country and reached areas controlled by the regime, such as As-Suwayda, Damascus, and Latakia. People of these areas are not able to tolerate the poor economic situation, and from their perspective it is the ruling authority that bears the blame. When the protests broke out in 2011, people hoped to find a solution soon. However, after more than 10 years, the efforts made to reach a political solution have not succeeded. This led to the emergence of these criticisms and the demand for a solution. The focus –among this category of Syrian people– has shifted from calling for reform, to demanding an end to the war and the formation of a new government”.**

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## 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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