

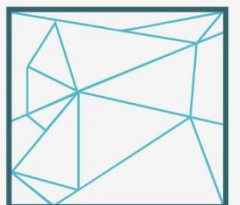
## Northwest Syria: Local Authorities Attack Journalists, Suffocate Freedom of Expression



- Media workers in the region are threatened, arrested, tortured, and even assassinated

March 2024

سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
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Syrians  
For Truth  
& Justice



## **Northwest Syria: Local Authorities Attack Journalists, Suffocate Freedom of Expression**

*Media workers in the region are threatened, arrested, tortured, and even assassinated*



Northwest Syria continues to be one of the most dangerous areas for journalists and media workers. In its latest [report](#), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria said that “[t]wo journalists were beaten with wooden sticks and rifle butts and detained briefly on 18 December [2023]” for covering a [protest](#) of the Syrian Lawyers Syndicate against the [Turkish coordinator’s interference](#) in the work of lawyers and the justice system. The protest was held in front of the Courthouse—locally known as the Justice Palace—in al-Ra’i city in Aleppo’s northern countryside, controlled by the opposition’s Syrian National Army (SNA).

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) also monitored the post-protest tensions and documented acts of violence against four other journalists and media workers at the hands of security groups affiliated with the Türkiye-backed SNA. Notably, sources STJ interviewed for this report also said that plain-clothed Turkish intelligence officers were present at the protest.

The attack on journalists sent shockwaves across the local media community. The Syrian Media Association—self-identified as an independent civil organization seeking to protect media workers and promote revolutionary media work—issued a [statement](#) condemning the assault. It also called on **“forces from across the revolutionary spectrum to shield journalists’ voices and lenses from the new machine of oppression”** in reference to local authorities, their affiliated security services, and armed groups. For their part, several journalists and media workers from the area took to social media to express outrage at the attack, saying it recalled the status of journalists and freedom of expression under the Syrian government before the 2011 uprising (see image 1).

Notably, the attack on journalists in front of the courthouse was the largest and most visible in 2023. However, it was not the only assault. In northwest Syria, local authorities continue to tighten their grip on the already limited civic space, repressing both institutions and individuals, as well as their activities that do not resonate with their ideologies. The local authorities are exceptionally hostile towards journalists, media workers, and activists, in particular those who dare to document ongoing violations perpetrated by armed groups against local communities.

The oppressive practices of the local authorities go beyond overbroad [administrative restrictions](#), including complex measures hampering the journalists’ access to demanded authorizations and dooming freedom of speech. The local authorities often use threats, arbitrary arrests, torture, and even [assassinations](#) against journalists and media workers. These practices remain rampant in the so-called Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield strips—administratively run by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and militarily by its affiliated SNA—and in Idlib province—entirely controlled by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its administrative offshoot, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).

In this report, STJ unveils several human rights violations perpetrated by local authorities in northwest Syria against media workers in 2023. These violations capture the grim status of freedom of expression, which almost does not exist in the region. The report builds on interviews STJ’s field researchers conducted with four media workers; two witnessed the attack in front of the courthouse, and the other two were repeatedly summoned for interrogations in Idlib. All four journalists spoke to STJ on the condition of their anonymity, fearing reprisals from the authorities.

Notably, this report complements a series of investigations that STJ has already published on the shrinking civic space in northwest Syria. In a 2023 [report](#), STJ disclosed the details of the media activist Muhammad Abu Ghannoum’s assassination in al-Bab city in northwest Syria by gunmen affiliated with the SNA’s al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, who remain at large. Additionally, in a 2024 [report](#), STJ monitored the adverse impact of the local authorities’ repressive measures on the work of women’s organizations and feminist groups, including the activities of freelance female journalists and media workers.



Image (1)-Screenshot taken from the Facebook account of one of the journalists attacked in front of the courthouse in al-Ra'i city.

## The Attack in Front of the Courthouse in al-Ra'i

STJ interviewed media workers Said al-Hassan<sup>1</sup> and Rami al-'Aboud,<sup>2</sup> who witnessed the attack in the aftermath of the lawyers' protest in front of the Justice Palace in al-Ra'i city on 18 December 2023.

The two journalists gave matching accounts of the extensive presence of military and security forces during the protest. There were members of both the military and the civil police whom they could identify by their uniforms. There were also members from the Political Security Service—affiliated with the Civil Police and functions as “the SNA's intelligence service.” They wore civilian clothes and drove Civil Police vehicles.

At the protest, there were also members of the Turkish intelligence. Rami said, “They wore plainclothes and rode civilian armoured vehicles. They distinguished themselves with the Turkish labels on their coats. They all carried guns in waist or leg holsters.”

Said narrated how the situation spiralled into violence after the protest ended and described the assault suffered by his colleague. He said that one of the plain-clothed officers on site demanded that lawyers leave the protest arena through the courthouse's main gate and ordered journalists to wait in front of the building, claiming they would be evacuated using another exit. Said stressed that they “intended to arrest us,” the reason why both the lawyers

<sup>1</sup> The source chose to use a pseudonym during an online interview on 31 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The source chose to use a pseudonym during an online interview on 31 January 2024.

and journalists refused to be segregated and insisted on leaving together, which led to clashes with the security and military officers there. He added:

**“During the clashes, an individual attacked my colleague, slapped his face, and hit him on the back. He forcefully grabbed his camera and broke it. He also seized his phone. The lawyers intervened and took the shattered camera and the phone back.”**

The clashes continued until the lawyers decided to leave in a convoy so no one was left alone and rendered vulnerable to arrest. Said added that one of the lawyers told his beaten colleague that the Political Security Service was determined to arrest him for the video he posted from the protest’s location, pointing out that other journalists were hit and arrested by the Political Security Service and subsequently released under the lawyers’ pressure.

Said stressed that this was not the first assault this colleague has suffered. In 2022, the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division wanted to convey a message to *Orient TV* by beating his colleague who used to work for the channel before it closed down. Notably, the armed groups in the region harboured great animosity towards the channel that reported on their violations extensively.

Said elaborated on the incident, saying that his colleague was assaulted for reporting on an SNA commander’s raid into a civilian’s house in al-Bab city in northern Aleppo. The commander also beat that civilian’s old mother, which caused tension in the city. Said added:

**“My colleague held a microphone displaying *Orient TV*’s logo. A civilian called (S. H.) assaulted him. [S.] advocates any non-military tensions that al-Hamza/al-Hamzat stirs up, purportedly for the good of al-Bab city’s people. [S.] and his group attacked him. He had a cameraman with him. They broke his microphone and the camera.”**

Said emphasized that physical violence is not the only tool the armed groups use to intimidate and take revenge on media workers in the region. He added that one armed group filed a “defamation lawsuit” against that same colleague, claiming he provided *Orient TV* with information on one of the operations the U.S.-led Coalition against Daesh (Islamic State-IS) conducted to capture an IS commander in al-Bab city, where the armed group operates. The court proceedings lasted for a year and a half before his colleague was ultimately declared innocent of the charges. Said added that, during the trial, the judge himself immensely pressured his colleague to confess to the accusations laid against him.

For his part, Rami narrated to STJ what happened with the media activist Faris Zain al-‘Abidin after the Political Security personnel arrested *Syria TV*’s correspondents at the end of the lawyers’ protest:

**“Fares and his colleague decided to follow the correspondents to the police station aboard their car. A silver civilian car then started tailing them and stopped them. Several men, in plainclothes and armed with Kalashnikov rifles, got out of the car and asked Fares and his colleague to ride with them. When Fares and his colleague asked the gunmen to introduce themselves and why they asked they accompany them, [the gunmen] started hitting Fares. After ten minutes of continuous beating, Fares lost consciousness. [The gunmen] placed him in the back seat and restrained him. One of the gunmen put his leg on Fares’s head and began insulting his sister and mother. Fares could neither move nor even talk back to the gunman, who then continued to repeat, ‘Abdulrahman Mustafa is your president until the end of time!’”**

Rami added that the Civil Police and lawyers from the protest rescued Fares and his colleague as the gunmen led them to an unknown destination, adding that they learned the gunmen were members of the personal security detachment of Abdulrahman Mustafa, president of the SIG. Rami also recounted:

**“Fares went to the Azaz hospital due to the excruciating pain he felt across his body. When the police at the hospital learned of his circumstances, they refused to write a report [and did not allow the staff] to write a medical report either. When Fares posted that the police refused to document his case, the police wrote a report, as did the medical staff. Fares then filed a complaint with the court against Abdulrahman Mustafa and his personal security detachment. However, the complaint has not progressed, and [Abdulrahman] was not called for an investigation yet.”**

Rami said that Fares had to undergo surgery because he had a meniscus tear due to the extensive beating on his leg.



Image (2)- A photo of Fares's leg after the surgery, which STJ obtained from Rami.



Image (3)-The photo was circulated on social media, showing the beating marks on Fares's body.

## Repeated Calls for Interrogation in Idlib

In Idlib province—predominated with equally repressive conditions—the HTS-affiliated Directorate of Media continues to function as a policing and reporting tool, often used by the HTS's security services to keep tabs on journalists and media workers they deem “culprits.” The HTS established the directorate in early 2019, and since then, [local media](#) has been saying it is “founded to control media work” in the province.

Yassin al-Haj,<sup>3</sup> a media worker, has been summoned three times by the media directorate on behalf of the General Security Service in 2023, making him one of the numerous victims of this security collaboration. Interrogations ensued after the orders, during which he supplied

<sup>3</sup> The source chose to use a pseudonym during an online interview on 1 February 2024.

detectives, frequently HTS officers, with details on his activities and links to his work on the internet.

Yassin's struggle with the local authorities was not confined to repeated interrogations. In December 2023, Yassin was also detained for five hours at one of the HTS's security checkpoints for working with *Orient TV*. Notably, the SSG had [banned](#) the now-closed *Orient TV* from working in Idlib since 2022, which made all its correspondents in the area targets for the HTS.

Yassin narrated that he was detained even though he was discreet about his work with *Orient TV* after the ban, and that is because the HTS has informants who track down the videos published by the channel about Idlib. These informants collect information by asking people featured in those videos about the content creators.

The personnel at the checkpoint ordered Yassin to get out of the car for interrogation after they ran a computer search on his name, which showed he was subject to a warrant from the SSG's police. The personnel initially did not tell him about the claims in the warrant. Yassin recounted:

**"An HTS security officer, not an SSG police officer, appeared and took my personal information. He said the warrant was due to a video I had filmed, which caused the deaths of several HTS members. He started gaslighting me and using psychological pressure. The video is old; it was published almost a year ago and was filmed on the streets from a car, not on the battlefield. So, I believe it was a pretext to put me under psychological duress and coerce me to confess other stuff."**

The security officer then asked Yassin to search his phone, which he refused first out of concern for his privacy, as he had family photos saved there. However, Yassin then succumbed and handed the officer his phone after the latter threatened to refer him to the Military Justice Department if he refused to cooperate. Yassin added:

**"The officer searched my phone, including my text messages and photos, and did not find what he was looking for. In a warning tone, he told me I would not be arrested and would be released for now but that I should consider myself suspended from work until I have settled my situation with the SSG's media directorate."**

Yassin stopped working in Idlib after the incident and relocated to A'zaz, fearing that he might be arrested again.

In Idlib, journalists, media workers, and activists also face arrests and interrogations should they fail to adhere to the SSG-issued media law, which remains unpublished, according to media worker Muhanad al-Salem.<sup>4</sup> Muhanad was summoned for interrogation after covering a protest in Idlib in late 2023, organized by the wives of members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir/Liberation Party (LP). The party "[promotes](#) the revival of the Islamic Caliphate." The women demanded the release of their husbands arrested by the HTS and also called for the "ousting of Abu Mohammad al-Julani."

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<sup>4</sup> The source chose to use a pseudonym during an online interview on 1 February 2024.



Notably, the media directorate issued the media law in February 2022, which purportedly [aims to](#) “regulate media work, preserve the rights of workers in the media field and the rights of others from being attacked through the media.”

In stark contrast to the objectives of the media law, Muhanad was arrested after he posted a video from the protest. He was led by officers from the SSG’s Civil Police to one of their nearby stations without being told the reasons. Muhanad said that two detectives from an HTS security service interrogated him while the two present police officers remained on the sidelines:

“I was accused of affiliation with the LP, which I denied. [The officer] said there was no other reason why I covered the protest. I told him I was not protesting; I only filmed and posted a video from the event, just like I would with any other. I also told him I was a journalist and possessed a press ID issued by the SSG’s media directorate. They told me the ID was insufficient and I should have applied for authorization. They added that the media law bans covering protests without their approval, claiming I had signed a copy of the law. I responded that the law remains unpublished, and its provisions are unknown to us. The officer said, ‘Enough with that! This is prohibited, and everyone knows it.’ The futile conversation continued endlessly. He kept pressuring me and accusing me of belonging to the LP, and I just repeated, I was only a journalist.”

After a long argument with the officer, Muhanad was referred to the HTS’s Military Justice Department, which he said “is the apparatus that investigates cases related to IS, the [Syrian] regime, and espionage.” The department delayed the interrogation and ultimately dropped Muhanad’s case under pressure from the Media Association in Idlib. However, it tried to force Muhanad into signing a pledge that he would not repeat this violation. He refused to sign, considering the pledge an “arbitrary measure” because he was not informed that journalists are banned from covering LP-related protests specifically.

This was not the first time Muhanad was interrogated concerning his work. In 2019, an unidentified security group led Muhanad to a detention facility and held him there for a week under an arrest warrant. He narrated:

“I was blindfolded and led to a location that was clearly a former government facility transformed into a prison. I remained there for a week. I still do not know the location of that prison, but it is certainly within Idlib. They put me in a cell where they held LP, IS, and Syrian regime members. It was the worst punishment ever. I had to listen to the IS members openly accusing me of being a *kafer* (infidel), who made sure I heard them talk about *Kufer* (impiety), apostasy, and espionage for the West and how the materials we filmed, shared, and posted were a tool in their service.”

Muhanad was forcibly disappeared for two days. It was only after his family posted that he was abducted on social media that the security group disclosed his whereabouts. The group called the family to let them know he was being interrogated under a warrant.

Muhanad added that he had already spent five days in detention before he was called for interrogation for the first time, saying the detectives put him under psychological duress even though he told them the name of the outlet he worked for of his own accord and despite the fact that they already knew this piece of information.

جهاز الأمن العام  
القطاع: ٦.٦

التاريخ: / / 14 هـ  
الموافق: 20 م

إلى المدعو: \_\_\_\_\_  
السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته  
يطلب حضوركم إلى: \_\_\_\_\_  
وفي حال عدم حضوركم سيتم اتخاذ الإجراءات المنسبة.

اسم الأب: \_\_\_\_\_  
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الوقت: \_\_\_\_\_  
اسم المسؤول ومفتحه: \_\_\_\_\_  
الختم

تُحْرَزُ نسخة كربونية في صفحة (تقرير الاعتقال) إن تعرّض المبلّغ إلى توقيف

Image (4)-A summons Muhanad received from the HTS's Political Security Service.



## ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.